

The pixel and the pond

as part of

SILENT INTIMACY

solo exhibition by

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A conversation between Đặng Thuỳ Anh and Văn Đỗ

Van Đỗ (VD): You started practicing the arts in 2017 when you were still a student of Graphic Design at the Vietnam University of Fine Arts. Can you tell me more about this decisive moment, when you launched your artistic practice alongside your studies at the university?

Đặng Thuỳ Anh (ĐTA): In 2014, when I was a first year student at the University, I started to volunteer at Nhà Sàn (an artist collective in Hanoi), helping out the artists and setting up exhibitions. At that moment, I had not yet decided to become an artist or to nurture any artistic practice; the meanings of certain exhibitions still eluded me at times. In 2017, Tuấn Mami and Vũ Đức Toàn organized a workshop on performance art that was open to the members and volunteers of Nhà Sàn. That was the first time I came across the idea of art-making as a way of being at peace with oneself, beyond writing or verbalizing one's thoughts. Afterwards, I created my first work in IN:ACT, an international performance art festival organized by Nhà Sàn Collective, which motivated me to think and learn more about art. Fortunately, Nhà Sàn's Emerging Artists course started right after from 2017 to mid-2018. We were able to study with senior artists like Trần Lương, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Trương Quế Chi, etc. In the course, we learned from these artists the fundamentals of art making, and moved on to make our first art pieces. Upon that foundation, I started to understand art more deeply and proceeded eventually to further readings.

VD: I see that you practice predominantly in performance art, perhaps your most go-to choice compared to other media? Is that by chance or intentional?

ĐTA: I practice both performance art and other mediums simultaneously, besides the project introduced in this exhibit, we young artists often self-organized guerrilla performances outside the framework of a certain event or festival. With different forms of art such as installation or video, I would have to think carefully about the concept, execution, and representation; but performance is a much more flexible, itinerant medium. The main material in performance art is the artist's body. As long as performance proves a viable material for my practice, I will continue to work with it.

VD: When you first started, did you see any contradiction between your artistic practice and your training in graphic design at the university? Or do they, in some senses, complement each other?

ĐTA: In the beginning I was quite concerned and was determined to separate these two aspects of my work: one was meant for

for livelihood solely while the other was a refuge for the self. But after further reflection on this subject, I realized that everything I did up to that point had a reason and was informed by my experiences. Because without any interest and understanding in graphic design, my approach to art would have been entirely different. At the moment, I seek to harmonize the two trajectories. My graphic design skills can act in tandem to support my artistic practice.

VD: Where did you find inspiration for your first artworks? After two years, do you think much has changed within yourself?

DTA: In the beginning, I did everything quite intuitively. When an idea emerged I would have faced it head-on without giving it much thought, unlike how I would ruminate on the subject now. These days, I have more old works to compare and contrast to, while in the beginning everything was new and most of what I did was just to try out different materials through methods I knew best. For example, the first artworks that I made at the university were quite close to graphic design.

VD: Artworks that you made at the university?

DTA: At the time, I attended a workshop on conceptual art, organized by the Goethe Institute at my university. We were asked to use only text, however flexible and interactive. Meanwhile, there was this pond in the middle of my university that changed its color throughout the day. What struck me as peculiar was that at times the color of the pond was crystal clear, at times the blue of a swimming pool, and then it just got greener and greener as moss and microbes developed. When the water was completely obscured, the university would release the water, cleaned the bottom thoroughly and refilled it again. A cycle completed. The issue, however, was that there were fish in the pond, and they died en masse. It seemed that people really paid no heed to the issue and its solution (while in fact that was the façade of the university!). At the time, I took some photographs to document these color changes. One other day, as I was standing on the third floor where my classroom was, I saw a red dot next to the pond. I descended and found out that it was indeed where they had dumped the dead fish but from the third floor it looked like a mere dot. Whenever the pond got clouded and the fish died out, the water would be changed before adding new fish. On the occasion of the workshop I made a work that responded to that cycle.

In digital imaging there is a theory that images are constituted by multiple pixels, and when one zooms in on an image, one would find the pixels that make up said image. When one

zooms in on an image, one would find the pixels that make up said image. When one zooms out to the maximum level, the image itself would also become termed a 'pixel'. This theory reflects my perception of the fish on the ground - from a distance they appeared as a simple pixel. And yet, at a closer range, they also appeared to be made up of pixels. The same dynamic happens when I work with different graphic design software.

For this pond related work, I took photographs and then blew them up, picking one dot of color inside the pond in each image. Afterwards, I came up with a color chart that indicates the changes over time. After that process, I arrived at three color strips forming the pond's cycles of changing color. I will now tell you the ways the audience approached my work: I printed color cards using color from the stripes and scattered all over the university. On the back of each card was the address to an Instagram account full of codes. For a Fine Arts student, they would be obvious color codes (CMYK). For those without that knowledge, the codes must first be deciphered through a search engine to arrive at one of the color charts that I just showed you. Each image showed a pond and the caption indicated the date of the photograph. This was all the information provided. The meanings were up to the audience.

At the university, the way people saw these cards was parallel to the way I saw the fish on the school ground - only as pixels. I wondered if this kind of presence prompted them to question any of the information provided?

VD: When you looked at the phenomenon of the fish and the pond, did you have any other association in relation to other issues?

DTA: Every day, students and lecturers walked past the pond. But no one felt as if the color changing cycles were a problem or deemed it irrational, even as it was at the center of the campus as well as everyone's field of vision. Everybody felt fine about it. At first, I likewise did not intend to do anything about it. I simply saw it as a peculiarity and took some photographs. I often have the habit of keeping things I have no obvious use for. Like in the performance where I burnt my hair, I kept the things on my body, in a subconscious, intuitive manner.

VD: Could you say more about this archival impulse? What do you often keep and to what end?

DTA: Since secondary school I have often kept my hair and fingernails. These are things that were once on my body but no longer. Even though they have already left my body, I still feel a certain connection and wish to preserve them. There is no rationality, no specific reason. Like how one would keep photographs. Or how people often let go of worn clothes.

Sometimes I would bring them out to see and then put them away. Perhaps it is similar to the process of writing a diary but in a different way. I myself think that I have a good memory, that once I have a visual impression of something I would remember it. I also think that each person has a different way of analyzing problems. If you are a good writer, you would solve your problem by writing, by words. Since I work with images, whenever a problem arises I would, first and foremost, solve it by visual means.

VD: When I used to live in my old house, there was a room full of used books, my father's entire bookshelf. When my mother renovated the house and I moved out, the shelves were all moved into the room for the altar, and my own room was totally empty. At that moment I felt a true loss because the memories of my childhood and my father - memories that this room held - have now both moved into the altar room. Earlier when everything was still in such a haphazard bulk, I paid little attention to the books, let alone reading any of them. Only when our living space changes, in such a swift manner, as we prepare ourselves for the arrival of the unknown, do we feel the loss of authority over spaces that used to be ours. If your current house has to be demolished, everything will have to be moved away - have you ever thought about that?

DTA: Actually, thinking about it does not really bring about any solution. My family's story will still be there, which is to say there is already a deadline and they have already given us the information regarding the resettlement. We are only waiting. Its presence is felt, but it is also something quite ambiguous. I do not know when, at what time, what location. Just like you said how we ignore certain things when they are still here, until the moment they truly disappear. Right now, the place I live in is a big house constituted of smaller houses. My grandparents both worked at the University of General Sciences and the Kim Giang complex where we live is reserved for those who have worked in this university. We thus have a big slot here where my own family, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, four families in total, all stay together.

The structure of my house is quite peculiar too, because it is a complex made up of houses on the ground rather than apartments. My house has four storeys. On top of us lies another unit with its own staircases on the side. One crucial point in our relationship with the neighbor was our negotiation with them in terms of construction. In a nutshell, the neighbors are allowed to build above us, and our family is allowed to build some partial structures on top of their house as well. In this way, both families can add to the existing structure and keep the harmony of the place. The whole complex is like that: one unit on the ground and one unit on top, one

house to the next. My house has its own indoor staircase and a rooftop.

VD: When was the house constructed?

DTA: In the 60s and 70s. There used to be a pond there in the old days, which was then filled with soil to create a flat surface and afterwards houses. There was also a gate, and a common yard for my family, and my uncle's. The toilet and the kitchen are separate from the house, though still inside the gate. It is similar to those structures in the countryside in the past. One can also go to the roof of the bathroom area to hang laundry, and from there look onto the neighbor's house just opposite.

VD: This structure strikes me as quite the contrast to your exhibition design, isn't it? While this exhibit uses a neat vertical set up, your house has a horizontal, dividedly complex structure. Does this structure allow for intimacy among neighbors?

DTA: We got along quite well with our neighbors until quarrels broke out during the construction. Because of this structure, people could not escape one another: if my family were to wash our vegetables in the yard, the neighbors could see us from above. Now everything has been constructed higher. However, the problem was that my family can build on top of the structure but cannot erect any wall. Do you remember the scenes with the metal bars in my video for this exhibition? We had to set up a net and put on it a glass-like, transparent plastic sheet to allow for sunlight. If we had built a wall, the house behind ours would have had no light at all. Because the two houses shared the same wall, and the light was coming from our direction, we had to make it transparent to allow for lighting.

VD: So privacy was no longer?

DTA: It was in fact quite inconvenient. People could see one another on the rooftop. The three storeys were all connected. The balconies were open spaces, only the rooms were enclosed. It used to have more ventilation, burglars entered all the time because the house opened to the street and to other houses. Burglars could go from one end to another of the complex because all the units were connected.

VD: What is the purpose of the reconstruction? What is being built in its place?

DTA: To construct the FLC apartment complex. But like I said, because of such structure, more often than not multiple families co-inhabit a piece of land with only one certificate of land use rights (or the red book). Meanwhile compensations are

made based on land ownership paperwork, each certificate is set for one house. That is the policy, the authority would calculate the numbers by certifications, not per capita. And if we were to calculate based on the number of people, my family currently has 13 members.

VĐ: If we were to expand on this project to talk more broadly about your practice, what do you see yourself most interested in or drawn to?

ĐTA: I create most easily with things that surround me, not necessarily personal things. I am also often captivated by changes in nature. In the two previously discussed projects, I was interested in natural elements (the pond, the fish, the snail, etc.). An example of how I would come across and become fascinated by a material was the snail, even though the issue at hand had more to do with urbanization and familial matters. At first glance, it had nothing to do with animals, but because of my interest and fascination, I found a way to link the ideas together. When I said I was pondering over a problem, what I meant was that although the thought of it was constantly on my mind, that thought also informed me about the gravity of the issue and the limit of my capability. This was and still is something that affects both my family and society at large. To change the situation is something surely beyond myself. Art-making, however, is meant to help me be at peace with the images in my mind, to bring them out. To do nothing would be to remain perpetually agitated.

VĐ: My impression of your work is that there is always something absurd about it. For instance, in the work about the fish pond, suddenly there is a dead fish in the middle of a university campus. Meanwhile, your perspective on the subject matter is also as absurd as it is sarcastic: why does one even keep fish - and koi fish no less - only to have them die out and replaced every time the water goes bad? This is rather similar to the way you work with the snail or perform cooking snail noodle soup for the audience in your first open studio at Á Space. There is one thing in this exhibit that I also love, which is the fact that all the objects you store inside the glass box are household items, sometimes even just parts of the object instead of its whole. It is similar to how you keep parts of your body. While these objects form parts of the household, you also show the parts that constitute them. Why did you not put the entire joss paper burner in the exhibit instead of only its lid!? Perhaps you will say that you simply picked it up somewhere, but I presume it is also your way of seeing things.

ĐTA: In fact, one would consider something absurd if one has a different standard for what is normal and what is not, so whatever deviates from that standard could be seen as absurd?

Think of the death of animals, for example, a pet will always meet that inevitable end. That is to say I think sometimes the line between rationality and irrationality can be quite obscured.

VĐ: I did not mean to equate absurdness to deviation from the norm, but an action that people do time and again, without understanding the purpose of such action, or its meaninglessness. And when we become aware of that situation, we wonder why they do such a thing? But as we observe the world we see many similar incidents, the absurd at that point becomes the standard.

ĐTA: For me, the shifting colors of the pond are extremely absurd. And yet, I am not certain others view it the same way? People still walk past the pond every day and know for a fact that the color is changing, but no one ever has a further reaction. But I think everyone has a different starting point. I am someone who poses questions, while others perceive this story just as a matter of fact, without that crucial question mark.

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