

**Press Reviews**

Mark Rappolt, 'Thu Van Tran, My words flu up, my thoughts remain below', Art Review, January & February 2020

## Thu Van Tran

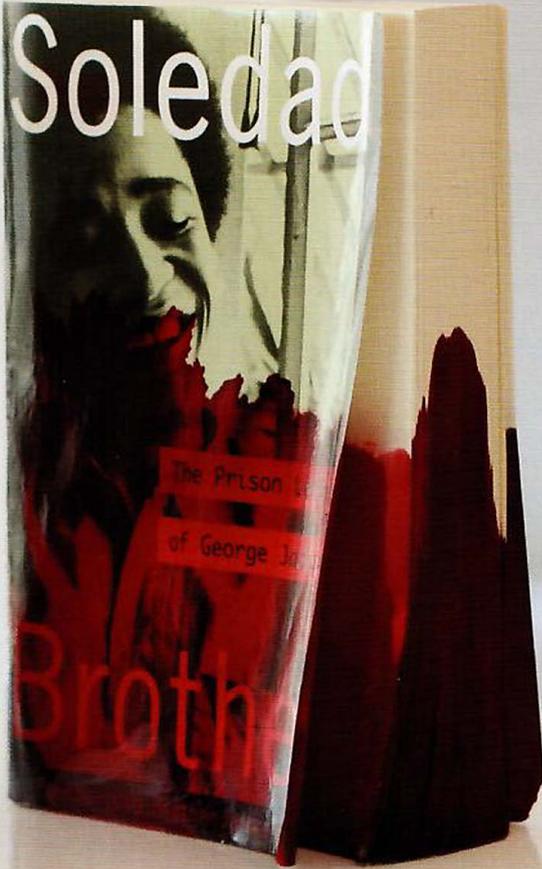
### My words fly up, my thoughts remain below

*Interview by Mark Rappolt*

Soledad



Soledad



Thu Van Tran was born in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and moved to France as a refugee in 1981, aged two. She studied at the Glasgow School of Art and the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where she now lives. In 2014 she regained her Vietnamese citizenship. Her work – which spans photography, video, sculpture and installation – was included in the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017 and the following year was nominated for the Prix Marcel Duchamp. In the past she has stated that we are all made by ‘stains’ and that history is constructed by ‘contamination, occupation and domination’. While her work has tackled the colonial relationship between Vietnam and France as well as Vietnam and America, incorporating histories of violence, exploitation and capital, it also explores the formal and chemical qualities of the different media in which it is realised.

ARTREVIEW *Language has played a role in many of your works.*

THU VAN TRAN In 2013 I had a solo presentation based on experiments with language and light in the Statements section of Art Basel. It began when I was travelling in an English-speaking country and started to read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* [1902] in English, the language in which it had originally been written. I was determined to understand it, which meant that it gradually became clear that I was effectively engaged in a translation project that would end up with my publishing a version of the book in French. But I started translating in a very particular way. I didn’t want to reproduce Conrad’s original text word for word; I wanted to test whether or not my lack of comprehension of the language and my subjective interpretation of the story could produce new meanings.

AR *What kind of things did you change in the translation?*

TVT The whole narrative takes place during a rising tide and it is told while the narrator is waiting for the water to turn. I wanted to get closer to a form of spoken language, and also to insist on the contemporary dimension of such a story, so I decided to transpose the past time of the narrative into present time. I also wanted to change the names of geographical locations (cities, lakes) to those of Southeast Asia. But as I read, I realised that Conrad never mentioned either the Congo or Belgium at any time in the book. The changes I have made are those guided

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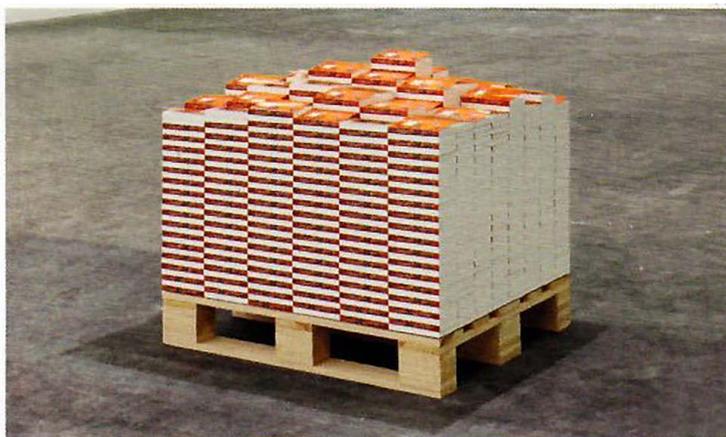
by a personal writing – my subjectivity. For example, the ‘official’ French title of *Heart of Darkness* is *Au coeur des ténèbres*, but I translated it as *Au plus profond du noir*, which means something more like ‘Deepest into the black’. For me, it was important to remember the skin colour within the black colour. My interpretation has also taken me further: I have, for the third edition of the book, incorporated whole passages of my own invention. I describe in more detail the contradictory feelings that could be experienced by the characters who encountered madness. I still haven’t read the official French translation because I rewrite my translation for each new

edition. I already know that for the next one I will replace the ivory, which is the coveted and stolen resource in the narrative, with rubber...

AR *Does this relate to your personal experience? You’ve made reference to the rubber plantations of Vietnam in previous works.*

TVT Yes, all of these changes have to do with me and my experience, but especially this process of transmitting through another language. I tried to negotiate the trajectory of one world moving into another: Joseph Conrad’s world into mine. I was looking for a kind of collision. Conrad navigated up the Congo River during the period of the country’s occupation by Belgium; I come from Vietnam, a former French colony. Also, I grew up with two languages: one culture from the inside, one of the outside. These two had structured my mind and thought, in an equal duality. I express myself in French, whereas I dream in Vietnamese. I have always juggled between one and the other, with humour and deficiency, adopting behaviours specific to each language.

I wondered if my cognitive world was limited by the possibilities of my language. Likewise, I wondered whether or not the frontiers of my language were those of my world? Would I understand the idea of freedom could I feel it, if that word didn’t exist in the language I spoke or thought with? Would I have grown up the same if I only spoke Vietnamese? Moreover, communist ideology played a role in my consideration of the Vietnamese language: in it, the pronoun ‘I’ has a dozen transcriptions depending on the position one occupies in relation to the person one is addressing. There is no ‘I’ in absolute terms; only relative to another person, group or a society. It is a language in which, for example, it is difficult for me to express objection.



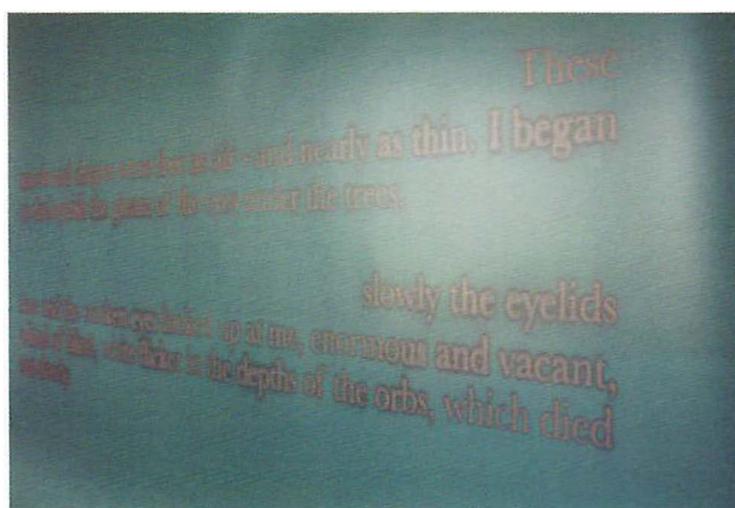
above *Au plus profond du noir*, 2013, books, hevea wood pallet, 85 x 90 x 90 cm

preceding pages *Imaginary Jackson*, 2016, two editions of George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, 1972, red ink, dimensions variable



*Heart of Darkness*, 2013, 59 A4 paper sheets, 120 glass sheets,  
4 hevea wood planks, dimensions variable

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*top Listen, the darkness deepens, 2016  
(installation view, Ladera Oeste, Guadalajara, 2016).*

*above We live in the flicker (detail), 2016, unfixed  
photograms on Kodak paper, dimensions variable*

AR *The personal seems important to you.*

TVT During the process of translation I was first drawn to Joseph Conrad's own biography: at the end of the nineteenth century he returns from a trip to the Congo, after which he enters a sort of aphasia that will last about three years. He finally transposes his story and the violence that he had witnessed during that journey into the form of a novel that he decides to write in English. He could have chosen to write in Polish, his mother tongue, or in French, a language that he knew well, but he preferred to use a language in which he was completely uncomfortable, as if only it could break the aphasia in which he was immersed. This language process inspired me.

AR *Why is this idea of discomfort important?*

TVT I think because it can lead us to situations where we get the obvious. Conrad must have needed some form of struggle or combat in the language to deliver his story in writing. I discovered that the Japanese author Haruki Murakami wrote with a typewriter early in his career, while he ran a jazz bar in Tokyo's suburbs. Every night, when the bar closed, he tapped on a machine that had a Latin keyboard, and so decided to write his first texts in English, which he translated to Japanese. He said that this process allowed him a particular method of writing: first English forced him to write in a pared-down, essential way, after which the process of translating it into Japanese brought a miraculous breath of fresh air to his relationship with his native tongue, seen from the perspective of a foreign language and structure. Murakami relearned Japanese by using another language that forced him to write clearly. He has said that his first writings would not have been the same if they had been written directly in Japanese.

AR *Can translating be as powerful as writing?*

TVT It seems to me that the question has no meaning. I am writing when I translate. My approach to Conrad might seem free of restrictions, but in reality it was laborious, as I tried to unravel the original in the most intuitive way possible in order to rewrite it. I think translating involves a writing process that is just as valid as writing on a blank page.

AR *Can you ever escape the constraints of written/spoken language? Isn't the attraction of visual art partly the possibility of escaping this?*

TVT Rules of speech and writing can be dispensed with by recourse to sound and vision; that is, by transcribing the musicality of language and the drawing qualities of writing. I was interested in the visual aspect of writing, and the question of how to exhibit it. Somehow I had to imagine another level of translation.

In the end it took the form of two works. The first was a materialisation of the text [*Au plus profond du noir – Manuscript*, 2013]. I chose to display every page of the whole 60-page manuscript in sequence, with each soaked in an increasing amount of black ink to produce a gradient from beginning to end of pure white to deep black, light to dark, legible to illegible. I wanted the darkness to gain in presence while we experience the text. The second work dealt with the reading experience. It consisted of a series of unfixed photograms on which were exposed excerpts from the novel [*We live in the flicker*, 2013].

AR *Is there a distinction to be made between your translation of the words and your physical manifestation of the words in the photogram?*

TVT Both are translation gestures, but one treats equivalence on the level of meaning, the other operates by equivalence of intensity and emotion, which is closer to an act of transcription. As Umberto Eco mentions in his essay 'Dire presque la même chose' [2003], the distinction is situated in the level of translation. For each

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degree, we have to accept loss as a creative factor. We lose something, but what do we gain in return? In a way, this is how mutation operates.

AR *How did you choose the particular excerpts in the photograms?*

TVT I chose to extract sentences from the novel where light appears but could never remain, since it is always caught up by the darkness of the story. And then, at night, in front of the bay window in my studio, I used stencils to expose the words on photosensitive paper. The first rays of early morning sunshine literally captured and inscribed the words. I left the stencils exposed for months and obtained a kind of chemical saturation. Light revealed the writings: 'The sky without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light...'; 'The white patch had become a place of darkness'.

AR *Do you think there is a relationship between the processes of language and of chemistry?*

TVT When the photograms are finally exhibited, and because the process of exposure is ongoing,

the light that made the words appear also inevitably makes them disappear. This chemical process somehow has both pure autonomy and pure immediacy. In my opinion, the process of language is similar. For example, even reciting by heart something perfectly memorised has an element of the unexpected, a margin of error, because the word (*la parole*) is an unprecedented act, you can't 'take away' something that has been said unless you say it again... The experience of saying something is unique, like a process that moves forward in a sequence that doesn't turn back. When I write I always speak out loud, to catch the harsh part of the language, combining abstraction and meaning, mixed to give a pure material. I look for this unexpected aspect in my relationship with shapes and materials, and chemistry somehow has this.

AR *Are you attracted to this kind of ephemerality? The ability of things to change or fade or disappear?*

TVT For the unfixed photogram series, we feel the blue is chemically fading to grey: the more you read, the more you erase the word (because of its exposure to light). This phenomenon of appearance and disappearance is what I am often looking for in language and the sculptural process. A movement that embraces language and material within a common creative process. In *We live in the flicker* I entrusted a possible experience to the material, by giving the words to a moving surface with light as the intermediary. All this experience remains at the service of a fragile moment of reading and beauty... It is so hard to define what an aesthetic experience ultimately depends on, for it can manifest itself or it can simply not happen. Within these ephemeral, immediate or slow phenomena, I am looking for that. The question is also how to capture, visually, this instant of passage from life to death. Disappearance leaves traces, it is the passage that is intense. It's the same for words.

*Listen, the darkness deepens* [2016] is the title of an exhibition in Guadalajara, in which I developed this notion of language embodied in materials. The show also included the series *We live in the flicker*, with a transcription of a Fernando Pessoa poem placed on the ground [*People*, 2016].

AR *Why the Pessoa poem?*

TVT Pessoa, in a collection of poems translated into French as *Le gardeur de troupeau* [in English, *The Keeper of Sheep*, 1925], writes: 'I am the shepherd, my herd are my thoughts, and I think with my eyes, with my nose, with my ears, my mouth...' I quote from memory, but I totally agree with the fact that we do think with our senses. That is the first reason, I guess, that Fernando Pessoa is like a friend at my side.

He is the poet of our melancholia. He disappears from the visible world because he feels he belongs to no land. Also, he pretends to be plural, several. Under the name of Alberto Caeiro, he writes free verses in a rough language about things of a spiritual nature.

They spoke to me of people,  
and of humanity.  
But I've never seen people, or humanity.  
I've seen various people, astonishingly  
dissimilar,  
Each separated from the next by an  
unpeopled space.

I took this excerpt from Pessoa/Caeiro's *Poèmes jamais assemblés* ('uncollected poems') and my wish to give body to this speech drives me to work with clay, earth itself. I chose the physical earth to symbolically materialise the missing earth evoked in the poem. I moulded letters and cast hundreds of ceramic letters, all unfired, to show their fragility of being. The poem was therefore delivered in fragments. *Our Melancholia* [2017] is a library of the moulds that preserves the possibility of materialising this language.

AR *What does it mean to you to materialise writing?*

TVT When we think 'writing', we don't actually see anything. We read a word on a piece of paper, a book or a screen but we don't see the word as a potentiality of form or an affective formal experience. Here, the poem evokes the impossibility of belonging to any part of the earth, the feeling of political and melancholic exile. A subtraction of the man from the reality. I looked for the most effective form to deliver these words. The moulds appear as the possibility for these verses to exist, and for any poetry to exist. The word here is shown in its absence, in its container. In the fragile frame, the mould,

which I have tried to protect, because the plaster, by being mineralised, became brittle, broken and fossilised; the wax prostheses come to support this potential of speech to be born and to emancipate itself through its own appearance. These moulds at once describe the possible proliferation of the word and warn about its absence or potential disappearance. Here again the negative form, *le trace*, the hollowed form, will insist on the fragile word, and witness our desire to be and belong.

AR *In 2014 you were invited to curate a show on Marguerite Duras's writings at the Centre Pompidou. Perhaps we could end with that. Why did you title it Portrait of a style of writing? And why distinguish between the style and the author?*

TVT The French title – *Portrait d'une écriture* – doesn't really seem to distinguish the two. I mean the border is less present, and the association of 'portrait' and 'écriture' makes them even closer. Indeed, I think that our investigation of Marguerite Duras's 'style of writing' was carried out in the first place through a portrait: through her life but also through her choice to write for the outside world while retaining her own private narrative. She was able to publish texts of extreme intimacy, such as that written after her first child's death in the journal *Sorcières* ['Witches'].

The scenography that I proposed embodied this duality. I faced problems such as how to give life to an archive and how to restore the experience of Duras's life without falling into a form of documentation? The exhibition was intended to introduce the experience of the writing through a presentation in the mode of a collision between written, spoken and imaged forms. This is how texts, sounds and films were programmed into sequences played

within the show, which had a specific duration. The time and space of the exhibition were then totally intertwined.

AR *Does the relationship between the outside world and the personal or intimate narrative that you see in Duras also inspire your own work? And does it also involve a negotiation with the ego? In that it places value or importance on the individual narrative?*

TVT One thing that brings Duras and I closer together is our common filiation with Indochina (she was born in Vietnam's Gia Định Province and lived there until her majority). This closeness to her experience can give me as much insight into her life as any biographer. But in reality, what makes me feel close to her was her commitment to what she called 'the outside world'. More specifically, a text she wrote to express her indignation at the closure of a factory that dismissed all its workers. Of course, novels such as *The Sea Wall* [1950], which recounts her childhood in a French concession in Indochina, spoke to me, but, as she said, this book is first and foremost a communist novel, in the way in which it engages in a critique of the French colonial administration through the story of the trials suffered by her mother. I think the ego's share must be exceeded to take on another form. This transformation takes place in each of Duras's books. For her, writing is the act of absolute transformation. Even if the story is originally motivated by her feeling of injustice and sometimes by revenge (as is the case with *The Sea Wall*), once the writing takes place it has already taken her elsewhere. In this, she is the author who has influenced me the most. ar

*A solo exhibition, Dust Notes, is on view at Almine Rech, Paris, until 11 Janu.*



*At a Tortoise's Pace, 2019,*  
30 ceramic tortoises, dimensions variable.  
Photo: Rebecca Fanuel



*Our Melancholia*, 2017,  
plaster, residues of clay, wax, rubber, oak wood,  
gouache, dimensions variable

*All images* © the artist.  
Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech, Paris

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