



GALERIE QUYNH CONTEMPORARY ART

Ngô Đình Bảo Châu

# TOWARDS REALIST SOCIALIZATION

Curated by Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần

GALERIE QUYNH

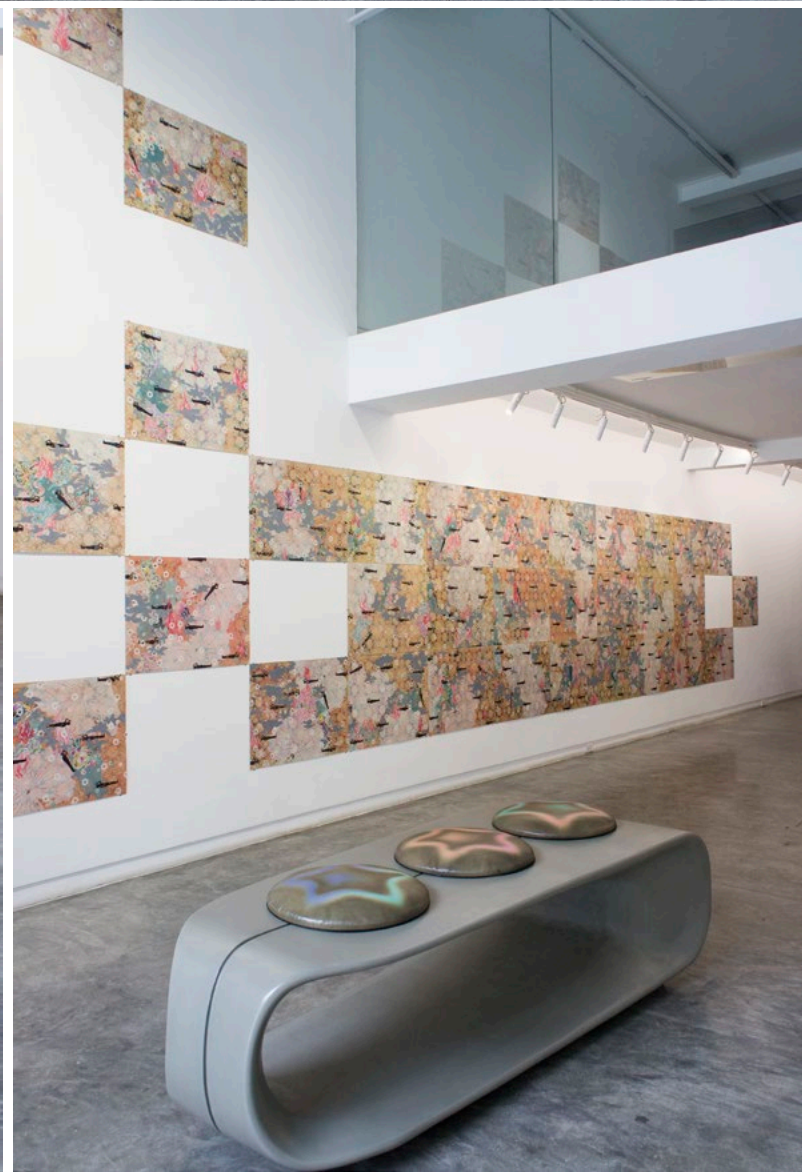
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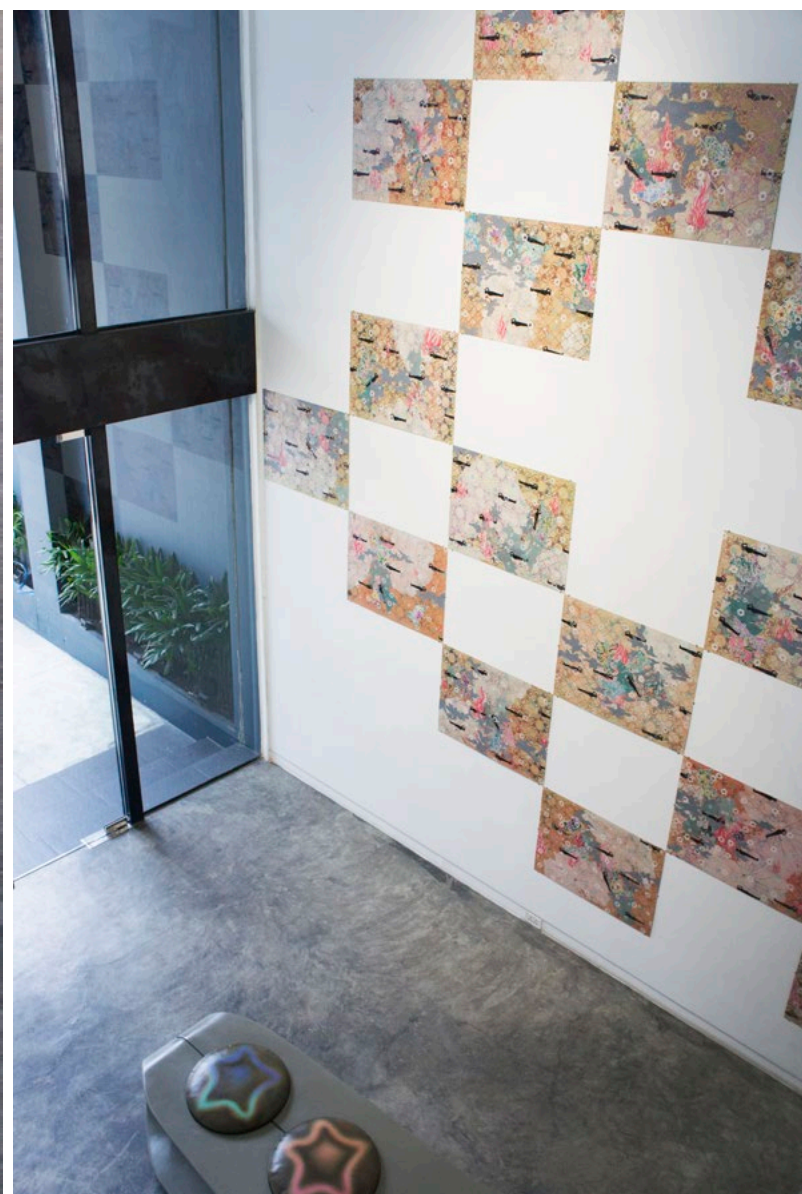
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# INSTALLATION VIEWS



























# TOWARDS REALIST SOCIALIZATION

Curatorial essay: Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần

Editor & translator: Thái Hà

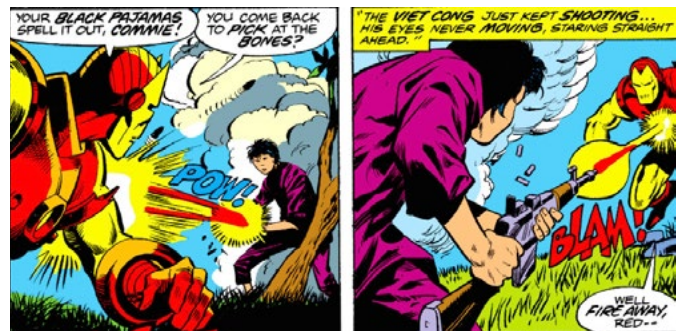
## I. Using one image to signify another

*'Mementos lose their value when the past of which they remind one no longer has any meaning. Furthermore, someone who not only uses mementos to remind him, but makes a cult of them and lives in the past as if it were the present, has a disturbed relation to reality.'*<sup>1</sup>

– Hans-Georg Gadamer

*'Cultural memories are preserved in symbols. In moving through the layers of culture, symbols both lose meaning and accumulate new ones – not only from traditions but also from other cultures.'*<sup>2</sup>

– Trịnh Bá Đình



excerpt from *The Invincible Iron Man: Vengeance in Vietnam!* issue #78, published by Marvel Comics Group in 1968



Instagram post from @congcaphes, published February 6, 2019

Let's play a game of Finding the Similarities for the two images above. It is easy to spot they both show parts of the word 'communist' ('cộng' in the picture of the coffee table, and both 'cộng' and 'commie' in the comic strip). If you have seen any Hollywood films on the so-called Vietnam War, you are likely to have encountered the slang 'commie' used to indicate 'communist', as in Iron Man's dialogue above. Placed in two different contexts, its meaning has strayed from how it has been defined by the original political thought. That meaning now lies in the figure of the guerrilla fighter wearing áo bà ba<sup>3</sup>, jumping out of the tropical canopy to ambush American soldiers – or otherwise Iron Man, as in the September 1968 issue of Marvel comics. It also lies in the logo of a café franchise – where 'cộng', along with other signifiers of the past such as font, color scheme, and tone of language, becomes an aesthetic in service of a trendy lifestyle.

The examples listed above illustrate how this word manifests as a *sign* – the human stele to fire at or the café logo – but also as a *symbol* – an opposition regime in the global war on ideology, or an historical period pre-Đổi Mới.

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative", in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 2005), 127.

<sup>2</sup> Trịnh Bá Đình, *Từ Ký Hiệu Đến Biểu Tượng* (Hà Nội: Vietnam National University Press, 2018), 60.

<sup>3</sup> A southern Vietnamese garment.





*Epaulette – Bench*, 2020, concrete, vegetable-tanned leather cushions, wood, 51 x 190 x 85 cm

Using tactics similar to those found in popular culture, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu plays with the nature of signs, overtakes the visual meaning attributed to those signs, and disregards the symbols from which they derive. In *Epaulette – Bench*, the artist magnifies the rank slide and alters its material make-up. She separates the slide, a sign that indicates hierarchy, from what it signifies and strips away its function: to symbolize roles, obligations, and the greater order. Though the object retains the shape of a rank slide, its magnification opens up new possibilities for it to exist as a sculpture and/or bench. As sculpture, the object takes on an additional function: as artwork. Concurrently, as a bench or more broadly as furniture, the object has an architectural function. The artist creates a matrix that connects symbolic links.

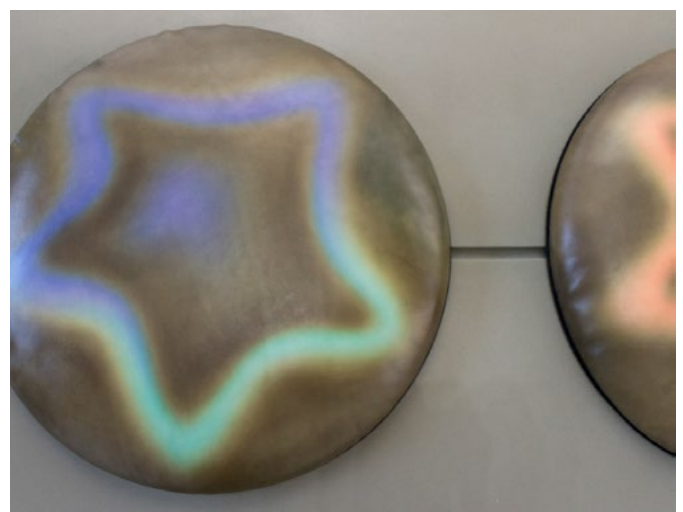
According to philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the establishment of signs and symbols is based on convention<sup>4</sup>. What conceives the relation between the signifier and the signified is the institution. Conversely, Gadamer argues that a work of art, from inception, comprises its own pictographic 'institution' before convention reaffirms the artwork's meaning and function<sup>5</sup>, such as to signify religion or to commemorate.

Returning to *Epaulette – Bench*, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu peels off the layer of meaning that convenes the signifier and the signified – the slide and its ability to rank power – then covers it with a different signifier – an artistic symbol. If we observe the 'institution' installed by Bảo Châu and accept the block of cast cement as an artwork, then its function as art will never be lost, whether it is found in a gallery, a workshop, or, hypothetically speaking, a military museum. On the other hand, the material weight of *Epaulette – Bench* is a metaphor for the power of the rank slide. What is previously the signifier has now become the signified. Through her manner of image-making Bảo Châu builds an accumulative system of signs, or what theorist Roland

Barthes calls metalanguage<sup>6</sup>. The artist claims the right to rework the institution of a symbol familiar to most Vietnamese people, who have either experienced or inherited a war legacy, and who know all too well the power of armed polity in this country.

Similarly in *Uniform – Wallpaper*, the set of paintings covers a surface with countless signs and symbols. However, as opposed to *Epaulette – Bench*, where Bảo Châu magnifies the original object to create a weighted independence in the middle of a 3D space, on the 40 sheets of 'wallpaper', representative images are rendered in miniature, overlapping one another like a perplexing jigsaw puzzle. We encounter *măng non*<sup>7</sup> – a standardized symbol of the Hồ Chí Minh Young Pioneer Organization, here multiplied and arranged like a six-petal flower, hidden under smaller, white floral motifs. The multitude of swirling flowers obscures the symbol and its original institution of signifiers.

When looking at *Uniform – Wallpaper* from a distance, a coal black swarm seems to fly by, as if the bearer of bad news. Upon closer inspection, the myriad insects turn out to be the printed silhouettes of a saluting schoolboy, but what he salutes remains a mystery. The posture of salute – a metaphor for respect and loyalty – forms a link between symbols that indicate the act of summoning: collective organizations, the B40 fence, and sparks that burn as fire. Depending on our distance from the work – resembling autostereograms popular in the 1990s – its images alternate between one signifier to the next. As Trịnh Bá Đình observes: 'The meaning of a symbol and what it signifies are not in total agreement [...]. The symbol is not only what it represents but also something else – it is dualistic. [...] The relation between meaning and the signified [...] is one that is similar but not equivalent [...].'<sup>8</sup>



*Epaulette – Bench* (detail)

4 Gadamer, "The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative", 133.

5 Gadamer, "The Ontological Foundation of the Occasional and the Decorative", 133.

6 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Cape, 1972).

7 Literally: young bamboo shoots.

8 Trịnh Bá Đình, *Từ Ký Hiệu Đến Biểu Tượng*, 57.



## II. Death Instinct

*'Monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage. [...] Of this social space, [...] everyone partook, and partook fully – albeit, naturally, under the conditions of a generally accepted Power and a generally accepted Wisdom. The monument thus effected a "consensus", and this in the strongest sense of the term, rendering it practical and concrete.*

*'Monumentality transcends death, and hence also what is sometimes called the "death instinct".'*<sup>9</sup>

– Henri Lefebvre



Photograph of a Vietnamese youth jumping on the head of a Hai Bà Trưng statue in Saigon, taken on November 5, 1963 (source: 36hn.wordpress.com).

This photograph was taken a few days after the First Republic of Vietnam (1955-1963) was overthrown. The public toppled the statue of Hai Bà Trưng, erected by Trần Lệ Xuân<sup>10</sup> to honor the spirit of patriotism and encourage women to participate in military politics. As Erika Doss analyzes: 'The vandalism and destruction of the Trung Sisters monument in November 1963 was generated by incompatible public understanding of its visual and gestural language, or symbolic capital. Madame Nhu appropriated the nationally beloved story – an image – of the Trung sisters to promote herself and the ruling elite of the Republic of Vietnam. [...] The public saw, instead, her blasphemy of national icons and when Diem's dictatorial regime fell, so did her monument.'<sup>11</sup> This is a counter-example of what philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre calls everlasting monumentality<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, monuments are eternal because of their durable construction material, and ontologically they are solid and as assuring as truth itself. Yet Lefebvre also admits that conflicts inevitably occur when monuments lose prestige, or in other words, when the Power and Wisdom that embodied society are no longer accepted by the majority.

Perhaps Madame Nhu's goal to mobilize women would not have ended tragically had she applied the ideology of socialist monuments. Except for certain works that honor specific leaders or heroes – symbols which represent themselves – all monuments of labor-victory-memory are collective. The sculpted faces do not describe any figures in particular; heroes appear abstract and universal. It becomes possible for any member of society to imagine themselves in that position, or vice versa, monuments are their very depiction. The process to embody one's 'membership' is socialization, where each individual internalizes cultural and moral habits to become a member of society. In any struggle, when society requires sacrifice and solidarity, each individual – after comprehensive socialization – will be inclined to follow.

When speaking of Trần Lệ Xuân's mobilizing women to participate in national affairs in the Southern half of Vietnam, we cannot help but think of women who lived above the 17th parallel and the social expectations they faced. The war looked to them to sacrifice their personal lives, and offer the country their husbands and sons. In *I hold the remote in my hand*, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu mimics the act of watching television at home – the ultimate medium to socialize the masses. In the video, she approximates the act of switching channels then stops at a documentary – initially a separate artwork titled *The Remained One* by Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai – sometimes interrupted by

<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "The Production of Space", in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 2005), 139.

<sup>10</sup> Considered the de facto First Lady of the First Republic of Vietnam, Trần Lệ Xuân, better known in English as Madame Nhu, was the wife of Ngô Đình Nhu – chief political advisor and younger brother of Ngô Đình Diệm.

<sup>11</sup> Erika Doss, "Toppling the Trung Sisters Monument: Cultural Vandalism in Saigon, 1963", in *Decoding Dictatorial Statues*, eds. Bernke K. Zandvoort and Ted H. Yoon (Eindhoven: Onomatopée 157, 2019), 167.

<sup>12</sup> Henri Lefebvre, "The Production of Space", 139.





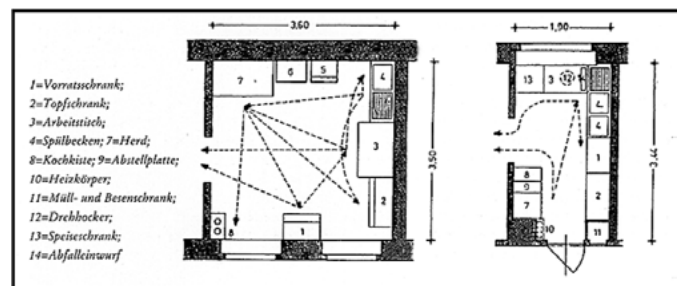
*I hold the remote in my hand* (film still), 2020, single-channel video, 19 minutes 24 seconds

commercials, one of which being *Television Commercial for Communism* by The Propeller Group. In Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai's short essay film, close-ups of a monument that honors the families of martyrs carefully describe the sculpted lines of ageing mothers, wives, and soldiers. That standardized and universal delineation helps the monument traverse through different areas of aesthetics, culture, and prejudices in order to remain standing through the years.

During the Vietnam War, or more broadly the conflict between the two ideologies of the Cold War, each side created a figure of the female as monument through words, images, and physical manifestations. Due to the 'hot' situation of direct armed conflict, the symbols of Hai Bà Trưng and the Heroic Vietnamese Mother represented all women who have joined the war. Meanwhile, looking to 'cold', non-militaristic zones, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu investigates a space that society has designated, and continues to designate, as a woman's place: the kitchen.

In *Everything falls down, the flames go up – Twin Kitchens*, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu reconstructs the famous Frankfurt Kitchen designed by Margarete 'Grete' Schütte-Lihotzky – the first professionally-trained woman architect in Germanophonic areas. Shortly after Ludwig Landmann, Frankfurt's ambitious socialist mayor, took office in 1924, he appointed Ernst May as the chief architect and city planner responsible for developing strategies to create affordable, low-cost housing. May immediately invited Lihotzky to radically reform the working-class housing environment. Though with seemingly legitimate intentions, like Madame Nhu, Lihotzky fell into her own hypothetical trap of how to build a useful monument

for women. Historian Leif Jerram analyzes her approach as follows: 'Lihotzky equated rationalization with liberation, and this allowed what was an essentially very highly regulated and deterministic set of manipulations of women's lives and space to be couched in heroic rhetoric. [...] The attempt to force women to behave in a certain way undermined the liberationist credentials of the Frankfurt model, and the aesthetic underpinning of Lihotzky's arguments begins to make this spatial segregation seem more and more like an act of aggression against working-class women than an act of liberation.'<sup>13</sup> Even so, her Frankfurt Kitchen was still hugely popular in the 1920s and 1930s; nearly 10,000 kitchens were mass produced, and the Soviet government had also invited Lihotzky to exchange knowledge and develop industrialized urban areas.



The number of steps taken inside the Frankfurt Kitchen (right) is reduced as compared to a standard kitchen (left). Joachim Krausse, "Frankfurt Kitchen", in *Oikos – Von der Feuerstelle zur Mikrowelle: Haushalt und Wohnen im Wandel*, ed. Michael Andritzky (Giessen: Anabas, 1992).

Ngô Đình Bảo Châu, in collaboration with artist Nguyễn Đức Đạt and architect Laurent Serpe, remodels the Frankfurt Kitchen and even duplicates it, as if applying the principle of mass production that follows the modular units of modernist architecture. The irony is, although *Everything falls down, the flames go up – Twin Kitchens* resembles the original structure, it is made of cardboard. It is an antithesis that not only counterbalances the robustness of material in modernist design, but also complicates the nature of kitchens, where fire, a life-force, also has potential to destroy. Moreover, the use of emulsion paint and imitation silver leaf evokes joss paper, and thus destabilizes the monument's perceived timelessness. If monuments can resist their 'death instinct' until the ideologies and values they represent collapse, then this monument to the Frankfurt Kitchen has an inherent 'death instinct', only waiting for that death to come.



### III. An eroded portrait of ideology: Decoration

*'The nature of decoration consists in performing that two-sided mediation; namely to draw the attention of the viewer to itself, to satisfy his taste, and then to redirect it away from itself to the greater whole of the context of life which it accompanies.'*

*'[...] it should not invite the attention to linger and be itself noticed as a decorative motif, but have merely an accompanying effect. Thus in general it will not have any objective content or will so iron it out through stylization or repetition that one's eye glides across it.'*

*'Ornament is not primarily something by itself that is then applied to something else but belongs to the self-presentation of its wearer. Ornament is part of the presentation. But presentation is an ontological event; it is representation.'*<sup>14</sup>

– Hans-Georg Gadamer



*Die-in - Pillow Chain*, 2020, foam mattress, velvet, embroidered ribbon, 10 x 50 x 30 cm each (29 pieces total)

A hypothesis: the ontology of ideology is only affirmed by the presentation of politics in society. Those manifestations can appear in textual or visual form, but quite clearly, for the masses, images – on posters, in adverts and films, as monuments – are the most immediate and pragmatic. For example, when we come across a slogan, its scale attracts us before its content. Thus, according to Gadamer, those visual manifestations are decoration, responsible for attracting viewers and leading them to an ideology – where the message exceeds what the decorative object signifies. Yet, what will happen when the viewer remains imprisoned by decoration, and refuses to escape from a context that is aiming towards the crux of ideal values?

Perhaps they will drown in dreams, one after another, to satisfy their fleeting tastes?



*Closed eyes - Light*, 2020, transparent resin, stamped copper sheets, LED lights, 57 x 52 x 13 cm

...intently memorize a moment, an event?

...be protected by the light of faith?



*Lost portrait - Altar*, 2020, acid-etched steel, lacquered hand-carved wood, 57 x 46 x 28 cm

...until there is no escape from the cycles and layers of eternal decoration?

Perhaps the nature of ideology is immortal. Unfortunately, what signifies ideology is constantly eroded by countless acts of politics, hypnotizing one into the stranglehold of decoration.

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<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, "The Production of Space", 135.



## About Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần

Arlette Quỳnh-Anh Trần is an art laborer based in Saigon, Vietnam. She is Curator and Director of Post Vidai – a collection of Vietnamese contemporary art based in Geneva and Saigon. Arlette was Assistant Curator at Sàn Art, and previously Assistant Curator at Saigon Open City – the first attempt to realize a substantial manifestation of contemporary art in Vietnam, curated by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Gridthiya Gaweewong.

Her curatorial practices aim to go beyond the mere aesthetic value of art and consider art as a catalyst that uses visual language to interpret, question, and narrate multiple spheres of one topic. She focuses on the collaborative labor between visual art and other disciplines, from natural and social sciences to business, design and fashion. Arlette has contributed her research, writings and thoughts to various local and international publications, exhibitions and projects, such as the Istanbul Biennale 2015; Hugo Boss Asia Art Award 2015; 2084 (2012) with Pelin Tan and Anton Vidokle; *Digitizing the Archival Materials of Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre* for Asia Art Archive; World Biennale Forum No. 1, Gwangju, Korea; SYNAPSE – International Curator's Network, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; and several solo and group shows for young emerging artists in the region.

In 2012, together with visual artists Trương Công Tùng and Phan Thảo Nguyên, she founded Art Labor, a collective that works between the visual arts, and social and life sciences in various public contexts and locales. As a collective member of Art Labor, she has travelled to work at NTU CCA Singapore, the Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, Guangdong Times Museum, Centre Pompidou, Paris, and the Carnegie International, 57th Edition.

She is currently a Master's candidate at the California Institute of the Arts under the Fulbright Scholar Program.



# THE WORKS





***Epaulette – Bench***

2020

concrete, vegetable-tanned leather cushions, wood

51 x 190 x 85 cm

edition of 3 + 1 AP









***I hold the remote in my hand***

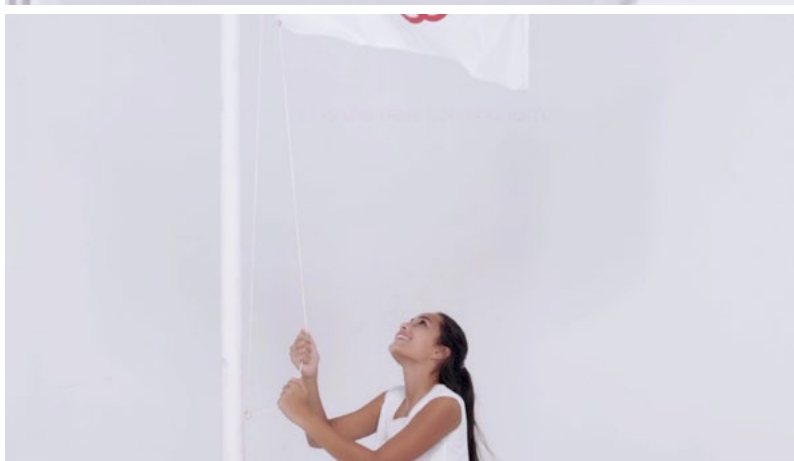
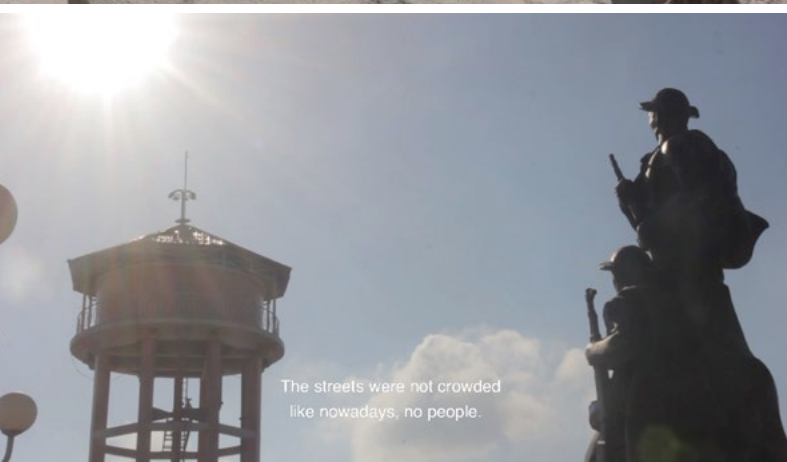
2020

single-channel video using found footage and footage from *The Remained One*, 2019, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai and *Television Commercial for Communism*, 2011, The Propeller Group

19 minutes 24 seconds

edition of 5 + 2 AP









***Lost portrait – Altar***

2020

acid-etched steel, lacquered hand-carved wood

57 x 46 x 28 cm





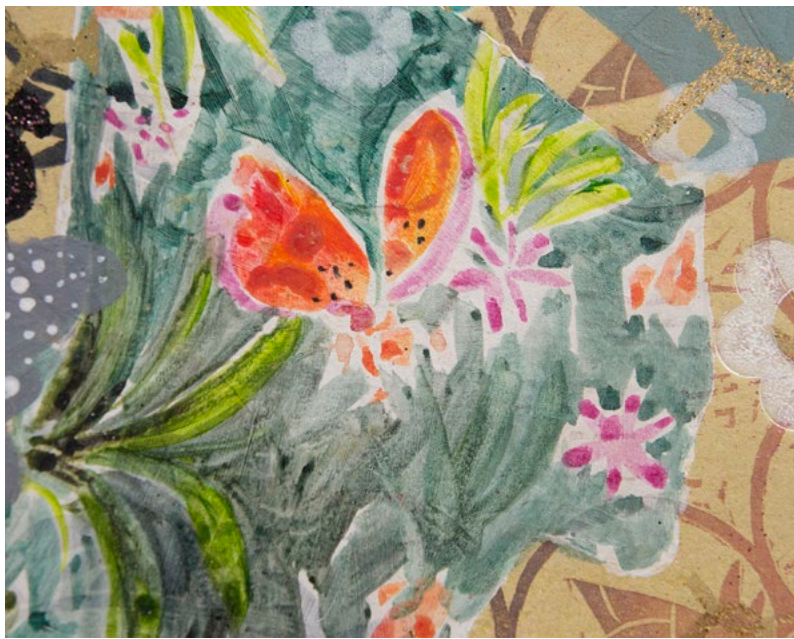




*Uniform – Wallpaper*  
2020

woodblock print, monoprint, stamping, stencil, acrylic, glitter, imitation gold leaf on cardboard  
60 x 80 cm each piece (40 unique artworks)













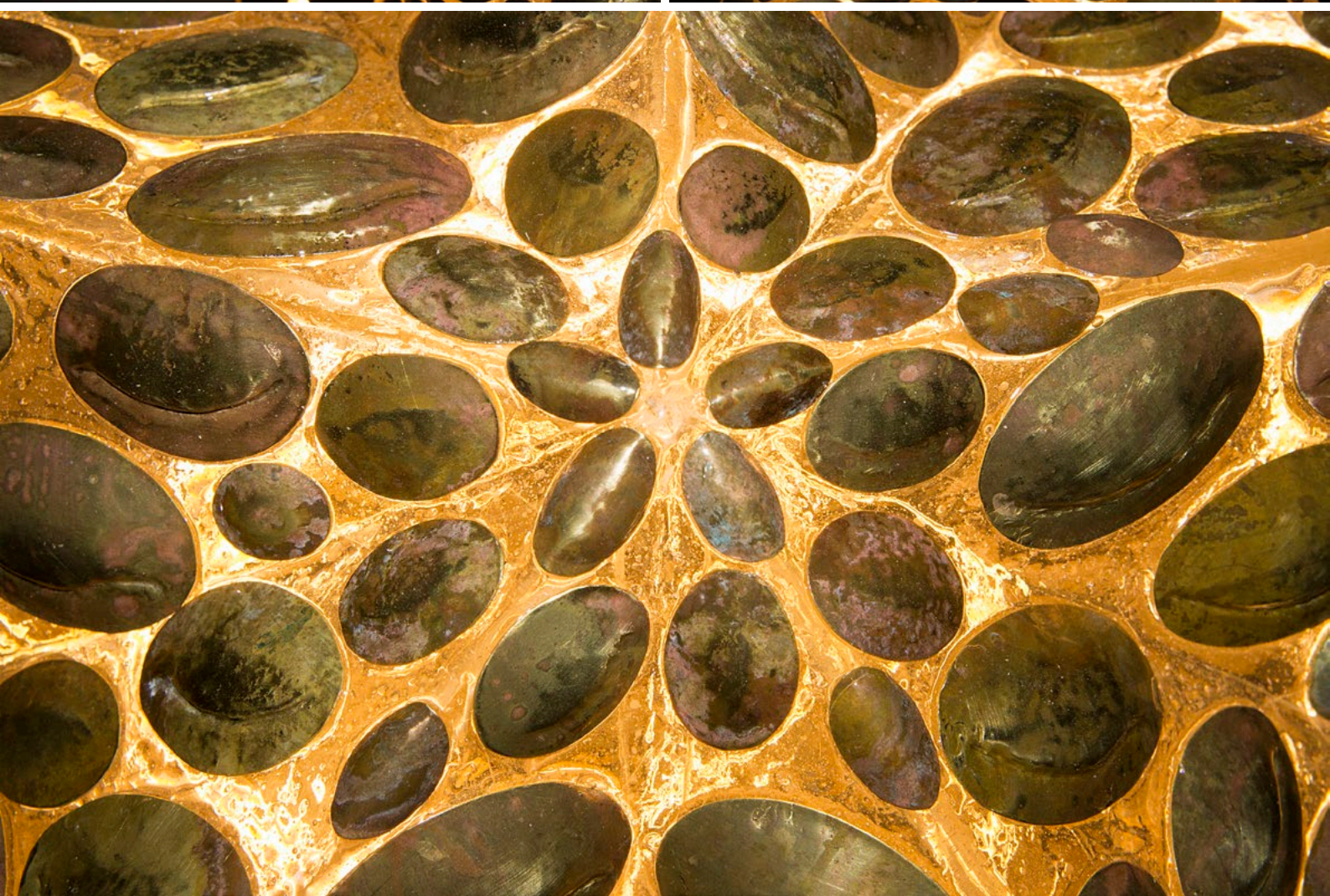
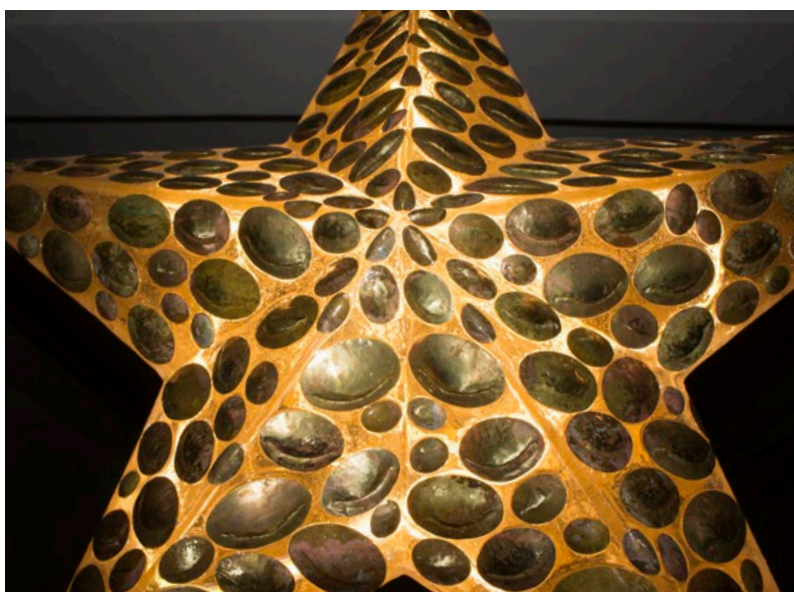
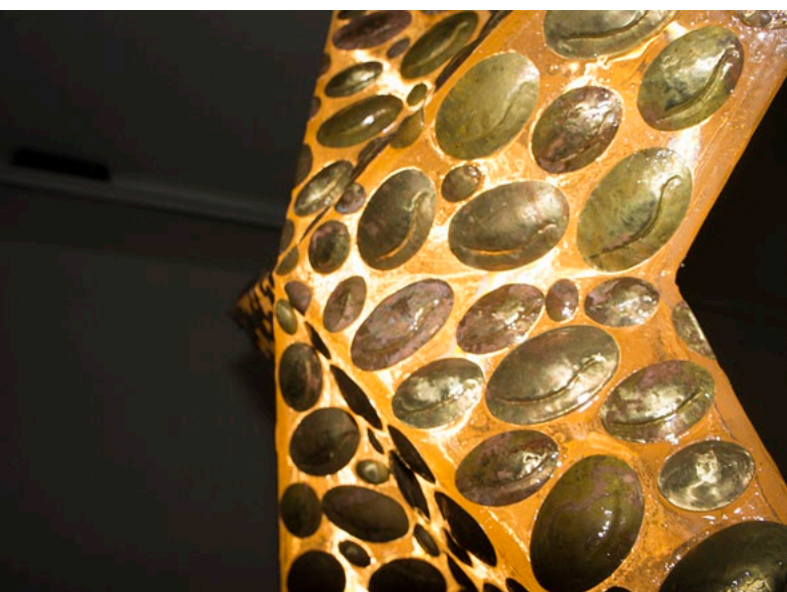
*Closed eyes – Light*

2020

transparent resin, stamped copper sheets, LED lights

57 x 52 x 13 cm









***Everything falls down, the flames go up – Twin Kitchens***

2020

cardboard, papers, imitation silver leaf, emulsion paint, L-brackets, screws, LED lights

200 x 650 x 180 cm

edition of 3 + 1 AP













*Die-In - Pillow Chain*

2020

foam mattress, velvet, embroidered ribbon  
10 x 50 x 30 cm each pillow (29 unique pieces)

















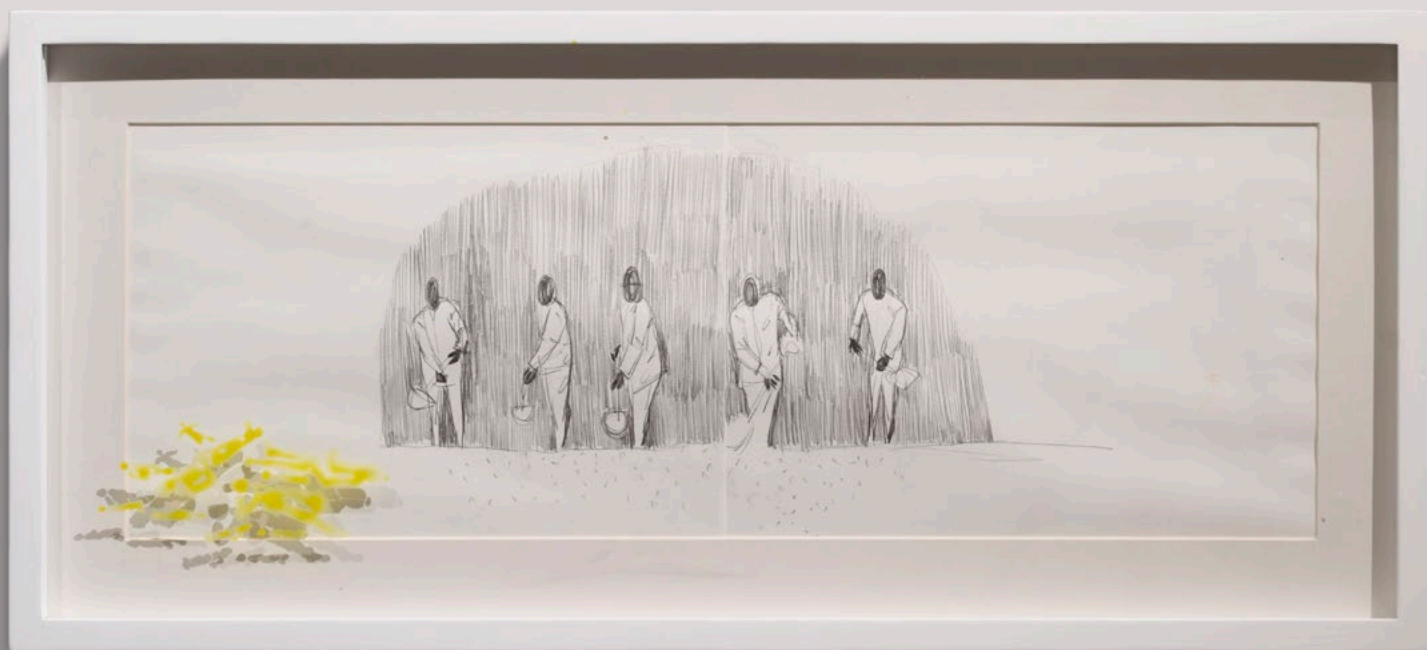
***The Extracts***

2015-2020

set of five framed paintings linked by hand-drawn shapes on glass  
graphite on paper, acrylic on glass, wooden frames

105 x 160 cm





***The Extracts #13***

2015-2020

graphite on paper, acrylic on glass, wooden frame

29 x 65 cm





***The Extracts #14***

2015-2020

acrylic on paper, acrylic on glass, wooden frame

31.5 x 43.5 cm





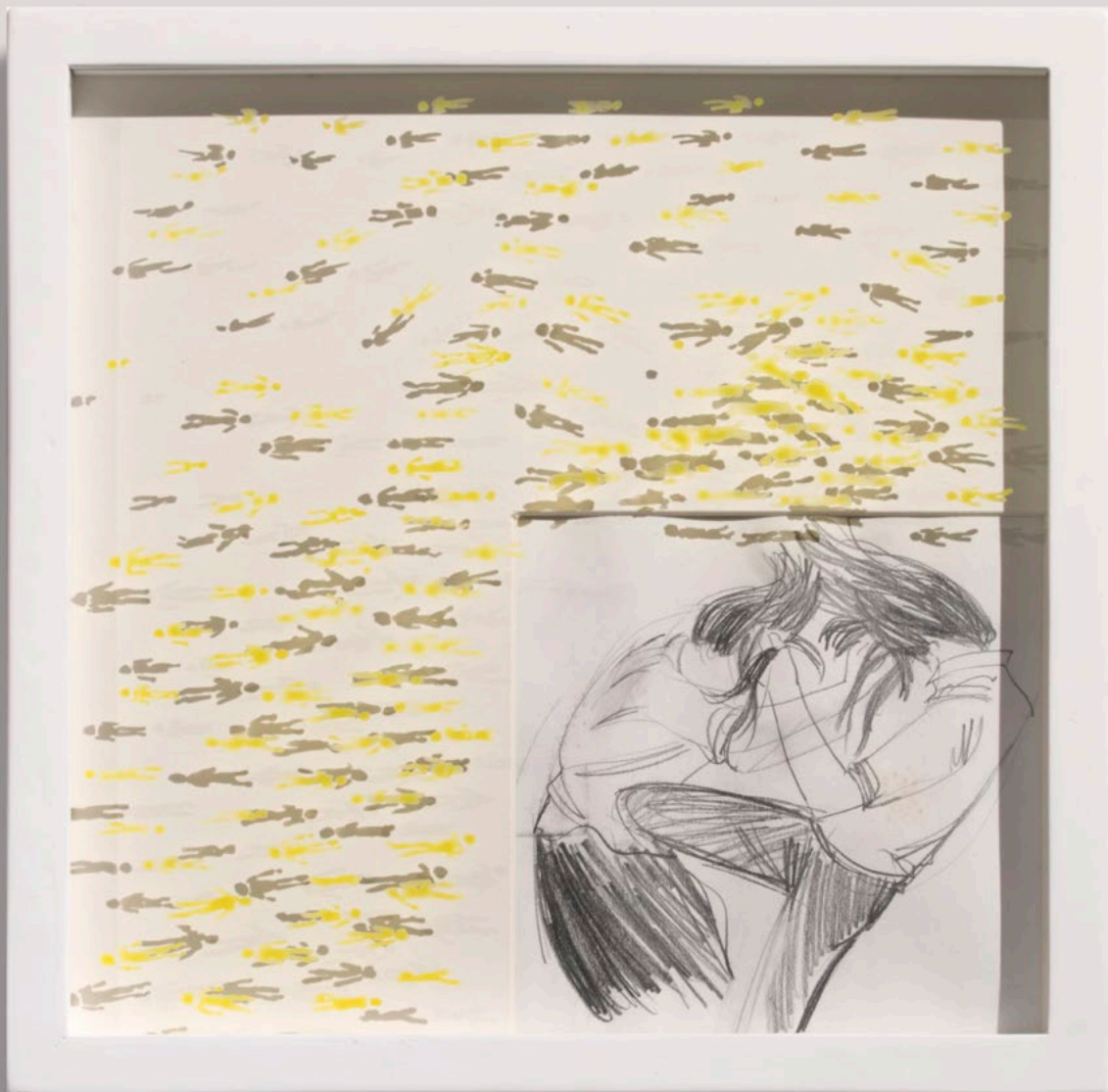
***The Extracts #15***

2015-2020

acrylic on paper, acrylic on glass, wooden frame

62 x 84,3 cm





***The Extracts #16***

2015-2020

graphite on paper, acrylic on glass, wooden frame

27 x 27 cm





***The Extracts #17***

2015-2020

graphite on paper, acrylic on glass, wooden frame

21 x 30 cm



# BIOGRAPHY





## NGÔ ĐÌNH BẢO CHÂU

Born in 1986 in Dong Thap, Vietnam

Lives and works between Hue and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

### EDUCATION

2010                      Graduated from University of Fine Arts, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2020                      *Towards Realist Socialization*, Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2013                      *Silk of light*, Sàn Art Productions x Phuong My, Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2019                      *Block of Silence*, SECC, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

*Where The Sea Remembers*, The Mistake Room, Los Angeles, CA, USA

2018                      *Body Survey(ed)*, Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

2017                      *Dogma Prize*, Heritage Space, Hanoi, Vietnam



2016	<i>loco-liti</i> , Sao La, Địa Projects, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>She</i> , Địa Projects, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>She</i> , Sweet 'Art, London, UK, travelled to Little Pink Monster Gallery, TX, USA <i>Open Room 2</i> , private studio, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (artist-cum-organizer)
2015	<i>Bất-Phân-Thân</i> , Nhà Sàn Collective, Hanoi, Vietnam <i>Body Bouquet</i> , Welch School Galleries, Atlanta, GA, USA <i>Kickstarter</i> , Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>Chung 2015</i> , PongDang Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>March</i> , Sao La, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
2014	<i>Open Room 1</i> , private studio, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (artist-cum-organizer) <i>Chung 2014</i> , PongDang Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>Out of Nowhere</i> , Sao La, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
2013	<i>Spring Galleria</i> , Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>Lab 2: Exhibition</i> , Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
2012	<i>Pharmacide</i> , Meta House, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
2011	<i>National Young Arts Festival</i> , Hanoi, Vietnam <i>Art Swap</i> , private venue, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
2010	<i>My Eldest Sister</i> , Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>National Art Exhibition 2010</i> , Hanoi, Vietnam <i>New Talent 2010</i> , Fine Arts Association, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>MW 2010</i> , Fine Arts Association, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
2009	<i>Young Artists Biennale</i> , Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam <i>The particular/The general</i> , Fine Arts Association, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

## RESIDENCIES

2018	New York Fellowship, apexart, New York, NY, USA
2013	Sàn Art Laboratory, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
2010	943 Studio, Kunming, China

## GRANTS

2016	The Denmark–Vietnam Cultural Development and Exchange Fund (CDEF) for <i>Open Room</i>
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