

# Kora

An artists' book by Clifton Meador



The Derge Parkhang

In the west of China, in what has historically been part of Tibet, is one of the great cultural treasures of Tibetan Buddhism. Situated in a high valley, at about 3300 meters, is a temple devoted to the preservation and printing of the Tibetan sutras, a printing temple that holds the greatest number (more than 300,000) of Tibetan woodblocks in the world. The Derge Parkhang\* is frequently called the "Treasure house of Tibetan Culture."

I traveled to the Derge Parkhang first in the Summer of 2006 and again in the summer of 2007. I went as part of an interdisciplinary research team\*\* to understand traditional Tibetan book production as a living, ongoing endeavor,

rather than a dying museum of obsolete technology. What we found was surprising and exciting: not only is book production from carved wooden blocks an ongoing enterprise, but the Parkhang is publishing new works using this ancient xylographic technology.



A Tibetan-style book.

One of the most surprising and interesting things about the Parkhang for me was the reverence that the Tibetan have for it: it is, after all, just a printing plant and a place to store printing blocks, but pilgrims come from all over the Tibetan world to walk around it and pay respect to the books that are created there. I stood in front of the Parkhang and watched hundreds of people walk around and around the building as a way of honoring the contents. I saw people prostrating themselves in front of the building, crawling around the outside of the building, motivated by reverence and religious devotion.

For an artist like myself, where the printing of a book is an integral, creative part of the process, this appreciation for the printing of books is deeply moving. I know that the Tibetans revere the Parkhang from a sense of religious devotion, and that my work is deeply secular, but I was moved and impressed that a group of people could care so deeply about printing. As I stood there watching them, they seemed to embody the language of the books inside the Parkhang. I decided to make a digital font of line drawings of the pilgrims: a literal transformation of the pilgrims into text, at least in the context of this artists' book.

Kora is the name for Tibetan ritual circumambulation: walking clockwise around a site of religious importance. This book celebrates that practice at the Derge Parkhang.

\* Parkhang is a Tibetan word that means something like printing house, though almost all Parkhang were associated with monasteries and might therefore be called printing temples. I think it is more respectful and honest to just call them by their Tibetan name: Parkhang.

\*\*comprised of an anthropologist (Dr. Patrick Dowdey, curator of East Asian Art at the Mansfield Freen Center of East Asian Studies at Wesleyan University), a professor of Tibetan Buddhism (Dr. Padma'tso, herself a Tibetan and living in China) and myself as an artist who specializes in making books.

The form of Kora is derived from a traditional Tibetan-style book: the pages are loose and the long page shape is, in itself, a reference to palm leaf sutra from India. Tibetan books are, traditionally at least, printed from carved wooden blocks and come in five sizes, with the largest size reserved for the Kangyur and Dengyur, the books of scripture and commentary. The book cloth for Kora comes from Derge and is a traditional way to preserve a book.