

*Toi khoc nhung chan troi khong co nguoi bay
Toi lai khoc nhung nguoi bay khong co chan troi*

**I cry when skylines do not have flying people
I cry again when flying people do not have skylines**
-Tran Dan (Written 1987/8, published 2007)

This tiny poem paints a bleak portrait of a place with no room for the imagination, a muffled lament for a landscape purged of artists. It was written in the early years of *doi moi*, the set of ‘open door’ economic policies that catapulted Vietnam into becoming one of the fastest growing economies in the world. At that time, Hanoi was a city ‘in the dark’, isolated from the world outside the communist block, impoverished, with few streetlights illuminating the night. As Tran Dan (1926-1997), the author of this poem, experienced, the cultural landscape was grim.

A former soldier-poet, Tran Dan was a central figure in the *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* movement (Humanism and Works of Beauty)¹ - a “brief flourish of dissent which burst forth in 1956”² Tran Dan was thrown into jail, sentenced to hard labor, expelled from the Artists Association³, banned from publication, publicly denounced and socially ostracized. In her book “A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam” Kim Ninh makes a convincing argument that “Tran Dan became a focal point around which a number of intellectual concerns coalesced, and the state’s violent reaction to him marked the moment when simmering intellectual questions burst into the open”⁴ Published twenty years after scribbled into his ‘dusty notebooks’, our title poem is one of fifty-odd “mini poems”, many of which are experimentations with sound and meaning, often attempting to create sounds that have no meaning at all. This collection, evidence that he continued to write novels and poetry under intense repression, is inspiring.

¹ For in depth history and analysis on *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* movement, see George Boudarel’s monograph “Cent Fleurs écloses dans la nuit de Vietnam: Communisme et Dissidence 1954-1956 (Paris: Editions Jacques Bertoin, 1991) , and Boudarel “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhan Van Giai Pham Affair,” trans. And ed. By Phi-Linh Banesth in *The Vietnam Forum*, No. 13 (1990), pp. 154-174. Also see Pete Zinoman’s forthcoming publication “Nhan Van-Giai Pham and Vietnamese “Reform Communism” in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation” in the *Journal of Cold War Studies*.

² Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002, p 156.

³ Founded in 1957, the Arts Association provides artist with a support system. Commissioning work, supplying art materials, organizing and promoting national art exhibitions. The Arts Association continues to exist, but artists are no longer reliant on it for sustenance. Structured like a governing body, the association has an executive committee acting “as supervisors of the art community, holding meetings every five years to decide the directives and goal of art production nationwide...The association became equated with officialdom, almost to the point that an artist who was not a member was virtually not considered an artist.” From Taylor, Nora 2004 *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2004, p. 55.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 129.

In pointing to the tragedy of a world without art, Tran Dan protests it. Beneath the depressed outlook, hovers an alternative reality, a confirmation that things have not always been this way, and will not always be this way. In his radical faithfulness to portraying his own version of the world, this is a poem of hope, opening up the possibility for freedom of expression, for future people in the skylines.

Today's Flying People

Nguyen Manh Hung's fine tuned and bizarre paintings take to the air, charting out incisive portraits of Vietnam now. In his irreverence for official-dome, Hung re-commemorates the military jet plane. They become more than vehicles of war. With these surreal hybridizations, Hung creates hypnogogic images that lay bare a simultaneously combative and symbiotic relationship between government mandated Marxist-Socialism and the consumer driven market-economy, between urban and rural life. The jets become ox carts, and literal carriers of meaning, transporting the countryside into the city, recycling, and discarding historical remnants deeply entrenched in present day Vietnam.

Nguyen Huy An guides us back down to the labyrinthine thoroughfares of Hanoi's Old Quarter – streets laid out 1,000 years ago. The city pulses now. Streaming with motorbikes, gilded in neon, rattling with the jackhammers of constant demolition and construction. Cutting beneath the flash and wildness of today's Hanoi, Huy An brings us to a standstill with his monastic approach to art making.

“This mess of thread is the result of walking and measuring each street in the Old Quarter of Hanoi... There is something unknowable hovering there – like a hidden shape: un-exposed, unclear, a veiled feeling... the thread itself is an encrypted curiosity and mystery.” (Nguyen Huy An 2011)

Huy An's creative process is a physical pilgrimage towards silence and the unknown. Shadows and traces are as much his medium as the simple materials he returns to time and again (coal, ink, thread). Huy An seems to want to become his materials – he once, in a performance, sat motionless in the umbra of street-signs throughout the night. For his project *“The Old Quarter”* Huy An collapses the city with the movements of his body, transforming a clandestine process and terrene expanse into a bare sculpture, looming and dense, but newly visible.

Nguyen Phuong Linh and **Bill Nguyen's work** emerges from the border of the city, in a partially demolished neighborhood on Hoang Hoa Tham street. Once forestland, then farmland, and until recently, a bustling neighborhood, it has been a historic borderland, where battles for control of Hanoi have been fought for centuries. In 2008, the government began a demolition project to make room for a bridge into new satellite suburbs. After three years, there is still no bridge. Unnervingly reminiscent of a bombsite, this section of the neighborhood is both inhabited and abandoned. Hoang Hoa Tham's remaining residents live in limbo, unsure of how long they can stay and where they will go. With current prices of land in the “golden areas” in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city even higher than in London, it is impossible for low-income earners, the vast majority of the population, to buy a home in their city.

Bill Nguyen's photographs abstract the environment – shells of houses, stripped of electrical wiring, windows and rebar, they have lost their function as homes. Bill records the residue of past inhabitants, the sooty wear of removed picture frames, and stairs that lead from floorless room to floorless room. Pausing at an uncertain, and uncomfortable intersection between war and rapid development, Bill condenses complex sites of memory into minimalist landscapes.

Nguyen Phuong Linh extends and transforms the temporary ruins. In “*Traveled Plants*” she collected wild shrubs from the rubble and plants abandoned in emptied houses. The salvaged garden is still growing. It will be protected and transported to safe places when the whole area is destroyed. “*City*” is constructed with broken bricks, ceramic, cutting boards, coal, ash, projected light and shadows. These unfolding projects, originally installed in the home of a family that has lived in Hoang Hoa Tham for two hundred years, eulogize what’s left behind, asking us to consider soon-to-be overlooked landscapes and forgotten histories.

Tuan Mami’s paintings are bursting and bright. Curious, overflowing and spare, the canvases animate a conversation on the tensions between censorship and revelation. Critiquing how authoritative structures of power force people to grow accustomed to ‘camouflaging’ in everyday life, Tuan lures us into a lush foliage. In these green dreamscapes danger is both hidden and latently obvious. Hungry for total liberation, his playful paintings create small pockets of clarity in the midst of tangled confusion, imagining a way out of personal and political repression.

A young *Viet Kieu* (Vietnamese overseas) living in Hanoi **Khanh Xiu Tran’s** photographs mix fearlessness with timidity, pregnant with strangeness. This reality is a complex drama, one she wants to get close to, and then closer still. Xiu shoots intimately and at a distance. People seem to become a part of the patterns around them. A portion of this series was commissioned for the “Long Bien Picture Show” a collaborative photography and video project curated by **Jaime Maxtone-Graham**, and **Nguyen Trinh Thi**. By law, all artwork publicly shown in Vietnam must first be approved by a government censorship board. Xiu’s cropped frames were singled out as inappropriate because they “would make Vietnamese people uncomfortable. “After an appeal, all her photographs were allowed to be shown⁵. As a discussion of origins, Xiu’s work explores the conflicts and disjuncts between displacement and integration, migration and physical appearance that emerge from her feelings of isolation in her parents’ native land.

Drawing upon his background in cinematography, **Jaime Maxtone-Graham** opens up a studio in the streets of Hanoi, setting up professional lights to produce an ongoing series of photographic portraits: incandescent, and nuanced. Acutely aware of the historical implications of being a Westerner settling down in Vietnam, his portraiture work is informed by colonial photographers of the late 19th and early 20th century. Husband of fellow *SWFP* artist **Nguyen Trinh Thi**, and father to their young daughter – Jaime uses his photographs to undermine the assumed roles of white men as patriarchs, and the rightful beneficiaries of power. These images portray collaborations– a temporary complication and undoing of the imbalance of power that defines photographer and subject, a trope that remains particularly persistent when visitors from ‘developed’ nations come bearing cameras to capture Vietnam. Committed to building a dialogue beyond the ‘decisive moment’, Jaime’s approach de-subjugates his subjects. Opening himself up to the possibilities that uncertainty and vulnerability provide, Jaime makes room for the people he photographs to shift the dynamics of power – putting them in control of how they want to step into the light he carries along with him.

Nguyen Trinh Thi’s sound and video installation “Unsubtitled” offers a haunting and defiant testament to the power and fragility of Hanoi’s experimental art scene. In the original installation at Nha San Studio, luminous figures were projected onto life-size wooden cutouts in the dark. These are the digital body-doubles of the individual artists who made up Nha San Studio’s social constellation in the Fall of 2010. The installation bends the dialogue surrounding an intense slew of negative media coverage and a

⁵ Jaime Maxtone-Graham. “The Long Bien Picture Show” *Trans Photography Review*. Ed. Sandra Matthews. Hampshire, Connecticut. University of Michigan Scholarly Publishing Office. Spring 2011. <<http://tapreview.org/curated/maxtone/maxtone.html>>

directive by the cultural police to “put on pause” all exhibitions at Nha San Studio. This particular clampdown was in reaction to photos of artist La Thi Dieu Ha performing in the nude. The images circulated like wildfire through the internet, making public evidence of the first instance of a female artist performing naked within the country. “Unsubtitled” opened the studio back up when the period of laying low ran its course.

Thi directed each artist to face the camera, eat an item of food, and then state their name followed by the name of the food they had just consumed. Suggesting a kind of review stand, the pseudo-interrogation sessions do not result in self-criticisms. Instead we see and hear a chorus of overlapping statements-of-the-obvious: the basic human act of eating was just committed. Examining the gap between artists and the general public, and questioning long running methods of surveillance and intimidation pervasive in Vietnam, Thi creates an ethereal portrait of this time in Hanoi, and of the flying people who inhabit it.