

Poems of the sky

to spring, summer, autumn, winter and the tree of life

A few days before Thanksgiving 2014, in her Chicago studio, Ly Hoang Ly created the longest-running performance piece in her practice, what she experienced during that time contributed significantly to her transitional process of critical thinking and artistic practices. On November 24, Ly started fasting for two weeks. During those days, she went to the market to cook and invited friends to come over. Each of them, became both spectators and participants, brought along an item, ate a cooked meal and became a part of the work. During the fasting period, Ly regularly monitored her health through heart rates, blood pressure, blood sugar and collected blood stains, observed changes in the colours of her urine, and felt the changes in her physical and spiritual body. The end of the project was also the time when Ly went through every stage of change in her flesh and emotions, from the physical lightness to the unbearable pain in the gut. She felt her body and soul were separate from each other and from everything else, as if they were encased in a transparent sphere, detached from the outside world through an invisible shell.

In this case, by imposing restrictions: stopping nutrients, but at the same time strictly following a schedule: going to the market, cooking and receiving guests every day, she gave her physical body a new and stable living condition, thanks to that, she redirected all her senses inwards to the changes of each cell, each internal organ to adjust to the body's need to live.

Focus on breathing, things will fall into place

Yearning to deepen the connection with her inner self, in 2015, Ly Hoang Ly participated in a meditation course in Plum Village, France, as an observer. She took notes and recorded videos but still adhered to the schedule and activities with the Sangha. In March of that year, Hanoians were buzzed with the news that the city would cut down 6,700 ancient trees on 190 urban streets. Ly wrote on her personal social media to call on everyone to practice the Hug Meditation exercise that she and her friends did. Sangha is practicing in Plum Village. The Hug Meditation calls for the act of hugging, mindfully¹, with loved ones, and on this occasion, Ly wanted her and her friends to do the exercise with trees. In her article, she said, "Hugging trees – Hugging our loved ones – Hugging ourselves. An installation performance piece. The museum is the street or the place where we live. Exhibition time is the present. Our action is the performance, and the shape created by the embrace between a person and a tree is the installation."² She offered 6 steps of the performance for those who participated. Tree huggers were instructed on how to cleanse (inhale and exhale, relax the whole body), prepare all the

¹ According to Plum Village, "When we hug, our hearts connect and we know that we are not separate beings. Hugging with mindfulness and concentration can bring reconciliation, healing, understanding, and much happiness." Plum Village, Hug Meditation, September 14 2023,

<https://langmai.org/tang-kinh-cac/vien-sach/thien-tap/gieo-trong-hanh-phuc/thien-om/>

² Hoang Ly, 2015, Hugging trees – Hugging your loved ones – Hugging yourself (France), September 16 2023, <http://www.lyhoangly.com/hugging-trees-huggingourloved-ones-hugging-ourselperformance-art-installationom-cay-om-nguoi-ta-yeu-thuong-om-chinh-minhplum-village-french-lang-mai-phap/>

senses (get in touch with the present, with the heart, lungs, blood vessels, brain), how to connect (dedicate mind, listen to sounds, breathe, see the tree as a loved one...). Thus, in a controlled external condition, the performers could all their senses on the contact, exchanges going in and movement within their bodies.

This performance was re-acted in 2016 when Saigon received news that more than 300 ancient trees on Ton Duc Thang Street would be completely chopped down to make way for the city's upcoming plans. This performance was also the starting point for a series of multimedia artistic productions in later years. Like a word-connecting game, Ly's works are born one after another through continuous cycles of life, inspired by the smallness of (many) fates in a face of demolition and construction, through inward self-adventure, to let the inner strength lead the way through making art, relentlessly, as a way of life.

In 2018, when each row of trees began to be uprooted, Ly Hoang Ly performed various durational performances at different times. From an artistic perspective, it is a continuation of the performative exercises in which the process of movement, emotions or conflicts are rendered into actions, which here are roughly divided into: static and dynamic. From a civic perspective, a public performance installation also raises questions about the scope and function of public space in civic participation.

Public art: public integration or public intervention?

Hope - Memory Tree is the first work created to dedicate to the trees, the grass, the people and life out there. Inspired by the street nameplates and makeshift signs handwritten from those who make a living on the street, on the day the last tree, number 169, was cut down, Ly installed the work *Hope - Memory Tree* on the tree's former location. The public installation art had a chance to live fully to its spirit, which belonged to the public space, and was able to communicate to everyone through a straightforward and common language. The first audience of the work was an elder street vendor. She has been selling beverages under tree 169, together with those trees, she's been a witness to the upheavals of history. She arrived early in the morning, as soon as the work was installed. Those trees have fallen but people's lives had no choice but to carry on. Knowing the artist too well due to her spending days performing at the street, the lady leisurely used a foamboard to play with the letters spinning in the air. At that time, apart from the physical site, Ly also used social media as an exhibition space that archived most of the audience's interactions with the artwork. The work stood in peace for 10 days before being pushed down, same fate with the trees, however, its life seemed to transcend those short-lived days due to the values it brought might go beyond the dichotomy of artistic standard of beauty and ugliness. When the Western art world moved on from modernism, which dictated an artwork's autonomy regardless of space, artistic practices started to weave into the maze of the streets. Art in public places, art as public spaces, or art in the public interest were all evolving paradigms of the history of contemporary public art in the West. In the context of places like Vietnam, in order to read a public installation art such as *Hope - Memory Tree*, it's necessary to go back to a basic question: To whom does public space belong? To what extent, can a guerrilla installation artwork integrate to every day's life, become a signboard, and live the life it's supposed to? To what extent, does the artwork become an intervention; to which problem does it intervene and with whom does it become a dialogue – confrontation? Regardless of being in the East or the West, public art has largely been popularised through socio-political movements.

Hence, is it possible to completely eliminate the political aspects of the work? There are various ways to read a public art work, it can be read from the revolution of art history, or through urban planning and the design of common spaces, or through the lenses of civic rights and its limitations, or even just from the eyes of those who accidentally encounter the work and play with it wholeheartedly.

The static – dynamic factors in durational performance

Similarly, there are also several ways to read a performance: based on the methodology or looking for meaning, through the role of the viewers or through the eyes of the participants, using semiotics or reading through the flow of history and, therefore, art and religion, looking at space, and time or even, from an intertextual relationship to other materials.

What can we see from a series of durational performances in *So, we became machines*? In 6 of the 7 performative situations, the performer keeps her body *static*, sometimes lying on the road, sometimes standing next to the excavator, sometimes standing on a tree stump, sometimes standing under a tree root that had just been uprooted. Movement, if any, is kept minimal. Thus, the artist builds a monument with her body and, over time, also makes her presence invisible. If the central image (the performer) and the central action (the performance) deviate from expectations, that is, there is no predetermined dramatic event, then what can one read from the work? First of all, perhaps we should start by focusing on looking – seeing - listening - feeling. A performance creates optical and sound situations; in durational performances, they are also the passage of time and the opening and changing of space.³ Purely optical and sound situations, according to Deleuze, promote an active seeing while situations guided by actions tend to lead to the passive visual function (pragmatic visual function), the viewer is forced to sit and watch. Because the performances are also rendered into video channels, viewers here are basically divided into two groups: direct at the performance site and indirect through the recorded documentations.

At the site, the audience (except for the artist's friends who came to support and help record) became reluctant and passive viewers. They look, discuss, confront, or ignore. Who are they? Passersby, people living and doing business nearby, people on duty to cut trees, and... the police. Their encounters or confrontations can last a few minutes, a few hours or a whole day. They are aware of their position as spectators, and unintentionally play the role of passive spectators with the passive visual function, here, they can expect an action, a reaction, or an event to happen. Perhaps, except for paid police officers or those who make their living on the streets, hardly anyone takes the time to watch these performances till the end. The time of the work is therefore encapsulated from the beginning to the end of the performance: one day, one year. From this perspective, the performance space is also encapsulated in the artist's private bubble, and interactions, if any, with this sphere.

Audiences who watch the performance indirectly through video documentation experience another time and space outside the work. Here, the time of the work lies between and beyond the performances. The space of the work is no longer a bubble containing the artist and her movements. It is more complex, and is made up of a series of complex, neither homogeneous

³ Borrowing Deleuze's ideas here when he analyzed the crisis of movement-image in cinema, and how time-image has gone beyond the meaning of action sequences by creating optical and sound situations (opsigns and sonsigns).

nor predetermined movements from passers-by, people making a living around, the tree-cutters, and the tree itself being cut down. Thus, reluctant audiences become performance participants within this indirectly rendered space. What is the difference between these indirect audiences and the live viewers? Indirect audience are not only aware of their audience position but also aware of the interchangeable roles from audience to participants within the video documentations. They realised that those reluctant performance participants experienced immediacy, perhaps even more than what was shown in the lens.

In the only performance in which the artist's body is in a *dynamic* state, the time and space of the work are continuously (re)created by successive actions and reactions. Now, more clearly, the participants are the ones who immediately react, confront and interact with the artist. Viewers (directly and indirectly) place expectations on events that unfold through successive responses. If in the static performance series, the artist's presence is a negative space, created by movements and external impacts, then in the dynamic performance series, her presence is radiated through the initiative of the artist; at this time the spatial order is arranged through improvisation, it is shared and contributed by many different performers at the same time.

The interrelationship of materials

One of the most distinguished features in Ly Hoang Ly's artistic practice is how the creative materials have an equally important life, somewhat hyperbolic in the concept of the works. If the passage of time is an important material in durational performances, then other tangible materials collected during the performance process are all used for Ly's paintings, sculptures and installations. Sawdust and steel are two special materials that have deeply moved Ly since those days of performing on the street, when she witnessed saw blades hitting the tree trunks directly. She quietly collected the remaining sawdust after each day, and used them for her works as a way to carry on the life of the remnants.

The element of time in *Soaked in emptiness* is crystalised through layers of lacquer, where each layer has a life of its own, created by the combination of reading - writing, sprinkling – painting – sanding. The artist created the initial layout of the painting by marking the streaks of sunlight through the window on the board, then invited her friends to join in the performance. She read her poem composed during the process of making *So, we became machines* and the participants took notes with lacquer paint, then covered those words with sawdust, then tapped with hammers, followed with the words being distorted making the sawdust cluster like small graves, or golden clouds. After drying, the sawdust is brushed away, leaving the letters exposed... Then continue the process of applying paints, waiting for it to dry, hammering, then applying again. If previous performances were documented through the language of video, *Soaked in emptiness* uses the patient and repetitive natures of artistic labour in lacquer as a pace and condition for the performance.

Blue ball and the red thread series is perhaps the most solid example of concretising ideas through materials, and this work is perhaps the most personal of the works on display. The work overwhelms the space with a series of egg-shaped steel panels from crescent to full, serving as a support frame for 21 ceramic paintings, gradually growing from the ground. Inspired by the concept of samsara in the series *Flowers of the Four Seasons (Pine, Chrysanthemum, Bamboo and Apricot)*, the work is a series of days transforming violence and peace, decay and rebirth through the use of earth and steel. Throughout the flow is a red thread leading the blue balls

through the cracks of ceramic glaze, looking almost like a maze. The further it goes, the more clearly the steels appear in shape, pushing the ceramic paintings and the balls higher. Perhaps, trying to make sense of those metaphorical images is not as important as the viewer letting themselves follow the red thread, experiencing the and the correlation between materials and the impression they deliver along the way.

The poems ... returned to the sky

The work *Poems of the sky* is the only work created specifically for the exhibition space, and is also a work born through continuing dialogues. While working on *Soaked in emptiness*, Ly saw that sawdust, when covered with lacquer paint, lingered like golden clouds. The clouds immediately connected her to Georgia O'Keeffe and her meticulous work on clouds in *Sky Above Clouds IV*. Ly wanted to converse with O'Keeffe through her own clouds. She used the entire space of the wall facing the sky at San Art to create a site-specific dimension for her sky with the clouds made with 95 thousand silver leaves. Perhaps the initial, simple purpose was just to have a dialogue with an artist whose thickness of works comes from a deep connection from inner depth to everything around, bringing a respect and inspiration that transcend borders and generations, then maybe in that way, she continues to look for the red thread inside, or maybe she just wants to use that excuse for herself and the audience to look up at the sky, to see, and to think. Then, perhaps over time these works will have a life of their own, they will be born and mature so that their life will no longer depend on the presence of the artist. Maybe they continue to be interacted with, reminded of, but maybe they will fade into oblivion, like any poem read under the sky. At end of the road, the red thread will follow the blue ball and fly back to the sky.

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