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Lacquer's Ecology, or the Swirl

By Kevin Chua

On Hang Bong and Hang Gai streets in the Old Quarter of Hanoi are several stores that sell a variety of craft goods: baskets, ceramics, textiles, wood carvings, and paintings. Some of these paintings are made using lacquer, an ancient and venerable tradition known in Vietnam as *son ta*.[1] The medium's renown is proportionate to its difficulty: the long and exhausting drying process lengthens the entire process for one painting to several months.[2] Originating in China, the technique for lacquer spread to Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam. In Vietnam, it has been used for several centuries, an essential decorative underpinning of aristocratic court culture.[3] During this ancient period, lacquer adorned furniture and temple architecture; it held ritual objects in the tight grip of the sacred.[4] Its mirror-like surface gave objects an entrancing gleam, and took its beholders out of ordinary time.

Lacquer's entry into modernity came in the 1920s, when the French – in Indochina as colonizers for about half a century – revived lacquer as part of a broad program of artistic education provided by the École des Beaux Arts d'Indochine. Joseph Inguimberty was famously struck by the lacquerwork in the Temple of Literature in Hanoi, and encouraged his Vietnamese students to try the ancient technique. Blending European aesthetics and Vietnamese subject matter, these students rediscovered a half-forgotten medium.

Now, ask any artist in Vietnam about lacquer, and they will trot out this well-known, potted history. Central to this story is a belief that lacquer calls up something essential about Vietnam. It speaks to tradition and cultural identity. Along with silk painting, lacquer has been held up as the truly Vietnamese art. It runs a straight line back to the nation's past.

What I will argue in this essay is that Oanh Phi Phi, in testing the limits and potential of the medium, is engaged in a project of unbinding lacquer's history. To "unbind" means to take apart, to separate. Before the tired story of national belonging and identity, what *is* lacquer? And more importantly, what does lacquer *do*? While it would be easy to list metaphors in front of Phi Phi's work ("It reminds me of... It looks like... It resembles..."), such description strikes me as of limited value. In this essay, I will go past metaphor, to engage what I consider to be the literal moment in or dimension of her work. This is a space of suspension and contradiction, with meaning unstable, and not (yet) resolved. Contradictions in three works by Phi Phi will open onto three historical moments.[5]

Before the work emerges as a finished painting, it is an unstable, liminal entity. When the harvested lacquer has settled into layers, it is worked or processed, either by hand or mechanical churn. If worked with a wooden paddle, the lacquer becomes a soft brown color, known colloquially in Vietnam as "cockroach wing." If an iron tool is used, a chemical reaction causes the lacquer to turn an opaque black, known as *son then*. Numerous thin layers of processed lacquer are applied onto the baseboard, with each individual layer dried and hardened. (Lacquer is a natural plastic that polymerizes upon contact with oxygen, giving the material its peculiar hardness.) As forms are painted on, mixed in, or sanded away during the layering, each layer interacts with the lower ones.[6] The top-most layer does not have priority. Ever so slowly, a painting is "found."[7] Usually the finished surface is of a deep black, which has an aqueous quality that Phi Phi beguilingly calls "liquid shadow." Its sheen differs from that of oil painting; think of the darkest black that descends to an infinite depth. Before the finished painting is a pluridimensional space and time that I call the "swirl." What if we treat lacquer's abyssal surface as a meeting place, rather than as an autonomous thing?[8] What if we think of lacquer as mediation, rather than terminus?[9]

Central to my essay will be the split between "art" and "craft," a legacy of Western modernity.[10] If "art" alludes to individuality, originality, uniqueness, and intelligence, "craft" harbors notions of the hand-made, skill, repetition, materiality, and nature.[11] The division between art and craft is often haphazard and arbitrary, setting one set of objects and makers apart from another.[12] But if we believe the Western moderns, craft can succeed into or becomes art. Moderns will often tell you that any artist can make this leap. But the move from craft to art is ultimately an idealist, occidentalist fantasy, that coincided with the late-19th century pseudo-scientific belief that placed "primitive" cultures at the bottom of an evolutionary ladder, and "advanced" European nations at the top. The craft-to-art succession is colonialist: while European colonizers paid lip service to developing the ability of their subjects to produce art, they privately believed that the natives were "inherently" incapable of transcending craft.[13] Look at the wall tiles, the basket, the rug in Gérôme's *Snake Charmer* (c. 1879): craft has long been fodder for Orientalist fantasy. Natives are kept in the subjection of believing they can make the leap from craft into art. The opposite direction of moving from art to craft is not without its own difficulties: art under modernity often dreams of its creation under conditions of unalienated labor.[14] But more often than not, this yearning for craft masks guilt and disavowal. True mergers of art and craft, accompanied by real changes in the social relations of production – think of moments in Russian Constructivism or the German Bauhaus – were rare. The succession of craft to art, then, often conceals a richer and more entangled set of relations. I will use the swirl to address these relations mobilized by lacquer: this is lacquer's ecology.[15]

One: 1920s-40s

Black Box (2005-2007) was the first of Phi Phi's mature works. Lacquer images cover the tops of sixteen equally-sized wooden boxes, all reminiscent of coffins, though ambiguous enough to be read as benches or storage containers. Breaking away from the categorial fixity of "painting" and "sculpture," Phi Phi sought to

create works that functioned as "fields of experience."[16] Displayed in a grid-like arrangement, "with neither chronological nor spatial order," the boxes induced a spatial and temporal levelling, or radical equity. It was as though we had stumbled onto a graveyard, surrounded by coffins unceremoniously pushed up – pushed back – into the world. No sunken plenitude of death for us.

The making of this work saw her actively thinking about the history and theory of lacquer painting. "Despite its extensive history," she wrote, "the complex and elaborate process of creating a lacquer image was mostly seen as a means to an end [...] I began to look for metaphors to capture the unique process of working with *son ta* [...]" Meaning contingently emerged out of process, rather than process as a brute means to an end. This manifests in *Black Box* in the way that metaphors do not extinguish the materiality or felt embodiment of the work. (I would *not* say that the more metaphors you can come up with, the better the work.)

The work's title gestures to something hidden and obscure. In media theory, a "black box" is a device or system – such as a transistor or algorithm – whose inner workings are closed off to an operator. Yet Phi Phi refrains from the false knowingness of metaphysical depth. The box covers are of shared food, shoes, a motorcycle: all "personal interpretations of social (but not socialist) realism," ordinary things and activities. She wanted to create a genre painting that reflected "shared and common experiences in Vietnamese society." (The absence of humans makes these feel less like genre painting than still life; perhaps human figures would have fixed the work too much in time.) These images notably evade tourist clichés of Vietnam (the street vendors, cyclos, etc.), and seem to reach for something more fundamental about Vietnamese experience, things or situations so ordinary and mundane that we tend *not* to remember them. One might say that she was returning lacquer to the quiet grandeur of the everyday, where one might find the psychological drive in life – which is also the drive toward death – in something like habit.

One can see the deep conditioning of Phi Phi's training as a painter in this work. An important influence was the Spanish artist Antonio López García, whom she sought out as teacher. From García she learnt not so much a particular style of genre painting, than how painting could become a form of "record keeping." Having her painting be index or trace allowed her to break free from representation. Painting no longer needed to depict a world. It also meant that culture didn't need to stand as figure to nature's ground.

Black Box is haunted by the split between the religious (the allusion to funerary ritual) and the secular (the relation to genre painting), which first occurred under the auspices of the École des Beaux Arts d'Indochine (hereafter EBAI), founded in Hanoi in 1925. French scholars differentiated between "*objets d'art*" and "*objets de culte*"[17], which was essentially the split between "art" and "craft." On Inguimberty's promotion, a lacquer painting studio was set up in 1927. Village artisan Đinh Văn Thành worked alongside students Trần Văn Cẩn and Trần Quang Trân, with their French painting teachers Alix Aymé and Inguimberty looking on.[18] At its best, the EBAI introduced a range of Western artistic techniques and media to Vietnam, and educated many students, several of whom went on to define "Vietnamese" art.

But though the French art teachers were generous, they may have always believed that their Vietnamese students didn't have it in them to create art.[19] Craft – artisanal production – it seemed, was all that they were capable of.[20] The distinction between art and craft mirrored other contradictions of the period: did the French want to give freedom and democracy to the country, or were these freedoms only nominal, with them ultimately doing everything in their power to keep Indochina as a colony?

Of the various students who took up lacquer painting in the 1920s and 30s, Nguyễn Gia Trí is widely acknowledged as the artist who moved lacquer most decisively from craft to art. His *Les Fées* (*The Fairies*), a giant, 10-paneled screen painted early in his career (c. 1936), may likely have made reference to Matisse's *Joy of Life* (1905-6), as curator Phoebe Scott has asserted. In size and ambition, the work rivals – dare I say outstrips? – that of Matisse. "[The] deliberately free and experimental treatment of the lacquer in *Les Fées*," Scott writes, "can be read as a self-conscious assertion of the artist's unbridled creativity – a message which had a loaded significance in the colonial context in which the work was made."[21] The work turns on the irony of the spontaneous forms having been realized – momentarily stilled – in the ineffably hard medium of lacquer. Spontaneity makes quick fiction of lacquer. Now it is by no means certain that the work was intended as an anti-colonial statement; only after 1945 were lacquer paintings such as these reframed as *national* achievements.[22] In 1936, things were more uncertain. Phi Phi admires *Les Fées* for its sheer experimentation; for her, the work is like a "dictionary" of lacquer painting techniques.[23]

Central to the colonial economy was the division between art and craft.[24] During the early colonial period (1880s-1910s), the goal of the administration was to assimilate Indochina into the French republic. Infrastructure was built and the economic efforts of the Vietnamese were developed – but only to an extent. Like the British in India, the French underdeveloped the Vietnamese handicraft industry.[25] This mirrored the underdevelopment of the economy as a whole.[26] Handicrafts were written off as export goods and as tax revenue as early as 1884.[27] Cultural assimilation was premised on "giving" French culture and civilization to the populace, which was accompanied by a defensive categorization of ethnic groups, and the racially-segregated urban planning of Hanoi. The cornerstone of economic exploitation rested on land alienation. By 1930, 50% of the rural population were landless peasants working on large estates; landless peasants in Tonkin totalled nearly 1 million.[28]

Towards the 1920s, the colonial project shifted from "assimilation" to "association." This was a softer and ostensibly more benign form of colonialism that purportedly allowed indigenous groups to develop along their own lines. Such cultural relativism was mirrored in architect-planner Ernest Hébrard's buildings, which incorporated Indochinese decorative features. (Of course the cultural hybridity bears similarity to the work being done at the EBAI.)[29] But beneath the superficial touting of Vietnamese tradition and cultural merger lay, in fact, a more repressive system of economic extraction.

In calling Nguyễn Gia Trí's work "experimental," the danger is in saying that his ideas – even political ideas – were unformed and inchoate. I wonder how much of Gia Trí's painting was mere artistic expression. One could say that in the 1920s and 30s, the very terms of the Vietnamese "nation" were up for grabs – the concept had not yet hardened.[30] (*Les Fées*, you could say, was neither Vietnamese nor French but both and neither.) Perhaps some of the painting's politics was relayed through Matisse – who is rarely thought of as *having* a politics.[31] Women-in-a-landscape was a trope of post-Renaissance European painting, and Gia Trí may have known it was the city's fantasy of the countryside. By the 1930s, Hanoi had become alienated from its surrounding provinces; rural-to-urban migration made that fact clear. One couldn't look out the window and fantasize about the landscape. The Haussmannization of the city cut its residents off from nature – but also their past.[32]

Scott argues that Gia Trí's lacquerwork can be seen alongside modernizing developments in Vietnamese literature and poetry during those decades.[33] Individualism was set against the strictures of family and society. But I wonder if there is more. What if the contradictions within Impressionism and Post-Impressionism/ Fauvism – spontaneity versus market rigidification, originality versus reproduction – were laid bare when these styles were handed out by the EBAI instructors? Was transcultural appropriation always already parody? Rather

than an idealism, Nguyễn Gia Trí may have been pursuing a critical *realism* (in other words, showing things as they are, rather than how we would like them to be). The women in the painting are notably depicted wearing the *ao dai*, an outfit that was being revived by local modernist designers in the 1930s.

Now we tend to think of the artists of this period as believing in the craft-to-art succession.[34] They wanted to make "fine art," and be dutifully educated by their French teachers. While I do think that a successful merger of art and craft occurred in the best artworks, it's not the idealist craft-to-art fantasy that we might be thinking of. If craft became art, it's by way of art carrying – in Adorno's definition – "truth content." It is the capacity of art to conduct immanent critique, to grasp the totality of nature and culture. Instead of presenting us with pastoral nature or a dreamy utopia, *Les Fées* may be about keeping the tension between nature and culture alive. In the indeterminacy of lacquer layers, in the aporetic non-merger of figure and ground, lies Nguyễn Gia Trí's modernism. The painting's expansive inwardness may have been a refusal of colonial extraction and underdevelopment. It's in the eternal disjunction of figure and ground that we find our necessary freedom.

Two: 1950s-80s

Specula (2007-2009) may be the most geological of Phi Phi's works.[35] A barrel-arched passageway with lacquered walls loosely reminiscent of a cave interior, walking through the space has us descending down successive layers of time. The "metamorphosis" of lacquer into stone, moss, or crystalline water isn't representational, she writes. Pigments formed from oxidation, water, precious metals, and resin from the earth, "[establish] a parallel with the natural matter of a cave." Layering and sanding the resin analogize the long and slow process of geological formation, sedimentation, and erosion. I would go a bit further: more than a material resemblance, *Specula* is a literal enactment of geological process.

A speculum is a medical device used to probe bodily cavities; the work has us penetrating, as she puts it, "the evocative space of this imaginary womb." Perhaps this is why the work feels involuted, turned in on itself. Phi Phi sends us – sends lacquer – down all manner of architectural cavities: Vietnamese village gates (*cong lang*), chapel naves, caves. (I keep thinking of the psychedelic corridor in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958).) The work feels prehistoric, as though church architecture had folded back to a more primordial regime of time. Or is time merely a question of orientation? What if we turn back, turn toward, not past but future? What if the future could be glimpsed in the past? The star-like shapes at the top call to mind Antoni Gaudí's dazzling riffs on Islamic architecture in Barcelona; like the ceiling of the Palau Güell., *Specula* has us looking skyward. Against the heaviness – the sheer weight – of death or sullen tradition, lacquer here is aqueous, light. Our feeling of suspension is enhanced by the lights from below. Of course, some prehistoric cave interiors have us hovering, their shamanic imagery torch lit and ablaze.

"When I started working on large compositions in lacquer, I realized that it is not a solitary individual practice but rather a team effort. I like to refer to my studio as a renaissance studio because while everyone has their role, there is a sense of an on-going learning process, experimentation and discovery." Usually she works with an assistant; the labour-intensive manufacture of lacquer all but requires it. But you could widen her circle of collaboration to encompass gallerists, dealers, writers, curators, and historians. If you count the people connected to galleries and museums, there are managers, funders, art handlers. (The contemporary art world will always want to highlight her individuality as an "artist," to have her working alone.) In fact, she relies on a chain of production involving human and nonhuman elements that starts from the *Rhus Succedanea* trees in Phu Tho province north of Hanoi, and runs through plantation owners, tree tappers, sap processors and sellers. To enter the rhythm and flow of materials and space is, for Phi Phi, to be "suspended" in the studio.

Lacquer painting became more difficult during the period from 1954 to 1986 in Vietnam (to call this period "Socialist" ignores the fact that the post-Doi Moi regime of market socialism is still socialist). Fighting on the battlefield took precedence over art production in the studio. Often neglected in art history, because of the supposed dearth of art, the period is nonetheless important for the meaning of modernism in Vietnam. Tô Ngọc Vân, who worked for the Viet Minh, and established a state school for the arts in the northern resistance zone, wanted to force a more definitive rupture with the EBAI, with the move to revolutionary politics. But he soon found himself unmoored. "Artistic change is so difficult," he cried. "We feel it is as heavy as moving a mountain."[36] He had shifted from oil depictions of idyllic bourgeois women to militant lacquer paintings of soldiers and peasants, such as *Soldiers and Porters Resting on a Hill* (1953). Though at first heeding Ho Chi Minh's call for art "to inspire the people's spirit and nation-building resistance," he came to decry such art as simplistic propaganda that was too easily understood by the masses. He became internally divided: "The torment of my soul is how to make the self that serves the nation and the masses and the self that serves art [...] not to come into conflict or, even worse, betray one another."[37] Though lacquer painting continued to be the preferred medium of the revolutionaries from 1945, formal experimentation was suppressed, scorned by the Communist Party as decadent colonialism. Most of the lacquer painting produced during this period has a familiar, rote cast of soldiers and peasants.[38] And yet there are exceptions. Nguyễn Văn Tỵ, a student at the EBAI from 1934-41, allegorically reunified North and South Vietnam in his lacquer painting *South and North United* (1961). Lisa Safford has pointed out that the topos of embracing women draws from Renaissance iconography of the Christian Visitation (i.e. Elizabeth visiting the Virgin Mary); Văn Tỵ may have seen such Western art after the reopening of the EBAI (under the provisional government) in 1945. The work's unexpected channelling of Western art challenges, maybe even scuttles, its avowed utopianism.[39] How moving, this reuniting of sisters. Văn Tỵ may have been painting Vietnamese Socialism's future-past. In North Vietnam in 1961, there was still reason to hope. It's a bit strange to find artworks of the period testing out, maybe realizing, possibilities brought forth by the EBAI, as though modernism was a still-unfinished project.

Curiously, in the post-1986 period, most lacquer artists in Vietnam have ascribed to "individual" or personal expression and style. Yet this individuality tends to be monotonous and uniform,[40] or rather, "collectivist." On the one hand, expressive lacquer painting in many ways continues the dream of the old socialism. (Phi Phi refrains from unitary or single meaning in her art, which she finds too rigid. She employs polysemy, but not as a simple appeal to different audiences. Meaning is found in the reflexively intentional making of a work, in the process of stirring and layering and sanding. Polysemy is *collective* rather than collectivist: it is a multiplicity that assembles and gathers things into a whole.) But on the other, socialist realism today is more diverse, and less dogmatic, than we might think. There are painters who *are* innovating, and whose use of words like "authenticity" and "experimentation" shouldn't be scoffed at. The centuries-old mandarin examination system in Vietnam, which allowed talented rural people to achieve promotion, and tied court to village, is seen again today in villagers who come to Hanoi to attain an École-based art education (now the Vietnam University of Fine Arts), and bring this knowledge back to their village.[41]

Collective, collection. Jennifer Way has written of how a collection in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC (accession number 244852, listed as "67 ethnological specimens [...] gathered from living peoples in Viet Nam," and a gift from the government of Vietnam in 1962[42]) was caught between competing imperatives. The collection was shown at the *Art and Archaeology of Vietnam, Asian Crossroad of Cultures* exhibition that opened in Washington, DC, in October 1960, which traveled to various locations in the United States in 1961.[43] The exhibition organizers wanted to showcase the democratic, pro-capitalist side of the new nation of South Vietnam through a selection of ethnological objects – including several lacquer trays,

panels, and screens – that were part of ancient trade networks.[44] But certain objects in the collection, which had been recently and commercially produced (i.e. handicrafts), stymied this goal. Some of them were also from North Vietnam. In the end, the collection failed to exemplify fine art. Events in Vietnam in the early 1960s (e.g. the increasing number of American troops in Vietnam) were moreover outpacing the ability of the collection to contain it. The collection ended up being relegated to storage in the Smithsonian, rather than at the Freer Gallery of Art or the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (both of which specialize in Asian art), in a kind of archival or museological limbo. For my purposes, the collection buckled under the art/craft contradiction, and the competing political interests of several agents and institutions.[45] The long and complicated history of the Vietnamese resisted forcible definition. And at no point was there a simple succession of craft into art.

Three: 1980s-2010s

In *Palimpsest* (2013-18), lacquer was painted on slides that were projected onto silk screens. In the centre of the room was a large projection device, assembled from old small and medium-format film projectors, which Phi Phi called a "lacquerscope" – alluding to microscopes and telescopes. It was as if we were pulled in two directions, led to see the really near and the really far. Micro and macro pull apart, and collide. Built into the work is, undeniably, a sense of wonder and discovery: one thinks of the worlds opened up by Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* in 1665. What do lacquer molecules look like, as the liquid is being stirred?

Phi Phi has written that "*Palimpsest* was [...] an attempt at the total dematerialization of the medium painted on opaque panels into light [...] What we see is no longer lacquer painting in the traditional sense, but an examination of its minute qualities, as though observing it through a microscope for the first time." But I wonder if there is an idealism lurking here: dematerialization (or transparency) can entail an epistemological determinism, to know in advance what we see. What do we *actually* see, than want to see? Blindness may paradoxically be the dominant mode of vision. When Freud used his metaphor of a "mystic writing pad" to refer to the palimpsest of memory, there was an unpredictability to what he was describing. Memories could be laid down, but also erased.[46] In the process of layering and sanding of lacquer, there is an unpredictability as to which layers show through, and how they do. "Palimpsest" refers to a Medieval parchment on which script can be crossed out and written over; the word – itself layered or palimpsestic – comes through Latin from the Greek "palimpsestos," which conjoins "palin" (again) and "psestos" (rubbed smooth).

I wonder whether we "see" lacquer at all. The word seems too belated, and obfuscates the conditions of production of lacquer (perhaps in the same way that exchange value belies use value). It's more like we are compelled to, or summoned by, lacquer. (I wonder, in a related manner, whether my visual sense – so privileged in Western modernity – inhibits access into other realms of experience.) The obdurate material seems to rebuff us, yet calls forth an envy, a desire to know its secrets. While it shares porcelain's penchant for secrecy – the Chinese recipe for kaolin wasn't discovered by the West until the mid-18th century – lacquer has little of porcelain's everyday familiarity (which is actually the result of centuries of mass, lower-grade production). More haughty than porcelain, lacquer's secrets remain cloaked.

The images on the slides themselves are fully abstract, without any recognizable imagery. Fungal, arrhythmic, they look biological, inhuman – we are looking at something grown, rather than made. In some places, we can see through the layers – they are uncannily transparent. It is as though we are looking through (our) skin, watching ourselves disappear. The projection device draws attention to the fact that all seeing is conditioned by a perceptual apparatus or machine. Seeing requires an ecology.

The involutive or ecological seeing involved in *Palimpsest* finds its opposite in the kind of seeing appropriate to beauty. Beauty is a form of distancing and detached contemplation. We look at the world, rather than be in it. (One recalls those EBAI students who went out to paint the landscape, rather than interact with the workers in it.[47] Also forgotten was the knowledge that pagodas had long been integrated into a circulating landscape of wind and water in Vietnam.[48]) Such an "aesthetic" attitude can be said to drive the market for contemporary art. The art market took off after the Doi Moi market reforms that began in 1986, which opened Vietnam up to foreign trade and investment.[49] With decollectivization came a resurgence of village craft traditions, and the handicraft industry boomed.[50] No doubt the market for oil painting is plagued by fakes, in the sense of copies – which only serves to fuel the market.[51] With lacquer painting, too, imitations occur in the form of industrial or car paint used to simulate natural lacquer; most tourists cannot spot the difference. What is unnerving, at least to scholars and artists in the West, is that even reputable artists and galleries get in on the act.[52] Such "commercial lacquer painting" (my term) does not resist the pull of the commodity; it bleeds into souvenir production. Hence its reliance on a manufactured *image* of Vietnam: quaint houses, pastoral villages, distinctive 'ethnic' clothing, etc. Tourism is nostalgia's twin. Such an image is also premised on the imagined continuity of the lacquer tradition in Vietnam. The post-Doi Moi opening of the country to foreign investment repeats the late-colonial lure, when Westerners were encouraged to travel to Vietnam.[53] Curiously, as the boom in the commercial lacquer painting market is occurring, one hears reports of the natural lacquer painting market "struggling."[54] However much this is true, it repeats colonial-era rhetoric, by which the French bemoaned the lack of improvement in the indigenous economy – but this false pity was a way for them to disavow their own underdevelopment of the Vietnamese handicraft industry. Neoliberal capitalism repeats the ruses of colonialism.[55]

The nostalgia for the old city found in many commercial lacquer paintings appeared just as a private construction boom in Hanoi was underway in the early 1990s.[56] Soaring property rental prices increased pressure to redevelop historic central areas of the city, with many residents in the centre of Hanoi forced to relocate to the suburbs. But resistance to urban development has emerged in unusual places. For example, the Hom-Duc Vien market in Hanoi – which contains monks' graves, animist trees, a market deity, the god of the earth and the god of wealth – was planned to be demolished, part of a broader government push to replace fresh markets with super- and hyper-markets.[57] (Urban renewal in Hanoi is accompanied by state efforts to impose "civilization.") The demolition didn't occur, due to the web of protective spirits in and around the market, and the people who believed in them. At a number of markets in Hanoi in the late 1980s and early 90s, local authorities went so far as to ban small altars in individual market stalls. No doubt the small altars often placed at the entrance of Vietnamese shops are mostly not made of lacquer (they are of the cheap, metallic variety). Yet each of these, I think, carries a memory of lacquer's former social function: as a platform for spirits.[58] One finds lacquer on the pillars of the Diec Pagoda in Vinh City, with the entire ruin abetting and disrupting colonial, socialist, and market-oriented urban development.[59] Some have argued that in the post-Doi Moi period, spirits have re-emerged – their occurrence, no doubt, a bulwark against the forces of rapid urbanization.

A pastoral image of the forest often accompanies the mention of lacquer.[60] The lacquer sap, again, comes from trees grown on cottage-industry plantations in Phu Tho province. Yet this forest could be reallocated by the government. Land expropriation has been undertaken by the state in the name of modernization and development, for the building of infrastructure, and for urban expansion.[61] In principle, since the market-oriented reforms of the late 1980s, forest and agricultural land have been decollectivized, and redistributed to individual households. In turn, foreign and domestic markets have been liberalized, which has encouraged economic investment into mountain areas, with the goal of intensifying fixed cultivation. Farmers have been

encouraged to move away from swidden agriculture, in favour of irrigated rice agriculture, with the aim of making the land more productive.[62] But in practice, state efforts at territorialisation (surveying, mapping, etc.) have not uniformly led to private control.[63] The leasing of land to foreigners has, at times, encountered resistance.[64] There has been a disconnect between official government policy and the local understanding and implementation of such land-use policies.[65] The influx of foreign capital into environmental management, forestry development and biodiversity conservation has "inadvertently [legitimized] state territorial strategies, [deepened] distributional inequity and paradoxically [undermined] [...] biodiversity."[66] The industrial exploitation of the forest, which began during the French colonial period, has effectively been revived.[67] "Ecological" destinations like Thung Nham Bird Park are actually tourism corporations. Forests are being depopulated of animals, to supply a demand for wildlife meat in urban restaurants, and for Eastern medicine in Vietnam and China (e.g. bear bile for cancer).[68] Archaic dreams of Eastern health and sexual potency are driving species extinction. As all this is happening, climate change is exacerbating environmental conditions, and the ability of agriculture to adapt.[69] Beneath the surface image of lacquer is a more complicated political ecology of land use, agriculture, and species survival.

For me, the thrilling (disturbing) thing about lacquer lies in the anxiety of not knowing where the "ground," the bottom layer, is. Figures seem to float. One always feels suspended; these are vertiginous pools of doom. As anxiety builds, the formality of the medium seems to announce itself, calls one to decorous attention. Lacquer's austerity invites deception: it is as though one could feign one's belonging to court or aristocracy – and get away with it. Cue the deceptions of the commercial lacquer painting market.

The infinite suspension is also a movement. Lacquer's more compelling history, I think, resides in its nomadism, its ability to infiltrate objects, rooms, and spaces. To have these objects quietly appear *as* furniture (perhaps the highest compliment for any medium is to be able to disappear into mediation). Lacquer was originally designed to protect objects from elements, and sometimes these objects travelled. While it is almost certain that lacquer came from China, more interesting are stories of its circulation.[70] For example, what was lacquer *doing*, when ambassador Tran Tuong Cong famously brought lacquerware from Hunan back to Hanoi in the 15th century?[71] Did those objects give his entourage strength and vitality, on their journey?

While lacquer is commonly thought of as requiring precise climactic conditions[72] to dry, we can think of the process as a string of contingencies. Compressed into the material are conditions of site and place: like wine, lacquer has *terroir*.[73] Before it hardens as material, lacquer is about durational process: waiting for layers to dry, the slow trickle of time. Before it hardens as meaning, lacquer consists of the connections that take lacquer painting beyond studio and market, from the micro- to the macro-level (and back again).

For Phi Phi, lacquer establishes a relationship to place, without the need for a determined sense of belonging. Without the need for nationalism, and its brand of identity. Place without identity. I think of this as getting used to our transience, to a world without false, transcendental ideals. Thinking about lacquer's ecology – which is a world beyond the false dichotomy of art and craft – might allow us to move beyond the familiar divides between natural (or collectivist) and commercial lacquer painting, or between what Phi Phi is doing and the vast majority of socialist-realist lacquer painters driven, sincerely-driven, by authenticity and nationalist belonging. Again, so much of the discourse unhelpfully hinges on lacquer's being "original" and "authentic" to Vietnam. Even the craft industry in Vietnam faces the problem of how to bring lacquer into modernity, which is not the same thing as having craft succeed into art. What is a "global" lacquer tradition that doesn't cling to an essentialized, reductive version of "Vietnam"?

Suffice to say that Phi Phi doesn't have all the answers. Her work has, however, started the process of unbinding lacquer's history. In her use of the material, Oanh Phi Phi puts into motion the swirl of studio, market, city, forest, world. Humans and nonhumans uncouple and tether, in lacquer's steady dance of agency. Agency, distributed among multifarious relations, isn't knowable in advance. A gust of wind can literally kill a painting. But the unbeknownness of agency is both condition and exigency, crucial as she pays attention to the pools and eddies of lacquer's history. So we wait for lacquer to dry; we await its limpid sheen, on the far side of time.

END

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[1] Southeast Asians have never had access to sap of *Rhus verniciflua*, used by Chinese Korean and Japanese. The three main sources are *Rhus succedanea*, *Melanorrhea laccifera* and *M usitata*. Trees grow in drier forest zones up to about 1000 meters, and are not deliberately cultivated. Tapping is carried out by making V-shaped incisions and inserting small bamboo cylinders to catch the resin. The matured resin is black, which can be intensified by adding iron sulphate or softened with indigo, while the addition of cinnabar (red mercuric sulphide) or red ochre produces red lacquer. The tapped resin stored in covered baskets of woven bamboo, which have been waterproofed with lacquered paper or paper soaked in persimmon oil. The resin separates into five distinct layers, with the lowest providing a base for crude varnish and fillers, and the next a caulking material for boats and baskets. The second and third layers – *son nhat* and *son nhi* – are used for decorative work after further filtering. Anthony Christie, "South East Asia," in Jonathan Bourne, et. al., *Lacquer: An International History and Collectors' Guide* (London: Bracken Books in association with Phoebe Phillips Editions, 1989), 144.

[2] Lacquer has the ability to resist drying, even in dry conditions. If the atmosphere is damp, oxygen is absorbed more quickly and evenly. Lacquer is applied in very thin layers; each of which is dried for three days or more. More than ten layers can be painted on. During the high point of lacquer in China in the 14th and 15th centuries, between a hundred and two hundred layers could be applied to a single piece. Five basic pigments are added to lacquer: red, green, yellow, gold, and brown. These blend well into the liquid. The object is first covered with a thin coat of fine sawdust mixed with filtered lacquer and filler. This is rubbed down with pumice and covered with a mixture of lacquer and finely filtered clay. Further layers of carefully graded lacquer follow, each polished with powders and "cured" in a warm, damp atmosphere.

Lacquer: An International History and Collectors' Guide, 12.

[3] Though lacquered leather has been used for the saddles and harnesses of mandarin's horses, and the decoration of carrying chairs, it is the decoration on wood which most typifies the work of the Vietnam region, which can be seen on screens, containers and furniture. *Lacquer: An International History and Collectors' Guide*, 145.

[4] "[In] the pre-modern world [the] chemical process [behind lacquer's transformation from liquid to solid] was not understood; lacquer's potential to move between liquid and solid state was consequently invested with magical properties. Lacquer was, quite literally, a medium for getting in touch with the divine. This attribute, together with the astonishing durability of objects covered with it, helps to explain why since ancient times it was used for grave goods, Buddhist images and ritual propaganda." Christine M. E. Guth, "Out of touch: on the sensorial in the historical interpretation of Japanese lacquer," in *East Asian Lacquer: Material Culture, Science and Conservation*, eds. Shayne Rivers, Rupert Faulkner and Boris Pretzel (London: Archetype Publications in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011), 3.

[5] These three moments or periods are loosely connected to the work; they are by no means meant as comprehensive explanations of the individual works.

[6] According to Phi Phi, in the application of paint, lacquer is the opposite of oil painting: with oil, one builds from thin to thick layers; with lacquer, one builds from thick to thin.

[7] For Nguyen-Long, "Due to this long process it is not possible for the artist to be spontaneous in execution. What can be captured is a form of delayed spontaneity. Thus considerable skill and experience is needed to produce a painting that conveys a sense of spontaneity, liveliness and movement." Kerry Nguyen-Long, "Lacquer Artists of Vietnam," *Arts of Asia*, vol. 32, issue 1 (January-February 2002): 34.

[8] I borrow the phrase from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xxxiv.

[9] Most art histories of Vietnamese lacquer approach it in terms of stylistic evolution, with style as a terminus. E.g. Nguyen-Long, op. cit..

[10] Larry E. Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Though there were various forms of the art/craft (or liberal art/vulgar art) dichotomy since around 500 BCE in the West, it underwent a polarization only in the late-18th century. Thus began the modern *system* of art that underwent various challenges, especially from the late-19th century (e.g. the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain), but which we are still living with today. A key factor that affected the art/craft opposition was the arrival of industrialized production, which removed the need for human workers in factories, thereby decimating many craft industries. Such machine production mostly began in Vietnam with colonialism in the late-19th century.

[11] "Craft" refers to madeness (in other words, form), materiality (which isn't specific to craft), or skill (from the Old English word "craeft"). The association with the hand is important. For much of its history, craft did not include mass production. "Handicraft" refers to the skill of making decorative objects by hand; it comes from the Middle English word "handcraft." For the politics of craft, see Michele Krugh, "Joy in Labour: The Politicization of Craft from the Arts and Crafts Movement to Etsy," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 281-301.

[12] For a fresh rethinking of "craft," see Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). Adamson confines his study to modern and contemporary Western art.

[13] Pamela Corey writes that "For [artists], such as the late Vietnamese artist Vu Dan Tan, craft methods – both improvisational and cultivated – served as a way to shift paradigms of artistic representation away from painting on canvas, with its colonial residues as the predominant focus in institutional pedagogy and tourist markets, and to signal the vitality of the vernacular, the ephemeral, and the locally sourced." But the use of media other than painting may only perpetuate modern, colonialist framings of the art/craft dichotomy set out in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Craft becomes – perhaps has always been – the false repository of cultural authenticity. Her argument regarding Sopheap Pich and Dinh Q. Lê needs to defend them from the charge of possible (self-)Orientalism, in their use of craft. See Pamela N. Corey, "Beyond Yet Toward Representation: Diasporic Artists and Craft as Conceptualism in Contemporary Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Modern Craft*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2016): 161-181.

[14] The Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain tried to put this philosophy into action.

[15] I see ecology as inseparable from capitalism. For the ecology of capitalism, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). Marx is often (wrongly) criticized for promoting a Baconian domination of nature and a technological Prometheanism, whereas he was acutely aware of the emergent splits between nature and culture, city and country, capital and labor. Marx was also concerned with the co-evolution of human beings and the environment; both were interdependent and changed over time. As a "materialist," Marx "[saw] evolution as an open-ended process of natural history, governed by contingency, but open to rational explanation." (16) For Marx's concept of "metabolism," see 158-160. My approach to ecology is aligned with the fields of political ecology and political ontology; see, for instance, the work of Bruno Latour. For a refreshing history of Vietnam that considers ecology as intrinsic to social and political history, see Ben Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[16] The quotes are mostly from an essay by Oanh Phi Phi of her work: Phi Phi Oanh, "A Contemporary Approach to Vietnamese Lacquer Painting," in *Arts du Vietnam: Nouvelles Approches*, eds. Caroline Herbelin, Béatrice Wisniewski, Françoise Dalex (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 159-164.

[17] Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 35.

[18] Phoebe Scott informs me that there was a richer sense of collaboration between the EBAI teachers and students, than the teachers simply "looking on." Alix Aymé, for instance, made lacquer painting herself.

[19] Victor Tardieu's successor, Evariste Jonchère, reportedly said: "I have seen the artists in Hanoi and they are artisans, not artists." See Taylor, 34. Tardieu was rare for the period in truly supporting his students' ability to create art.

[20] E.g.: "In an era where it seems that the machine must more and more take the place of man, beautiful lacquers attest to the wisdom of those who knew, disinterestedly, how to submit themselves to the exigencies of a severe technique, in order to realise a marvelous collaboration of material and spirit." Alix Aymé, "L'Art de la Laque," *Tropiques: revue des troupes coloniales* 327 (1950): 53, 60. (Translation by Scott.) Note how Orientalist the passage is: by fixing the dominance of art over craft, by the notion of artists "submitting" to technique, by the unifying "collaboration" of "material and spirit."

[21] Phoebe Scott, "Lacquer Painting Between Materiality and History," in *Radiant Material: A Dialogue in Vietnamese Lacquer Painting*, published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, held from 5 June to 3 September 2017 at the National Gallery Singapore (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 12.

[22] One of the strongest statements on the characteristics and capacities of lacquer was by Tô Ngọc Vân: "The radiant substance of lacquer pleases artists who are thirsting to find a new medium, more eye-catching and more moving than oil paint. The substances of 'cockroach-wing' lacquer, black lacquer, gold and silver in lacquer are changeable, flexible, no longer substance without soul [...] Not one red of oil paint can stand beside the red of lacquer without being made pale. There has never been a black of oil paint that could be put beside the black of lacquer without being made to seem faded and motionless." Tô Ngọc Vân, "*Son mai* (Lacquer)," *Van Nghe* 5 (1948): 21. Quoted on Scott, 4. For Nguyễn Gia Trí, see also Lisa Bixenstine Safford, "Art at the Crossroads: Lacquer Painting in French Vietnam," *Journal of Transcultural Studies* 1 (2015): 126-170, esp. 133-138.

[23] Phi Phi exhibited her *Pro Se* at the National Gallery Singapore. The work was specially commissioned for the 2017 exhibition *Radiant Material*, as a response to Nguyễn Gia Trí's *Les Fées*. For *Pro Se*, Phi Phi wanted to renew Nguyễn Gia Trí's question of how to paint lacquer in a "modern" age. She answered it with social media imagery of contemporary, everyday experience.

[24] Before the colonial era, there were periods when craft production was encouraged. E.g. with the new societies formed as a result of the Tay Son Rebellion (1771-1802). See "The Tay Son Rebellion," in Ronald J. Cima, ed. *Vietnam: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987).

[25] Meena HK, "British Industrial Policy and [the] Decline of Handicrafts in [the] 19th and 20th century," *International Journal of Advances in Social Science and Humanities*, vol. 4, issue 4 (April 2016): 41-48. For Marx, "It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel. England began with driving the Indian cottons from the European market; it then introduced twist [i.e. a fine strong thread consisting of twisted strands of cotton or silk] into Hindustan, and in the end inundated the very mother country of cotton with cottons. From 1818 to 1836 the export of twist from Great Britain to India rose in the proportion of 1 to 5,200. In 1824 the export of British muslins to India hardly amounted to 1,000,000 yards, while in 1837 it surpassed 64,000,000 of yards. But at the same time the population of Dacca decreased from 150,000 inhabitants to 20,000. This decline of Indian towns celebrated for their fabrics was by no means the worst consequence. British steam and science uprooted, over the whole surface of Hindostan, the union between agriculture and manufacturing industry." Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," *New York Daily Tribune*, June 25, 1853. "Other villages which relied on a particular craft were also affected when, for example, the French demanded [that] villagers set ridiculously low prices on all handicrafts and then proceeded to buy up large quantities of them to trade in Europe." Julie Shackford, *Vietnam: An Historical Perspective* (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i, 1992), 156-157.

[26] Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 116-136.

[27] William S. Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 77.

[28] Cima, ed. *Vietnam: A Country Study*.

[29] In his teaching at the Hanoi College of Fine Arts, Hébrard narrowly inculcated the *style indochinois*, and didn't think Vietnamese architects and planners were capable of developing a style for themselves. (Logan, 105.) Gwendolyn Wright sees these architectural developments as a self-serving scheme by which colonial officials "hoped to preserve an established sense of hierarchy and propriety, buttressing it with what they perceived to be traditional rituals, spatial patterns, and architectural ornament, believing that this would reinforce their own superimposed power." Gwendolyn Wright, "Tradition in the Service of Modernity: Architecture and Urbanism in French Colonial Policy, 1900-1930," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 59 (1987): 292.

[30] For Southeast Asian literature that challenged the vitalist ontology of the nation, see Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[31] For the Matisse of refusal, see T. J. Clark, "Madame Matisse's Hat," *London Review of Books*, vol. 30, no. 16, August 14, 2008, 29-32; T. J. Clark, "The Urge to Strangle," *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 11, June 5, 2014, 3-6. For intentionality in Matisse, against affective readings of his art, see Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[32] For the "Haussmannization" of Hanoi, see Logan, *Hanoi*, 104ff.

[33] Phoebe Scott, "Towards an Unstable Centre," in *Reframing Modernism: Painting from Southeast Asia, Europe and Beyond*, exh. cat. (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2012), 26-27 and 36-37.

[34] E.g. Nadine André-Pallois, "Le Renouveau de la peinture à la laque au Vietnam: L'Impact de la colonisation," in Flora Blanchon, ed., *La question de l'art en Asie orientale* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008), 345-354. Yet there is strong period evidence to suggest that the EBAI students *did* care about the art-craft distinction; indeed, the distinction was probably more important to them then, than it is for us today. Another important qualification is that most of the EBAI students weren't trained as craftsmen; few had training in craft techniques before entering art school. I would nevertheless say that the EBAI instilled the craft-to-art succession in them, which is also a desire and fantasy.

[35] She has said: "[To] work with lacquer, a medium that requires so much time and energy requires a deep desire to give yourself up to the influence of the environment. I think it also requires the willingness to accept that not everything is under the complete control of the artist and to accept that the artistic process involves both creation and destruction. For me, an image in lacquer is not the representation [of] one single inspired moment built up by skilled hands but is more akin to a fossil, a record of a cycle of creation and destruction by sanding to come to a more concise image of intention."

[36] This section draws from Safford, "Art at the Crossroads," 151-157.

[37] What interests me about Tô Ngọc Vân is that his move to the forest did not just involve a change of styles, but may also have been an intensification of modernism. For Tô Ngọc Vân, see Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 47-52.

[38] Nora Taylor points out that for a time, this was genuine, utopian, and – if we believe the artists, who accompanied the soldiers on the field – highly charged.

[39] I wouldn't agree with Safford's point that "These ideological rebels [Nguyen Tu Nghiem and Bui Xuan Phai], who explored the purity of the distinctive lacquer medium, [their] ethnic identity embodied in pre-colonial folk borrowings [...], and [with a] freedom of personal expression *devoid of propaganda*, have had the greatest impact upon the artists that have emerged since Doi Moi." Safford, 156 (emphasis mine). "Personal expression" is itself of course highly ideological – since the 1980s, it has become the ethos of market capitalism.

[40] See, for example, the paintings in Quang Viet, *Vietnamese Lacquer Painting* / *Hoi hoa son mai Viet Nam* (Ha Noi: Nha xuat ban My thuat, 2014). Phi Phi tells me that there is an annual exhibition of "new" socialist realist lacquer paintings in Hanoi.

[41] "As [David] Marr has pointed out, scholars had 'spent most of their existence far from court and close to the annual harvest cycle, teaching, writing, or serving in district and provincial positions.' Thus, 'the ricefields' gave scholars and peasants alike 'a reason for being and sealed the contract between man, soil, and sky.'" Kiernan, *Viet Nam*, 327. He cites David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 53ff.

[42] Among the items included in the collection were: a carved chest with bone shutters; a wooden printing block; ceramic fighting cocks; carved, wooden, inlaid and silver boxes; a brass perfume brassier; tortoise shell fans; and – for my purposes – lacquered, brass, and silver trays. Jennifer Way, "The Liminal Collection: Vietnamese Handicraft at the Smithsonian," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 116.

[43] The exhibition was organized by the Smithsonian National Collection of Fine Arts with the Embassy of Vietnam.

[44] The lacquer objects were in the "Ethnological Section" of the exhibition. i.e. they were presented as (ideal, pure) art rather than craft. "[The] exhibition's examples of Oc-Eo culture demonstrated significant exchange with Mediterranean cultures via India and the Middle East." Way, 124.

[45] "the handicraft artifacts did not signify as expressly Vietnamese, whether for the Smithsonian or for the State Department aid program." Way, 133.

[46] For the "mystic writing pad," see Sigmund Freud, "A Note upon the Mystic Writing Pad," (1925), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19 (1923-25), *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey, rev. ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 227-232.

[47] Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 25-26.

[48] Logan, *Hanoi*, 60. The wind/water theory emphasizes the ecological value of several urban and architectural features, for example, the dyke system that allowed the steady regulation of water flow in Hanoi.

[49] For a trenchant demystification of the notion that the 1986 reforms brought freedom and liberation to the Vietnamese art world, see Nora A. Taylor and Pamela N. Corey, "Doi Moi and the Globalization of Vietnamese Art," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 14, issue 1 (2019): 1-34.

[50] On the resurgence of village craft production, see Taylor and Corey, 8. Several village handicraft companies have developed connections to the global market. See Rachael A. Szydlowski, "Expansion of the Vietnamese Handicraft Industry: From Local to Global" (MA thesis, Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 2008).

[51] For the Bui Xuan Phai phenomenon, see Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 63-76. See also Richard C. Paddock, "Vietnamese Art Has Never Been More Popular. But the Market is Full of Fakes," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/arts/design/vietnamese-art-has-never- been-more-popular-but-the-market-is-full-of-fakes.html.

[52] The Vietnamese indifference toward the copy may be a Chinese phenomenon. See Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd (Boston: The MIT Press, 2017). He argues that the Chinese copy has an ontology that is different from that of the West.

[53] E.g. For Vice Admiral de Marolles at the Exposition Coloniale of 1931 in Paris, "One of the facts that would have struck the visitor to the exhibition has doubtless been the marvellous development that Tonkin has made in less than fifty years." Quoted on Logan, *Hanoi*, 96.

[54] E.g. "Vietnam's Traditional Lacquer Art Struggling to Survive," *Tuoi Tre News*, August 19, 2014, https://tuoitrenews.vn/lifestyle/21757/vietnams-traditional-lacquer-art-struggling-to-survive. The author points out that "In recent years, traditional craft villages such as Ha Thai, Chuyen My and Chuon in Hanoi, Dinh Bang and Cat Dang in northern Vietnam's Bac Ninh and Nam Dinh provinces have also switched to industrial lacquer and adopted more machine-run production phases."

[55] For the appropriateness of "neoliberalism" to Vietnam, see Christina Schwenkel and Ann Marie Leshkowich, "How is Neoliberalism Good to Think Vietnam? How is Vietnam Good to Think Neoliberalism?", *positions: asia critique*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 379-401.

[56] Logan, *Hanoi*, 223. From 1989, the government largely withdrew from the provision of public housing, in favor of the construction and renovation of apartment buildings and houses by the private market. This policy shift allowed the sale of public housing. Another result was a private construction boom.

[57] Gertrud Hüwelmeier, "Market Shrines and Urban Renewal in Hanoi," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 2 (July 2018): 291-318. She writes: "Anthropological research on market shrines, particular trees, graves and cemeteries, pagodas and temples in Hanoi contributes to the ecologies of urbanism framework by insisting on an expanded understanding of ecology that includes the natural environment but considers ecology in a broader sense. Competing discourses, multiple voices, (in)visible entities and various levels of political hierarchies in (post-)socialist Vietnam generate competing urban ecologies [...] Agents in these processes are residents, urban activists, traders, planners and local authorities on the human side, and spirits inhabiting the urban infrastructure, including market shrines, on the non-human side." Hüwelmeier, 311.

[58] E.g. "Parfois ce n'est pas un seul esprit qui s'incarne dans un individu, mais plusieurs; dans certains cas toute une multitude. Lorsque le dong, pour quelque opération de nécromancie, doit descendre aux enfers, il faut qu'il soit guidé par des esprits qui s'incarnent dans telle ou telle partie de son corps: <<Je salue le Bouddha, les saints et tous les esprits dignitaires – dit le sorcier –. Veuillez protéger le dong; les chefs sur la tête et les partisans sur les pieds; sur chaque épaule 10,000 généraux et 10,000 génies. Que Bouddha se tienne sur la tête du medium; que la grande déesse Muong et la saint Le mai dai vuong se posent sur l'épaule droite; que l'épaule gauche soit occupée par la puissante déesse du Tonkin et le prince Son trang. [...] Les deux Hac sat veillent à ce que le médium tienne ses deux mains appliquées sur son visage comme si elle y étaient fixées avec de la laque, de la résine, de la gomme ou de la poix. [...]>>." Paul Giran, *Magie et religion annamites: introduction à une philosophie de la civilisation du peuple d'Annam* (Paris: Challamel, 1912), 142-143.

[59] Christina Schwenkel, "Haunted Infrastructure: Religious Ruins and Urban Obstruction in Vietnam," *City & Society*, vol. 29, issue 3 (2017): 413-434.

[60] There is the occasional sentimental display of lacquer paintings in the forest. E.g. "A lacquer painting exhibition in the forest," *Tuoi Tre News*, May 22, 2013, https://tuoitrenews.vn/lifestyle/9880/a-lacquer-painting-exhibition-in-the-forest.

[61] Philip Taylor points out that land contestations have not simply involved a dyadic relationship between state and society: "The apparent incapacity of the society's governing institutions to effectively resolve land disputes has created the conditions for a suite of quasi- and non-state actors to fill the gap and recent years have witnessed the emergence of decentralized and hybrid mediation processes." Taylor, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Contests over Land in Rural Vietnam, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 3.

[62] "Concurrent with urban and aquaculture expansion is the intensification of farming methods. To meet the goal of making Vietnam the world's number one rice exporter, the central government is making widely available agricultural price supports, microfinancing and farm credit, and input subsidies. The net result is an increase in yields but also increasing fertilizer and pesticide applications. [...] Crop types are more for market and export than for family and local consumption, crop rotation cycles have shortened, and water management – especially midseason drainage – is a common practice to increase yields." Karen C. Seto, "Economies, Societies, and Landscapes in Transition: Examples from the Pearl River Delta, China, and the Red River Delta, Vietnam," in Barbara Entwisle and Paul C. Stern, eds., *Population, Land Use, and Environment: Research Directions* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2005), 203. She notes that "periurbanization is accelerating, driven in part by village cottage industries in handicrafts." (207) Also: "It is often assumed that command-and-control economies are characterized by top-down decrees, especially in the urban planning context. However, in reality, urban dynamics have become more the result of a mélange of uncoordinated interests (sometimes at the commune, town, or county level) than the synchronized activities of central government agencies." (209)

[63] Jennifer C. Sowerwine, "Territorialisation and the Politics of Highland Landscapes in Vietnam: Negotiating Property Relations in Policy, Meaning and Practice," *Conservation & Society*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2004): 97-136.

[64] E.g. Gary Sands, "In Vietnam, Protests Highlight Anti-Chinese Sentiment," *The Diplomat*, June 12, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/in-vietnam-protests-highlight-anti-chinese-sentiment/.

[65] Tran Duc Vien, Stephen J. Leisz, Nguyen Thanh Lam and A. Terry Rambo, "Using Traditional Swidden Agriculture to Enhance Rural Livelihoods in Vietnam's Uplands," *Mountain Research and Development*, vol. 26, No. 3 (August 2006): 192-196.

[66] Sowerwine, "Territorialisation and the Politics of Highland Landscapes in Vietnam," 98.

[67] Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 134-135.

[68] Stephen Nash, "Vietnam's Empty Forests," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/travel/vietnam-wildlife-species-ecotravel-tourism.html.

[69] "At present, mountainous regions are facing a lot of difficulties due to more and unpredictable natural calamities, longer droughts and the biggest limitation are low and unstable crop yields, under-utilization of flat lands, hunger, poverty and inappropriate exploitation of natural resources in consequence of all above stated." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "Baseline Survey of Phu Tho Province," 2012.

[70] There is a long history of lacquer and global trade in the pre-modern era. See, for instance, Kaori Hidaka, "Maritime trade in Asia and the circulation of lacquerware," in *East Asian Lacquer*, 5-9.

[71] The Vietnamese tradition may have been the inspiration for the rest of Southeast Asia; notice how the Burmese use the Vietnamese word "*yun*" for lacquer. There is even a Thai story that puts the original source for lacquer on the trade route to Hanoi. *Lacquer: An International History*, 144.

[72] According to Phi Phi, nine months of the year are good for making lacquer; late fall and winter are too dry. The humidity should be about 80%. Gusts of air are not good for lacquer, as it dries out the surface and does not dry it through. Still air is ideal.

[73] For "*terroir*," the characteristic taste and flavor imparted to a wine by the environment in which it is produced, see Ian Tattersall and Rob DeSalle, *A Natural History of Wine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), esp. 132-154.