

Vietcetera.

May 15, 2023, by David Willis

Three Art Shows To See In Vietnam Right Now

The Vietnamese art scene is showing signs of new growth, as evidenced by the opening of The Outpost Art Organisation in Hanoi, and a promising new gallery at Centec Tower, Ho Chi Minh City.



Trong Gia Nguyen, *Vietnam Airlines & Space Shuttle* (2023), oil on canvas, 61 x 100.5 cm. Image Courtesy of Galerie Quynh

Vietnam has a well-celebrated artistic heritage, characterized by traditional art forms such as silk painting, lacquerware, and water puppetry, but it is only in recent years that Vietnam has started to gain recognition for contemporary art as well.

Due to a lack of institutional support, contemporary Vietnamese artists have been experimenting with new media, such as performance, video, and installation in relative obscurity for over two decades. However, the situation is improving, as local patrons step forward to build collections and set up exhibition spaces, nurturing flourishing art scenes in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Check out three of the most awe-inspiring art exhibitions across the country right now.

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Peculiar Interfaces

The Outpost Art Organisation, 15/04/23 — 23/07/23

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Trong Gia Nguyen, *Sonnet, Anh có nên ví em với ngày mùa hạ? Em đáng yêu hơn và rất đỗi dịu êm*, 2023
Dulux Shadow Rose (210 x 27.5 x 5.5 cm). Image courtesy of Galerie Quynh

Songs of Singularity

Galerie Quynh, 15/04/23 —03/06/23

The longest-running white cube space in Vietnam, Galerie Quynh is pretty much the blue-chip gallery of contemporary Vietnamese art. They have moved several times over the last two decades, finally settling in a tall and skinny Saigon-style building in 2017, which they built out with four separate exhibition spaces across three different floors, as well as state-of-the-art storage and a beautiful roof garden.

Currently on display is a show by the Belgium-based artist Trong Gia Nguyen — his third solo at the gallery. Born in Vietnam and raised in the United States, Trong eventually settled in Saigon for about a decade before moving to Brussels a few years ago. His work is incredibly diverse in terms of media, yet there is a steady conceptual basis to his practice, characterized by a wry sense of humor, visual wordplay, and a consistent engagement with the transcultural experience of a Viet Kieu in a post-internet world.

The grandiloquent exhibition titled “Songs of Singularity” evokes the language of epic poems such as Nguyễn Du’s “Tale of Kiều.” However, the reference to The Singularity (ie. the theoretical scenario wherein mankind and AI merge consciousness) puts us into a more futuristic context, which is fitting given the themes of technological entropy and evolving tradition running through the work as a whole.

The exhibition begins with an immersive installation of “cracked phone screens” made of iron, evoking the ornate, French-style gates and window grates which are so common in Vietnam.

Cracked Mobile installation by Trong Gia Nguyen, 2023. | Image courtesy of Galerie Quynh

Other works in the show include oil paintings which the artist composed in Google 3D Warehouse and then outsourced to different painters in Saigon for completion, and a playful series of câu đối produced by artisans in Huế, consisting of carved wooden couplets written in Vietnamese with Chinese style Nôm characters, bridged by painted text in English, saying things like “Knock Knock” or “I Got You Babe.”

For those who maintain that artistic talent is simply about being able to paint or sculpt well, this show is guaranteed to induce seething and the gnashing of teeth, but for those who appreciate conceptual art, it should prove highly stimulating.



Cracked Mobile installation by Trong Gia Nguyen, 2023.
Image courtesy of Galerie Quynh



COURTESY PATINOIRE ROYALE / GALERIE VALÉRIE BACH

Trong Gia Nguyen

Perpetual Painting, 2022, huile sur toile, 10 panneaux modulables, 199 x 15 cm.

Trong Gia Nguyen complexe

Son patronyme est un programme à lui seul! Et si "Qui dort dîne", il lui arrive aussi de patiner.

★★ **Trong Gia Nguyen – In Perpetuity** Art contemporain OÙ Patinoire royale/Galerie Valérie Bach, Espace Verrière, 15, rue Veydt, 1060 Bruxelles. www.prvbgallery.com et 02/533.03.90 Quand Jusqu'au 12 novembre.

Natif de Saigon, Vietnam, Trong Gia Nguyen, qui a grandi aux Etats-Unis, vit désormais à Bruxelles. Conceptualisant son art pictural, l'artiste aborde des thèmes aussi essentiels, aussi exacerbés, de nos jours, que les jeux de pouvoirs entre des humains épris de domination, mais aussi les conflits qui, toujours davantage, régissent un monde comme en suspension entre la victoire des uns et la défaite des autres. Les droits civiques et, surtout, ceux des minorités, ne sont pas absents de ses mises en perspective.

À La Patinoire, Trong Gia Nguyen tente deux approches. Il y a sa série de tableaux de la série "The Diabolical", numérotés. Inspirés au peintre par un recueil de récits intitulé *Les diaboliques*, œuvre de Barbey d'Aurevilly, ces tableaux, aux couleurs chaque fois bien tranchées – bleu, vert, blanc, rose, jaune... – font référence aux crimes qu'aurait commis une femme. Laquelle n'apparaît pas mais est symbolisée par des lignes anthropométriques telles qu'utilisées dans les commissariats pour mesurer les prétendus coupables.

Si vous nous suivez, malgré la complexité du propos, vous serez censé décrypter l'une des histoires contées par Barbey d'Aurevilly il y a près de cent cinquante ans. On nous précise – utile à savoir! – que les lignes verticales sont absolument exactes et accrochées sur les murs en respectant la bonne hauteur.

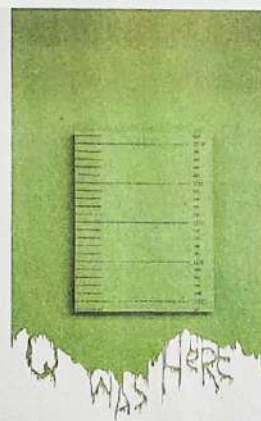
Pour arriver à ces mesures, Trong Gia Nguyen a pris pour référence des affiches, des photographies. Les couleurs des ta-

bleaux, peints sur bois, correspondent à celles qu'il a préalablement posées sur le mur. D'où, nous est-il précisé, "ces peintures peuvent littéralement et mathématiquement calculer le 'quotient de culpabilité' de chaque spectateur".

Les données du problème ne sont pas closes pour autant, car il est ajouté à notre intention de béotiens en quête de réponses que le "passé est capturé sous les aplats de couleur. Un passé invisible à l'œil du spectateur mais tapi sous les couches picturales". La démonstration quemande une suite, le texte fourni par la galerie s'en chargeant. Complexe? Réponse sans ambiguïté: à prendre ou à laisser!

Dans *Perpetual Painting*, œuvre en panneaux possiblement extensibles, Nguyen dépeint une table à la longueur sans fin. Assemblage de natures mortes? Jouant avec les images 3D puisées sur internet, l'artiste incite le spectateur à se composer une table à sa mesure. Le clin d'œil à Poutine recevant ses interlocuteurs à une appréciable distance n'est pas innocent. À vous de jouer et de prendre part ou non au jeu plastique ainsi initié.

Roger Pierre Turine



COURTESY PATINOIRE ROYALE / GALERIE VALÉRIE BACH

Trong Gia Nguyen, "The Diabolical 4.2", 2022, acrylique sur bois couleur semblable au mur, 114x84 cm.

Pacific Rim Artists Are Given the Limelight at OCMA's California-Pacific Triennial

By Liz Goldner



When the Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) launched the California-Pacific Triennial in 2013, it became the first California museum to survey the work of Pacific Rim artists. The Triennial — the offspring of the California Biennial, introduced at OCMA in 1984 — thereby became a distinctly more global event than its predecessor.

As Dan Cameron, curator of the 2013 Triennial explains: “SoCal museums had never looked at the Pacific Rim as a point of reference for the state's current and future demographic, with all the cultural, political, and economic implications.” He further acknowledged that our state’s multiethnic life and culture are often determined by migration from South America and Asia. His aim then was to place artists working in California within this broader global network. Cameron (today an independent New York City curator) organized the 2013 exhibition featuring contemporary paintings, illustrations, sculpture, video, light, sound installations and more from countries bordering the Pacific Ocean.

The 2017 Triennial “Building as Ever,” curated by OCMA senior curator Cassandra Coblentz, running through September 3rd, shares the basic aim of Cameron’s exhibition, because as she says, “In Orange County the cultural influence of the Pacific Rim is ever present.” Yet, there are dissimilarities. A chief difference is this year’s focus on architecture, and especially on the ephemeral nature of buildings. Or as Coblentz writes in the accompanying catalog, it affords “an opportunity to think deeply about what it means to simultaneously build up and tear down architectural structures” and to “respond to the question of permanence relative to the built environment.” Philosophically, most of the installations in the show are conceptual in nature. Salvadoran Ronald Morán’s “Intangible Dialogues 1-21” (2017), as one example, is geometric sculptural piece made of thread, spanning its specifically designated gallery space. In fact, the time-based or work-in-progress aspects of many installations in the show add to their conceptual qualities. “Building as Ever,” featuring 25 individual projects by artists from 11 countries across Asia and North and South America, includes drawing, painting, sculpture,

photography, video and multimedia pieces. An additional 26th project is the exhibition catalog; or as Coblenz writes: "This fluid sense of artist/architect/writer extends to this accompanying book." Indeed, the catalog elucidates what architecture may not be in our contemporary world; the book also clearly describes the individual projects in the show, some of which are as "fluid" in nature as the show as a whole.

The first project in the exhibition, just outside the museum entrance, is by Los Angeles-based Renée Lotenero. This installation, "Stucco vs. Stone" (2017) is comprised of blown-up photos mounted onto plywood of classic decaying European buildings. This disorienting project includes medieval and Gothic style structures, most appearing to fall down on each other. Coblenz explains that architectural ruins, which provide a record of history, are valued enough to merit preservation. Lotenero's project is also reminiscent of Banksy's "Dismaland", a post-apocalyptic "bemusement park," installed in the U.K. in 2015, and of the "Dismayland" Gothic monstrosity paintings by Costa Mesa-based artist Jeff Gillette, also cited in the Banksy article.

A similarly dystopian installation is in the entryway just before the main galleries. "This is Architecture" (2017) by Mexico City-based Santiago Borja is a six-foot long grave, created by removing a concrete slab from the museum floor. Exploring the significance of materiality, the artist states, "the 'presence' of something absent has a spiritual connotation that is itself rarely found in modernism."

Just inside the entryway, "China House Great Journey" (2017) by Chilean artist Pilar Quinteros explores the history Santa Ana's Chinatown, which was intentionally burned down in 1906 by white supremacists of that age. To accomplish her goal, the artist focuses on a Newport Beach landmark, China House, built in 1914 and demolished in 1987 to make way for new housing. Her wooden model of the pink Chinese style house installed on a pedestal, beckons visitors to view her documentary film in a nearby room. The 15-minute film depicts the artist walking, while dragging the rope-bound China House, from the old Santa Ana City Hall through Irvine, Newport Beach and finally to the beach, near the spot where China House once stood—an eight-hour journey. Sitting on the sand at dusk she rebuilds the house, which is now in many pieces, then stands up and kicks the structure until it falls apart, perhaps symbolizing the transient nature of cherished homes and communities. The film proceeds to examine the history of Santa Ana's Chinatown through old newspaper clippings and historical records, as well as the history of China House including images of its demolition.

A significantly larger structure in the exhibition is by Vancouver-based Cedric Bomford. "The Embassy or Under a Flag of Convenience" (2017) is a site-specific scaffolding constructed of steel, wood and reclaimed materials. This five-story edifice, similar to structures erected for buildings undergoing construction, is the first of several pop-ups, which the artist intends to put up in different places. The scaffolding's temporary nature addresses Orange County's and SoCal's ongoing disregard for longevity as builders continue to construct faceless tract housing. The structure also invites visitors to climb up its rickety stairs to its top, where they can view nearby Fashion Island and slivers of the Pacific Ocean.

Also featuring scaffolding are 12 digital chromogenic prints, focusing on massive construction sites in downtown Los Angeles as it undergoes rapid development. L.A.-based Alex Slade's

M.O. is to explore with these images, “issues of gentrification, power, and control over economies of place/space,” while echoing similar growth trends throughout the Pacific Rim. With titles as “Wilshire and Figueroa, Wilshire Grand Center, Hanjin Group, Seoul, South Korea (73 story tower. Total budget \$1.1 billion)” (2015), these photos exhibit deft understanding of composition and color, while displaying hints of familiar L.A. sights including Disney Hall. These construction sites’ immense girth, seeming to overtake downtown, may cause viewers to long for the old downtown Bunker Hill neighborhood, with its elegant Victorian homes, which was demolished in the 1950s and 60s.

Another classic now-decimated Los Angeles site was Hollywood Park Racetrack, in business for 75 years. Just before it closed in 2013, L.A.- based Michele Asselin photographed its large, neglected spaces, resulting in 25,000 images. From these, she chose 14 pictures, depicting jockeys, workers and racetrack devotees for her “Clubhouse Turn” series. These moody archival prints of nearly empty spaces include the mezzanine and a horseman’s lounge. They “focus on the psychology of space, memory, and witnessing,” the catalog explains, and “create a poignant and telling disconnect that speaks to the ultimate demise of a once thriving place.”

The most painterly project in the show consists of seven mixed media works by Saigon-born Trong Gia Nguyen who now resides in Ho Chi Minh City and Brooklyn. These oil pastels on canvas and mounted inkjet prints (2017) relate the story of Nguyen, who was four years old when his family fled Vietnam in 1975. He then grew up with his siblings in the United States. After returning to his country of origin, he unearthed old family photos of his several U.S. homes and superimposed semi-abstract paintings of his family onto them. His poignant collaged mixed media works evoke memory, the passage of time, and the experiences of an Asian family as it strived to assimilate in a foreign culture. Of all the installations in this show, these works are the most involving as personal histories.



“Building as Ever” does not depict pretty images. In fact some of the installations such as Santiago Borja’s grave are difficult to engage with. Yet the exhibition has a profound message for this age of constant flux with its changing power structures, political disorientation and the displacement of people from across the globe. It is also is a visual treatise on the transitory nature of architecture today. Or as Stewart Brand writes in the catalog, “Architecture has trapped itself by insisting

it is the ‘art of building.’ It might be reborn if it redefined its job as the ‘design science of the life of buildings.’”

Top Image: California-Pacific Triennial 2017 opening night | Ryan Miller

Bottom Image: "Enid, Pine Street (1975–2014)," 2015 by Trong Gia Nguyen

LAPALME

JANUARY 12, 2016



Trong Gia Nguyen, *Modular Yellow Picket Fence* (2015)
Courtesy Galerie Quynh, Ho Chi Minh City

TALKING ART: An interview with Trong Gia Nguyen

BY CORALIE CLAEYSEN-GLEYZON

Trong Gia Nguyen is a Brooklyn and Ho Chi Minh City-based artist whose work explores the relationship of power, and tensions at play between an artwork and its audience. Last week he was awarded the 2015 Miami Beach Pulse Prize by Pulse Contemporary Art Fair. Brought to the fair by Milan-based mc2gallery, Trong's installation of 8 pieces was featured in ArtNews and helped make Pulse a real highlight of Miami Art Week this year again. Lapalme Magazine's Art and Culture editor was allowed to peek into the world of the artist and explore the corners of his incredible mind. Here is an excerpt of their discussion:

Do you remember your first art emotion, The first time an artwork raised a form of consciousness in you, an emotional response? The first time an artwork-like emotion came upon me was probably at about the age of five. I was living in Enid, Oklahoma and a big tornado was passing through. I went to the basement for fear of life and slept through the whole thing, much like art school. When I woke up, the dark skies had cleared up and I walked out onto the sidewalk. You could still feel the residual winds, but an amazing sun came out, straight out of a Hudson Valley painting. There was crazy color everywhere. I remember standing there -a la Caspar David Friedrich- just standing still, forever gazing at this sky. I guess you can say that was my first encounter with the sublime.

If you could choose a mentor who would it be and why, Across all time periods, no boundaries? Mephistopheles. Because I believe in extremes. How can one know true joy or happiness unless one has fathomed the darkest depths? In short, it's the limits of human experience I would seek out, one that values totality if there is such a thing.

Your work is at the crossroads of tragedy and comedy. An art piece quite innocent and playful at first can reveal itself as completely tragic in a split second. Do you find creative drive in your love of black humor and the absurdity of life as experienced through the prism of your multicultural encounters between Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) and the US? Every other day something odd happens to you in Vietnam, much like it does in Florida where I grew up. Minor things, but absurd and tragicomic in their own ways. I'm comfortable with the precarious, though it isn't necessarily a condition I would choose to be in all the time. Amid this theatre of the absurd, I've been making these ex votos paintings of everyday, petty miracles that I encounter in Vietnam. Ex votos come from a Mexican vernacular tradition in which a small painting illustrates some miracle that has happened. The votive work includes a text giving thanks to the saint, divine being, or thing responsible for that miraculous intervention. My paintings are more modest in contrast. They pay gratitude to such things as a woman fixing my motorcycle's flat tire or for my local running track, which has this concrete house blocking every lane, and all runners have to run around it at one of the turns. An apparent eminent domain failure. Another painting celebrates crossing the road in one piece -in Saigon, this is no small task.

Not only does your work play with the audience's emotions but it's also asking them to meet you half way. Sometimes unsettling and challenging but eventually always opening itself to reveal a plethora of cultural references and astonishing messages. The potential for engagement in your art is huge and your installations certainly cannot be taken in at a glance. I believe in a certain kind of treading intellectual labor, and I've always said that I like to make the viewer work for it. Generally my projects provide an easy entry point of recognizable objects, but from there it's a small journey that the artwork and viewer hopefully takes together. A dialogue ensues, and an equal "give-and-take" relationship is demanded from both. At its best, art worth experiencing should be challenging and take things to task.

The whole experience seems to reflect on itself. A sort of metadiscourse on art appreciation, your practice seems to ask the audience to consciously think about the way they apprehend a work of art. Your described this as a power struggle can you expand on that thought? I thought of this power dynamic during the "Sensation" show in Brooklyn about 15 years ago, when Giuliani was demanding to censor the work of Chris Ofili. I was asking myself what "decency standards" would consist of, if a contemporary art gestapo had its way. Historically, in propaganda posters and films, art has served politicians and political ends in almost repressive terms. I wanted to explore this relationship. When a viewer enters any exhibition space, he or she determines the criteria for looking: how long to look at something, under what aesthetic criteria, and so on. In doing so, control is asserted over the work. In some of my works, I try to invert this control in favor of the artwork and render the viewer helpless. It's a political role reversal in which the artwork assumes a dictatorial character, but not so easily recognized as such. I want such works to activate and "actionize," not just passively reveal Googled demographics or academically preach to the choir, as most socio-politically motivated work nowadays tend to do.

Where can we see your work at the moment? I am currently in a two-person show at Galerie Quynh in Ho Chi Minh City, then probably in the fall I'll do a solo in Milan with mc2gallery. In between I'll print guns with a 3D printer and give them away.

Where are you headed next and how does the future look? I'm stationed in Ho Chi Minh City at the moment, and my goal over the next year is to explore the scene in Southeast Asia. I want to check out Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, Jakarta, and all the other amazing stuff in Vietnam. I want to do a motorbike trip in the north and camp in those massive underground caves. Southeast Asia is a part of the world that is its own galactic cultural ecosystem, one that is also very dismissive of the egocentric western art world, and I like this. I love you New York, but fuck you too.

soso magazine

July 2015

“Trong Nguyen: Precipice Searching”

By Yasmin Martinelli



Win Win: 2013, acrylic paint, wood, mirror, vinyl. 84 x 60 x 54 inches

Artist Trong Nguyen creates artworks that both hilarify and stupefy, intrigue and bewilder. His extensive career has seen him in solo and group shows the world over, guest lecturing at different universities, partaking in thrilling artist residencies, and making a great deal of art that perches on the precipice of something dangerous, confrontational, powerful, and yet often with an element of playfulness and tongue-in-cheek whimsy. A huge, long list of galleries and museums around the world have played host to a collection of his artworks; some include: Coleman Burke Gallery (New York), Kingston on Thames (UK), Galerie ZK (Berlin), Galerie Quynh (Ho Chi Minh City) and Fruit & Flower Deli (New York). As a curator, Trong has organized numerous shows, including *Room without a View* (Freies Museum Berlin), *By Invitation Only* (Kinz, Tillou, + Feigen), *The Guy Debord Show* (New General Catalog), and *Who? Me?* (Zabriskie Gallery). He has received grants from LegalArt Miami, Artist in Residence in the Everglades, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Harvestworks Digital Media Center, Bronx Museum of the Arts, and Puffin Foundation. Currently, the artist resides in Vietnam where he is working on a number of paintings and other artworks. Some were exhibited a few months ago at Galerie Quynh, in Saigon. We caught up with the artist at the turning of a sweltering summer in Berlin.

Hello Trong, how is Vietnam treating you? What are your favourite things about being there? Are you working on anything in particular over there?



Portable Confessionals: 2012, handcut paper grocery bags. Each bag 17 x 12 x 7 inches

I'm in Saigon, and it's great. I've actually relocated here, for probably at least one year. I guess I can claim to be bi-continent at the moment. It's HOT right now in Vietnam, but having grown up in Florida, it's not that big a deal. I was born in Saigon, so it's a distant homecoming of sorts. Favorite things so far - food food food, and everywhere you go, it's really a non-stop, cinematic city - every turned corner in the day and evening feels like stepping in and out of a Gregory Crewdson photograph or a David Lynch, Wong Kar-wai film. The small art scene is pretty cool, too. And in general, I'm loving it because it feels so detached from the New York City-centricity. I have a love/hate relationship with the apple, like the rest of us, so I have to raise the occasional freedom tower finger to the 'hood. I was here in Saigon three months ago in February for a solo exhibition at Galerie Quynh. At that time I had hoped to finish one or two more projects, but didn't get very far. So now I have more time to tackle those works, which are related to a documentary film project I'm working on called DONG. I just rented a small house in the city that I will also use as a studio, and I'm looking forward to developing new work from whatever is available here materially. No Amazon. No Pearl Paint. Lots of humidity, so that could be my new medium. It's the first time I've seen one of my canvases start to mold, so that's exciting. The house is typically gaudy and cheaply built, in the classic Vietnamese style. 4 small floors, 3 bedrooms. Reminds me of being in an ugly hotel, so now all I have to do is make the art to go with it, and maybe plant a neon sign outside. In the meantime, I am figuring out how to ride a motorcycle and do as the locals do. Traffic is crazy and lawless here. After two days at it, I've counted one bruised shoulder courtesy of crashing into a wall, and two broken sideview mirrors.

In New York, what consumes most of your days? Any studio projects and/or happenings that you care to share?



Right before coming to Vietnam, I was mainly working on a series of ceiling cakes and sketching ideas for projects that I want to jump into in the near future....For the Vietnam show, I produced a series of paintings that resembled bastardized coloring books. In between New York and Vietnam, I had also spent a bit of time in Asheville, North Carolina working on the film project, with my collaborator David Raymond. Gotta get to the woods now and then. So now I need to do quite a lot of editing for that. I'm also working on the soundtrack for the film, which is an art project in its own right. For this, I'm asking non-Vietnamese speaking bands to cover war-era songs from the motherland in their best Vietnamese. It's the reversal of what you see so regularly with foreign singers who belt out songs in perfect English without understanding a lick of it. Vietnamese is a different animal of course. So far we've gotten one track in, a Carol Kim cover by the Detroit band Saturday Looks Good to Me. It's great! Other bands that will be covering songs also include Jamaican Queens and the Dusseldorf duo Bar.



The Once and Future... : 2008, Acrylic paint, styrofoam, foil, wood, and custom designed sword (etched steel, leather, bronze). 42 x 42 x 42 inches.

The last solo exhibition you had in Berlin was in 2010, Neo-Theo at Galerie ZK. How did that show come together?

Moritz Gaede, who runs ZK, is a curator/provocateur friend I met years ago in Toronto, and he had developed this great online project in 2001 called DriveDrive.com, that showcased a series of works by conceptual artists. I was doing my web-based Ebay project at that time, and Moritz's site was the satellite portal to that durational work. He moved to Berlin and opened ZK in 2010, which was an extension of the online space, but with more of a political bite. I had originally produced the Neo-Theo project for an exhibition on Governors Island, curated by No Longer empty. Governors Island is this tiny island just a stone's throw from Manhattan, and it was a former military base complete with forts and perfectly preserved colonial homes that were previously used by officers. It had served its purposes and went unused for something like the last 40 years, and thus was this big patch of green waiting for developers to ruin. I showed Moritz images of my installation in one of the colonial houses, and he wanted to bring it to ZK. It's a dark piece about the fine line straddled by both fascism and nationalism, and the blind historian inside all of us.

You also participated in a group exhibition called From Our Living Room to Yours at Goff + Rosenthal and exhibited special works at Superbien Greenhouse. What were these shows like and what did you take out of these experiences?

Goff + Rosenthal was a fun group show curated by Daria Brit-Shapiro, and it was my first time in Berlin. Some friends were also in the exhibition and all I remember from that was a snowball fight after the opening and eating chili at 4 in the morning at Rodeo. Something like that...The Superbien space hosted a solo exhibition that I divided into 4 parts - essentially four shows over four weeks. It was a lot of work, but a great experience with happy results. The exhibition venue is a real greenhouse with transparent walls, so one absolutely had to contend with the space in ways that required some ingenuity and twist of convention. I couldn't hang anything on the walls, so opted for a few diverse projects. For two of them, I covered the walls with one-way mirror paper and controlled whether viewers were able to see into the space or not. One was a fictitious concert called "Sonic Berlin," where bands played inside the greenhouse yet no one was allowed to enter or see. The rock experience was truncated as they could only hear. The other one was a collaborative performance with several dancers and musician friends, called "Ready Set Sail." It was our way of exploring the city and encapsulating that experience in a narrative that also asked of the viewers to be explorative. We would lead them inside the greenhouse to watch the movement outside and vice-versa, creating open and claustrophobic vantage points to the movable performance.

What are your impressions of the art scene in Berlin? Differences or



Neo-Theo (Possessed American Flag):
2010, Creased cotton flag, audio loop,
framed photographs. Varying dimensions

comparisons to NYC?

Places like Superbien definitely allow for more of the experimentation Berlin is known for, and I think it's a city that artists can live cheaply and easily make work without pressures of crazy rent. Though, from speaking to a few Berliner friends in New York, they claim it's easier finding random day jobs to stay afloat while also having more potential to sell some work. The collectors base in Berlin is practically nonexistent, I guess. The gallery scene is broad and Berlin is comparable to New York culturally in many ways. Have you ever seen those t-shirts that read "Detroit Hustles Harder"? Well, I think New York hustles hardest, and that might be the biggest contrast. New Yorkers pride themselves on working like maniacs. Our east-coast style is definitely different from the easy-going lifestyle of east Berlin. Don't get me wrong, I love having breakfast at 3 in the afternoon like anyone else. I also like the co-op model that exists in Berlin, where a group of artists will rent a space and do a regular program of gallery exhibitions of each artist's work, and enlist or hire a curator to run it. It's a very smart, alternative model that works well in big cities where there is always more talent than available commercial galleries. That sort of thing is impossible with the sky-high rents in New York, and thus, so many talented people are left with little room to create significant exhibitions.

I would like to discuss some of your various artworks... let's start with your recent ceiling cakes. Traditionally, cakes say 'Happy Birthday/Anniversary/Graduation' or something like this. They commemorate an important life event. 'Happy Ending' is rather tongue in cheek, 'C U Next Time' implies this is not some one off celebratory gig, as we so often associate with a cake.... Aw Hell Naw is genius and somehow reminds me of the humorous 'Nigga Preez', 2010-11. A playful nature is something thats embedded in your work. Because I think you do this well, how do you communicate important/serious ideas, whilst being playful and funny?

I use humor as an entry point to whatever else I want to "discuss" in the work. With the ceiling cakes, one immediately finds them absurd and initially funny, but even the texts on them take on an ulterior meaning, alluding to the present, physical danger that is inherent in the way they are installed above the viewer. It's a precarious setting. People don't tend to think of artworks as being "dangerous," but that is an element I try to utilize as much as possible into my works, whenever I can. I want there to be a power struggle between the viewer and artwork, and I want the viewer to know they're going to be on the short end of it. Appropriating popular black culture phrases, "Aw Hell Naw" and "Nigga Preez" intentionally disrupt the discourse on race issues in the U.S. If one paid sole attention to media, you would think the country was just made up of colorless black and white folk, with both sides claiming empathy and dominion over the color they see in the mirror. It's a stale possessiveness that hinders any real resolution. Having experienced racism from black, white, brown, pink, and green people, I'd like to think the rest of us in the color spectrum also have some useful points on moving the topic ahead. I guess what I am getting at - in a very tangential way - with these works is that while it's important to look in that mirror, it might also be useful to put in some color light bulbs. That's a stretch in translation, but at least you get the point of how my thought process goes from point A to Z.

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Nigga Preez: 2011, acrylic mirror, glass, electroluminescent wire, wood frame. 30 inches diameter

Mine are pretty creepy colorful too, though definitely not edible. I think of them equally sculptural as painting, since I use oil and acrylic paint for the frosting and texts. Therefore they are an extension of "trompe l'oeil" painting. Though acrylic is a form of industrial plastic, I suppose. Beyond that, they're really meant to simply celebrate wrong and inappropriate things. References to the last supper and such are very specific to the idea of a shared meal amongst friends or strangers, to the conversations that unfold, to the exclusionary nature of some of these gatherings. The food pieces dole out what people sometimes want to say but are too afraid to, for fear of being politically incorrect and so on. Likewise, the "Messages from Guantanamo" work gave voice to all the identity-less prisoners who were being held at Gitmo. At the time of the piece, the U.S. government had not disclosed anyone's identities, save for their nationalities, which ranged greatly from Afghanistan to Holland, to Australia. Therefore, how can we simply label as "enemy" a faceless and nameless group, especially in a country where due process is fundamental? Importantly, I arranged for the bottles to be collected off the streets of Cuba. A friend of a friend illegally Fedexed 200 of them to another friend in Montreal, who then Fedexed them back to me in Miami. They went on a circuitous journey only to end up 90 miles from where they originated, which is indicative of American bureaucracy and foreign policy.

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'Portable Confessionals'. Does everyone have an inherent need to confess, divulge? Share their secrets or the secrets of others?

Portable Confessionals is a more subtle version of a megaphone, and considers the rampant confessional culture reflected in social media, celebritydom, and also the spiritual sphere. Viewers can interact with the piece by sliding their heads up the bags. They can whisper sweet nothings or shout out sinful somethings. Of course references to the less-than-pure priesthood is also evident. Originally I was going to title the work "Give Me Three Hail Marys and a Blowjob."

'Win Win' is genius! How much fun have you and friends had playing?

I think one of my best friends actually titled that work for me - a play on my last name, which is also pronounced "win." I had the work at an art fair, and after full days of people coming up and playing, taking portraits, etc, I think I need a holiday from the incessant sound of a plastic ball ricocheting off glass. But yes, it's a relatively light and playful piece, with the occasional selfie existential moment thrown in and multiplied. Moving forward, it'd be more fun to set up a tennis court version at Versailles and put powdered wigs and terrycloth headbands on everyone. To be called "You Cannot Be Serious! You Cannot Be Serious!"

Could you ever imagine yourself living in Berlin? Do you have another visit to our fine Hauptstadt on the horizon?



HAPPY ENDING! ; 2015, acrylic paint, styrofoam, wire, doily, wood cake stand. 10-1/4 x 12 x 12 inches.

I heart Berlin! I could see myself comfortably living there, and I have a lot of friends in the city, so it would not require much adapting. But I prefer the marginality of Saigon slightly more I would say. I have no immediate shows planned for your terrific city, but I may try to swing a visit later in the summer - I've been there every season but. And I heard there's a lot of sunshine then, naturally radiating from non-brooding Germans of course!

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The last solo exhibition you had in Berlin was in 2010, Neo-Theo at Galerie ZK. How did that show come together?

Moritz Gaede, who runs ZK, is a curator/provocateur friend I met years ago in Toronto, and he had developed this great online project in 2001 called DriveDrive.com, that showcased a series of works by conceptual artists. I was doing my web-based Ebay project at that time, and Moritz's site was the satellite portal to that durational work. He moved to Berlin and opened ZK in 2010, which was an extension of the online space, but with more of a political bite. I had originally produced the Neo-Theo project for an exhibition on Governors Island, curated by No Longer empty. Governors Island is this tiny island just a stone's throw from Manhattan, and it was a former military base complete with forts and perfectly preserved colonial homes that were previously used by officers. It had served its purposes and went unused for something like the last 40 years, and thus was this big patch of green waiting for developers to ruin. I showed Moritz images of my installation in one of the colonial houses, and he wanted to bring it to ZK. It's a dark piece about the fine line straddled by both fascism and nationalism, and the blind historian inside all of us.

You also participated in a group exhibition called From Our Living Room to Yours at Goff + Rosenthal and exhibited special works at Superbien Greenhouse. What were these shows like and what did you take out of these experiences?

Goff + Rosenthal was a fun group show curated by Daria Brit-Shapiro, and it was my first time in Berlin. Some friends were also in the exhibition and all I remember from that was a snowball fight after the opening and eating chili at 4 in the morning at Rodeo. Something like that... The Superbien space hosted a solo exhibition that I divided into 4 parts - essentially four shows over four weeks. It was a lot of work, but a great experience with happy results. The exhibition venue is a real greenhouse with transparent walls, so one absolutely had to contend with the space in ways that required some ingenuity and twist of convention. I couldn't hang anything on the walls, so opted for a few diverse projects. For two of them, I covered the walls with one-way mirror paper and controlled whether viewers were able to see into the space or not. One was a fictitious concert called "Sonic Berlin," where bands played inside the greenhouse yet no one was allowed to enter or see. The rock experience was truncated as they could only hear. The other one was a collaborative performance with several dancers and musician friends, called "Ready Set Sail." It was our way of exploring the city and encapsulating that experience in a narrative that also asked of the viewers to be explorative. We would lead them inside the greenhouse to watch the movement outside and vice-versa, creating open and claustrophobic vantage points to the movable performance.

What are your impressions of the art scene in Berlin? Differences or



Messages from Guantanamo
December 3, 2005, Installation of 200
glass and plastic bottles
Miami, Florida

comparisons to NYC?

Places like Superbien definitely allow for more of the experimentation Berlin is known for, and I think it's a city that artists can live cheaply and easily make work without pressures of crazy rent. Though, from speaking to a few Berliner friends in New York, they claim it's easier finding random day jobs to stay afloat while also having more potential to sell some work. The collectors base in Berlin is practically nonexistent, I guess. The gallery scene is broad and Berlin is comparable to New York culturally in many ways. Have you ever seen those t-shirts that read "Detroit Hustles Harder"? Well, I think New York hustles hardest, and that might be the biggest contrast. New Yorkers pride themselves on working like maniacs. Our east-coast style is definitely different from the easy-going lifestyle of east Berlin. Don't get me wrong, I love having breakfast at 3 in the afternoon like anyone else. I also like the co-op model that exists in Berlin, where a group of artists will rent a space and do a regular program of gallery exhibitions of each artist's work, and enlist or hire a curator to run it. It's a very smart, alternative model that works well in big cities where there is always more talent than available commercial galleries. That sort of thing is impossible with the sky-high rents in New York, and thus, so many talented people are left with little room to create significant exhibitions.

I would like to discuss some of your various artworks... let's start with your recent ceiling cakes. Traditionally, cakes say 'Happy Birthday/Anniversary/Graduation' or something like this. They commemorate an important life event. 'Happy Ending' is rather tongue in cheek, 'C U Next Time' implies this is not some one off celebratory gig, as we so often associate with a cake.... Aw Hell Naw is genius and somehow reminds me of the humorous 'Nigga Preez', 2010-11. A playful nature is something thats embedded in your work. Because I think you do this well, how do you communicate important/serious ideas, whilst being playful and funny?

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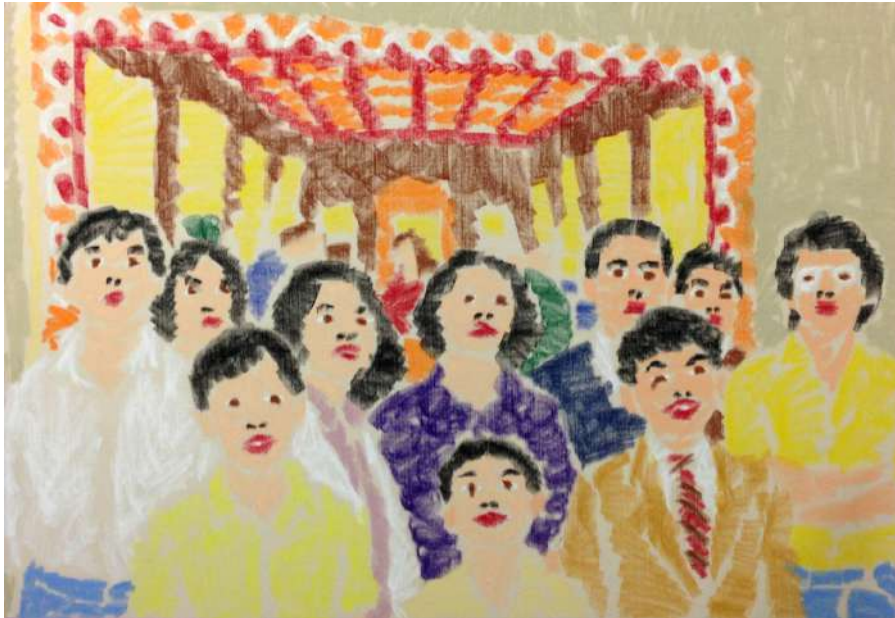
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Family Portraits Left Incomplete

by Keith Plocek, March 25, 2015



*Trong Gia Nguyen, "Family, Enid, circa 1982" (2014)
oil pastel on canvas, 145 x 208 cm*

HO CHI MINH CITY — Trong Gia Nguyen was only three years old when he was crammed into a Renault Dauphine with 13 other family members and driven to the Saigon docks on April 30, 1975. It was Reunification Day, or the Fall of Saigon, depending on your perspective. It was the day North Vietnamese forces finally expelled the foreign invaders, or the day the Americans callously abandoned their South Vietnamese allies. Amid all the confusion, with asylum-seekers trying to climb over gates to the U.S. Embassy and Americans pushing empty helicopters off aircraft carriers, the Nguyens managed to get on the last boat out of Saigon. They immigrated to the United States and never spoke of the day again.

Forty years later, artist Nguyen is revisiting his family's journey in *DONG*, a documentary film project in collaboration with collector-filmmaker David Raymond. In the [teaser posted online](#), you can see Nguyen playing with notions of memory, mixing clips from *Spaceballs* and *Sixteen Candles* with family interviews conducted by the artist's Brooklyn friends.

In addition to the film project, Nguyen is making works with similar themes for galleries, and one such show is up currently at [Galerie Quynh's](#) downtown space in Ho Chi Minh City. For *The Leavers*, Nguyen has taken old family photographs and created oil pastel paintings that look like completed pages of a coloring book, but with the original black lines erased.

The message behind the fuzzy paint and lack of outlines is clear: memories are imperfect, messy, constantly shifting and changing, like oil pastels that are never quite dry. You can never step twice into the same river, look at the same painting, or remember the same event, no matter how important it was for your family history.



Trong Gia Nguyen, "The Leavers" (2014), oil pastel on canvas, 14 works, overall: 1.90 x 4.50 m.

The highlight of the show is "The Leavers," a set of 14 individual portraits. These paintings are hung in the gallery with the patriarch and matriarch hung in the middle and the children fanning out, just as you'd see on the wall in a family home. A few of the men have decidedly 1970s looks about them, with smudges for nostrils that potentially double-up as mustaches.

Other paintings in the series are recreations of single snapshots of the artist's family members, with some of the photos dated before the artist was born. Taken as a whole, the paintings are radiant and messy. Nguyen takes us with him down hazy paths of childhood memory, and the works in *The Leavers* balance conceptual heft with playful technique.



Trong Gia Nguyen, "Family, Guam, 1975" (2014)
oil pastel on canvas

We often reflect upon the imperfections of memory with sadness. We want some moments, such as victories and kisses, preserved in amber. But Nguyen's paintings also bring to mind ways in which forgetting is important for healing, especially for a country sundered by war. Though originally cast as traitors, those who fled Vietnam were eventually welcomed back by the government and encouraged to start up businesses. Nguyen had not returned to his homeland until a few years ago, when he went to install a show at Galerie Quynh, where he was invited back this February.

He tells me over email that he's quickly spotted by locals as someone who grew up elsewhere, especially because he's six feet tall. "But once that little bit is over with, I've found that as Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese), I'm treated the same as 'countrymen' and will always be regarded as such. It's quite touching actually."

You can never go home again, but *The Leavers* shows us that sometimes where you wind up isn't wholly divorced from your past, and that memories can grow at once fuzzier and brighter over time.

“Treasure Troves” by Ernest Beck
Worth Magazine, April/May 2008

Treasure Troves



David Raymond's collection includes the Germaine Dulac film *La coquille et le clergyman*, 1926, bordered by Sheng Qi's Red Army Mao (Young Mao) on one side and My Left Hand-N.P.C. Meeting on the other.

DAVID RAYMOND

DAVID RAYMOND, a media entrepreneur and independent film producer, shuns the oversized and commercialized art fairs. “It’s an unbridled orgy,” says Raymond of the Miami event and its partying, art-buying hordes. “How is it possible to go and look at art in a comprehensive and cohesive way? You need to spend time with art.” Art Basel Miami Beach, he adds for emphasis, “is like the Hamptons.”

Raymond, who lives across the street from MoMA in New York, began collecting about a decade ago, accumulating works by pioneering 20th-century photographers including Man Ray, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Brassai. Last year he sold 171 of his most important surrealist pieces to the Cleveland Museum of Art and donated another nine.

When it comes to traveling, his taste runs toward the specialized fairs where he can slowly browse and rub elbows with fellow enthusiasts. Paris Photo, an annual event that focuses on photography, is an important stop. “Everyone in the photography field converges there,” Raymond says about the show, which featured more than 100 galleries in 2007. “It’s like a big

photo love fest.”

He does not necessarily come home with a trove of new work, however. Last year the offerings left him largely unmoved except for a video by the contemporary Japanese artist Noriko Yamaguchi. Raymond had seen the work—a stop-motion video called *Peppermint Mother*, featuring sticks of chewing gum covering the artist’s body—earlier in the year at the Asian Contemporary Art Fair in New York. At Paris Photo he ran into the artist’s dealer, MEM Gallery of Osaka, and found out there was a copy available; he bought the video for around \$1,000.

For Raymond, chance encounters—and the hunt for the art he wants—are part of the excitement of collecting. He once bought a drawing for \$100 at a now-defunct auction house in San Francisco, and after some sleuthing he confirmed that the work was by John Constable.

In 2004, Raymond saw the work of Chinese artist Sheng Qi at an Asia Society show in New York. So far he has not gone to China to buy, nor was he interested in China’s much-hyped new art when it first burst upon the West, but he says the artist’s work

haunted him. A few years later, Raymond tracked down the artist’s gallery, Red Gate in Beijing, and after an email exchange agreed to buy two photographs, which the gallery shipped to him. The photos depict a hand with the pinky chopped off; a picture of Mao is cupped in the palm of one.

More recently, Raymond has commissioned work directly from Vietnamese artist Trong Nguyen, who lives in New York. The two met when Raymond frequented the Zabriskie Gallery in New York, where Nguyen worked. Nguyen came up with the idea of taking words from Raymond’s favorite books and writing them on rice kernels. “I said to Trong, ‘Would you do it for me?’” Raymond recalls. The kernels, with minute writing from the *I Ching*, Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Goethe’s *Faust*, are encased in small plastic bags that hang on the wall of Raymond’s dining room. For Raymond, the collaborative experience was so gratifying that he is considering commissioning additional works from Nguyen, and perhaps other artists. “It’s great when a collector can initiate a creative process,” Raymond says.

we make money not art

From our living room to yours

5 March 2007

Regine

art in Berlin

Back in Berlin's art galleries.

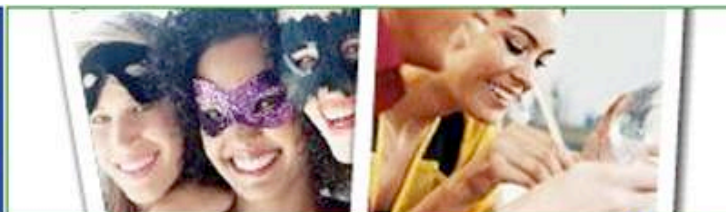
Walking down Brunnenstrasse, i stumbled upon **From our living room to yours**, an exhibition that focuses on six American artists whose work gives a *glimpse into the garbage and glory of American pop culture*. There are several very nice pieces that both denounce and celebrate *the notion of Americana and the useless gifts (or souvenirs) we give to the rest of the world, from our living room to yours*.

The best discoveries of the show for me are:



- Borrowing the red and yellow of the Vietnamese flag, **Trong Nguyen's cake** is decorated with a shiny frosting made of oil paint that reads "Happy Birthday War", commemorating the recent 30th anniversary of the **Vietnam War**. Playing off the idea of Magritte's **Ceci n'est pas une pipe**, Nguyen is poking fun at the American tradition of celebrating the wrong thing, *demonstrating our own distinct brand of **schadenfreude***. A second cake, displayed in what looks like the gallery kitchen reads "Help Me", it's white on white so you have to get very close to it to be able to decipher the call.

At **Goff + Rosenthal** until March 17.



nyc life

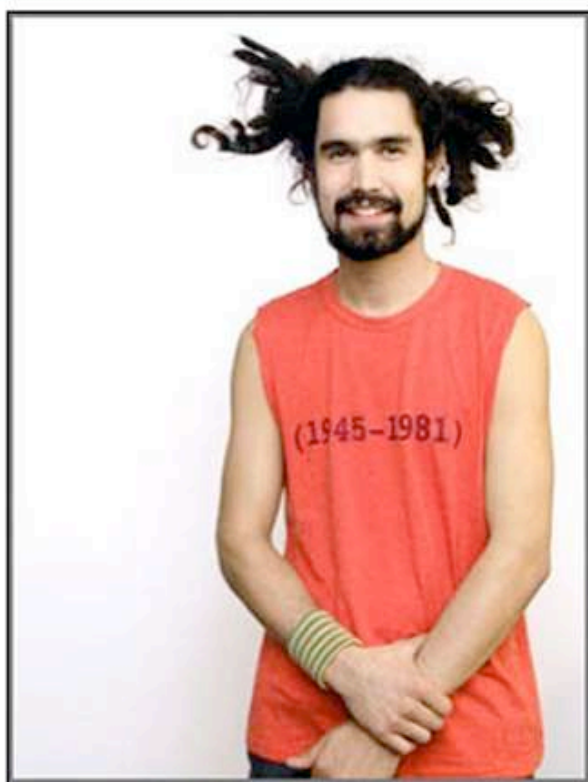
Style Tip

Teeing Off

by Nina Lalli

January 4th, 2005

Every year, artist Trong Nguyen produces a new product for his company Humanitarians Not Heroes. In his words, the company "is an art project that doubles as mass commodity." Nguyen uses familiar, accessible items like T-shirts, fortune cookies, vanity mirrors, and identification cards to blow your mind and make you want to purchase. The T-shirts bear the birth and death dates of people such as Gertrude Stein, Bob Marley, and Ho Chi Min, or dates of historical events or eras: the Spanish Inquisition, Prohibition, the '80s. But names are not included, and like a club with no sign, that's evidence of hip. Nguyen says, "The shirts hint at basic things like mortality and the celebration of life. At the same time, they are a question mark and quiz show." Whoa. Whether you dress to comment on mortality or just to look good, these have the potential for addiction—collect all your favorite writers, artists, religious leaders, celebrities, scientists, royalty, wars, and more.



Redemption T-shirt: Celebrating Bob Marley
photo: Anthony Kearns/Trong Nguyen

Available at:
Pullover, \$35
161 Rivington
Lower East Side
212.979.0661
Available online at:
cameandwent.com

ARTS ONLINE

Matthew Mirapaul

A Market for Flotsam and Jetsam as Performance Art

Trong Nguyen sold a bottle of designer perfume last week through the online auction service eBay. Normally such a sale would not be considered a work of art. But Mr. Nguyen is an artist, and the \$11.45 deal he made is part of a yearlong, untitled art project.

Over the course of 2001, Mr. Nguyen (pronounced win) plans to use eBay to sell 1,001 of his possessions. He has already collected more than \$230 for 20 items, including the perfume, books and the word "nothingness," which he sold to a friend for 70 cents. Are the buyers getting utilitarian objects or artworks produced in a limited edition of 1,001?

The answer lies in the eye of the purchaser. For those who know they are participating in an art project, the objects they buy from Mr. Nguyen are backed by an eBay invoice that serves as a certificate of artistic authenticity. For those who merely happen upon his items, they are just more online auction goodies. But if you accept Mr. Nguyen's conceit that each item contributes to a work of art he is creating, then each item should be considered, say, as one would a brush stroke on a painting.

Like many young artists, Mr. Nguyen, who is 29, is using the Internet as a new medium for exploring familiar aesthetic issues. Does an artist's touch turn an everyday object into an art object? How does an artwork receive its value? How does one's possessions define an identity?

Mr. Nguyen, who was born in Vietnam and came to the United States in 1974, also is striving to connect with an audience that he might not otherwise reach. Countless artists and musicians have learned to bypass traditional channels of distribution and sell directly to the public through the Internet. But those transactions remain mostly commercial. What Mr. Nguyen is saying is that if you bid, then you are participating in his art game, whether or not you know it, and the Internet becomes a performance-art stage rather than an information platform.

Mr. Nguyen, who has a master's degree from the University of South Florida, is not the only one on the virtual performance-art stage. Two other young artists, John Freyer, 28, and Michael Mandiberg, 23, are engaged in similar but independent online projects.

If you buy into this as performance art, then the objects themselves are artifacts of the performance. If not, this is just another online garage sale.

Mr. Freyer says he intends to sell most of his belongings through eBay in the coming year, and is documenting the process on his Web site, AllMyLifeForSale.com.

Mr. Mandiberg is selling all of his possessions, for which his Web site, Mandiberg.com, functions more as a catalog. His items bear a fixed price, and are available for purchase through the Internet-payment service PayPal. All three online projects are asking viewers, in a commodity-driven culture, whether one's personal identity is defined by nothing more than a collection of stuff.

As with many virtual endeavors, there are real



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Trong Nguyen, an artist, in his Brooklyn studio with items he is hoping to sell on eBay.

world precedents for these projects. For example, starting in the 1970's, artists like Christian Boltanski and Daniel Spoerri produced works based on inventories or collages of quotidian objects, and the theme persists. On Friday the British performance artist Michael Landy is scheduled to unveil a piece for which he has reportedly disassembled thousands of his personal items (including a car), although he has yet to reveal what he will do with the components.

Philippe Vergne, visual arts curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, said: "It's good that artists are trying to infiltrate the Web because if they don't, it's going to become a place only for commerce. I like that they are occupying this vacuum and making art projects."

The online selloff projects are not the first acts of virtual performance art. Natalie Bookchin, who teaches at the California Institute of the Arts, said there was already a name for infiltrating a nonart Web site for artistic purposes: parasiting. Ms. Bookchin has seen it before. In 1999 CalArts students used eBay to auction the institute's gallery space. Last year members of the online-activist group RTMark auctioned their passes to the Whitney Biennial artists reception.

For Mr. Vergne, these projects question whether an artist's involvement adds value to items that might not otherwise have any. "It touches the fetishism that we can have with artists," he remarked. "Kurt Schwitters said everything artists speak is art, so you can also say that everything artists touch becomes a piece of art."

It is not easy to discern that Mr. Nguyen's eBay listings are part of an art project. To find his items, you must go to eBay.com and search for the seller "tgn2001." Although he annotates some listings with personal stories, this artist, who lives

in Brooklyn, does not fully reveal what he is up to.

But central to his work is the first item he put up for sale, the book "Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist," by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, published by Yale University Press in 1979. The stories attached to his listings seem true, but Mr. Nguyen said he also was "inserting fiction to create my own mythology." As the 1,001st item, Mr. Nguyen will auction his complete list.

If Mr. Nguyen is building his image through his eBay listings, Mr. Freyer, a graduate student at the University of Iowa, is committed to conveying his identity as accurately as possible. To that end, each item is accompanied by a personal history.

Visitors to Mr. Freyer's Web site can see clearly that this is an art project, but eBay shoppers who unwittingly win one of the items are apprised of his true intent when they receive his invoice.

Mr. Freyer has yet to decide if he will divest himself of everything, especially since eBay regulations prevent him from offering items like his Social Security card. And like Mr. Nguyen, he is selling immaterial possessions.

In December he sold his birthday party in New York to Brian Troyer, a Web developer at an Internet company. Although they did not know each other, Mr. Troyer now spends time with some of Mr. Freyer's friends. "We all agree it's the best \$1.25 I ever spent," Mr. Troyer said.

Since Mr. Freyer started the venture late last year, he has sold 120 items for about \$700, including his childhood false teeth to the university's art museum and his winter coat to a man in Indiana. He asks buyers to keep him apprised of his past belongings, and hopes to visit some of them later.

"People are the objects that surround them," Mr. Freyer said. "The question this raises is, what happens to the goods and services that define who you are when they are no longer yours? Is Ralph in Indiana going to become more likely to consume canned tomatoes?"

When the project concludes, Mr. Freyer wants to sell AllMyLifeForSale.com to someone who will start the project anew.

Mr. Mandiberg, a New York artist, does not expect his project to end. When his stuff is sold, he replaces it and adds the new items to his online catalog. He is limiting himself to the real items in his possession. So far he has sold about 30 things, including his Curious George lunchbox collection and a lone black sock. His wallet and its contents remain available for \$2,500.

Like Mr. Freyer, Mr. Mandiberg accepts that his possessions may define him, and he says he fears losing his identity if all his possessions are purchased. "I feel very much exposed," he said.

As should all eBay sellers, who may now realize that the objects they offer reveal quite a bit about them. But is it also art? Is every bottle of perfume sold on the Web a possible Rodin? "We're calling it art," Mr. Nguyen said, "but people do it every day on eBay."