

Thu Van Tran

24 hours in Hanoi

From 19 April to
30 June 2019

24 heures à Hanoi (24 Hours in Hanoi) translates a direct experience that the artist Thu Van Tran (born in Ho Chi Minh City in 1979) had last year during a stay in Hanoi, a city that was foreign to her, for the time it takes a revolution to occur.

Her visit to the Temple of Literature proved decisive for the project. The site is one of the most important cultural and spiritual centers dedicated to Confucius – and his heirs – in the country. There visitors can view 82 stone turtles whose shells support stelae with texts carved in Ancient Vietnamese, a form of the language that has been forgotten since the introduction of a Western alphabet by French and Portuguese Jesuits when they arrived in the 17th century. Symbols of eternity and wisdom, these turtles in Asia represent the allegories of the world – which, moreover, they bear on their four legs or is depicted on their shell. Stunned by her visit, Thu Van Tran has reproduced the 82 turtles in wax on a smaller scale.

Entering Le Crédac's large gallery, visitors walk among these sculptures as if in a mausoleum. An elegy-like melancholy overcomes one, a kind of meditation before these incarnations of the knowledge and history of Vietnam. The artist has chosen wax as her technique for reproducing the stone turtles as probably a reference to lost wax, that step in a process that makes it possible to cast a time-defying alloy; the wax indeed disappears, leaving in its place the eterni-

ty of bronze. Here Tran has decided to freeze the sculptures at a stage of fragility and eventual obliteration. Their milky untouched beauty is akin to the color of untreated natural rubber, a material that often appears in her work, moreover.

Over time the stelae have become illegible but Tran gives a second life to language through each animal and various written short poems (that can be heard in the film). Thus, the territory of writing is reborn from the stelae. From the start of her artmaking, the disappearance of texts and books has shaped her pieces, just like the disappearance of a language due to colonial hegemony.

The initial installation guides us to the screening of the film *24 heures à Hanoi* on two separate screens. The raw material of Tran's art is fiction. Despite the constant conjuring up of history because she belongs to two cultures, Tran is always breaking free of reality.

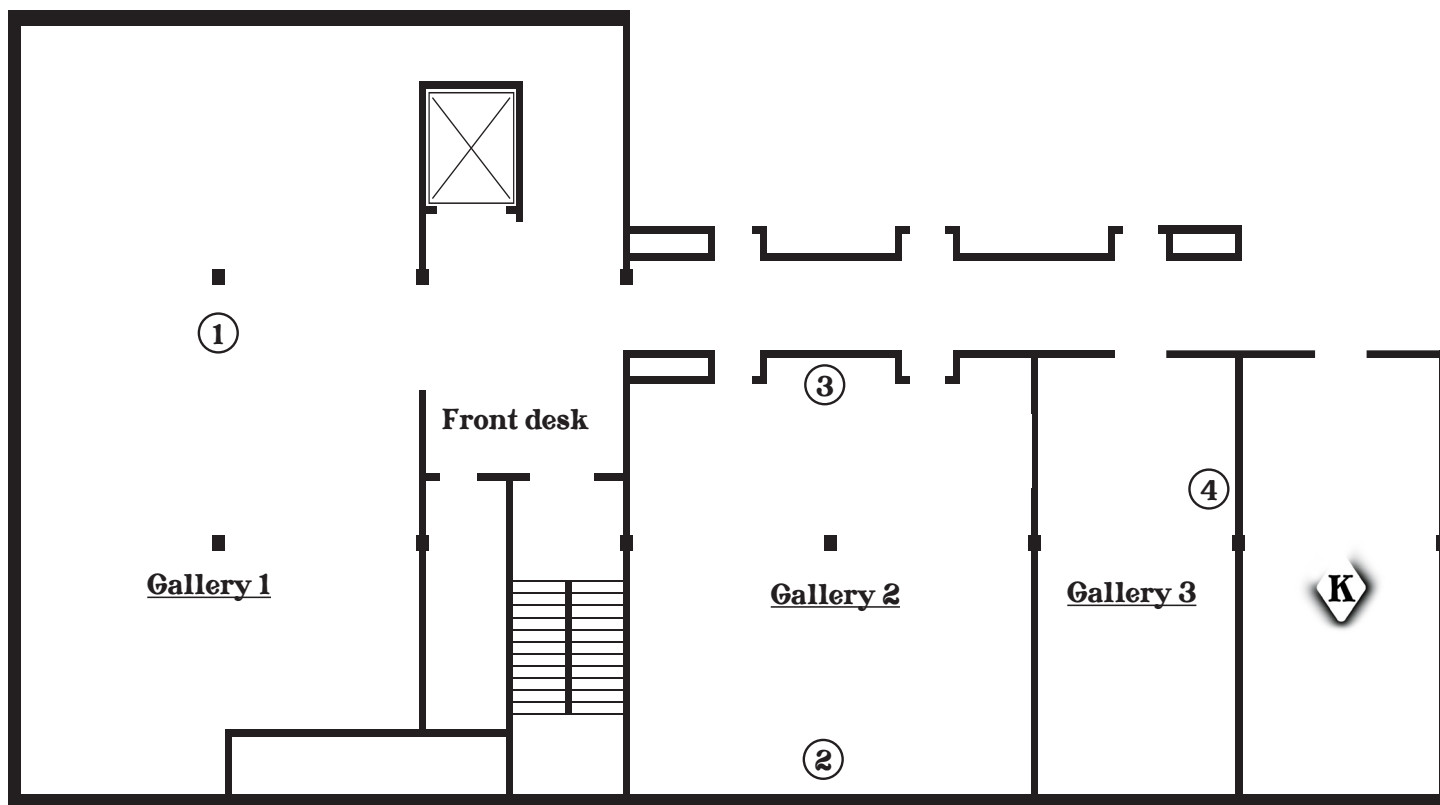
The film begins with a view of the winding Red River, shown without perspective, and continues with the gestures of a sculptor who is working clay for use in roofing. The camera follows the start of Hoa Mi's wandering. It's noon. She visits the Temple of Literature, one of whose courtyards houses the turtles, which speak to her in a dream. We will follow her during a terrestrial cycle in a city that is unknown to her. *These 24 hours are the theater of reappearances. Souls are recalled to our present existence*, the turtles whisper haikus. As if in a daydream, the instant is frozen in time, focusing in close-up on the stelae, their carved text nearly worn away, displaying a palimpsest of constellations. Further

along, Hoa Mi overlooks the temple's roof of wishes, then moves through a show venue where the tracking lights seem to play by turns the roles of the moon and the sun, and are superimposed like dreams and reality. The scarred tree looms up opposite Hoa Mi's feet, which are submerged in the liquid rubber; and still further on in a surprising effect hymns ascend from a cathedral, an enduring vestige of French colonization.

Opposite the screenings, Tran has hung two rubber skins in which turtle and rubber tree leaf motifs are encapsulated. Her experiments with the rubber tree entail a kind of colonial memory. For several years the artist has been keenly interested in *Hevea brasiliensis*, the scientific name of the rubber tree, that Brazilian seed that a French sailor transported across the ocean in the early 20th century and planted in Vietnam, where it was to produce great wealth. Tran has taken it up as an art material that is imbued with physical and historical traits. "For Vietnam, this seed was a poisoned chalice. It became a significant source of revenue but at the price of seeing the greater part of the country's fertile lands occupied by French colonists."¹ It continued to exact a devastating cost for Vietnam when the American military sprayed Agent Orange on rubber plantations during the Vietnam War.

In the third gallery of the exhibition, color is front and center, concentrating an ambiguous content that springs from work the artist first initiated in 2012 on multicolor herbicides, orange, white, blue, pink, green, and violet. "While contaminating the soil in Vietnam, the American army also colonized our imagina-

1 Lequeux, Emmanuelle, « Un artiste, une matière 6/6 : Thu-Van Tran et le caoutchouc », in *Le Monde* (20 August 2018), p.12.



tions: wasn't that colorful name, Rainbow Herbicide, a cynical way of fooling our unconscious?"²

Returning to a process that she had already worked with in the past, Thu Van Tran superimposed the six colors in different orders and opacities, inevitably producing gray. Tran freed herself from that result thanks to two elements that show through. There is, for example, a suggestion of the *Annunciation* fresco (cell 3) from the Convent of San Marco in Florence which Fra Angelico painted in 1440; Tran shows only the architectural matrix, removing the incarnation of the angel, Mary, and in all likelihood the artist. Like a cell that has been whitewashed, the gallery's proportions doubtless inspired in the artist this dip into the heart of the Quattrocento. She has transformed part of the baggage that Western Christianity carries with it into art, the depiction of the Constellation of the Turtle through 82 day and night points escaping from a setting reborn. If all religions and traditional societies are founded on oral tales explaining the origins of the

universe, or cosmogony, this one seems akin to Buddhism through its meditative power. Finally, in light of this fresco one cannot help but think as well of Marguerite Duras's novel *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (1952), in which a man at the start of the story decides the course of the rest of his life in front of Fra Angelico's fresco. Duras plays at creating another kind of Stendhal syndrome, given that the two scenes take place in Florence.

Beauty is one of the issues driving Thu Van Tran's work. Here, as in all of her work, it is a matter of constantly introducing the aesthetic experience as a modality of a possible rereading of history. According to Tran, the commitment to beauty and delight is a valid artistic stand. The gray of the fresco doesn't conclude the show since the artist has imagined its form as a loop where the constellation of the 82 circles brings us back to the revolution of *24 heures à Hanoi* and the 82 wise turtles, guardians of a the scholarly and poetic heritage of Vietnam.

Claire Le Restif

1

82 tortues me disent (82 turtles are telling me)
2019

Wax, shellac, plastiline, soil
Coproduction Thu Van Tran, Meessen de Clercq, le Crédac
Courtesy of the artist and Meessen de Clercq gallery, Brussels.

2

24 heures à Hanoi
2019

16 mm film, 2K video ;
colour, sound, 29 min
Courtesy of the artist and galleries Meessen de Clercq, Brussels, Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich

In the roles of:
Hoa Mi / Hoạ My Nguyễn
The young girl from the North /
Thị Giáng
Hương Phùng
The taxi driver / Thanh Tran Phuong

With the voices of:
The storyteller / Anh Tuấn Le
Hoa Mi / Irène Quoico

² Thu Van Tran and Claire Le Restif, « Les Belles distances (interview) », in *Beaux Arts magazine, hors-série : Thu Van Tran*, to be published (May 2019).

The Turtles / Thi Thuý Le
Recording: Manh Thái Hoang Le

Writing, filming, editing:
Thu Van Tran

Translation: Manh Thang Hoang Le
and Thu Van Tran

3

Pénétrable ; allégorie de la lune, de la feuille d'hévéa et de la tortue (Penetrable; allegory of the moon, the rubber leaf and the turtle)
2019

Latex, pigment
Courtesy of the artist and galleries
Meessen de Clercq, Brussels, Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich

4

Colours of grey ; constellation des 82 tortues (constellation of the 82 turtles)
2019

Pigment, binding medium, water, gouache, graphite
Courtesy of the artist and galleries
Meessen de Clercq, Brussels, Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich

The exhibition receives support from the Taguchi Art Collection, Tokyo and the help of RAJA Group.

Events and opening's partners:
Grolsch ; Les Nouveaux Robinson.

The artist would like to thank all those who made it possible, from near and far, to carry out this project: her family and collaborators in Vietnam, the Taguchi Foundation, her workshop in Paris, Claire Le Restif and the entire Crédac team.

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From a Far East to Another East

Un programme of films conceived
by Thu Van Tran

— From 18 to 28 April —

Minh Quý Trương (and Freddy Nadolny Poustochkine)

Minh Quý Trương was born in 1990 in Buon Ma Thuot in Vietnam's Central Highlands. In 2008, he entered Ho Chi Minh City's University of Theater and Cinema to study film direction, but broke off his studies at the end of his first year to embark on a career in independent film. In 2012, he joined the marketing team of AFA (Asian Film Academy, Busan International Film Festival) and competed in the Berlinale Talents section of the 2016 Berlin International Film Festival with his film *Mars in the Well*. He is currently part of the management team at Gã0, an exhibition venue in Ho Chi Minh City.

Mars in The Well, 2014

Film, color, sound; 19 min

Childhood memories and the landscape of his native city provide the materials of Minh Quý's films. *Mars in the Well* was largely filmed in Buon Ma Thuot on his parents' farm. In light of the natural disaster announced by rising sea levels (in the Mekong Delta the sea already reaches 60 km inland), Minh Quý imagines 2053 as the year of both Saigon disappearing beneath the flood and Vietnam's first attempts at an inhabited mission on Mars.

— From 2 to 12 May —

Quynh Dong

Quynh Dong was born in 1982 in Haiphong, the seaport that serves Hanoi. A 2004 graduate in graphic design from Bienne's School of Design, she pursued her studies in the fine arts in Switzerland at Bern

University of the Arts followed by Zurich University of the Arts. In 2013, she entered the residency program at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. The artist turns to pop culture to gather material for her works. Lacquer paintings, New Year calendars, decorative miniatures, children's toys, and the tropes of popular series are mixed and superimposed to create landscapes with unlikely cultural motifs.

Karaoke Night, 2009

Video, color, sound; 30 min

For Quynh Dong, karaoke – a popular institution which the Vietnamese are introduced to at a young age – enters a permanent practice of artistic research on the Vietnamese experience of the diaspora and the private role of community spaces. In this subculture, she views karaoke as an active form of isolation, which she assumes here by singing alone until she drops from exhaustion, from nightfall until the break of day.

Late Autumn, 2015

Video, color, sound; 15 min

Running counter to the kitsch of works, the imagery of *Late Autumn* is translucent. The silhouette of Quynh Dong, who is dressed in red, appears and disappears cyclically, just as the leaves of a tree, already bare, would slowly drop. The solemnity of these idle presences is joined to a melancholic soundtrack played by two violins in dialogue.

— From 15 to 26 May —

Công Tùng Trương

Born in 1986 in Đắk Lắk and currently based in Ho Chi Minh City, Công Tùng Trương graduated in 2010 from the fine arts university, having specialized in painting on lacquer. Deliberately more intuitive since then, his practice now incorporates video and installation, and draws its inspiration from spiritual culture, micro-history, shamanism, and ghosts.

Across the Forest, 2014-2019

Two-channel video, color,
sound; 17 min 42 sec

Across the Forest displays the artist's deep fascination with the history and culture of the Jarai, the largest ethnic group in Vietnam's Central Highlands, where he is from. The video depicts fragmentary scenes that play out simultaneously in that region: hands collecting latex from rubber plants; a basin, a bit of iron sheet, a jacket hanging from a tree to scare off birds; family members watching television, practicing slash-and-burn in their fields, digging, praying, sleeping. The artist incorporates in these sequences surreal images of night dreams. The surface of the film is steeped in a double exposure of flying ants and in the sounds of insects, thunder, and howls. The video paints a dark portrait and contemplates a community confronting numerous upheavals.

Portrait of a Deforming Symbol – Lost and Found, 2017

Two-channel video, color,
sound; 4 min 48 sec

This video is part of a vast project of collecting urban myths in Saigon. These "material myths" are mainly gathered in District 2, where the process of reshaping city space is the most obvious, from swamps to semi-urban zones to marshes once again, while awaiting the future megalopolis to arise. The myths can be found on the billboards with their faded images and torn slogans; in the plethora of pieces of iron scattered about and unearthed by metal detectors. These door bolts, rivets, scale weights, and tools, which in the past contributed to the community's daily life, have become scrap to be recycled. As objects fashioned by man, they last longer than the lifecycle of a human being and even though they are mere fragments, their bodies remain in places where even humanity is unable to resist.

— From 29 May to 9 June —

Que Chi Truong

Que Chi Truong (born in 1987)

holds an M.A. in film studies from the University of Paris III: Sorbonne Nouvelle. The artist and curator is active in the visual arts and cinema world. Her practice examines the spectacle of daily violence in Vietnam while also engaging with the complex relationship between archives, memory, and imagination. Since 2015 she has been a member of the curator board of the Nhà Sàn Collective, an artistic initiative from Hanoi's oldest not-for-profit art space. She is also a professor of film at Hanoi's University of Theater and Cinema.

Mặt trời đen, 2012

Video, color, sound; 12 min 55 sec

In her first short fiction film, Que Chi Truong films a young couple adrift in the urban jungle of Vietnam's largest city, Ho Chi Minh City. They hum *Mặt trời đen* (dark sun), a rock song expressing the pessimism of the young people of the Republic of South Vietnam before the country was unified in 1975.

— From 12 to 28 June —

Dimitris Tsoumplekas

Born in 1967 in Athens, Dimitris Tsoumplekas is a photographer and video maker. His work focuses mainly on the interaction between public and private, and the ways our environment – personal as well as collective – shape individual and social experience. Landscape literally and figuratively dominates his practice. He is a member of the Depression Era Collective, which has taken part in the Thessaloniki Biennial (2015) and the Culturescapes Festival in Basel (2017). In 2018 and 2019, Thu Van Tran and Dimitris Tsoumplekas participated in the group show *Anatomy of Political Melancholy* (cur. Katerina Gregos) at the Schwarz Foundation (on the island of Samos) and the Athens Conservatory.

TEXAS.

***The Problem With Our
Current Situation, 2011***

Slideshow ;
Digital photographs

In 2010, Dimitris Tsoumplekas returned to Greece after having lived nearly twenty years in Berlin. It was at this time that he began his Texas photograph series.

« *Texas is a tavern in Northwest Greece. Initially it was called "Paradise" and renamed "Texas" in the '70s when a man took off his gun and shot two customers. His wife and her lover.*

Texas is a battleground of repatriation. Coming back to Greece in 2010 I felt confused. I had to rearrange this uncanny spectacle of people and places and, because I failed constantly, I was drifting to an observation of small and big details of a disordered life. Everything I noticed seemed to result from a battle with time, a battle with itself.

Texas is a work of mourning.

Texas is a sort of farewell. The designation of the border. And the border, as perceived by Heidegger, 'is not where something ends, but as recognised by the Greeks, the border is where something begins to unfold its essence.' »

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