

Curatorial meandering - Excerpts taken from a letter exchange between Bill Nguyễn và Vân Đỗ

Dear Vân,

What do we talk about, when we talk about sculpture in the context of Vietnam - where there is constant friction and negotiation between the weight and direction of ideology, and the artist's creative vision and need for individual expressions? Does this complex environment hinder the practice of local artists? Or does it in fact help to create artworks capable of going back and forth between predetermined concepts of form, color, composition and shape (purely for aesthetic purposes), and the artist's desire to reflect the changes happening in real life (in the hope that art can contribute to shedding light on, and improving social disruptions)?

...

I wonder, 'What is sculpture - to me? And, where do I see sculpture in my daily life? '

I think of the statues of Buddha, Mother Goddesses and deities in temples and pagodas - a form of folk art thoroughly embedded into the spiritual life of the Vietnamese. I think of the fever to build grand monuments across this country -of Buddha, Jesus, kings, generals, political leaders, revolutionary heroes, heroic Vietnamese mothers and historical events. Trillions are paid out each year to continue and strengthen these symbols for the regime, reinforcing the presence of these icons in our collective memory. However, who are these monuments really built for? I also think of the many national and international sculpture camps held in Hanoi and Saigon over the years, with seemingly forgotten, abandoned and deteriorating sculptures scattered across the two ends of the country as a result. Is it relevant to continue hosting such sculpture camps now?

Another example: curator Vũ Huy Thông shares the following regarding the 6th 'Hanoi - Saigon Sculpture' exhibition (opening September 2020 at the Vincom Center for Contemporary Art, Hanoi, in an effort by non-governmental artists to continue the dialogue on the present-day status of sculpture in Vietnam): 'Change in the quantity through 6 exhibitions also lies in the variety of visual styles, materials and themes of works: from abstract art, minimalism, surrealism, expressionism, pop art, symbolism, figurative to conceptual art; spanning various materials including metal, wood, stone, painted wood, cardboard, paint, ceramic, composite, fiberglass, synthetic materials, etc....' Such generalized and formal descriptions make me think of how, for Kant, a work of art is considered 'pure' when it exists only because it is beautiful, when it moves the viewer aesthetically, and not because of any other objective function. That is, the prerequisite value in a work of art lies in what it *is*, not what it *can do*. Is this framework still relevant in considering and evaluating the value of artwork today? Should art be purely for art's sake?

Best,
Bill

Dear Bill,

What is sculpture? Is it still necessary to talk about sculpture in the present context? Of course it is, because the question of form is never just about form. But how do we discuss this? What questions do I need to revisit, what further questions do I need to ask?

I'll start with the exhibition title *Within / Between / Beneath / Upon* - as a suggestion for another way of reading sculptures. These four words help to navigate the relationship between one object and another, and also between the outer appearance and the inner meaning of an object. I believe that through these relationships, we can establish the object's place in the world. But, doesn't the existence of one thing - in relation to others - also help to create the world?

To me, this title constructs a set of code with which viewers can use to approach sculpture. The question I ask myself is whether I can try to use this set of code to unpack the different practices of sculpture you'd mentioned in your letter. I don't look at the sculptures scattered in gardens and parks necessarily as bad nor abandoned. I don't deny art practices that are purely for aesthetic appreciation, propaganda imperatives or decorative purposes either. And if there exists artists who still choose to pursue the pleasure of material and form, then as viewers and curators, there's nothing we can do to change the artists' choice. Nevertheless we still have total control over how we can respond to them, or how we can see them - in different light.

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For example, browsing through the article 'The outdoor sculpture garden in a terrible deteriorating condition'¹ on Zing News, when looking at a close-up photo of the rusted iron on the surface of artist Trương Đình Quế's work 'The Traveller', I suddenly wonder, 'Why don't people see that as beautiful? Isn't deterioration also a mark of time, and a reflection of the way nature works - as a part of the creation process and the life-cycle of the artwork? Would it be possible at all to see deterioration through such romantic lens?' Because this is also the tactic that Richard uses in the making of his sculptures. In 'Heaven's Roof', he works with rice paper to create a roof (often seen in the North of Vietnam), and intentionally lets the material interact with the condition of the exhibition space - its temperature, humidity, and light.

It is when I think of Richard and this work that I think of the word *between*, because it evokes the transparency, the emptiness, and the negative space of a sculpture. When

¹ <https://zingnews.vn/vuon-tuong-dieu-khac-ngoai-troi-xuong-cap-hang-loat-post738957.html>

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talking about sculpture, people often use terms such as weight, volume, and scale. What if we describe sculpture also in terms of its gaps, holes and voids?

As for Thảo Nguyễn, I think most of the word *upon*. You see, in one of my visits to Nguyễn's studio, we discussed how to display the work of Điềm Phùng Thị and hers, and whether she'd want to separate the two. Nguyễn immediately asserted no, and suggested, "Điềm Phùng Thị's sculptures placed on top of mine, as one installation, as one work." It is as if Thảo Nguyễn is leaning her shoulder next to Điềm, grateful and empathetic with Điềm's love for Huế, for the arts and life.

Best,
Vân

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Dear Vân,

Within, between, beneath and upon – these words help me follow the ‘traces’ of thoughts and inspirations that the artists have embedded into their works. An artwork, I think, consists of three elements: the visual, the content and the artist's intentions. In other words, they are the ‘the signifier’, ‘the signified’ and the creator.

...

I want to discuss Hiền Minh, Richard and Thảo Nguyễn's relationship with sculpture, precisely through their ‘artistic gestures’. Here, for me, an artistic gesture is understood as drawn from the intentions of the artist; it is the act of transforming ‘the signified’ into ‘the signifier’.

Hiền Minh covers. In this exhibition, Hiền Minh uses dó paper to cover objects associated with the domestic. They are piled on top of one another – the ordinary with the divine; the industrial/modern with the traditional. Cover – to conceal, or protect? To mend, or expose? And, what is it beneath that's being concealed, protected, mended, and exposed? If we consider an artwork to be inseparable from site, then what does this work – and Hiền Minh's act of covering – say about the (social, cultural, political) context in which the work is made?

Richard borrows. With unbound openness and curious eyes, Richard follows his intuition and lets himself be immersed in an image bank of his memories, stimulated by what he sees in his immediate surroundings, or on his visits to other parts of Vietnam and of the world. Richard borrows from this pool of visual references, extracting and transforming them, ultimately to reproduce only a fragment of what once was. Borrowing, and then blurring, emptying, and making abstract the original - what does this gesture imply?

Thảo Nguyễn leans on. In her practice, Thảo Nguyễn carefully collects various visual elements, then arranging and merging them to create a sense of unity. Shoulder-to-shoulder, skin-to-skin, close co-dependence – the constituent units of her work in this exhibition come from different places and times. Some are made by Thảo Nguyễn herself, some are original works by Điềm Phùng Thị, others are reproduced. What does Thảo Nguyễn's act of basing on/leaning against history mean? What does this gesture say about the past, what can it imply in the present?

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I also want to reflect on our own ‘curatorial gesture’, and on what makes an exhibition. I wonder, ‘Does an exhibition exist only through a collection of works you see in a space, and through the relationships created by their placement? Or does an exhibition also exist in

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other forms and through different levels? Suppose: in the conversations between you, me and the artists; in the words of the curatorial text; in this letter correspondence between the two of us; in the various public programs surrounding this exhibition which we will carry out; in our personal notes, audio recordings and sketches? Or, can an exhibition simply exist in our imagination?’

Best,
Bill

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Dear Bill,

Placing the artworks of any two artists side-by-side reveals a connection, a meeting point that the artists themselves might not be aware of. Perhaps this is also what we are trying to do in this exhibition - not to reconcile differences, but to create dialogue between them.

For example, in terms of visual, form and methodology, Thảo Nguyễn and Hiền Minh's works are nothing alike. But if you ignore the outer layers (the visual) and look at their interior (the concept) of the works, both artists seem to share a concern with language.

On the surface of Hiền Minh's sculpture are the questions: Who is woman? What is woman? Where is woman? Why is woman? When is woman? Instead of imperative statements (often appearing on propaganda banners accompanying monuments on the street), Hiền Minh's questions directly point at the subject of 'woman', thereby bluntly stripping away and challenging any stereotype we have when it comes to defining what a woman is. At the same time, these questions evoke an affirmation that language is power, and that language is an important and helpful strategy – not only to investigate systems of power, but also to unpack agendas hidden underneath conventional discourses about women.

Thảo Nguyễn takes a step further to inquire about *quốc ngữ* (the Romanized Vietnamese alphabet) – its usage in our everyday life, and as a means to record the past and document history. With the Romanization of the Vietnamese script, the French colonists were able to gradually unbind Chinese influences and mode of writing – another example and reminder of the power of language. Starting with the question of how *quốc ngữ* became the official language of Vietnam, Thảo Nguyễn took the opportunity to go to Rome and access the archives of ARSI (Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu). There, the artist found some of the first documents written in *quốc ngữ*, including a letter written in 1659 by Vietnamese catechist Bento Thiện, and sent to Italian missionary Giovanni Filippo de Marini. In this letter, Bento recites the Vietnamese tale of 'Magical Bow'. Appearing in the exhibition space with the crossbows are several marble bases carved in the shape of the Vietnamese accents *huyền, sắc, hỏi, ngã, and nặng*. Standing alone, unattached to any letter, these characters are devoid of meaning. Like a child learning how to spell, Thảo Nguyễn playfully points out how language can hinder meaning, and how truths can be gleaned from disparate fragments (of history). Our job, as viewers, is to re-assemble these visual traces and references, so that a new network of meanings can emerge.

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Who creates discourse, and for what purpose? Isn't what we're doing – proposing questions and expressing ideas in an attempt to expand the meaning of sculpture – also to

participate in already-existing discussions about sculpture, and about art in general? And, as writers and makers of discourse, are we adding anything else to such discussions?

These days I am constantly thinking about the notion of space in relation to sculpture. My thoughts are still in a state of jumble, with reading materials here and there. I'd like to share with you a reference I've stumbled upon - an excerpt I really like from the essay film by French pioneer filmmakers Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, *Statues also die*:

When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture.

That's because the society of statues is mortal. One day, their faces of stone crumble and fall to earth. A civilization leaves behind itself these mutilated traces like the pebbles dropped by Petit Poucet (Charles Perrault)

But history has devoured everything. An object dies when the living glance trained upon it disappears. And when we disappear, our objects will be confined to the place where we send black things: to the museum.²

Thinking about the works in this exhibition in relation to Chris Marker's contemplative experience makes me wonder about two things. Firstly, can I now see works of art independent of context? Secondly, I feel a sense of consolation, as for me, the works presented here really are *living* monuments. *An object dies when the living glance trained upon it disappears*. But in this exhibition, viewers are not just there to look; they are invited to take part in the extended life of the work. They are encouraged to ask questions, invited to sit, sometimes allowed to touch in order to feel the material of the work. And so, the question of whether we can see works of art independent of context, is now also on the part of the viewer.

Best,
Vân

² Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, *Les statues meurent aussi's* (*Statues Also Die*, 1950-53).

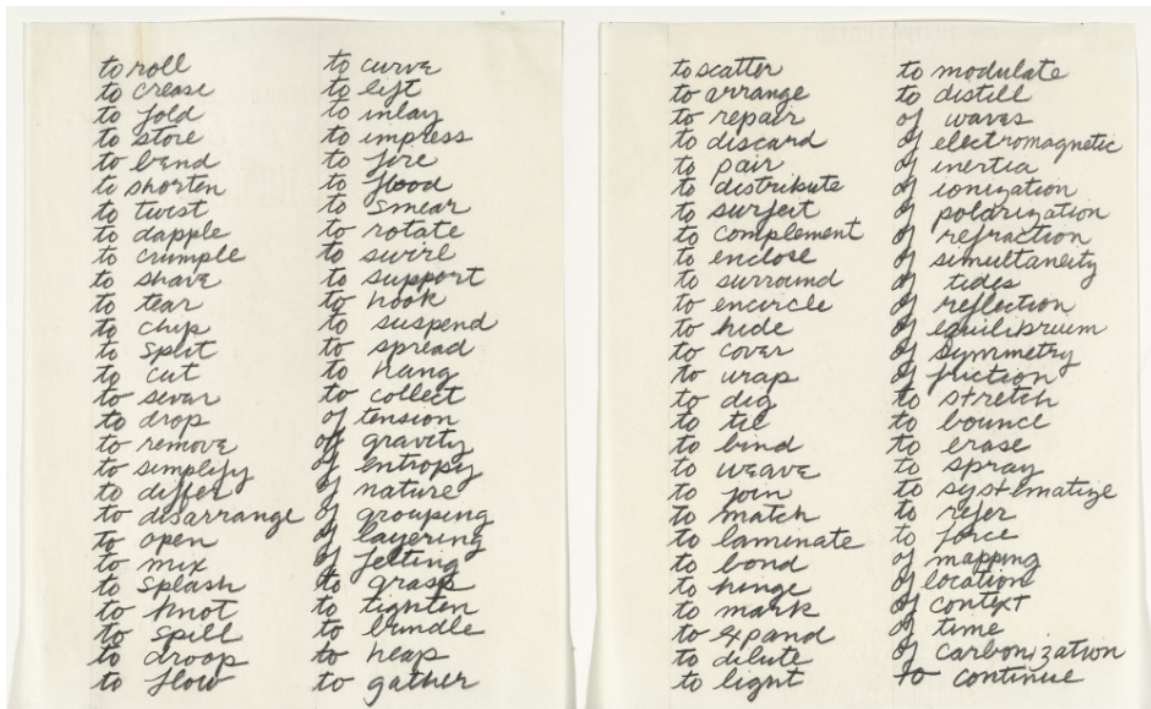
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Dear Vân,

If an artwork is the accumulation of 'artistic gestures', then an exhibition is the accumulation of 'curatorial gestures'. Supposedly, an exhibition is to unpack the meanings of artworks, to uncover the personal world of the artist. But I also consider the practice of exhibition making as a series of acts and decisions to materialize the curator's intent. In said series of acts and decisions, language, words and writing are most important for me.

...

I'd like to share with you a written work that's really inspired me throughout our process of writing to one another: 'Verblast' (1967-1968) by sculptor/painter/conceptual artist Richard Serra:



Did you know:

- that Serra once said, 'Drawing is a verb'?
- that 'Verblast' is considered a drawing, but made up entirely of words?
- that the above 84 verbs (*to roll, to fold, to cut, to crease, to open, to mix, to spill, to lift, to cover, to dig* etc.) and 24 possible contexts (*of tension, of gravity, of refraction, of simultaneity, of symmetry, of friction* etc.) act as a kind of guide for Serra's sculptural

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practice? (i.e. he would take any verb from the list above, then apply it in his process of in handling material and realizing a work's final form)

- that 'Verblast' came from Serra observing his own process in the studio; that he simply documented his own actions and verbalized them step by step?

And so, what we see here in this work is a swapping of function: drawing becomes action; action becomes sculpture, sculpture becomes word; word becomes drawing. As viewers, we 'read' (i.e. see) both the action of the artist (his 'artistic gesture'), and the materialization of his artwork. The artwork is not in one medium or another; it instead exists in all forms, shapes and matters. And to see it, we simply have to imagine.

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Like the three artists of this exhibition, you and I – with words being our primary material – also borrow and utilize the properties of sculpture and apply them in our writing process. We use writing to extract, chisel, combine and transform our emotions and thoughts into their final form - as words.

In this process, we consider:

- the density of words;
- the length, placement and purpose of texts;
- the different viewpoints we take as writers (from the personal and emotional, to the more historical and critical);
- the different types of text and their nature/characteristics (from the poetic and stream-of-consciousness, to the concise and essay-like).

All of these factors are carefully measured and carried out, in an effort to realize our own 'text-sculptures', in order to reproduce the multidimensional and imaginative power of language and of the thought process. Because at the end of the day, imagination is the greatest lesson art and writing can teach us.

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You know, Vân, I've also been thinking a lot about how I will - in the future, after this exhibition - continue to use language as an integral mechanism of exhibition making. If the original reason for using the format of exchanging letters was because we felt as if we were confused, groping in the middle of the sea of thoughts, then at this point, I've become completely carefree. I anticipate the waves of reflection from your letters, and respond with my own. It seems that there's no longer any limit in terms of deadlines, or any pressure to produce sharp arguments or concise texts. After all, the practice of curating is not meant to just construct complete narratives. You and I – through our journey of writing to each other – are in fact creating a space for continuous contemplation. In doing so, we are giving each other the opportunity to analyse, critically reflect and respond to the questions we ask

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ourselves, each other, and essentially, the audience. Time — to reflect, feel, imagine — this is what an exhibition should give its viewers. It is also what the viewers need to offer, in order to fully commit themselves to the exhibition, the artworks and the texts on display.

Best,
Bill

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Dear Bill,

In reading again the letters I'd sent you, I find that they're full of thoughts chasing and negating each other; sometimes my logic doesn't even add up. But such a process somehow makes sense, for it shows that the four prepositions we'd set initially (within / between / beneath / upon) do not make up a fixed framework with a predetermined size and of one dimension. Instead, this 'frame' expands, and serves only as a cue to initiate the first circuit of thought. Setting such 'rules' - to think along with, but also apart from the artists and their works - is a strategy I learned from this process.

This is also the first time that I become aware of the ability of the art of curation to be 'elastic', to open up and welcome other interdisciplinary dimensions. Continuously switching up our perspective while curating is akin to changing the focal length of the lens while filming. At times, we can zoom in to look more closely at details; at others, we can zoom back out to see the overall landscape. It is in this process that I think we are also putting into practice the framework we'd proposed for this exhibition. To delve into our inner thoughts and apprehensions, to place ourselves between and among other individuals and ways of thinking, to build upon those who have come and gone before us.

Many questions I raised at the beginning, up until now when our exhibition set-up is nearing completion, have resolved themselves. Among these are the questions of what constitutes 'modern' and 'contemporary' aesthetics, and how to both embrace and 'fluidify' a medium/material's seemingly rigid definition and characteristics. I found my answer to these wonderings through a conversation with Thảo Nguyễn. Thảo Nguyễn told me that the first time she stood in front of Điềm Phùng Thị's art, she felt enveloped by the them, sensing Điềm Phùng Thị's *aura* and the power of her world emitting from the hundreds of artworks, embedded in her legendary geometrical modules. Such pure visceral reactions can indeed transcend all differences and times, turning art into a realm of "democracy and utopia" (borrowing Thảo Nguyễn's words, for this is something I also believe in). Saying this, however, doesn't mean that I am denying the existence of differences - whether historical, social, generational or individual. But it is in the act of learning to listen, to speak nearby such differences, that I hope to better imagine, sympathize and appreciate ones' fate, life, personal choices and social contexts.

Best,
Vân