

Forewords by Davide Quadrio

Contemporary art's fascination with Buddhist images has grown exponentially over the last few decades. From exotic fascination in Buddhist iconographic symbolism, by way of more conceptual and philosophical attitudes, right up to trivial and superficial fascination in its direct market value, artists have investigated this philosophical and religious practice and used it and misused it to turn images into something else: their own artwork. Paola Pivi's approach to this distant world of philosophical and religious symbolism takes a very different and distinctive trajectory. In her project *Tulkus 1880 to 2018*, the artist flips around this conventional approach to the "foreign" Buddhist world, creating a complete Buddhist work where her presence as an artist is distilled and made ephemeral by a work of art without art.

It is as if the artist has grasped the magnitude of the topic, researching and collecting the "manifestation" of her artistic journey and letting it be what it is without making or expecting to add, take away or alter the original meaning of these images.

The portraits of tulkus - recognized reincarnations of Buddhist masters - that caught Paola Pivi's attention are part of the proliferation of Buddhist images that are common to all areas where Tibetan Buddhism has flourished (Tibet, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, Inner and Outer Mongolia, as well as Buryatia, Sikkim, Ladakh and other areas of India, Bhutan and Nepal, and, in recent years, the Western world).

Photographic images have become part of the traditional painting continuum.

Among other objects related to rituals and offerings, formalized paintings, most commonly known as *thangka*, are created to be an inspirational aid to meditation and are often bordered by magnificent brocade. *Thangkas* are viewed as physical representations of the speech, body or mind of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Tulkus and are ritually consecrated in a ceremony (*rab gnas*) in which a deity descends into the image. Since the introduction of photography, however, photographic reproductions have also been used in Tibetan homes to consecrate domestic shrines, and photo-icons are now even more visible and widespread than consecrated Buddha images. Photographic images play a similar role to that of earlier *thangka* paintings in the diffusion of the religious power the tulku symbolizes. In other words, these images carry the same power that the real tulku does.

The project *Tulkus 1880 to 2018* aims to be a summa of photographs of all the tulkus in the

world, from the beginning of photography until today.

It is a work of mammoth proportions that has seen an international team of experts working for two years, so far, collecting, researching and cataloguing thousands of images all around the world. This will be the first time that such a survey of tulkus from all the Tibetan Buddhist schools, in many farflung geographical areas, has been attempted. Moreover, it is a unique and unprecedented undertaking that connects academic research to the contemporary art world in the consequential organization and presentation of these images in a contemporary art context.

The collection process is being carried out in many areas of the world, with images found in temples, museums, archives, studios etc., but also borrowed from private owners, scanned and returned, or taken by professional photographers in temples or in private circumstances. These images carry with them the Tibetan diaspora, which is thus brought together in a seemingly chaotic visual system where the images of the tulkus all speak with the same power of spirituality beyond the past, present and future. It is a choir of single voices, a perfect cacophony, with all these different sounds coming together in a fragment of space-time. Paola Pivi acts as the conductor of the orchestra in this project, putting together thousands of images to create a visual reading of these powerful beings, but also - through the subtle details of the photographs: architectural details, throne arrangement, religious objects, common objects, clothing, posture, facial expression, glance, body language etc. - automatically creating an unconventional and dynamic narrative of the history of Tibetan culture. The photographs collected for this project will be displayed in different sizes: approximately 300 in large format, 600 in medium format and 500 in small format, each accompanied by a caption with information on the tulku and on the photograph.

One extraordinary ancient Tibetan thangka of an important tulku and his lineage will also be displayed at the center of the photographs: a symbol of the direct connection of these photographs to the ancient artistic tradition of sacred Tibetan tulkus' portraits, a reminder of the uninterrupted tradition of the merciful glance.