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Tiffany Chung – Archaeology Project for Future Remembrance

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Tiffany Chung's work reworks, parodies, and unmask the pretensions of master-plans, all while playfully engaging with the creative energy and the dreamworlds that plans inspire. Beauty mingles with ruination, colorful fantasy frames grey rubble, and creative inspiration infuses and is infused by frustrated spirit and loss. Chung's own master-plan, one might say, is to make master-plans into objects of contemplation, to put plans in their place, to both appreciate and question them. In so doing, Chung highlights the great power they hold—as sources of both hope and destruction. This work refuses to pander to simplifications. Neither endorsing nor discrediting nostalgia, the work plays with fantasy futurism while poking fun at utopian delusions. The works on display in these two galleries bring both remembrance and anticipation together into a single contentious space. What might in other contexts be represented as a pitched battle between antithetical perspectives on urbanism and social change instead morphs into a fractal vision that sees both opportunity and loss as part of a single complex story. When looking at the pretensions of master-plans and utopian projects, one cannot avoid the observation that the city is reborn precisely as the city is lost. Viewing these works, the senses come alive just as the heart sinks.

Colors leap from the lines on the map, spreading like a fungus of dreams. In this way, viewers of these works are invited to embrace the great stylistic and conceptual beauty of plans. But viewers grow suspicious as well. The landscape collapses beneath the weighty vision of the plan, the "growth" it feeds seems also to eat away at the very landscape it ornaments. Viewers are thus dared to confront the conceptual violence such plans impose on the very world they attempt to render more beautiful. In the process it becomes possible to embrace but also stand back from the creative impulse to dream of future cities—the plans themselves can be works of art and vehicles that express human creative imagination. A thousand growths of creative color literally spill out from the

architectural lines of the maps, diagrams, and plans. But Chung's works also refuse to be fully seduced by such plans and she exposes the worlds which are covered up by the way we fetishize beauty over messy social life. Precisely at the moment that the eye draws closer to the pen strokes and the fungal spread of color across the map, these works reveal how much is obscured by these plans. Beautiful plans, like so many other beautiful works of the mind, are founded on choices and decisions, which suppress alternatives and obscure other possibilities. While these installations invite us to imagine and appreciate planners as artists, they also force us to imagine how we might feel if we found ourselves on the brink of master-plans, not the masters of the plan but subjected to the master-plan which spreads over us, beautifying as it swallows us whole.

The master-plans are in this way drawn into a complex conversation formed through the comingling of multiple perspectives and varying scales of attention. A contentious conversation of mutual appreciation and mutual skepticism rises forth among those who are subjected to plans, those who have committed great energy to designing them, and those who see great beauty in them while looking at them from a distance. These works also productively allow for the possibility that the very categories which so often arrange people into opposing camps need not be seen as mutually exclusive. In fact, most people in the world can be many kinds of people at once. A cosmopolitan urban designer, trained in the arts of Computer Aided Design, may well be captivated by the watery landscape of the Mekong Delta. An evicted resident, whose ancestral home was cleared to make way for a New Urban Zone detailed in one of these master-plans, may well find the colorful lines of urban planning documents beautiful, even if those lines demarcate spaces of exclusion. Treating planning documents as polyvocal works of art that both speak and are understood in different registers lays bare both how they help us see the world in new ways and also how they can conceal a world which should otherwise be so clearly evident before us.

"The floating town," first exhibited at the Singapore Biennale in 2011, uses architectural design to question the hubris of modernist city planners who have for so long forsaken the ecological challenges of tropical flood-prone societies. Wary of utopian megaprojects that fail to account for local environments, this work draws attention to the floating livelihoods of the Mekong Delta, where social life thrives on the water and where vernacular form outwits the most formal designs of architecture. While the fixed boulevards of modern cities like Ho Chi Minh City flood with increasing regularity, the floating town sways gently on the currents, ebbing and flowing with the tide. Reimagined here as an architectural model, this floating town rewrites the architectural elements of vernacular housing in the code of the modern architect. It ultimately reveals how vernacular form is itself a form of

urban planning even as modernist urban planning itself might be the greatest threat to vernacular form.

In the installation titled, “an archaeology project for future remembrance,” Chung reflects on what a master-plan has rendered invisible. Remember this, the installation says without uttering a word. Remember a place populated by 14,600 households—around 60,000 human beings—rendered empty by the force of a dream. Imagine a place that once was but is no more: a collection of neighborhoods—a vibrant urban fabric full of homes, cafes, markets, restaurants, pagodas, churches, shrines, community halls (đình làng), ancestral tombs, lineage halls, cemeteries, schools, People’s Committee offices, businesses, roads, pathways, and gardens. Imagine the sounds: from the shrill clang of ship repair hammers striking against the rusty steel skins of ocean-going ships, to the shouts, jokes, meal-time conversations, and lullabies of so many families. Imagine this all as a way to remember: a pocket of the city nestled within a network of canals lined by water-coconut trees, several hundred hectares of low-lying fields, duck marshes and fish ponds. Listen in your mind to the animated voices of a spirit-medium possessed by the Mother Goddess at a lên đồng spirit-calling ceremony, the homilies of the priest at the Thủ Thiêm Catholic Church, the harmonies of the children’s choir led by the Sisters from the Congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross (Hội Dòng Mến Thánh Giá), the intriguing sounds of people speaking in tongues at an underground Charismatic Protestant home church, the Cao Đài incantations, the Buddhist mantras, the hát bội village theater performances at the community halls during the annual Lễ Kỳ yên festival, the ribbing and jockeying of spectators at a cockfight, the sounds of guitars bending out the note of cải lương songs, and the impassioned crooning of friends, stretching their voices to complete their favorite lines from another chorus from another song from another time by Trịnh Công Sơn. Imagine all this rendered empty by the skyscraper dreams of a future yet to come.

Remember the plan, which for over a decade screamed out directives: Knock down the houses and fill everything in with sand. Bulldoze it, make it flat. Giải tỏa trắng!¹

But nostalgia reveals nothing. Now the people have gone. There is no need to imagine what is there today, for this is not a dream anymore but reality. The cây bàng trees² where shade once repelled the sun have been felled by the chainsaws of progress. Grasses grow tall, covering the remains of houses. The eddies of the Saigon river lap against the shore. A graveyard of windows taken from demolished homes recalls but does not replace a teeming settlement, many thousands of lives now displaced across the city. People say the “jungle” (rừng) has returned, overtaking this pocket of the city, waiting, anticipating. Hurry up and go has turned to wait and see; like the hurry up and wait rhythm of Saigon itself. Advance, push

forward, wait. Tiến lên. Đẩy mạnh. Chờ đợi.³ The project now hangs (treo). But there was a time when it moved in hyper-drive at the speed of a dream fueled by ambition: when the people refused to leave, the newspapers announced the need to rapidly push forward with the compensation and eviction process.⁴ But time has changed with the times; now that the people have been largely evicted, the newspapers announce that there is “‘No rush’ for Thủ Thiêm upgrade.”⁵ Hurry up and wait. This is one way to tell the story of Thủ Thiêm. Another way is to tell the story of passionate dreams of the future—of building a city with modern infrastructure, a world-class financial district filled with luxury housing, fast highways, corporate commercial districts, and landscaped public spaces. But the stories, of course, converge; because the dreams—like plans—achieve their clarity of vision through the very act of rendering a place of equally passionate vibrant sociality into an imagined wasteland. The process of building Thủ Thiêm requires destroying it first.

Every city has a right to dream. One might even say that people living in cities have an imperative to dream and plan and build and remake the world—cities are spaces of novelty, invention, creativity. But the problem with future-oriented dreams is the way that they can obscure so many details of the present and the past, rendering vibrant social worlds into wastelands. As cities reinvent themselves, the dreams of the future intersect with all that came before, with the dust and soil upon which real human beings live, and the bricks, tiles, window-casings, door frames, and corrugated metal rooftops of everyday life. When dreams touch the earth, every dreamer with a conscience must be prepared to confront the history and social life obscured by the force of those dreams.

Tiffany Chung’s “archaeology of future remembrance” sifts through the rubble of development to recapture voices and social spaces which have been rendered invisible by the transformation of a city. It is not a project of nostalgia but of remembrance, uncovering, like an archeologist, traces and buried fragments of civilization. This excavation into the traces of a lost civilization is an appropriate optic for a city that itself sees itself as committed to the civilizing process, driven by the slogan of “building and urban civilization” (“xây dựng văn minh đô thị”). The excavated tiles, like the hearths of long-dead ancestors uncovered in the great archaeological expeditions of the past, reveal the living spaces of family life. The digging, chopping, pounding, smashing, cutting, and the lifting movements of excavation reproduce the experience of demolition. Only now the process is not one of demolition but of recuperation—reviving the capacity to imagine the past.

The grass in Thủ Thiêm grows taller, day by day, fed by rain, scorched by sun, rustled by wind.

¹ The Vietnamese term “giải tỏa trắng” literally means to “completely clear by reducing the population density of a city.” In urban development, the term denotes the act of complete eviction, creating a blank slate by fully and completely demolishing all impediments that lie in the path of an anticipated construction project.

² Cây bàng trees (*terminalia catappa*) are large tropical trees with broad flat leaves and a wide canopy commonly planted along Vietnamese riverfront roadways or in rural towns to provide shade and space for convivial sociality. Throughout Vietnam, the cafes and tea shops set up under cây bàng trees evoke spaces of rest, calm, and tranquility, gathering spaces where one can pass lazy time with friends, neighbors, or workmates.

³ “Tiến lên” means to advance forward, and is commonly used as an exhortation to join a people together in a unified march of progress. “Đẩy mạnh” literally means to push with strength, and conveys the exhortation to push up, speed up, and step up to a task. Chờ đợi simply means to wait.

⁴ Đẩy nhanh tiến độ bồi thường giải phóng mặt bằng Khu đô thị mới Thủ Thiêm [Picking up the pace of compensation and land clearance in the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Zone]. *HCM-City Web*, 24 October, 2007. Article available at: <http://www.thuthiem.hochiminhcity.gov.vn>

⁵ ‘No rush’ for Thu Thiem upgrade. *Viet Nam News*. 30 August, 2013. Article available at:

<http://vietnamnews.vn/society/244200/%E2%80%98no-rush-for-thu-thiem-upgrade.html>