

THE ROLE OF THE VAST-STUDIO  
IN THE EMERGENCE OF BHUTANESE CONTEMPORARY ART:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE VAST- STUDIO SINCE NINETEENTH NINETY  
TO UNTIL NOW AS SOCIAL INSTITUTION AND SYMBOL OF  
CONTEMPORARY BHUTANESE LIFE.

A Thesis

By Passang Tobgay  
Student number: 1018977

Submitted to the Graduate faculty of the Gerrit Rietveld Academic  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Fine Arts, Department, BA Fine Art.

April 2015

Thesis Tutor: Janice McNab

## *Contents*

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
<b>Chapter I</b>	7
The Vast Emerges as an Artist “studio” for all artists young to old, from 1998 until Now	
<b>Chapter II</b>	12
The Contemporary Art Studio Scene: 1998-2015	
<b>Chapter III</b>	18
Theory and practice in traditional art academy	
Meaning of traditional art	
Why VAST-studio is different from Traditional academy	
VAST financial situation and later gets CSO	
Conclusion	29

## *Abstract*

This thesis analyzes the significance of the VAST-Studio in Modern Bhutan Contemporary art practice. In discussing the social and historical events of late 90s to until today, it establishes the atmosphere in which the first Bhutanese contemporary artists broke from their formal art institute system. The primary focus is two-fold.

First, how the VAST-Studio was established in Bhutanese culture as a social institution and the role this played as a replacement for Bhutanese traditional art and crafts and in the formation of a new art movement in Bhutanese society.

Second, how local artists incorporated the VAST-Studio culture into their art as a representation of Bhutanese contemporary life. In discussing the VAST movement in the 21st century, it goes on to examine the role of the cooking as a symbol of VAST life. The works of some senior artists from VAST are analyzed and compared in order to establish the symbolism of the VAST- Studio. Primary and secondary resources were used, including illustrations and quotes by the VAST founder, senior artists and filmmakers and writers, to establish physical descriptions of the VAST interiors.

This study shows that the VAST movement in Thimphu has an influential factor in the new Bhutan and in the birth of Bhutanese contemporary art. For the new young artists who portrayed VAST in their works, it is as a symbol of Bhutanese modern life.

## *Introduction*

Religion plays a major role in the culture and society of Bhutan. The country also has a tradition of decorative arts, and the ideas are mostly based on Buddhist beliefs.

Until the mid of the 1990s, Bhutan National Art Institute or as locally known “Gyalyong Zorig Chusum” (thirteen arts) controlled all aspects of the art world in Bhutan, located in the capital city. As the only accepted Bhutanese art Institution, the institute was a stifling presence, and it is still quite active at this time.

In response to fast changing neighboring countries and globalization pressure Bhutan opened its doors to the international community officially in 1990s. After a few years artist Asha Kama, with two other artists founded VAST Bhutan, in 1996. In June 1999, the Bhutanese government Introduced television and Internet for the first time. Since then Bhutan has changed rapidly and also challenged the strict stylistic standards of the Bhutan National Art Institute.

It was at this time that the VAST projects were changing the face of Bhutan. The effects of the reconstruction plan went far beyond the physical appearance of the Thimphu streets. There were also major changes in the lifestyles of the Bhutanese working class. These events culminated in the awakening of a new modern Bhutanese consciousness. This new feeling of modernity did not go unnoticed by Bhutanese intellectuals. In literature as well as art there was an overwhelming drive to embrace this new modern consciousness. VAST-Bhutan, group of artists came to be known a Bhutanese modern contemporary art.

Their decision to turn away from the Bhutan National Art Institute made public acceptance of their art a huge challenge. Despite its growing unpopularity, traditional artists still controlled the art market.

For the fledging Bhutanese artist this was an ever-present obstacle to success. They needed an alternative support system, something to replace the institute as a means for artistic instruction and discussion. They found this at the VAST-studio.

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine the role of the VAST studio in Bhutanese contemporary art breaking from the Bhutan traditional art institute and their pursuit of a new modern style. It will examine the VAST studio development as a haven for those artists committed to rejecting the established traditional art institution. In examining the history of VAST- Bhutan, as well as providing detailed descriptions of major VAST projects of the period, it will establish how VAST-Bhutan became a social institution and a symbol of modern Bhutanese artists life in Thimphu, Bhutan.

While examining the social and historical significance of the VAST-studio, the focus is on two aspects of its influence. First, a historical discussion of the VAST group and the role of the VAST studio played in the birth of contemporary modern Bhutan. Second, a study of VAST activities and art works that reveals how the VAST-Studio became a symbol of everyday life, artists were striving to express. The VAST-Studio would serve artists on many different levels and have a lasting impact on the emergence of Bhutanese modern contemporary art.

## Chapter I

### THE VAST EMERGES AS AN ARTIST “STUDIO” FOR ALL ARTISTS YOUNG TO OLD, FROM 1998 UNTIL NOW

From 1998 to the present VAST-Bhutan has had a succession of VAST- Studios patronized by the intellectual class. With the new modern feeling of Thimphu, VAST would find its place as a haven for artistic and literary discussion and debate. Many of the artistic movements that paved the way for a more modern style had beginnings amongst the scattered tables and chairs of the Studio interior.

Fresh ideas were born in the VAST-Studio, nourished in an atmosphere of young passionate artists and writers whose disillusionment with the tired, reactionary ways of the establishment pushed them in a new direction. The transforming of Bhutan,



(Figure 1). *Students/young Vast member joined for outdoor summer art camp in southern Bhutan, 2014*

the diminishing power of the traditional art institute and the emergence of the VAST studio as a social institution converged, creating momentum towards a sense of progress and modernity. A couple of café in the city have also created space as meeting places for VAST artists and their ideas. There was a general feeling of excitement that intoxicated more forward thinking minds.

Asha kama: *"I thought it was time to give back to society – especially the lost children," says Asha Kama. We embarked on an endeavor to design activities that involved children in understanding nature and culture, made them more responsible and connected them to youth related issue."*

The VAST studio as a place for intellectual discussion and debate was an invention. The VAST studio was the home of the young emerging artist crowd and interesting discussions caused a great deal of anxiety for Asha Kama, Founder of VAST. This atmosphere of intellectual discussion continued in the VAST-Studio. Particularly Thimphu city as fast growing city in the country and changes in Thimphu toward modernization brought the VAST studio to another level. One of the events that contributed to the changing atmosphere of Thimphu was a project such as "Art of Giving, Build A House, Rice Bank, Make A Wish and Young zoom on garbage". These are the project to awaken the inner sense of humanitarian action towards the local environment and continue the practice of Art of Giving. The project has a multi-beneficial role of local and gentlemen of the Thimphu often could be seen working along with VAST-studio especially in the weekend. For patrons of the VAST-studio, the widened VAST art garden in front of the studio and sidewalks were more accommodating to the sculptures and children arts. Accompanying this was an ever-increasing amount of leisure time – more of an opportunity to enjoy a few hours to socialize.

Growing interest in art among the children's. For these new generation crowds, there was no better place to see and be seen than the VAST-studio. One young student articulated his relationship with VAST-studio.

*"Our attic studio used to be a residential place which had a few number of families living in before we moved in. We made the shack into a beautiful studio. Most of us used to be bunk school to help in building the studio. We sweated for the studio so the attic studio holds dear to the hearts of all the members who were involved in shaping it. The attic was a place we could call our own. We have lots of memories with the attic...some are good, some bad and some sad".*

The VAST-studio is becoming the stage for modern Thimphu. The studio atmosphere is conducive to free thinking, which in turn makes it a prime arena for artistic discussion and debate. In the beginning the VAST-studio was a place where young people could meet, mix freely, speak openly about any topics. Often the some proprietor of the establishment participated in informal meetings, not particularly concerned about making money. They are happy to provide their supports such as art materials and financial support especially for the Projects. These are the best moments for VAST life.

Member of Vast-studio Thimphu society were not the only ones who would indulge in the new VAST-studio life. The art world in Thimphu is rapidly changing. Institutions that shaped the Bhutanese traditional art for centuries are beginning to speak for change as well. For the artists who would break away in this changing time, the Studio would serve as another stage or haven for those whose modern ideas were not welcome in the formal, established art institution. Until mid ninety's the "Gyal-yong Zorig Chusum" National art academy dominated art instruction and taste based on Tibetan Buddhist theory. The academy preached the value of drawing and paintings.

It has a strict definition of what could be accepted as "best Art". Paintings that came out of the academy have very fine drawings based on technique devoid of any indication of the artist's hand. Compositions are often same and reflected the value academy placed on classical ideals. In keeping with the teachings of the academy, the students, artistic taste favored what the instructors considered to be 'Best Art.' This definition included thematic content followed strict iconographic rules. Under this



(Figure 2). *Intellectuals gathered at VAST-studio for meeting about Art development in Bhutan 2014.*



system, there has little to no room for artistic discussion or experimentation. An artist ambitious for a successful career have no choice but to digest the teachings of the academy and hope to become holy painter. Many emerging artists shared Asha Kama (founder of VAST-studio) views about Bhutanese art system. He would employ a style that challenged the traditional conventions.

It was written on one of the local newspaper, Asha Kama said: *“As an artist, you have to create works of art, and I am becoming more of a social activist than an artist,” he ruminates, “I need to strike a balance because I am not doing justice to my art.”*

Traditional versus modern, the art discussions between Bhutan government officials and VAST-studio is still in progress. VAST-studio founder, often confront with the questions regarding his position on the matter of VAST activities. Founder kama, he is well known to all the artists and art lover, even to the school students around the country. He keeps VAST-studio open to anyone who wished to call, and want to express his or her thought and feelings.

It was significant that there were alternative styles developing to spark artistic debate. From this point, the atmosphere of change would only grow stronger. VAST-studio ideas would lead artists in a new direction, and pave the way for the next generation of Bhutanese artists. The VAST artists embraced the everyday reality of Bhutanese life, rather than the academy subjects. At the VAST studio, they are free to discuss ideas that were not allowed in the traditional art academy.

One of the first art studios to play host to the intellectual crowd of filmmaker, writers and artists is VAST studio. This Studio is home to many art members of modern Bhutan movement. The artists would enjoy often its cooking Bhutanese “Momo” (homemade dumpling) best known among Bhutanese, and specially chili Momo has considered as best, its popularity grew among VAST members and some foreigners. For the VAST artists, who were committed to portraying the stark realities of life, no matter how the taste feels or unpleasant, the atmosphere of the VAST is a perfect.

## Chapter II

### THE CONTEMPORARY ART STUDIO SCENE: 1998-2015

Asha Kama was emerging as a leader of a new modern Bhutan style. It was an art style that seemed to answer the some Bhutanese expects who challenged artists to put aside history and mythology and look to the growing modern city around them for inspiration. For Kama and his followers there would be a new place where they could meet to discuss their ideas. Thimphu city clock tower, at the heart of the city and still untouched by many of the changes of modern Thimphu city plan, was their first place to start art classes for young school children and after one year new VAST moved to near by old attic, would become home for some young artists. For many artist and senior VAST member lived, worked and found great inspiration there. Old attic was first VAST official studio, at the same time; it had positive energy and retained a certain quality. This quality drew more young children and future Bhutanese artists.

More important, studio was the free and easy atmosphere of the area. it was a place of free thinkers, writers and artists. VAST attic studio must have been irresistible to any young artists who craved any environment of modern thinking. A young artist



(Figure 3).  
*Artists at  
Vast-studio  
2011*

described the VAST-studio:

“ The attic would not rate as a conventional place for imparting fine art, with an undersized studio and even smaller administrative room. Enter the studio and you are taken to different sphere with canvas and paintings, each with a story of its own. Fresh droplets of paint on the floor suggest that an artist has just been busy. Walk around the room and you soon get engulfed by the expanse of color. You can't help but share at the vastness of imaginations expressed.”

For these young artists, VAST studio seemed to be a symbol of everything that was modern and forward thinking in art. It as everything that the traditional art academy was not. Many artists took up residence located just near by studio that is center of the Thimphu city. Interestingly enough, some of their neighbors were the most well respected members of the VAST. Founder Asha Kama lived in the area and even opened small art shop and gallery where VAST artists could buy art materials and exhibit their artwork.

VAST artists slowly success in their new modern style began to draw the attention of other traditional artists. Kama followers were drawn to a attic studio as the place of their artistic discussions, as well as their social lives. Yet, VAST artists are still finding their style. Different artists formed VAST group with different background like sculpture, painter, designers, filmmaker, writers and photographer which VAST studio made very special and interesting. Further documentation of the members of the VAST is provided on the blue board inside the studio and in video. Like a painter making the portrait of a friend with other friends around him, some member portrait could be seen on artist sketches and in photograph's.

3. VAST – studio, Thimphu, 2013. It shows a group of man gathered at a table, while another two young artists stands over them curiously looking at the center of table.. A beside paintings were hang on the wall and frames were carefully gathered in the conner. In the center, we see one senior artists comfortably setting on the chair and demonstrating to his colleagues.

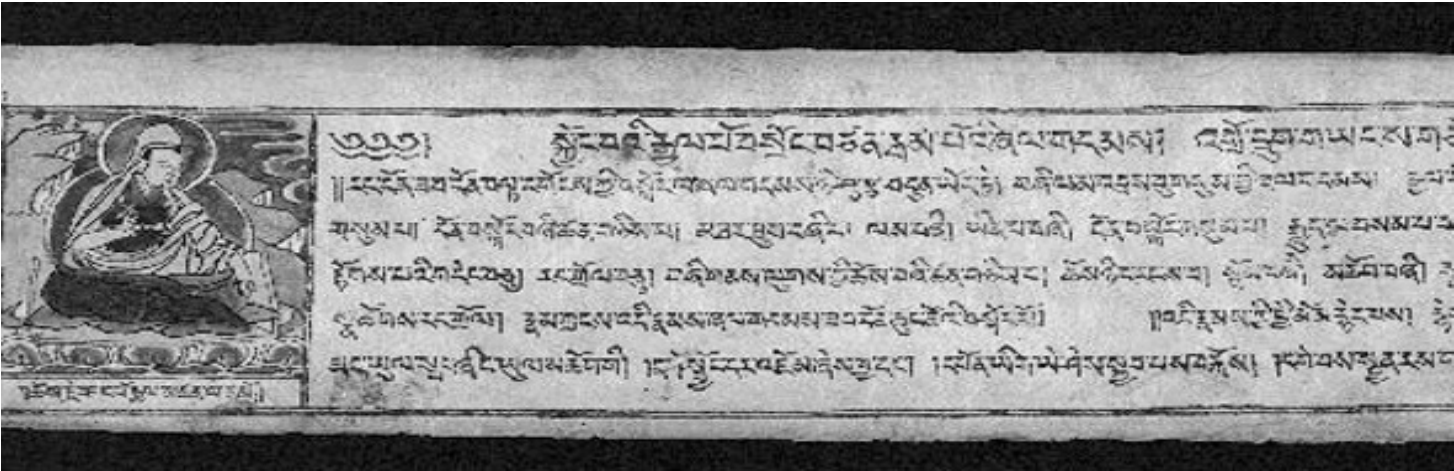
Unfortunately, there is little known about the physical appearance of VAST studio artists. Weekend were a regular meeting day for the VAST group, although at any given time an artist could find company and conversation at the studio. On Saturday night, artists would reserve tables for the group at their friend's bar. In these studio meetings the ideas of modern contemporary art grew stronger and more focused. The atmosphere was the ideal catalyst for the formulation of new ideas. Nothing could be more interesting than causeries with their perpetual clash of opinions. They kept artists wits sharpened; they encouraged artists with stores of enthusiasm that for weeks and weeks kept artists up until the final shaping if the idea was accomplished. From them we emerged tempered more highly, with a firmer will, with artist's thoughts clearer and more distinct. Also important for the artists at the studio was the feeling of camaraderie.

For all their differences in personality, and even artistic theory, they were united in their desire for a change. They shared a common disdain for the traditional art academy. They had all felt the sting of rejection and the frustration of depending on the

system they despised to gain any attention in the art world. For these artists the VAST studio was a safe house. In this refuge, the VAST artists group could discuss how to get their work noticed by the public. One of the most important events to arise from the discussions at the VAST studio was the annual art exhibition. The idea of putting together an independent show was resurrected out of a certain sense of desperation. In the previous year, the group had finally enjoyed some success. The local private art collectors had taken notice of VAST artwork and published some catalog featuring paintings by some senior artists. VAST also had some success at auctions and went for a good price. But, this bit of good fortune was closely followed by a setback for the group. The artists group could no longer depend on studio rent support from His Majesty 5th King of Bhutan and the local art dealer. Without this support, the group felt it more important than ever that they have a public exhibition.

From the very beginning, there were differing opinions in the group as to how the show should be put together. The group argued over whether there should even be an independent exhibit at all for some reason. The group would only achieve true recognition through acceptance from the public. Other matters had to be settled: who to invite, where to hold the exhibition, even how to hang the works.

# ANCIENT CHOKE SCRIPT IN BHUTAN



(Figure 4). *Old Choke texts with image of Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo, 549-605? CE. Was the founder of the Tibetan emperor.*





(Figure 5). *Students at their class, sculpture department at traditional art academy 2001.*



(Figure 6). *Three statues, Traditional academy, Thimphu, Bhutan, 2010. Platinum/palladium photograph.*



## Chapter III

### THEROY AND ART PRACTICE IN TRADITIONAL ART ACADEMY

When Buddhism first flourished in Bhutan, so did the written language of the dharma flourish. The predominant in the dharma texts is *Uchen* (dbu-can in choke and *tsoyig* in Dzongkha) an upright, block style of the Tibetan alphabet containing 30 consonants and 4 vowels. It was commonly taught the time of Guru Rinpoche's (Great Buddhist scholar) first famed visit to Bhutan in 737 CE.

*Uchen* is thought to be originally derived from the *lentsa* and *wartu* Scripts, which are still used to pen mantras and names of enlightened beings on prayers wheels and on the walls of Lhakhangs (Buddhist temples) as the written form of mantras, these scripts are much more closely related to the Sanskrit alphabet, *Lentsa* and *war-tu* both originated in India during the emperor Ashoka's time, 3<sup>rd</sup> C. BCE.



(Figure 7) *Installation artwork by VAST artistm at VAST exhibition space, 2010*

The *Uchen* and Choke, scripts were only taught to monks in Buddhist temples. Indeed, only Buddhist monks and few people understand the scripts and in majority Bhutanese do not understand the scripts. The population numbers approximately six and half lakhs, and there is no majority language. The Royal government of Bhutan has adopted an official language policy both aimed at establishing a single national language and that is *Tsoyig/Dzongkha*.

Many Bhutanese traditional art and crafts are carefully described and instructed almost everything in *Uchen* and *Choke*. In traditional art academy students were taught in *Tsoyig* or Dzongkha at their school. The *Uchen* (dbu can) script is used to read religious books, philosophical books and some history book as well.. Thus, its use is extremely widespread in Bhutan throughout temples and monasteries, if one does not listen carefully; it is very difficult to understand. Thus, many traditional texts are left untranslated.

However, it is difficult to say that why the academy is not concern about the script and acknowledge importance of theory as much as practical. which is necessary since all the history and art instructions are written in *Choke*. There is huge gap between theory and practice. Unfortunately, teachers do not share this knowledge with the student; it is more focus on practical teachque and students are practice every day like religious ritual. Bhutanese traditional art practice is based on repeating old existing religious believes and perception and that is not even change today in the academy.

### TRADITIONAL ART

This is very true in the case of bhutanese traditional academy art, paintings, sculpture and objects that are chosen, the function of which is the expression and representation of religious themes. In the Bhutanese art one finds very little that has no religious meaning. To understand the meaning of traditional bhutanese art it is important to have some idea of the meaning of Buddhist visualization practices. Among the iconographic figures, there are representations of different males and female of enlighten beings and few paintings are about philosophical discipline.

## WHY VAST-STUDIO IS DIFFERENT FROM TRADITIONAL ACADEMY

VAST has a vision and VAST artists believe that the contemporary art offers an innovative form of expression capable of highlighting Bhutan's to balance tradition with modernity. For example: VAST artists organize the national art fest and artists feel that a nationwide art competition will motivate contemporary artists to create deep, thoughtful and large bodies of work. The project was launched by her Royal Highness, Kesang Choden Wangchuck at the Le Meridien in February 2015, Thimphu during the certificate awarding ceremony of the Bhutan international art festival 2014.

*"Bhutan hasn't been open very long" says festival co founder Thinley Palden Dorji.*

*"We've protected our culture, but change is inevitable. The influence of the world is there: it's now a question of how we engage with it. The festival aims to give the youth a platform to express themselves, learn from international artists and share ideas." More than 100 international artists, performers and thinkers have been brought in to work alongside 200 local artists, with the aim of creating a lasting legacy, providing funding for the arts and setting up ongoing workshops and long-term relationships. Smaller events are planned throughout the year to maintain the momentum. And with Queen Jetsun Pema on board as patron, it has had a very big Bhutanese thumbs-up.*

*"The vision is for a world-class festival that's unique in its focus on collaboration and community," says co-director Ginny Galloway. "It's about youth and legacy and fusion of a culture that's so intact with that of the modern world."*

When VAST began in 1998, one of its ambitious mandates was to reach out to the national art community, providing both professional artists and young artists, opportunities to express themselves and educate those around them about the importance of art for self-expression. As contemporary art begins to emerge in Bhutan we must seize the opportunity to spread recognition of contemporary art as an art form as well as aid the breakthrough artists in their immersion towards international recognition.

Dedication to art, VAST has launch the annual nationwide contemporary art

exhibition would simultaneously celebrate both the achievements of His Majesty, as well as the birth of modern art under his dynamic leadership. The National exhibition is open to any bhutanese artists and also to international artists from abroad.

The exhibition call for submissions from across the nation and international ultimately, a jury of national and international personnel will choose winners to be recognized with, *The Khesar Award*.



(Figure 8). *Artists with their work process at the Bhutan international art festival 2014.*  
*Photography: Chand Bhattaral*

"I have always thought that art, in all forms, has a unique ability to bridge cultural gaps that are not met through other forms of teaching and communicating. VAST's watercolor outreach camp has confirmed my thoughts about the power of art and its ability to connect over language and cultural barriers." Described by exchange student.



This nationwide exhibition is to provide contemporary Bhutanese artists the space for display and recognition of their work in an art market dominated by religious and traditional artists. It would serve both as a means of recognition and reward for the winning artists, as well as a venue in which to increase contemporary art appreciation and education in Bhutan. The competition could be the gateway to the birth of contemporary art in bhutan or building a ground for the creation of a style of its own.

In order to motivate young artists to pursue their passions and old artists to continue painting, VAST create both a network of artists as well as an area for successful artists to display and curate their art, making art a career, not just a hobby. VAST artist, feel a responsibility to share their knowledge of art with the rest of Bhutan after working with the strong network of VAST artists for over 17-18 years. This national exhibition does not wish to limit the submissions to a specific genre of art or thematic inspiration, but horizons in the art world of Bhutan and reach to the international community. Many Bhutanese artists and filmmaker share their concern about new development in Bhutan. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche is an outstanding Buddhist teacher and director of *The Cup*, *Travel and magician*, and *Vara* (The blessing), arguably the first great Bhutanese feature film. He's young, thoroughly modern, and he has strong views on changing bhutanese life style with connection to their own traditional bhutanese culture. And also deeply concerned about modern world.

Dzongsar Khyentse is interviewed by Swati Chopra November 2005.

How do you find the balance between being a revered Rinpoche, and an artist who is creating in the modern medium of film?

Khyentse: Actually, there is no difference at all. I am sure there are some conservative Bhutanese who might think it is funny or strange for me to be making films. But this has a lot to do with their notion that films have to do with sex and violence, and are unwholesome. You can't really blame them because the only access they have is to films like that. They don't look at film as an art, but as commercially driven entrainment.

*"Why not? For me, film can be modern day thangka (Bhutanese Traditional Painting)".*

You have compared filmmaking with a thangka painting?

This is just to justify my work! (laughs). I guess what I was trying to say was that it is not as if buddhism forbids idols or paintings, like Islam. Although the Buddha himself said that those who see him as a form, who hear him as a sound, are in the wrong, but that is at the ultimate level. In order to express that level, Buddhism for centuries has the tradition of using all kinds of status, paintings, sand mandalas, and so on. There is no reason why film and other modern art form cannot be one of these mediums.



(Figure 9). *Student attended watercolor workshop in Bumthang, Bhutan 2013.*

(figure 10). *VAST, Senior artist demonstrated model drawing, with surrounded by local students and Students passionately listening to teacher instruction.*



Ura, because of its rural population, beautiful scenery, and eager children, offered a perfect community in which Asha Kama, and all the Volunteers of VAST were able to go beyond teaching techniques and color choice; they were able to inspire a creative atmosphere within the school and with each individual child that participated.



## VAST FINANCIAL SITUATION AND LATER GETS CSO

VAST is a non-governmental and non-profitable organization. VAST runs purely on contributions from individuals and other organization. Financially VAST had very difficult time and struggled to payoff their monthly studio rent for many year until year 2010, His Majesty 5<sup>th</sup> King of Bhutan grant monthly rent to the VAST as his support. His Majesty himself is also interested to create art and His Majesty contributed one of his artwork to VAST studio, For the VAST artists, His Majesty artwork is just more than a artwork, it's a treasure and inspiration for Bhutanese artists.

VAST Bhutan is now a registered civil society organization (CSO), and this provides the otherwise club-of-sorts legal backing and recognition to raise funds for the growth of art in the country. The VAST received its accreditation on September 2, 2015 this year from the civil society organization authority as a mutual benefit organization (MBO).

Founder Asha Kama, who was at the frontline of registering VAST as a CSO, said, "we could have registered as a commercial entity, but opted out, with all members and volunteers choosing VAST to continue functioning on a non-profit basis." The benefits of getting registered, he said, were: one, VAST could streamline their art activities and initiatives; and two; it was now entitled to raise funds or apply for them within the country and abroad. Without a registration number, there were issues of trust, when seeking fund.

So far, Asha Kama said the group, while functioning like a CSO, was dependent on goodwill of individuals, member of artists of VAST, friends, donors, and the volunteers, who contributed to keep the show running. "Because most works are carried out voluntarily," he said, adding only a few was employed, and they were provided with incentives.

Since VAST registered as a CSO organization, Asha Kama, who has been requested to be the chief executive officer (CEO), will take the office for a year as a volunteer with no pay. The work of the CSO, he said, will continue to be the same but



(figure 11). *Group photo of all the participants in Ura, Bhutan 2013.*

broader in terms of reach and frequency, like organizing art camps and exhibitions, tying up with artists or bodies at regional and international level, and supporting artists gain exposure and experience among others.

Kama said, would benefit artists from across the country, particularly the young and upcoming ones. “we’re already linking young people from different districts, and people are interested in opening branches where they live, and we’ll partner and network with them,” he said. “They want to initiate what we did 15 years back when VAST was formed.” As a CSO, he said, volunteers and staff would help create an identity for Bhutanese art. “Just now our art, contemporary particularly, should grow and meet world class art standards, and stand out as our own art,” he said, adding that artists should also support and enhance traditional art.

From the government, there was need for more support, especially financial support and sending artists abroad for exposure, by means of participating in art fair and

exhibitions, especially in the light that artists have been ambassadors of the country. VAST has about 20 permanent members, and around 100 art student members each year.

## Conclusion

At a time when artists were looking for a way to break from the traditional art academy, there was no place and there were no volunteer artists studio, VAST by the time. The VAST was established as haven for alternative thinkers and the VAST crowd. The VAST studio was home to many members of the VAST made popular by founder Asha Kama and co-founder Phurba and Rajesh Gurung. These were the writers and struggling artists who rejected the establishment of traditional art system.

The followers of VAST movement met every weekend at the VAST studio to debate the importance of their works, and also iconographic figures subjects over the mythological and religious works of the traditional art academy and the dramatic action of the Bhutanese contemporary art movement. This tradition continue with Asha Kama and followers of VAST studio, providing them with an atmosphere of progressive thinking and intellectual stimulation. This new generation of artists, writers and filmmakers found their retreat in the middle of Thimphu city, located 2500 meters above sea level.

The formation of the VAST group proved to be an important event in the birth of the new Bhutan contemporary art movement. Founder Asha Kama, emerged as a true leader of the VAST in the new Bhutan art. He and the VAST artists represented the first real movement to break away from the traditional art academy and exhibit their works independently and that totally different from the academy show. Even with almost no buyer or failure of their exhibition, the show represented a huge step for any artists who hoped to achieve success without the approval or going to the traditional art academy. VAST is challenging all existing notions of bhutanese art and the local art market that is dominated by traditional arts and crafts.

Their contact with private collectors was the basis for the artist-private collector relationship that changed the way art is exhibit and sold. For these artists the VAST studio replaced art academy in every way. Founder Asha Kama, he said, "VAST is the only true art studio that open to everyone."

The VAST studio play an invaluable role in the eventual success of the birth of Bhutan contemporary art and the creation of an art system independent of the academy. The VAST had moved their studio several times in different location because the space was small for growing family of VAST. Until this time, they searched for subjects in other aspects of bhutanese daily life. However, it could not be ignored that the VAST studio was a vital part of bhutanese culture and increase the popularity of the VAST studio. Since the VAST established, the VAST studio was a social institution. Many young artists and students could be seen there at all times of the day. The artists cooked their meals at studio, socialized and drank. To the sharp eye of the VAST artists, the studio was the stage of contemporary bhutanese life. It became a symbol in bhutanese art history. The works of many artists expressed the dynamic of the VAST atmosphere and established it as an integral part of bhutanese society.

For artists like Biswa and Chand, who were interested in capturing scenes of everyday bhutanese life, was a fundamental subjects. Although each artists portrayed it differently and their art reaffirms its significance in 21<sup>st</sup> century of bhutanese culture.

The work of art from the VAST, break from the traditional academy have a lasting effect on the bhutanese contemporary art history. Although their styles came into question by traditional art academy and by some local monk. VAST opened the doors for a freedom of expression in bhutanese arts that had long been stifled. They opened their eyes to the theater of life around them, rejecting the tired, outdated subjects adhered to by the academy. This allowed future bhutanese artists the freedom to choose style and subject, without the fear of never having their works exhibited or sold.

In all this, the VAST studio was the new Bhutan contemporary art academy and studio. Their images provide a lasting glimpse of the VAST tradition.

## End notes:

### Book:

1. 1993b. *The Languages and Linguistic History of Bhutan* ('Brug-gi skad-rigs dang de'i byung-rabs). Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan.
- 1993c. *The Grammar of Dzongkha* (2nd revised edn.). Thimphu: Royal government of Bhutan.
- So Close to Heaven, The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas* by Barbara Crossette 1996, A "New York Times" Asia correspondent writes

### Newspaper Article:

- 4.2014 *The theguardian news* (bhutan-thimphu-first-international-festival).  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2015/mar/22/bhutan-thimphu-first-international-festival>>
5. 1994. *Guide to Roman Dzongkha* (rDzong-kha ro-m>n-nang 'bri-lugs lamston). Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan.
- forthcoming. *Een eerste grammaticale verkenning van het Bumthang, een taal van Midden-Bhutan*. Leiden: Centrum voor niet-Westerse Studien.
- Dzongkha Development Commission*. 1990. *Dzongkha Rabse Lamzang*. (rDzongkha rab-gsallam-bzang) Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan.
- 1998. *A Kingdom in the Mountains Shares Its Secrets* ( the newyork time).
- A, Bhutanese art* <<http://valtermoiz.tripod.com/dzongkha/id16.html>>
- 2012. Bhutan, (*The Land of Serenity* by Matthieu Ricard)
- Impressions of Happiness, Bhutan's daily newspaper* (Kuensel)  
<<http://www.kuenselonline.com/impressions-of-happiness/#.VUI6IlsmlZ8>>

### Online web:

- Voluntary Artists' Studio, Thimphu, Bhutan.*  
<<http://www.vast-bhutan.org/what-is-vast/>>

### Notes

Many part of my research details, the findings and discoveries obtained from interviews and communications through social media such as an email, skype and phone call with professional Bhutanese artists and colleagues who are also interested in this subject.