

# A FICTIONAL ACCOUNT

---

By Tra Nguyen

29

JUNE 2016

Ho Chi Minh City is the largest metropolis in Vietnam, with more than nine million inhabitants. Mornings rise fast here. On average, at approximately 5:25 am, light appears from the east, and within 40 minutes it illuminates the entire city. Motorbikes fill the streets. Six to seven million of them flow together. At a crossroad, while red lights count down, the bikes build up anticipation with their riders. Three seconds to green, they are already dashing forward. The cars follow them closely. And so they do. With the sound of engines roaring rhythmically to an invisible beat, the city awakes.

In a small alley not far from the city zoo, tucked in a residential area, a Reading Room opens. On its wooden shelves, exhibition catalogs, monographs, art magazines as well as books on art theory, history and philosophy are neatly arranged, their backs dotted with green, yellow, red or blue. On another shelf a ceramic vase takes center stage. More books, leaflets, brochures and postcards surround it while a Buddhist statue looks out from the top corner. On the walls are paintings, photographs and a lightbox. It is Sàn Art, the longest-running independent art space in the city.



11:06 AM



(Previous page)  
Photo showing the interior of Sàn Art's Reading Room—a non-lending archive of resources on contemporary art practices that is accessible free of charge for use by the general public. Courtesy Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City.

(This page)  
**NGUYEN HONG NGOC (NAU)**, *Blinded girl in the world of light I*, 2013, photographic lightbox, 50 x 70 x 2 cm.

(Opposite page, top)  
**QUESTAL TAY**, *The Wound of Beauty* (detail), 2016, sheer fabric, thread and wood, dimensions variable.

(Opposite page, middle)  
**ADRIANA BUSTOS**, *Imago Mundi III. Channels of the Magdalena, Mekong, Paraná and Río de la Plata Rivers* (detail), 2014, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 40 x 600 cm. Collection of Asiatic Trust, Singapore.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**NGUYEN THI THANH MAI**, *Out I*, 2012, vaginal speculum and beads, 120 x 25 x 25 cm.

(Background image throughout)  
**ART LABOR**, *The Adventure of Color Wheel*, 2014, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Installation view from a permanent public art project for the Pediatrics Department, Ho Chi Minh City Eye Hospital.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy the artist and Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City.

A staff member, Ms. T, comes out of the back office to see a guest leafing through a brochure attentively, as if hidden inside were a secret map waiting to be decoded. As the guest turns around to say “Hello,” Ms. T notices that he is carrying mini binoculars. She wonders what the guest wants to see afar in this city—water monsters swimming up black narrow channels or red flying monkeys swinging on centennial trees?

Not giving Ms. T much time, the guest approaches her, pointing to a drawing on the brochure.

— *Sorry is this exhibition still on? I don't see any dates here. And where can I find it?*

Now that he actually speaks, Ms. T detects a lightness to his voice; it does not leave echoes in the air. Once a phrase is spoken, it immediately vanishes as if nothing had ever been said. Appalled, Ms. T forgets her tact and offers a cryptic answer.

— *That's not an exhibition. It's not on now, nor is it ever. And it doesn't have a venue so finding it will be a bit tricky.*

The guest doesn't seem surprised by it. He looks at the brochure again.

— *Really? So what is it then?*

Ms. T smiles.

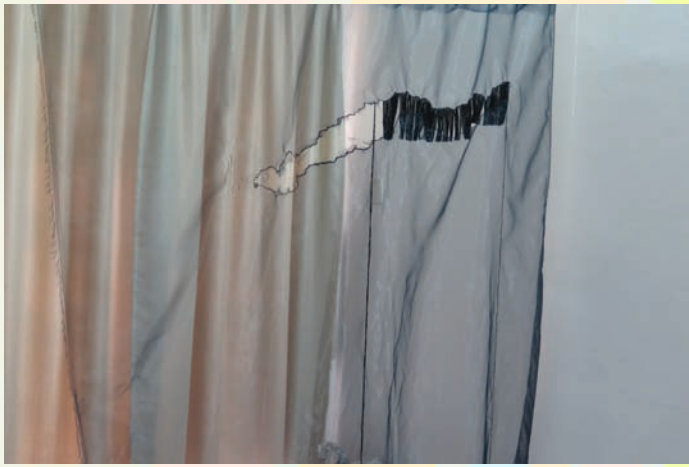
— *It's a long story.*

The guest sits down.

— *I like long stories.*

Something about the guest tells Ms. T that he is genuinely determined to crack the code. Something else tells her she shouldn't say anything untruthful (though she wasn't really planning on doing that, it's strange the way his presence implies that she does not have the option). Half curious, half intimidated, Ms. T starts telling the guest the long-winded story leading to the brochure in his hand.





In Vietnam, where fine-arts degrees focus heavily on technique and only lightly on history or conceptual analysis, graduate artists have few tools to experiment with, and few platforms on which to exchange ideas. The city's Fine Arts Museum holds modern and revolutionary artefacts that are covered in dust. In the few independent artist-initiated spaces where contemporary art is seen, there is still too little discussion on what "contemporary art" is. With the many how's, why's and why not's unanswered, confused artists resort to working for the advertising, marketing and film corporations who will pay handsomely for their technical skills. But no occupation can quell their desires to

push their artistic boundaries. Since 2012, artists who are determined to challenge themselves have been submitting proposals to Sàn Art Laboratory. The most outstanding candidates demonstrate eagerness and openness, with a resolution to grow through experimentation and critical discussion. The successful ones are granted a six-month residency. Sàn Art furnishes each with an apartment and a studio, where these artists can work free of commercial pressure. To help them realize their projects, there is funding, a local team with unrivaled experience on exhibition design and, most importantly, a chance to pair up with a "talking partner" whose expertise is relevant to their research. This "talking partner," who can be an artist, an anthropologist or a writer, serves as a soundboard and interlocutor, one who offers alternative, in-depth perspectives on the artist's chosen topic so that they can expand, connect, compare and discover differing methods and meanings. At the end of the six-month residency, together the three "Labbies" hold a group exhibition. The newly created artworks often complement one another, giving lively narrative to their co-existence and in many ways, echoing the exchanges within their shared space of creativity. The Laboratory, nicknamed "The Lab," has enabled many artists to spring forth on their paths: for example, Nguyen Hong Ngoc's works have traveled to different parts of the world; Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai earned a residency with Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Germany; Truong Cong Tung and Phan Thao Nguyen, who later formed the collective Art Labor with curator Arlette Quynh-Anh Tran, secured an interdisciplinary project at the Ho Chi Minh City Eye Hospital—the first collaboration of its kind between a government institution, commercial sponsors, medical researchers and an artistic collective.



After three and a half years above ground, the Lab has switched to guerrilla mode: only when a resident artist signals for input and dialogue does a motley crew of curators, artists and writers assemble at the studio for intensive critical discussions. Not a public event. Highly mobile. And always boiling with ideas—the purpose for which the Lab has been designed.

The brochure lays open on the table. It documents the last experimentation of its kind: a series of drawings by a Cambodian artist, an installation by a Singaporean artist and a body of large paintings by a Vietnamese artist.



The guest chimes in somewhat gleefully.

— So it is an exhibition?

Ms. T smiles.

— A project. To showcase an exhibition we need to apply for an exhibition license with the city's department of culture and sport. But it is not an exhibition, so there's no need for official approval nor will there be any paper trails. It doesn't exist.

At that moment, Ms. T has the impression that her guest is gauging her very presence while a machine repeats in his ears that there is no one in front of him. Whoever wins does not show. He simply nods.

— I see. Is there anything else that does not exist that you can share? I'm only asking because you seem to have a way to share the non-existent. And for some reason I think there is more to it.

Now, Ms. T has no apparent reason not to share other projects by Sãn Art with an interested listener, though a sense of foreboding overcame her and she had a feeling that something horrible might happen if she did. But looking at the guest's perfect straight face, she detects no hidden agenda (yet, as at 11:52 am, according to the digital watch he wears). So she goes ahead and offers another long eventful story.

Sãn Art Laboratory runs in parallel with another major program: *Conscious Realities* is a three-year project that focuses on the shared histories and cultures of the Global South and examines the lateral historical connections and similarities between Southeast Asia, South Asia, Latin America and Africa—a topic hardly studied in Vietnam, for the government panders to the United States, China and European countries, which are major sources of foreign investment. This program invites artists and intellectuals from fields as diverse as mathematics, economics, geography, political science, history, art theory, film-making, architecture and journalism to Ho Chi Minh City for public lectures and private workshops. Here again, “talking” is of central focus in order to challenge social assumptions, cultural habits and political apathy. Participants—artists as well as cultural enthusiasts—enjoy this rare chance to engage critical contemporary thinkers.

Archives are crucial to sustainable models of learning, hence each speaker suggests titles for Sãn Art's Reading Room, often donating books they have written. The Reading Room has now acquired a small collection of books that respond cohesively to the programs' triple thematics: the role of mythology in contemporary society; the artistic employment of social-science methodologies in contemporary visual culture and their subsequent reinterpretation of the “archive”; and the history of material resources as physical substance, as human labor or as a symbol of social significance. A collection including foundational essays by 19th- and 20th-century thinkers such as Walter Benjamin,



Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss, alongside acclaimed scholars Andreas Huyssen, Prasenjit Duara and Inrasara, to name a few, has recently been published. Named simply as the Conscious Realities Reader, it is the first of a series and all chosen texts have been translated into Vietnamese. Hoa Sen University, one of the most progressive institutions in the country, with a reputable publishing department, has partnered with Sàn Art, handling the administration and publication demands of the project.

Conscious Realities wraps up this year with a timeline that narrates the history of 1950s Vietnam according to the artists who have experienced it or have reimagined it. The timeline anchors on artefacts, artworks, documentaries, books and pieces of music that reverberate a very different sound than that of the division of the country, or of approaching choppers. Confined in a very small space, the exhibition expands time. Yes it is very interesting and no you can't see it because it is, at this point in time, invisible.

Ms. T ends with that note.

The guest looks at his watch. Then he says:

— Thank you for another fascinating story. It's now 11:55 am. Do you expect anyone at 12?

— My lunch lady.

— Who is . . . ?

— The one who delivers lunch to the team here every day. Do you want a lunch portion? We can order for you.

— Oh. Lunch. And lunch lady. No, I'm fine thank you. Do you mind if I stay here for another five minutes to wait for someone?

— Not at all, please. You might want to look at some books here in the meantime. Our Reading Room is one of the rare sources of contemporary art books in the city.

— I have no doubt about it. Thank you.

(Opposite page, top)  
**UUDAM TRAN NGUYEN**, *Serpent's Tails*, 2015, still three-channel video: 15 min 17 sec.

(Opposite page, middle)  
**SUDARSHAN SHETTY**, *Waiting for others to arrive*, 2013, single-channel video: 10 min 36 sec. Installation view from the exhibition "Conjuring Capital" at Sàn Art, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Ske, New Delhi.

(Opposite page, bottom)  
**VO TRAN CHAU**, *Water-image*, 2015, cotton, thread and water, dimensions variable.

(This page)  
**NGUYEN THUY TIEN**, *Goldfish on love and everything that's in between*, 2015, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.



The guest pauses as Ms. T awaits his further clarification, which he does not proffer. So she asks:

— *Why do you ask if I'm expecting anyone at 12?*

The guest pauses for a moment before answering:

— *Do you like long or short stories?*

— *Short. Always short.*

— *Sure. [He puts his binoculars on the table.] In 2015 you wrote a story about a person offering USD 25,000 to whoever can paint a truthful picture about "Ho Chi Minh City on 29th June 2016," yes?*

— *Yes. It's a work of fiction.*

— *I'm well aware. The thing is, a gentle-person has actually commissioned me to go check out the happenings in the city today, the 29th of June 2016, to see if a very detailed account of today's events is truthful. I can't show you this account, but I can let you know that in it, one thing directly involves you. This gentle-person will be here at Sân Art at noontime, and he or she said you would be expecting his or her arrival. And you were saying you weren't expecting anyone except for your lunch lady?*

By now Ms. T has gone speechless. Is she inside a fiction? Her own fiction?

The guest continues:

— *I guess you are surprised. You will be more surprised to know that so far, all of the events in that account have been true, including our conversation here about non-existent projects.*

What Ms. T manages to muster together is a feeble "How?"

— *That's what I'm eager to find out too. The one visiting you at 12 might have the answer. If you're not particularly in a rush, let's wait together?*

Ms. T runs a few options in her head and finds his proposal the most agreeable. She excuses herself to go fetch her phone in the back office, then sits down with the guest again at the communal table of the Reading Room. Then she realizes she has talked to this person for almost an hour now without knowing his name. So she asks him that.

He smiles for the first time.

— *My name is Jonathan McNeil.*

Without skipping a beat, he continues:

— *I am a fictional character.*

As her watch beeps at 12, Ms. T looks to the door.

Indeed someone is strolling in, and she knows immediately why she has been awaiting this specific gentle-person.

(Top)  
**RATU R. SARASWATI**, *Within walking distance*, 2015, mixed-media installation and performance, installation: dimensions variable, performance duration: approximately 30 min.

(Bottom)  
The inaugural "Encounter" public lecture given by mathematician and University of Chicago professor Ngô Bảo Châu, which took place in August 2013 at the University of Social Science and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, as part of Conscious Realities. Courtesy Nguyen Thanh Tuan.

