

All Work, All Play: Of Workers and Cosplayers, Or, POP-aganda: The Art of Tiffany Chung

By Việt Lê

Tiffany Chung is one of Việt Nam's most internationally visible conceptual artists, noted for using a pop aesthetic to conjure hyperreal, candy-hued visions which displace the common historical traumatic representations of Việt Nam. She has had numerous group and solo exhibitions and residencies throughout Asia and in the United States. She also helps organize events for Sàn Art, Sài Gòn's only independent art space. Chung's highly crafted work has received critical and commercial attention due in part to her deft examinations of modernization and popular culture within Asia.

Play, Chung's current solo show at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, examines the seemingly unlikely interplay between contemporary pop culture (particularly Vietnamese youth culture) and historical North Vietnamese propaganda images. The work examines the slippages between Việt Nam's past wartime rhetoric and the present moment's shift towards a culture of consumption. In short, Chung examines the relationship between Việt Nam's painful past and pop-culture obsessed present. First, let me briefly contextualize the country's socioeconomic transitions.

Việt Nam's accelerated economic growth – instituted by the socialist government's open door *đổi mới* policy in 1986 – has resulted in a dramatically shifting social, economic, and cultural climate. In the three decades since the gradual switch from communism to a socialist-capitalist political economy, Việt Nam has embraced globalization, as evidenced by ubiquitous advertisements, mass media rhetoric, booming businesses, large foreign investors and construction in its major urban areas. Việt Nam is arguably the fastest growing economy in Asia.

The communist propaganda images of heroic workers collectively fighting has been displaced by capitalist propaganda images of newly modern(ized) subjects in pursuit of individual pleasures. In both historical and contemporary moments, representation is at stake: it is a war of images, an attempt to win hearts and minds. The war-time propaganda images of happy, stalwart soldiers attempted to heighten morale and bolster sentiment against an imperialist American enemy. Today's bright, smiling adverts ubiquitously pasted on the crowded streets of Sài Gòn, Hà Nội and points in between attempt to sell visions of "the good life," another world order, another world over. Now it is the capitalist first world imperialists whom local Vietnamese are trying to emulate. Or are they? Love thy (former?) enemy.

Power Play

At first glance, Chung's photographic images are playful, colorful, idiosyncratic: young workers strike curious poses. Youth clad in vibrant jumpsuits dramatically angle their poolsticks or go "hunting" with a water gun and bullhorn, perhaps a surreal spoof of leisure activities and commodity culture. Other images feature a gaggle of schoolgirls in formation as if in a parade (or in a music video). These schoolgirls are shown uniformly crossing a bridge in Phú Mỹ Hưng (a pristine suburban housing development also referred to as Sài Gòn South), heading on a mysterious and possibly sinister mission; their leader holds a megaphone.

In a way, Chung's images also bring to mind contemporary avant-garde Chinese artists such as Wang Guangyi, the Gao Brothers, Sui Jianguo, Zhang Hongtu, among others (think "Mao Pop" or "Political Pop") who often filter Chinese propaganda and state iconography through a Pop Art lens to make wry, ironic political critiques. Chung's work attempts to blur the boundaries between pop culture and fine art, fact and fiction. An earlier series featured a Vietnamese pop star as an intergalactic time traveler in a photographic comic book universe. Chung's current body of work also culls influences from both

Vietnamese propaganda and Japanese animation (*anime*) and comics (*manga*).

The bright blue, green, and orange uniforms in Chung's photographs are a familiar sight on the streets of Sài Gòn: they are worn by various laborers who sweep the streets, pick up garbage, do construction work, manage traffic, and engage in other forms of manual labor. Most of them are employed by the government. However, the details render these "workers" and their activities nonsensical: they sport goggles, safety helmets, nylon safety vests, as well as wield poolsticks, water guns, bullhorns, and tubes for carrying poolsticks.

What is the division between work and play? Is this some Marxist critique about alienated labor (and leisure)? Perhaps the recurring megaphones may serve as a clue (Chung also has fabricated a giant fuchsia bullhorn sculpture covered in small pom-poms for this exhibition). Let me take a brief detour – in my apartment in Hà Nội overlooking Công Viên Lenin (a public park), every morning I would be awakened at six a.m. by the sound of tango music blaring from permanently installed megaphones dotting the park. Looking down from my balcony, I would see middle-aged couples gliding gracefully on linoleum, framed by swaying trees. Late afternoons spent strolling the streets near Hồ Hoàn Kiếm (Sword Lake), I would often be startled from my internal reverie by the tinny sound of daily propagandistic messages (about duty, unity, and so on) followed by the national anthem transmitted by megaphones perched high on poles throughout the garden city. On the dense shopping plazas of Shibuya in Tokyo and Myeongdong in Seoul (the artist has lived in both cities), mini-dress-clad female salesclerks would often stand in front of stores yelling into their bullhorns about promotions over the techno beats thumping from boom boxes. Proletariat ideology, "playtime" for the idle, and even protest are linked by the use of the bullhorn, an instrument used to broadcast to the masses. For Chung, the bullhorn becomes a symbol of power and play.

We Don't Need Another Hero

Chung's use of outfits and props for the protagonists in her series have both local and international referents. The subjects of her images are play-acting, but more specifically are engaged in *cosplay*, short for "costume play" (also known in Japanese as *kospure*), a subcultural phenomenon originating in Japan in which youngsters elaborately dress up as superhero characters from their favorite *anime*, *manga*, video game or fantasy film and re-enact scenes; it is a kind of performance art. In some instances, the participants simply just wear the costumes. Yet in Chung's photographs there is no identifiable superhero; the only "hero" is the worker. To recite socialist dogma, the true hero is the proletariat.

Going to my first *cosplay* fair with the artist in Sài Gòn, I was struck by the range of costumes as well as the blurring of gender and class divisions. Of course the *anime* staple of sweet-but-sinister schoolgirls (which appear in Chung's photographs) and dark brooding anti-heroes with big spiky hair and ominous trenchcoats was amply evident. Nonetheless, cross-dressing² (both in terms of gender and ethnicity) was also commonplace: for some of the *cosplayers*, I couldn't tell whether they were male or female; Vietnamese youth adopted the affects of their Japanese counterparts; time and space, fact and fantasy morphed. Chung notes:

cosplay happens to be a perfect medium that allows [Vietnamese youth] the freedom of being individual and having alternate personas momentarily, that brings social norms into question. Although these teenagers can't quite articulate their thinking and actions, this is certainly revolutionary in a society where critical thinking hasn't been exactly encouraged.

Although *cosplay* in Việt Nam isn't exactly challenging state ideology, (hetero) normative paradigms are subverted. As feminist theorist Judith Butler notes, performance and parody create alternate identities and identifications. While they appear to reaffirm traditional class and gender hierarchies (especially the

² Gender cross-dressing within *cosplay* is also referred to as "crossplay."

caricatures of masculinity and femininity embodied in *manga* and *anime*), performative play such as the *cosplayers* engage in may also challenge these social conventions.

Cosplay in Việt Nam becomes a space where social, economic, cultural borders are transgressed, suspended. The harsh realities of class, gender and ethnic distinctions become amorphous: local Vietnamese youth become global (superhero) citizens in this new world imaginary. Cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai notes that through individual and collective imaginaries, communities are created across physical and psychic boundaries. The imagination is viewed as a “social practice” – not a fixed process – which allows for complex negotiations of space, temporality, and agency. Through mass media, particularly film, music, and visual art, various collective subjectivities can be imagined, embodied. It is through *cosplay* that participants imagine and negotiate new ways of being, different networks of affinity that cross the bounds and ideology of the nation-state. Following Appadurai’s framework on imagination, two seemingly discrete tropes such as war propaganda and pop culture are spaces in which individual and national bodies interpret and *imagine* their collective past, present, and future.

Props and Gender (Propaganda)

Much of Vietnamese cultural and artistic output produced in the modern period prior to *đổi mới* has been government-sanctioned propaganda (Taylor). Currently, all cultural production (including films, exhibitions, events) must be approved by the government. Chung’s recent body of work most likely cannot be shown in Việt Nam: the government censors would not approve of the reappropriation of propaganda images and the possible parody of the proletariat. Artists living and working in Việt Nam such as Chung come up with different strategies for making and showing work. The artist’s earlier work utilizes a glossy pop veneer to make subtle socio-political commentary. This series is the artist’s most overtly “political” work to date.

Let’s take a gander at the inspiration for Chung’s series, Vietnamese propaganda posters produced during the American War (1964-1973), emblazoned with various nationalistic slogans. One propaganda image features uniformed workers with face shields using elongated sticks to pour iron molds. In Chung’s renditions, entitled “Be There or Be Square” and “Be Cool Be Playful,” the workers are pool hall youth (pool is a favorite Vietnamese pastime). Another propaganda image features a male and female couple in side profile resolutely holding a shovel and an ax, with trucks, trains, and other forms of transport the background. The artist’s takes on this trope (such as “Be Loud, Make Sound”) contains no text within the image, just posturing with props. Chung’s titles for her photographs are innocuous proclamations. Cultural critic Việt Nguyễn notes that the passage of time, rather than an “artist’s mediating hand” (as in the case of Chinese Mao Pop) makes Vietnamese propaganda posters palatable – and saleable – for certain audiences. He writes, “Whatever these works signal to me as an ironic western consumer of revolutionary chic, however, I also recognize that they are not pop art for my relatives, whose vivid memories of the war present them from seeing any irony in these posters.” One man’s pop is another’s agit-prop.

The difficult past which these posters conjure isn’t quite so traumatic anymore. Today, there is a market for revolutionary chic among both art collectors and tourists: several tourist shops in Sài Gòn hawk original painted posters and reproductions, geared mainly to expats. Framed on a wall or emblazoned on a tee-shirt, these images become commodified as aesthetic objects, a far cry from their communist aims. Their revolutionary fervor recontextualized, these posters carry varying meanings for different audiences. Yet the dividing line between prop and pop may be blurry. As Nguyễn observes, popular culture is intended for the masses, whether for socialist cadres or for Saigonese schoolgirls. Current propaganda – particularly state-funded “propertainment” (a mix of propaganda and entertainment) films – is no longer concerned about war and imperialism; its focus is on the pleasures and perils of modernity.

Mirror, Mirror

In terms of economic and cultural “progress,” is Việt Nam finally catching up, attempting to model itself in the image of first world powers and their past-times? I would argue that Việt Nam’s upwardly-mobile subjects, as well as the *cosplayers* are not blindly mimicking existing conventions. Referring to postcolonial subjects, cultural theorist Homi Bhabha notes, mimicry involves a difference that is “almost the same, but not quite.” The rapid spread of dominant consumer culture globally has some critics concerned about neo-imperial formations: the privileging of certain cultures (and discourses) over others, and the epistemic violence and elisions which it entails. But cultural imports must adapt, morph to fit their local constituent’s needs and desires. Sometimes that desire is for another “Other” to consume, and provide a contrast to the dominant culture. Anthropologist Ashley Curruthers has written about the commodification of the Vietnamese “exotic” in Japan including *phở* restaurants and quaint souvenirs (lacquerware, mother of pearl knickknacks) which symbolize Việt Nam’s rural/ “traditional” charms in contrast to Japan’s ersatz, uber-urban modernity. It is interesting that this commodification and consumption of Vietnamese Otherness in Japan is void of Vietnamese bodies, only products by proxy. For a while it was the rage for Japanese brides to wear *áo dài* as one of their outfit changes. In a similar manner, in Saigonese *cosplay* it is Vietnamese bodies that fill in/ fill out the Japanese-inspired costumes and characters. Not that there is a lack of either nationals in both countries: to overgeneralize, in Japan, there are many skilled and manual Vietnamese laborers, in Viet Nam there are many Japanese businessmen, tech workers and tourists.

In a way, *cosplay* is about this Othering, a spectacularization of difference (and different identities). Nevertheless, *cosplay* in Việt Nam is not the same as *cosplay* in Japan – there are different affective communities, different social, economic, and historical trajectories which inform the participants’ experiences. Given that both Japan and Việt Nam are more or less monoracial societies (with policies on ethnic minorities and multicultural politics notwithstanding), the importation of difference serves as a mirror of sorts. Through the looking glass, a topsy turvy world. Almost(?) the same, but not quite. (It may be novel to talk about Lacan’s mirror phase and subject formation, but I digress.) Writing about the symbolic function of the mirror, Foucault notes that it is a space of absence and presence, both a utopic (imagined) and heterotopic (real) space; a liminal position in which one’s subjectivity is negotiated, reflected upon (pun?), negated and constructed: “I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent (Foucault 2).” This space is both “unreal”—a space of fantasy and projection (and performance)—and grounded in reality. When looking in a mirror, one sees oneself in a space which doesn’t exist, yet also sees their own reality reflected.

Perhaps Foucault’s mirror is realized in cultural production and practices, a way of seeing oneself, reflected, refracted, a process of self-recognition and politicization (as Chung would suggest of the cosplayers’ critical potential). In donning cosplay outfits, the performers are transported to over there, there where they are not. This “there” can be anywhere: on the streets, online, onstage. Where does the individual (or national body) locate herself? What does it mean to be both subject and object of the gaze? In consuming imported identities and products, both Japanese and Vietnamese consumers edge the contours of their respective national identities, and simultaneously transgress and reinscribe those borders.

Behind the surface of the *manga* and *anime* inspired costumes, behind the veneer of fantasy and role-playing lie real inequities between Japanese and Vietnamese youth: Japan is a modernized superpower, Việt Nam its (economic) shadow. As a sidenote, I once overheard a tourist comment that Sài Gòn’s hustle and bustle and emerging skyline is “quaint” compared to Tokyo’s disorienting megalopolis. Chung comments on the socioeconomic disparities between the two countries, revealed by the quality of costumes (and money spent on them): “I’m deeply moved by looking at innocent, somewhat geeky, homemade costumes on these young [Vietnamese] people in contrast to slick, perfectly made costumes

on Japanese teenagers I've encountered around Takashita-dori in Harajuku or Shibuya area." *Cosplay* costumes in Japan are often meticulously handmade by the wearers, or fabricated by a hired artist, every detail exact; in Viet Nam the costumes are cobbled together by the wearers, to varying degrees of success.

In the "mirroring" of Japanese consumption of Vietnamese exotica, and Vietnamese consumption of Japanese imaginary identities, a circuit of glances and gestures occurs. Perhaps for the Japanese, it is a backward glance at an imaginary idyllic state; for the Vietnamese it is a longing gesture for utopic prosperity. Both societies have been affected by historical trauma and the push for rapid development, spellbound by the dreams of magnificent miles. Shadow and light. The teenage Vietnamese *cosplayers* project their desires and aspirations through performance and play within the confines of a socialist regime.

Vietnamese *cosplayers* are negotiating what it means to be young and uncertain in a society in flux, a society barraged with so many cultural influences, from Hollywood movies, *hallyu* (also known as the Korean Wave), Japanese *anime*, Canto-pop, as well as the legacies of colonial and neo-colonial dominance (Chinese, French, American, etc...). Bhabha states, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (85-92). It is exactly this slippage, excess and difference, which make the performance of class (in the case of Vietnam's emergent middle classes) and identities (in the case of the *cosplayers*) worthwhile for its participants (and observers). Propaganda becomes reappropriated; *cosplay* becomes a way to be visible and invisible; the proletariat becomes the new middle class. But to grasp these shifting processes is to go beyond frameworks of mirroring and mimicry. Vietnamese at work and play are creating new identities and identifications beyond ready-made models.⁷ In this process, old identifications aren't necessarily displaced by new ones; they are in juxtaposition, in dialogue. In parceling together existing cultural idioms, a hybrid language emerges. Ambivalence, parody, and play are part and parcel of Chung's artistic lexicon. This series points to these slippages: the fissures between the past and present, artifice and art, propaganda and pop.

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⁷ I also think of the "father of conceptual art" Marcel Duchamp's "readymades," created from existing mundane found objects, decontextualized and assembled (or represented) to create entirely new, provocative work.

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