

THE EXPLORATIONS OF JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA

There exists a significant body of writing on the work of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, whose work spans nearly fifteen years, of which a large part has focused on a continued investigation into memory and the memorial. Although I have known Jun for only a very short time, since my relocation to Ho Chi Minh City in 2003, I have enjoyed engaging Jun in many interesting conversations and have been an occasional witness to his work and conceptual processes. It is through our proximity that I've been asked to write some observations, however personal, on Jun's expanding body of work. The writing I propose is to offer some connections and concentrations on Jun's recent work, mainly from 2003-2007, exactly the period where our simultaneities overlap.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE VOYAGE

I'd like to begin by speaking of maps and of hope. Together, an object and an emotion, become the most basic tools of an explorer. Jun has returned to these tools time and again in the development of his work. In some cases I find this connection quite explicit and in others just on the horizon of making its presence known. Preceding any long term voyage one must consider the essential provisions required for survival, namely food, fuel, shelter and transportation. Beginning in 1994, Jun developed a number of installations focusing on the relationship between food and life. The fuel of the Vietnamese diet including rice, fish, chicken, instant noodles, vegetables and cooking charcoal became the materials for a series of indoor and outdoor installations. During this period from 1994-2001, Jun also began to incorporate mosquito nets, which in Vietnam are often the sole barrier between sleepers and nature, in his installation works. [From 1998 to 2001](#), Jun redesigned the cyclo, a pedicab commonly used throughout Vietnam for the transport of both humans and goods. His attention to these materials of basic sustenance allows me to consider this period of production as the preparation for a voyage. That voyage set sail in 2001 with the completion of *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam: Towards the Complex - For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards*. In this critically acclaimed work, created for the 2001 Yokohama International Triennial of Contemporary Art, Jun exploits the cargo containing the now familiar cyclo and mosquito net. We are able to observe the elements of his early work put towards the first homecoming voyage. *Towards the Complex* is the first of Jun's *Memorial Projects*, one of four journeys into narrative, memory and cinema whose ongoing development continues to this day.

CARTOGRAPHY AND UTOPIA

"The map is not the territory" – Alfred Korzybski

"On 8 March 1421, the largest fleet the world had ever seen set sail from China. The ships, some nearly five hundred feet long, were under the command of Emperor Zhu Di's loyal eunuch admirals. Their orders were 'proceed all the way until the end of the earth'. – Gavin Menzies, *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*.

Exploration and recording are partners. A record of an expedition never made and an exploration without a record are both projects unfulfilled. The earliest explorers knew that if they were to leave a mark on history, they would have to be markers themselves. As with the explorations of Columbus and Magellan, and yet more closely aligned to Zheng He (the Admiral of Chinese Emperor Zhu Di) or Hansel

and Gretel, Jun is consumed in the process of marking. Zheng He left behind a network of multilingual stone markers that incorporated the languages and cultures of the lands he encountered while Hans and Gretel left a trail of breadcrumbs to mark their journey into the dark forest (and the contemporary use of the word breadcrumbs referring to the path one takes navigating the internet). The synthesis of marking, technologies and exploration is explicit in Jun's new work, *Breathe Project 12,756.3*, where over the span of approximately six years he will mark his GPS coordinates and vital statistics while running in various places throughout the world in what he describes as "earth drawing." Whereas the early explorers faced superstitions and cosmologies of the sea and forest, Jun's navigations are challenged by histories, politics, and known science. Jun's mission is of reorganization - location, erasure, redrawing- which is essentially a respiratory and cartographic process.

Jun's focus on the cartographic is an important development, in the literal sense of working with maps and in the abstract sense, the spatial organization of his recent installation work, for at its foundation is an artist's challenge to how we perceive the world. Unique to our species, humans are model making creatures, harnessing metaphor and fact to create representations that aid the understanding of our existence. Imaginative maps of the past have depicted surfaces of the earth balanced upon the backs of titanic turtles to the concentric planes of heaven and hell.

We find evidence of the cartographic in the *Globe Project: Garden of Globes* debuting at this exhibition, that follows a trajectory whose precursors include the *Waterfield Project* (performance and installation at the Gwangju Biennale 2006), *World Atlas* (commissioned work for Art.Es Magazine, 2004), The Digging Project (Video, ongoing production) and the *Beachball Project* (Installation [at Malmo Konsthall in Sweden](#), 2005). Each work has in common a grid, whether carefully orchestrated movements in the striated space of a gallery battlefield or the lines of longitude and latitude superimposed on the surfaces of reconfigured maps.

I'd also like to mention the utopian nature of maps and its relation to Jun's work. Maps reveal that which we seek as much as that which we possess. Strangely enough, the word utopia was first used only a short time after the voyages of Columbus and Magellan with the publication of Thomas Moore's *Utopia* in 1516. In the truest sense of the word utopia means a *non-place*. It is in these imaginary non-places that the explorations of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba occur: from reconstructed underwater battles to minefields of plastic bottles. It is a "why not?" logic that suggests burrowing through the center of the earth to come out the other side. The territory is the mind.

MAPS TO GLOBES

Embedded in the *Globe Project: Garden of Globes* is a reference to recent Vietnamese history. That reference is to the Cu Chi tunnel networks developed by the North Vietnamese during the Vietnamese-American war, only now extended to an alternative physical reality, like a wormhole, collapsing time and space into a direct stream of information. Here the world, or rather worlds, are inverted with the surface of the earth folding back upon itself revealing its mineral core as a stainless steel shell. Imagined inhabitants of these globes gaze upon one another through the transparent open expanse of the interior of the globe. We might imagine reaching out across the sky to touch another. Jun returns to the utopian in the respect that every person is able to observe another in all points along the interior space, unencumbered by state control, intervention or mass.

Yet if the interior sphere is utopian, the exterior is anything but. The polished metal globes reflect and distort the image of the viewer and environment. The spheres appear immovable and heavy, fixed to bases unable to orbit. They might be seen as a formation of George Lucas' Death Stars. The reason why the polished surfaces of the globes are so effectively disturbing is precisely that they do not give you bearings. The only orientation given is the north and south poles where the globes are fixed to a sickle attached to the base. This disorientation where nothing is transparent and everything is reflected might go to comment on the social, political and economic transitions occurring in all migrations following rapid change. The installation may further point to a Vietnamese reflected reality that is still firmly attached to the sickle (referring to communism) yet increasingly mirroring more global communications and practices. But if reflections are merely surface illusions, as an image floating on water, one can only penetrate the image plane to see what lies beneath.

In the Lewis Carroll story, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, "Alice ponders what the world is like on the other side of a mirror, and to her surprise, is able to pass through to experience the alternate world. She discovers a book with looking-glass poetry... which she can read only by holding it up to a mirror." (Wikipedia)

The viewer here is restricted to tunnel vision. The construction of the globes is such that by peering into the globe through an eyehole there is the illusion of a direct line of sight to its opposite location on the other side of the globe. From Vietnam one is able to see Peru. Our location can only be determined through the difference of the other.

The Globe Project, might be seen as the successor to the *Atlas Project* (2004) commissioned by Art.Es Magazine. In the *Atlas Project* Jun reconsiders how our notion of the world is restricted by national borders. Jun meticulously removes everything from the map but the text and the latitudinal and longitudinal lines including land and sea. All that remains is text and grids. If this work has any relation to the graphic arts it is an experiment in information design. One is left to determine meaning through the varying typefaces and point sizes. In these series of erasures, we notice alternations between vast expanses of nothingness and great densities corresponding to the same patterns of the universe.

In the *Atlas Project* we find another important concern of Jun in his preference towards striated spaces and order. Jun has chosen not to remove the Cartesian grid from the image. The grid and its ordered arrangement of space are evident in Jun's work, most recently in the *Waterfield Project*.

FORMATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

As with a game of chess, the terrain of the installation is striated. Each partition and character is confined by a set of rules or actions. There is a private interior space where the performers enact a series of actions and a public exterior space where visitors are able to peer, as do guards prisoners, into the interior space from above. There is a definite border separating the two spaces. Arranged on the floor of the space are filled plastic water bottles that can alternately be read as the topography of the land and as ordinance, together as a mine field. Or as Jun has pointed out, a rice field of carefully aligned seedlings.

The male performers, over a period of weeks, consume bottles of the Coca Cola and Pepsi branded water and later refill the depleted bottles with their urine. At the fulcrum of this performance are two main issues: the tendency for capitalist ambition to turn everything into a commodity and a competition and the act of human transformation and purification.

CORPUS

It is strange irony that corporations often have an unfortunate history of dehumanizing practices from slavery and child labor and yet also contains the latin root, *corpus*, meaning body. Indeed, under limited liability laws corporations are afforded the same rights as humans and yet are not subject to the same punishments for transgressions. It is a body unlike all others, a body immune to suffering. Furthermore as corporations rush to claim intellectual property rights to the human genome, humans are increasingly beholden to the Frankenstein of their own making. Coca Cola and Pepsi, two of America's most recognizable corporations battle for the hearts and minds of consumers in the *Waterfield Project*. With every successful campaign for consumer loyalty a second tier business emerges: the fake. The fake is a scavenger. It lets the predator kill first and takes advantage whatever remaining consumer desire is left. An example of this is Meike, a Chinese sneaker manufacturer whose mode of operation is to sell footwear to Laotians who either mistake them for Nike or simply can't afford Nike. In the early nineties in a unrelated case in Vietnam, Nike became notorious for the uncovering of a much publicized substandard labor practices. The corporation is one of many issues addressed in *The Ground, the Root, and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree*, a special project in *The Quiet in the Land* arts initiative, an ongoing production in Luang Prabang, Laos.

We can also see the critique of the corporation in the *Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either nor Neither – A Love Story* (2002-2004). The corporation in this scenario is Chisso Corporation, who for decades dumped mercury into the water supply. Minamata Disease, which includes among its symptoms birth defects, paralysis, and insanity, was first discovered in Minamata in 1956. As a testament to its relationship with corporate negligence, the disease is also referred to as the Chisso-Minamata disease. As with many cases involving alleged corporate liability, there were years of corporate denial of responsibility even as factual evidence and victim counts increased. The same predictable pattern replays today in the US courts in a contest between Vietnamese victims of dioxin (agent orange) poisoning and the chemical manufactures of the toxin.

In each of the films that comprise expanding corpus of the Memorial Projects, we find a conflict of Man against Man, and a resolution of Man with Man. We can observe through the works of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba a genuine concern for humanity that often shares little regard for itself. Allegorical and hopeful, Jun challenges the accepted, whether it be official histories or marketing campaigns. It is with this sense of departure and exploration, and the starting point of the next voyage of the *Breathe Project 12,756.3*, that I wish to leave you with a quote that I find quite fitting for Jun.

"Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation." - Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

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April 2007

NOTE: Depending on the format of the texts, if a few short sentences are allowed for the authors, it should read:

R. Streitmatter-Tran is an artist living and working in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. His work, solo and collective, has been shared in venues worldwide including the 52nd Venice Biennale and the Singapore Biennale 2006 (as a member of Mogas Station), and the Gwangju Biennale 2004. He is also an occasional contributor to Contemporary Magazine. He maintains a blog at: www.diacritic.org

