

Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists - Organizers in Hồ Chí Minh City

By: Việt Lê

MAP QUEST

Born in Đà Nẵng, Tiffany Chung received her MFA at the University of California, Santa Barbara.⁷⁰ An artist who has lived in Sài Gòn for the past decade, Chung identifies as local. She utilizes a pop sensibility to capture the essence of the vibrant city life of an increasingly urban—and urbane—Việt Nam. The artist's pastiche installations often combine photography, sculpture, and video. Her photographs often employ the same visual vocabulary and materials found in her installations: polystyrene, polyethylene foam, MDF (medium density fiberboard). Exuberant fashion-like images feature wondrous poses of subjects with coordinating backgrounds and outfits in shallow space riding bikes, wrestling with oversized objects, going on a mysterious journey. Highly stylized sculptural objects reference street vendor carts, gas stations, and so on. Her work offers a new vision of space and place—a candy-colored utopic and hyperreal fantasy that displaces the historical, documentary images of a traumatized topography. Chung foregrounds excess, consumer culture, and surface, and questions the distinctions between public and private space, between cultural adaptation and economic aspiration, and

⁷⁰ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 17–19.

⁷¹ Tiffany Chung received her BFA at California State University, Long Beach.

between performativity and pleasure. Perhaps because of her palatable pop aesthetic, Chung has exhibited widely, within and without Asia.⁷²

In Chung's recent series of works on paper, entitled *maps*, the artist uses urban-planning, city, and subway maps as starting points to create abstract, intricately detailed large-scale renderings. The images are made up of colorful dots and lines that form patterns, shapes. The forms almost morph before one's eyes, turning and turning. Mapping is a form of knowledge, a way to exert control over the known universe, a way to chart development. Cultural theorist Graham Huggan notes, "maps are neither copies or semblances of reality but modes of discourse which reflect the ideologies of their makers."⁷³ The cartographic gaze extends the limits of human vision, makes the unknown known. Yet things fall apart. The artist notes that the project aims ...

... to examine the cultural and spatial transformations linked to economic development that are taking place in the outer areas of Sài Gòn where rural and urban intersect. I'm interested in observing the urbanization process that is going on here while relating it to some new cities developed in the past twenty years in other Asian countries.⁷⁴

Indeed, Việt Nam is in the midst of historic, breakneck development. The country is transitioning from a largely rural economy to an urban one, and also shifting from a state-run economy to a market economy. Following the pattern of China's urbanization, Việt Nam's infrastructure is becoming increasingly decentralized.⁷⁵ Urban sociologists such as J. John Palen have noted that center-periphery models of settlement and development do not account for the organic, multi-centric growth and decline of contemporary urban, suburban, and rural zones (financial districts, residential areas, commercial centers, and so on).⁷⁶ Sài Gòn is currently planning its decentralization, charting new financial, residential, and educational zones. How does one make sense of Việt Nam's tremendous changes? How are they implemented, and how can they be charted? Chung's "maps" resemble organic growths, perhaps mold or microorganisms growing in a Petri dish. For the artist, Việt Nam's rapid economic development is both bounty and blight. What happens when utopic visions fail and become dystopic? Chung presents a candy-colored utopic universe as a veneer for dystopic realities. The artist occasionally culls images from Ebenezer Howard's book *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Howard is the founder of the English garden-city movement, which has sought to incorporate expanses of green within urban networks.⁷⁷ This movement had a long-

⁷² Chung's solo exhibitions include "Momentum," Mai's Gallery, Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam; "Wonderland," Galerie Quynh, Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam; "Fifteen Seconds of Fame at the Sugarless Factory," Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan; and "Beyond Soft Air and Cotton Candy," LMan Gallery, Los Angeles, California.

⁷³ Graham Huggan, *Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 11.

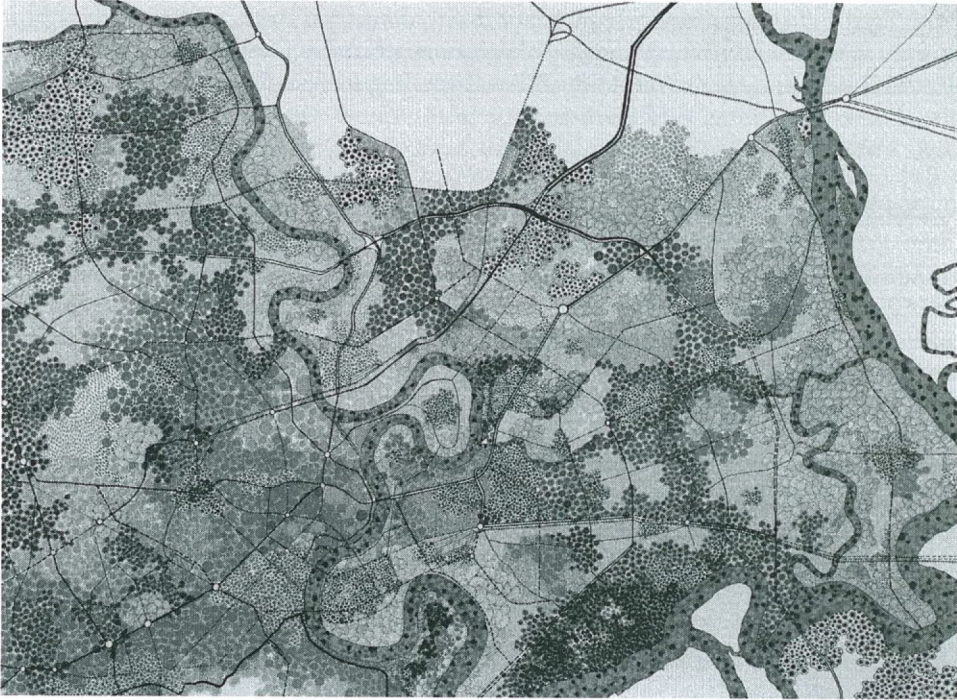
⁷⁴ Tiffany Chung, unpublished artist statement, August 2007.

⁷⁵ Klaus Rohland and Christine Delvoie, "Vietnam Infrastructure Strategy," World Bank, June 2006, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEAPINFRASTRUCT/Resources/CrossSectoralIssues.pdf>

⁷⁶ J. John Palen, *The Urban World* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1992).

⁷⁷ Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Eastbourne, East Sussex: Attic Books, 1985).

lasting impact upon urban planning throughout the world. Chung's organic maps wryly comment on these utopic garden cities. The actual garden cities are exemplars of controlled growth, however, in Chung's vision, this organic growth is overripe, perhaps decaying or festering. Her maps also look fungal. Fungi are parasitic plants lacking true root and stem structures; they reproduce by spores. Chung claims this rapid urban development is parasitic—it lacks depth, roots, sustainability, structure. Whether it is parasitic or paradise, the urban center cannot hold.



Tiffany Chung, *10.75°N 106.6667°E*, 2007, oil on paper, 79 X 109 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Quynh

Representations of diasporic communities often use seed/spore analogies and imagery. Upon closer inspection, Chung's maps consist almost entirely of circles, dots. These dots can be viewed as spores, diasporic seeds scattered. Diasporic communities were conceptualized along home/exile or center/periphery axes, patterns that show communities moving from a "homeland" to settle to other territories. Shifting away from this home/displacement binary, recent discussions account for multiple diasporic identities. Multiple movements and affiliations form one's being.⁷⁸ Chung's own identity as a "diasporic" artist is questioned: yes, she emigrated from Việt Nam and settled in the United States to live and study, but she has since lived in Japan, among other locales, and now currently calls Việt Nam home. Beyond simple conceptions of home/abroad, older models of diaspora fail to "map" her movements and identifications. The overlapping dots in Chung's maps

⁷⁸ Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa, editors, *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

speak of these ongoing movement and patterns of settlement, metaphorically and literally represented by the overlapping patterns.

THE EMPIRE'S NEW CLOTHES

The system of economic exchange and development that fuels contemporary economic growth is fungus-like—opportunistic, parasitic. But it is not fungible—goods and services are not equally exchanged. Việt Nam has recently joined the World Trade Organization, which ensures the country future trade expansion and economic growth. I'm compelled by discourses on modernity and development in East and Southeast Asian countries. While traveling in Asia, I would hear comments from others comparing Việt Nam to “more” or “less” developed countries such as Japan, Korea, Laos, or Cambodia. I heard many times from locals and expats that South Korea looked like Việt Nam twenty years ago, or that parts of Cambodia look like Việt Nam fifteen years ago, and so on. I found these comparisons troubling—it assumed a teleological narrative of development and progress. Modernity is not confined by a singular linear narrative, nor does it entail a single universal vision. Cultural anthropologist Lisa Rofel has argued for a framework of “discrepant modernities” that challenges universal/local dichotomies found in rhetoric used to analyze modernity, subject formation/identification, and consumption. Staying attuned to the fact that modernity is not a singular, uniform destination point can provide one with a richer conception of the uneven and parallel patterns of socioeconomic development that nation-states have followed across the globe. For instance, third worlds exist in first worlds, and vice versa. Rofel questions discourses pertaining to modernity and its Eurocentric, homogenous, and teleological assumptions. She advocates a conception that does not reify binaries between universalism and cultural pluralism. Instead of viewing modernity as “a singular certainty” or separate cultural space, Rofel acknowledges “discrepant modernities,” as noted above—localized psychic and real spaces in which relationships to modernity are articulated and contested.⁷⁹ Chung's work also comments on the rhetoric of modernity and its elisions. Urban planning, various maps, and utopic visions of development (including garden cities) all advocate particular visions of controlled progress and order.

Chung's large drawing entitled *10.75°N 106.6667°E 1867/2007* (oil & alcohol-based markers on paper, 2007, 135 x 90cm) acknowledges these discrepant modernities. This image layers a 2007 Seoul subway city map, Tokyo Metro map, and an urban-planning map for Sài Gòn, drawn in 1867, when Sài Gòn became part of the French colonial empire. Stripped of signifiers, the maps of Seoul, Tokyo, and Sài Gòn are indistinguishable. The layered maps form an abstract field of tinted lines and grids. It is an ordered cacophony of colored dashes, curves, corners, and shapes. The past, present, and future merge. Chung connects imperial violence and contemporary globalization. Postcolonial critic Gerry Turcotte writes,

Mapping and imperialism are linked. One is a signpost of the other's presence, a signal of ownership as resolute as a planted flag ... The cartographer's gaze is a totalizing one, naming and organizing a “blank”

⁷⁹ Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

space into knowable spheres ... The cartographer's eye/I is invisible, concealed, transparent, just as the language of imperialism is presented as natural and universal ... Maps are re/presentations, palimpsests, forgeries.⁸⁰

Is globalizing rhetoric regarding development another echo of imperialist discourse? Is this the empire's new clothes? Việt Nam's infrastructural development is funded, in part, by First World economies such as Japan, Korea, and the United States, as well as multinational corporate investments. Việt Nam's growth echoes past patterns of displacement, racialized hierarchies, and socioeconomic disparity.

Other works in Chung's series also merge different maps from different eras. The palimpsest layers reveal the underlying assumptions of urban progress. The piled maps and diagrams form a disorienting topography. The layering challenges the "singular certainty" of the original maps. Colonial ideology is overlaid with visions of modernity. There is no single, coherent vision, just cryptic terrain. The work's intricate details, sprawled seemingly endlessly, render this composite geography simultaneously tender and terrifying—a brave new world.

SUPER MARKETS

Within the Vietnamese art world, female artists have had to take a back seat to their male peers for a variety of reasons. To be a Vietnamese woman artist is to be in a "triple bind," according to postcolonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha.⁸¹ Vietnamese are already marginalized within international art circuits; a female artist's subject position further isolates her in Việt Nam and abroad. It is difficult to negotiate a hierarchal global art scene if one is thrice alienated as a woman, an artist, and Vietnamese, or any combination of the three: artist of color, woman of color, woman artist. These artists also operate within Vietnamese patriarchal society, where masculine conceptions of success and art dominate.

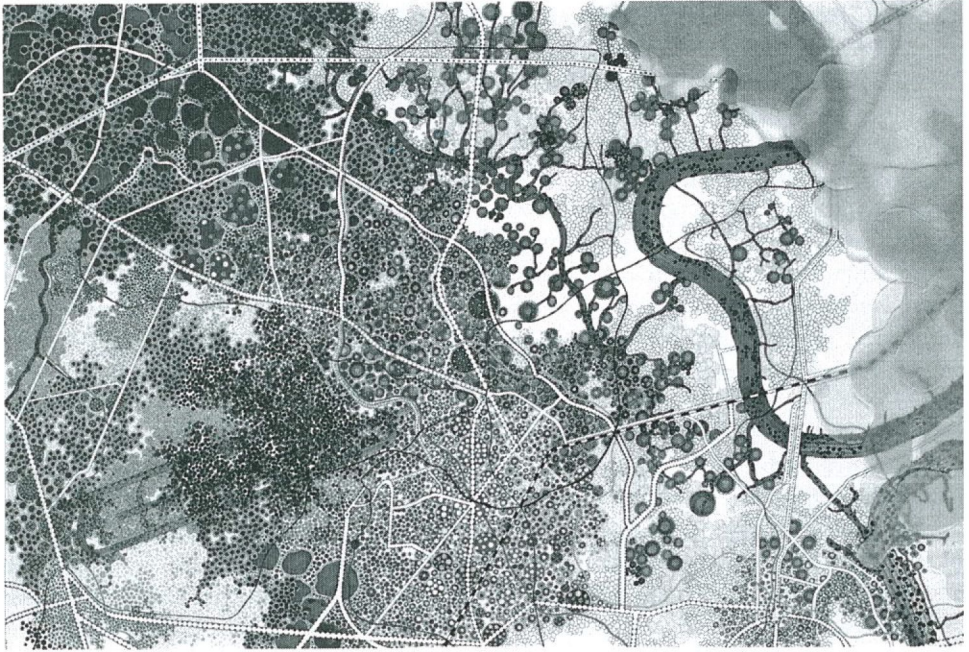
What about Vietnamese female diasporic artists residing in Việt Nam, such as Sandrine Llouquet and Tiffany Chung? While they may still be encumbered by a "triple bind," I argue that their positions as *Việt Kiều* grant them greater flexibility to navigate gendered hierarchies, and, by extension, greater visibility within and without Việt Nam. Llouquet and Chung also belong in a higher socioeconomic stratum than many of their female and male peers. This fact grants them greater freedom to produce and exhibit work.

This segment reconsiders the art market(s) in which Tiffany Chung's—and, by extension, Vietnamese local and diasporic artists'—work circulates. In 2009, Chung had her first solo show in New York City at a Chelsea-area gallery, in a highly competitive art market. Home to over fifty high-end galleries, the Chelsea district in Manhattan is known as the center of the New York gallery scene. And since the center of the Western avant-garde art movement moved from Paris to New York City after World War II, Chelsea is now arguably the "center" of the dominant art

⁸⁰ Gerry Turcotte, "Prologomena to Uncovering Alter/Native Scripts," *A Talent(ed) Digger: Creations, Cameos, and Essays in Honour of Anna Rutherford*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Gordon Collier, Geoffrey V. Davis (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi), pp. 145–46.

⁸¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1969).

world.⁸² Cultural centers necessarily form peripheries, regions with marginalized status. Postcolonial critics such as George Yúdice argue that the idea of a single center is outdated.⁸³ Now there are multiple commercial and cultural centers, with attendant peripheries. The United States' post-WWII status as the financial and artistic leader of the modern world is now questioned. The United States is now a faltering empire, and new economic giants have emerged from its long shadow.



Tiffany Chung, *Go Vap*, 2008, oil and alcohol-based markers on paper, 91 X 136 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Quynh

Art and economics are linked. The World Bank predicts that India and China will become the top two economic superpowers within the next few decades. China is currently the second largest global economy.⁸⁴ The power of art markets and art stars in both countries reflects this economic growth. The art world is shifting again. New York, Paris, and London are no longer the exclusive purveyors of what is considered "hot." These cultural centers no longer dictate what works are worth. Hong Kong and Dubai have also become major players and purchasing sites, with auction houses holding regular shows in these locales. Journalist Matt Miller notes, "The art market has gone global ... Russian oligarchs, Chinese property developers, and Indian industrialists are becoming as critical to the upper reaches of the

⁸² The historic shift of the avant-garde from Paris to New York was due partly to diasporic movement driven by World War II, when top European modernists sought refuge in America. The cultural landscape was rezoned to its current coordinates by the confluence of European émigrés seeking survival and artistic freedom and by America's postwar economic might and its rash of collectors, critics, and institutions responsive to innovative practices.

⁸³ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁸⁴ World Bank, "World Development Indicators, 2008" (Washington DC: World Bank, 2008).

international art scene as American hedge fund heads."⁸⁵ These ascendant economic powerhouses have fueled the development of cutting-edge art scenes and profitable art markets. Art markets follow bull markets. The art world is similar to any other marketplace.

Competition drives market economies and art markets. Pierre Bourdieu links economic and cultural development: the capitalist desire for ever new commodities and consumers parallels the art world's desires for ever new cultural commodities and collectors.⁸⁶ Other New York gallerists, such as Ethan Cohen of Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, have cornered the market for "niches," such as contemporary avant-garde Chinese art.⁸⁷ High-profile, living Chinese contemporary artists have fetched millions of dollars for a single work of art. Case in point: Beijing-based "Cynical Realist" Yue Minjun's self-portrait sold for US\$ 7 million at Christie's first Hong Kong auction in May 2008.⁸⁸ In these cartoon-like paintings, the artist is cloned endlessly in a single image. The bubble-gum pink clones all wear the same ironic grin, which can be read as a mocking response to China's abuses and rapid development.⁸⁹ Minjun's work is popular among foreigners looking for "political" art that promises to yield a return on their investments. Since 2000, prices for contemporary Chinese art have skyrocketed. As a result, collectors' interest seems to have reached a plateau. This once emerging market has reached its saturation point. Significantly cheaper, Southeast Asian art is now hyped as the next "hot thing." Southeast Asian trade goods lay the foundation for Southeast Asian high art.

Over the past decade, articles in newspapers ranging from the *International Herald Tribune* to the *New York Times* have trumpeted the rise—and rising prices—of Vietnamese contemporary art.⁹⁰ Anticipating the surge in interest for Southeast Asian art, gallerists such as New York-based Tyler Rollins and Willie Valentine—Valentine owns a virtual empire of galleries in Singapore, Yogyakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila—have chosen to specialize in Southeast Asian artists. Rollins's description of his gallery states, "After many years of travel in the region, we have identified an

⁸⁵ Matt Miller writes, "Collectors' appetites for Chinese contemporary art has abated slightly in recent auctions, while prices for Indonesian artists have jumped in the past year. That suggests rising young Vietnamese artists may soon come into their own as the auction houses and collectors keep trying to chase the next 'big thing.'" See Matt Miller, "The Vogue for Vietnam," *The Deal Newsweek*, September 26, 2008.

⁸⁶ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 233. He writes, "The endless changes in fashion result from the objective orchestration between, on the one hand, the logic of the struggles internal to the field of production, which are organized in terms of the opposition old/new ... and, on the other hand, the logic of struggles internal to the field of the dominant class, which, as we have seen, oppose the dominant and the dominated fractions, or, more precisely, the established and the challengers ..." Refer also to Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 29–73.

⁸⁷ Ethan Cohen Fine Arts: www.ecfa.com

⁸⁸ Miller, "The Vogue for Vietnam."

⁸⁹ Yue Minjun's website: <http://www.yueminjun.com>

⁹⁰ Recent articles on Vietnamese art include Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, "Vietnam's Rising Generation Awaits Recognition in the Sale Room," *International Herald Tribune*, March 26, 2008; and Jennifer Conlin, "The Awakening of Hanoi," *The New York Times*, Travel Section, February 18, 2007, among others. Vietnamese art has been proclaimed to be "in vogue" for more than a decade. See Philip Shenon, "Success Overnight, in a Sense: Vietnam's Artists Are in Vogue," *The New York Times*, November 29, 1994.

impressive group of emerging and mid-career artists whose work we feel privileged to present to New York audiences, in many cases for the first time."⁹¹ Bourdieu notes that a work of art is created "twice over," first by the artist and then by the spectator (gallerist, critic, collector, museum-goer, and so forth) and his or her society.⁹² The value of an artist and her or his artworks is conferred by a given art world, which reflects that fickle audience's aesthetic, cultural, and class interests.⁹³ Rollins and company—myself included—*evaluate* and translate artists and artwork the (third- or second-) world over for an international art audience. The question is not one of discovering a "great" artist, but of acknowledging the cultural assumptions defining what constitutes greatness and the systems that occlude certain gendered, raced perspectives.

Because artwork from Southeast Asia is still relatively cheap to produce and purchase, identifying and investing in "hot" talent from the region now will garner greater profits for both the collector and gallerist. Low overhead equals higher yields. The artist living and producing in the margins of the art world is still beholden to—and must make work to please—its center. This is not to insinuate a vampiric relationship between gallerists and their artists.

Many diasporic artists, including those residing in Việt Nam, take advantage of the opportunity to get more bang for their buck. To produce artwork in a developing country costs a fraction of what it would take in First World countries. Other local and expatriate artists also take advantage of the cheap, highly skilled available labor in Southeast Asia. In order to utilize these services, the artist becomes a middleman of sorts. The artist must know the local language and customs, or have a translator, in order to manage an ambitious art project. For some, these efforts are all part of a strategy that enables one to live and create work as a full-time artist, a way of life that would not be possible in other geographic locales. The combination of relatively low production costs, high standard of living, and an intimate yet vibrant art scene is an alluring mix for many artists who return to Việt Nam.