

# Corner College

Kochstrasse 1 • 8004 Zürich

## Quynh Dong: Artist Talk

17 March 2015, 20:00h

*Quynh Dong, after completing her master of fine arts at ZHdK 2010, followed by a two years residency at BINZ39 in Zurich, spent the past three years abroad, traveling, extending her education, researching and producing, first as an artist in residence at iscp (international studio & curatorial program) in New York in 2012, followed by an extended resident study program at Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in 2013 and 2014. She will give an artist talk at Corner College, on her way to her next residency at the MMCA (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art) in Seoul, Korea 2015.*

**A**t Corner College, Quynh Dong takes us on a journey into her studies of movement, of what has to be done from the vanishing point. The artist maps or sketches the affectual orientation and disposition of her practices, concerned with the politics of movement and its formal aesthetics. They confront her immediately with the affect and its practical and theoretical implications, as the affect always brings something unstable in the encounter between forces and mutable matter, through performative inversions of a choreographic web, like a dance of space/time whose distortions affect, able to induce the migration of the image or to decolonize bodies, as affect is resistance, too.

In her studies of movement, the artist works mostly, but not exclusively with the three mediums of performance, video and sculpture and their blocks of movement. Like the three avatars, which appear to be comparable to the three forced movements of the Deleuzian false forces, which are affect, percept and concept. They express three different paths, each of which brings its own layer of imprinted real. In their intersection, the concrete movement and ideal time emerge. As an artistic strategy, Quynh Dong intervenes in the relation between motion and sense, between trauma and optimism, between bodies and images. The artist's interest in the affect lies in its potentiality of opening her practices towards an ethico-aesthetic paradigm in which race, class and sex become affective forms that are not directly inscribed in the bodies and the subjects, but are political spaces. This moves the bodies and subjects away from identitarian constructions and their cultural limitations. Identities, understood as projections of the signifier, are dispersed in

the field of the affect with its forces liberating them, which become able to create themselves as a process of self-organizing and self-inventing subjectivities.

The artist deliberately exaggerates the femininity of her female characters, such as to affirm the ongoing feminization of affective labor inherent in the post-colonial landscape of late global capitalism. This embodied femininity, with its fragility and weakness, has the power to induce a creative melancholic opening that intensifies the flowing ephemera, re-appropriating them and the affect from the post-Fordist economic relations and recent rapid technological developments. She sets out, by means of art, to fill the atmosphere with fleeting implications of e-motions and sentiments that make the spectator feel how their perceptions depend on the conditions and the angle of their position in the space. The affect is for real, which means that its arrival serves as a force on her work that sometimes is rather non-work, which in the range of the affect lose their opposite values as the artistic practices are extended to the aesthetics of existence, *i.e.*, "how to affect and how to be affected."

The artist is more concerned with creating moods and generating situations that allow the space to be permuted under a forced movement of the affect in-itself, *i.e.*, a dense place of proximity and then a process of distancing, which winds up a temporality with its de-centric displacements, "both moved and moving," in the play of an extended network of agents beyond the mere notion of the human. Such an approach exhibits the quality of how an artist can expand her practices from the plane of representation to the micrologic of quantitative plurality of emotions and samples of invisible quantum fluctuations of a waving reality. The artistic techniques here are vectors of gradients, scales of temperatures, intervals or lengths of proximity and distance, feelings and their visible and invisible substances. Even if it can happen, as in her recent sculptures, that these ephemera turn into pieces of solid matter, her practices envelope atmospheric space or a space of density and its invisible forces, haunting that space with their uncanny hallucinations or vapor fluxes. The performance thus opens slight gaps to the void of the vacuum or the abyss where the body is rather possessed by external forces that animate the fragile body, like the wind playing with leaves of grass in the field. The artist's interest in digits and mass creativity is expressed in her enthusiasm for and attentiveness to popular culture, Bakhtin's *carnavalesque*, as in her long-term research into the Asian genre of soap operas. On the one hand they are the propaganda of a commercial and consumerist lifestyle. On the other, all codes are broken and melt down in their sugary sweetness, weakened by too much copy/paste, which she sees as a chaos of potentialities.

In Quynh Dong's performance *The summer is still green, what are you looking for* (2014), the event is grounded in the heart of the choreography of the melancholic drive and in the imperative of the kinetics of a static body as a pure movement. The artist's performance occupies the space in-between her own silent presence in front of the audience, where she



*The summer is still green, what are you looking for?*, 2014. Performance with light, sound and music. Duration: 60 min.

embodies the character of a young female desperately in love, and the sonic background from the melody of a sweet Asian pop love song. In this transitional space occurs the transmission of the invisible flowing signs coming from the reactions of the public and the liquidity of her own tears. The heroine she embodies appears dumb, and her tears are drops of a virtual "lapse into grayness," which is a sublime passivity of refusal to perform, as the performative lies in the exercise of exhaustion which gives affective birth to the future without a clear beginning, without an original. It is a temporary space within the place, of proximal senses and pathos, which makes the audience feel uncertain about the origin of the action or the performance. If we ask who is the performer, it is what is made in the performative relations performed by an extended network of agents or other, drawing on Bruno Latour's thoughts regarding the second source of uncertainty, from his *Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, when he asks: "Who is the actor?" In this space, in-between formless enjoyment and a silence freezing to death, unfolds an experiment on how the melodramatic can immanently grow and invert itself into cosmic melancholy, tearing the virtual horizon of nothing that has the potentiality to become something that depends on the imagination, an infinity of potentials in the machinic revelation of something which has never been covered.

In this performance, the artist generates zones of sentiments based on her appropriation of clichés and conventions from the cloud of romantic love, and on the moment of the cracks of disillusionment with them. At that moment the performance turns into an impersonal space of displaced and forced movement, of distance from the audience that reaches its degree of indifference, which is a situation of mobilizing



*SWEET NOEL*, 2013. Video installation. 1920×1080, 07:39 min.

the alienating forces of the sub-personal and pre-personal that open onto an ambience of difference and a new plane of consistency as re-singularization of the pre-existing, as the play of the blind forces of the extra-human, rather than the artist's active intentions – a space disturbingly evocative. In *The summer is still green, what are you looking for* the performance opens a door or liminal threshold on the "imperceptible," which is not about her 'private emotions.' The tears in this embodied silence are rather "external," as they come from the outside of the inside of the pre-extra-human, from a space of pre-subjective and univocal equality, where we cannot be sure any longer whether it is about a love story or other forms of possession.

Quynh Dong's extended research on Nguyễn Gia Trí, a Vietnamese painter who perfected the traditional technique of lacquer painting combining East Asian and Western techniques, who was at the same time one of the pioneers of Vietnamese modern art and the cultural codes of the modern Vietnamese identity as a synthesis of French colonialism and Vietnamese patriotism, led her to make her video clip *Sweet Noel*. The artist re-appropriates the allegorical and desiring approach of Nguyễn Gia Trí from his *North-Centre-South Spring Garden, 1970-1990*, a work which reveals figures that are like reflections on the surface of the water or beneath the water, a painting created by overlaying films of shiny amber materials that make the surface shimmer in all spectral nuances. This makes it ideal for digital re-translation. As in every translation something is lost and something new is gained, the artist re-enacts the gentle young ladies from the painting in order to de-video-analyze them and *détourne* their feminine appearance into a landscape of flora or a garden of artificial flowers of highly blown-up details bigger than the



human figures. By these means, the artist creates a flat shiny surface and blooming simulated space of electric bits of a hybrid world – a simulacra in which the artist multiplies the appearance of her characters in the digital repetition of the same. If the myth is a world without beginning and without origin, it also gives the key or the code to the interpretation of the new stories, the artist's feminine character finds itself born of the multiplication of the same in a non-authentic world predetermined by technological simulations and their mythologies. The discrepancy of scale between her female figures and the flora can be read as a critique of the colonialist interest to gather ethnographical and scientific information from everything, even art. As the artist says, there is only art, which can be aesthetically exciting and politically important, but there are no such categories as Asian, African or European art. Because of this, the unmeasurable quality and absurdity of art must be used to subvert the cultural stereotypes used to build prejudice and constraints. The artist sets about re-assembling micro-elements of culture based on the scales of measurement, through the re-appropriation of bits of the machinic endless process of cultural encoding and decoding in the transition of signs between different cultures. The artist's desires to decolonize both the painting and her video clip in the migration politics of the image from one to another, tracing her own 'indigenous' signature in a hybrid world, the new global village of a wired tribe.

Despite the apparent solidity of Quynh Dong's sculptural installations, where she abandons the human subject in the fever of disjointed pieces of glossy ceramic leaves from the chalices of moribund flowers running away from each other. They are sculptural assemblages of oversize copies



*The second stage of beauty, 2014. Floor sculpture ceramics. 9 m × 5 m.*



*Tears of a Swan*, 2013. Sculpture.

of pieces of dying matter, which emphasize their partial relations in the generating structures. In close-up, their surface becomes quantized, which leads to the idea that the world has a resolution. Their assembled ontology is a convoluted space oriented towards the virtual, trapping the perception into an installation process embodying optimistic cruelty that performs with striking effect to model the space in patterns patterning the plane. It brings the spectator directly to the heart of phantasm.

"Nothing is real," as some philosophers and physicists say. "Everything is simulacra." A paradoxical leap can turn such a statement to its opposite: "There is only the real," as others retort. Or, referring to Erving Goffmann: "Is it for real? Is it fake?" The phantasm and the apparent solidity of the object are both flux and concrete, one turning into the other depending on the spectator's distance to the object, which changes their picture of the world. In order to re-produce distinct objects, we have to picture it. In the process, the opposition between material and immaterial, real and phantasm becomes absurd.

"Art is an object of Beauty!" states Quynh Dong about her work. She sees the position of the artist in old fashion as the copyist of nature who questions reality, reaching a romantic overmodel of it and even kitsch. The copyist's gesture evokes the law of the copy and the matrix in a biopolitical sense. The copyist-artist can be seen as embodying the dark side of grace, as the artist gets access to the weak forces of a second nature of something artificial and plastic, which breaks the symmetry of the laws of physics and can capture and sustain the natural glamour and attraction of the dying flower like the frozen ripples of space/time, modeling the reality of decay and the noise of the entropic process. Could

this be the noise coming from the degrees of microscopic freedom of the entropic process? Indeed, there is hidden information in the solid objects, which can be understood as the intervals between “the infinity of little affective events,” induced by the relation of rest and accelerated movement of the virtual images blocked between the particles of solid matter. These oscillations are the creative resistance of the material. The waving reality of the hysteresis of the forces within the clay and their virtual potentialities meet the hesitating line the artist traces into it. In this sculptography, the network of objects becomes a system that claims that “the social is always more than human,” as assemblages are always social, and the social lies in the principle of connectivity. The links between them have to be composed by the audience walking among them. One can never be sure where these delusive statements are the noise of the ripples of laughter, or the artist’s own laughter, and where it has to be taken very seriously.

*Text: Dimitrina Sevova*