

Map Quest

Tiffany Chung, an artist who received her MFA at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who has lived in Sài Gòn for the past eight years, utilizes a pop sensibility to capture the essence of the vibrant city life of an increasingly urban—and urbane—Việt Nam. Chung’s pastiche installations combines photography; sculptural elements often made of foam, wood, or fabric; and at times video. Her photographs often employ the same visual vocabulary and materials found in her installations: polystyrene, polyethylene foam, MDF. Exuberant fashion-like images feature wondrous poses of female subjects with coordinating backgrounds and outfits in shallow space riding bikes, wrestling with oversized objects, going on a mysterious journey. Highly stylized sculptural objects reference street vendor carts, gas stations, and so on. Her work offers a new vision of space and place—a candy-colored utopic, and hyperreal fantasy which displaces the historical, documentary images of a traumatized topography. Chung foregrounds excess, consumer culture, surface and questions the distinctions between public and private space, (cultural) adaptation and (economic) aspiration, performativity and pleasure.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold . . .

—William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”¹

In Chung’s recent series of works on paper, entitled *maps*, the artist uses urban planning, city and subway maps as a starting point to create abstract, intricately detailed large-scale renderings. The images are comprised of colorful dots and lines that form patterns, shapes. The forms almost morph before one’s eyes, turning and turning. Mapping is a form of knowledge, a way to exert control over the known universe, a way to chart development. Cultural theorist Graham Huggan notes, “maps are neither copies or semblances of reality but modes of discourse which reflect the ideologies of their makers.”² The cartographic gaze extends the limits of human vision, makes the unknown known. Yet things fall apart. The artist notes that the project aims

to examine the cultural and spatial transformations linked to economic development that are taking place in the outer areas of Sài Gòn where rural and urban intersect. I’m interested in observing the urbanization process that is going on here while relating it to some new cities developed in the past twenty years in other Asian countries.³

Indeed, Việt Nam is in the midst of historic, breakneck development: the country is transitioning from a largely rural economy to an urban one, and also shifting from a state-run economy to a market economy. Following China’s urbanization, Việt Nam’s infrastructure is increasingly decentralized.⁴ Urban sociologists such as J. John Palen also note center-periphery models of settlement and development do not account for the organic, multi-centric growth and decline of

urban, suburban and rural zones (financial districts, residential areas, commercial centers, and so on).⁵ Sài Gòn is currently planning its decentralization, charting new financial, residential and educational zones.

How does one make sense Việt Nam's tremendous changes? How are they implemented, and charted? Chung's "maps" resemble organic growth, perhaps mold or microorganisms growing in a Petri dish. For the artist, Việt Nam's rapid economic development is both bounty and blight. What happens when utopic visions fail, become dystopic?

Chung presents a candy-colored utopic universe as a veneer for dystopic realities. The artist occasionally culls images from Ebenezer Howard's book *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Howard is the founder of the English garden-city movement, which sought to incorporate expanses of green within urban networks.⁶ This movement had long-lasting impact upon urban planning throughout the world. Perhaps Chung's organic maps wryly comment on these utopic garden cities. These garden cities are exemplars of controlled growth. However, in Chung's vision, this organic growth is over-ripe, perhaps decaying or festering. The maps also look fungal. Fungi are parasitic plants lacking true root and stem structures; they reproduce by spores. Perhaps Chung is noting that this rapid urban development is parasitic; it lacks depth, roots, sustainability, structure. Parasitic or paradisiac, the center cannot hold.

To continue the discussion of spores, representations of diasporic communities often use seed/spore analogies and imagery. Upon closer inspection, Chung's maps consist almost entirely of circles, dots. These dots can be viewed as spores, diasporic seeds scattered. While discussions of diasporic communities have been conceptualized along home/exile or center/periphery axes (in which a community moves from a "homeland" to settle to other territories). More recent discussions of diasporic communities have shifted away from this home/displacement binary to account for the complexities of multiply diasporic identities (in which one's subjectivity is constituted of multiple movements and affiliations). Chung's own identity as a "diasporic" artist is questioned: yes, she emigrated from Việt Nam and settled in the States to live and study, but she has since lived in Japan, among other locales, and now currently calls Việt Nam home. Older models of diaspora would not be able to "map" her movements and identifications beyond simple conceptions of home/abroad. The overlapping dots in Chung's maps may speak of these ongoing movement and patterns of settlement, metaphorically and perhaps literally represented by the overlapping patterns.

The Empire's New Clothes

The system of economic exchange and development which fuels growth is fungus-like—opportunistic, parasitic; but not necessarily fungible—goods and services are not equally exchanged. Việt Nam has recently joined the World Trade Organization, which ensures future trade expansion and economic growth. It is interesting to note the discourses on modernity and development in East and Southeast Asian countries. While traveling in Asia, I would hear comments from others comparing Việt Nam to "more" or "less" developed countries such as Japan, Korea, Laos or Cambodia. I heard many times from locals and expats that South Korea looked like Việt Nam twenty years ago, or parts of Cambodia looks like Việt Nam fifteen years ago, and so on. I found these comparisons somewhat troubling in it assumed a teleological

narrative of development and progress. Modernity is not a singular linear narrative, nor does it entail a single universal vision.

Cultural anthropologist Lisa Rofel has argued for a framework of “discrepant modernities” which challenges universal/ local dichotomies in rhetoric on modernity, subject formation/ identification, and consumption. Being attuned to the fact that modernity is not a singular, uniform destination point can provide a richer conception of uneven and parallel socio-economic developments of nation-states across the globe. For instance, third worlds exist in first worlds and vice versa. Rofel questions discourses pertaining to modernity and its Eurocentric, homogenous and teleological assumptions; she advocates a conception, which does not reify binaries between universalism and cultural pluralism. Instead of viewing modernity as “a singular certainty” or separate cultural space, Rofel acknowledges “discrepant modernities”—localized psychic and real spaces and places in which relationships to modernity are articulated and contested.⁷ Chung’s work also comments on the rhetoric of modernity and its elisions. Urban planning, various maps and utopic visions of development (including garden cities) all forward particular visions of controlled progress and order.

Chung’s large drawing entitled *10.75¼ N 106.6667¼ E 1867/2007* (oil & alcohol-based markers on paper, 2007, 135 x 90cm) acknowledges these discrepant modernities. This image layers a 2007 Seoul subway city map, Tokyo Metro map, and an urban planning map for Sài Gòn in 1867 (when Sài Gòn became part of the French colonial empire). Chung makes a connection between imperial violence and the contemporary processes of globalization. Postcolonial critic Gerry Turcotte writes,

Mapping and imperialism are linked. One is a signpost of the other’s presence, a signal of ownership as resolute as a planted flag . . . The cartographer’s gaze is a totalizing one, naming and organizing a “blank” space into knowable spheres . . . The cartographer’s eye/ I is invisible, concealed, transparent, just as the language of imperialism is presented as natural and universal . . . Maps are re/presentations, palimpsests, forgeries.⁸

Is globalizing rhetoric regarding development another echo of imperialist discourse? Is this the empire’s new clothes? Việt Nam’s current shifts—with infrastructural development funded in part by first world economies such as Japan, Korea and the United States as well as multinational corporate investments—echoes past patterns of displacement, racialized hierarchies and socioeconomic disparity.

Other works in Chung’s series also layer different maps from different eras. The palimpsest layers reveal the underlying foundations and assumptions of urban progress. The layering of maps and diagrams to form a disorienting topography challenges the “singular certainty” of the original maps. Colonial ideology is overlaid with visions of modernity. There is no single, coherent vision, just cryptic terrain. The work’s intricate details sprawled seemingly endlessly renders this composite geography simultaneously tender and terrifying—a brave new world.

Notes

1 William Butler Yeats, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1956).

2 Graham Huggan,

3 Tiffany Chung artist statement, 2007.

4 Klaus Rohland and Christine Delvoie, "Vietnam Infrastructure Strategy," World Bank. June 2006. PDF link:

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEAPINFRASTRUCT/Resources/CrossSectoralIssues.pdf>

5 J. John Palen, *The Urban World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992).

6 Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Eastbourne, East Sussex: Attic Books, 1985).

7 Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

8 Gerry Turcotte, "Prologomena to Uncovering Alter/Native Scripts," Hena Maes-Jelinek, Gordon Collier, Geoffrey V. Davis, eds. *A Talent(ed) Digger: Creations, Cameos and Essays in Honor of Anna Rutherford* (Michigan: Rodopi), 145-5.