

Parallel Public Space

The first and only time I was in Hà Nội, it felt like nothing so much as a space-time journey. It was like revisiting my childhood in the late 1980s in a city far west in China. Everything was happening outdoors: barbers shaving their clients' beards under huge roadside trees, grandmas making rice rolls in red buckets and serving simple drinks on the corner of a busy block, middle aged men and women playing badminton in large empty parks, and local musicians playing funeral melodies outside an Internet café. All this in addition to dozens of vendors selling vegetables and fruit amidst the constant humming of thousands of motorcycles coming from everywhere (and nowhere). If you imagine a similar city, and simply replace the motorcycles with bicycles and the Internet cafés with slaughterhouses, Hà Nội could easily pass for my home city 20 years ago.

I remember a lot of things being "public" at that time and usually open space: zoos, parks, transportation, and the cultural palace. There were many "private" things too; small, almost invisible vendors of every kind - individually they occupied less than one square metre; together they made up the ever-changing city scenery. Over the last 30 years, the definitions of "public" and "private" have transformed time and again. Sometimes they mimic each other. Sometimes they even switch places for a while before going back to where they were. But for the average city commuter, the distinction of public and private doesn't matter that much, as long as you have enough money: you either own it or pay for it. Everything belongs to someone else if not you.

It is, admittedly, very simplistic to compare or reduce Hà Nội to a Chinese city of two decades ago. The capital city of Việt Nam also stretches to the other end of the time spectrum, the modern, and sometimes the postmodern. When I tried to make my way to Nhà Sàn Collective's art space, the traffic was constantly interrupted by on-going construction, and wooden surveying stakes encircled plot after plot of land as if to separate the future from the present. At Nhà Sàn Collective's space, Nguyễn Quốc Thành had taped his photographic artwork on the window facing a bustling intersection. Behind his transparent human figures, the night lit up and fancy apartments with red rooftops represented, maybe, another way of life. I was very honoured to be there on that night to present my take on a "public" spectacle that happened eighteen months prior in a city only three flight hours away.

I assume you may have seen that time in that city, Hong Kong, on television: protesting students holding umbrellas, facing police armed with pepper spray and batons. You may have seen a drone-eye view of the occupied space in Central, Hong Kong's financial district. During the 79 days of the movement, the streets in the protest zone were transformed from a public (interest-generating) space to a public (free) zone, with people who came and left and people who stayed day and night. Anybody could enter there, and make a speech, or simply write their speeches on their tents. It was everything that contradicts the common logic of that city; nothing could be commercialised there, and the time you spent there was not productive, at least in the sense that you didn't get paid and you didn't contribute to the city's GDP. In other words, it was illegitimate space and time.

While wandering around these sites, I often couldn't help but wonder: was it real, all these peacefully angry people, all the doodles and graffiti, the singing and performances? How could they exist, and continue to exist? It was a crystallised moment of utopia that was prolonged to a day, a week, a month, and more, in which we the participants finally found a

possibility to review the city critically and ponder the alternatives - however impossible these alternatives seemed. Unsurprisingly, critical thinking touched on the public dimension, or rather the lack of public dimension in this international financial hub that constantly trumpets itself as "Asia's World City." Artists moved their artworks to the site. Some started to create new ones next to their tent.

The content of the works varied, but many attempted to pose the question: this is a city for whom? One of the installations was a very simple bunk bed. People and artists posted all kinds of pictures to the surface. Some of the pictures were of a documentary nature, showing the extreme living condition of Hong Kong's poor. Some were parodies of real estate advertisements where a "majestic house" could be just 350 square feet in size but HK\$3,500,000 in price. Better yet, the setting of this artwork, Admiralty, is one of the most expensive areas in Hong Kong, where a bunk bed would never appear, let alone in the middle of the street. Accommodation, taxation, education, employment, pollution, minority rights, freedom of speech... slogan after slogan, artwork after artwork, the occupied zone became a showcase of the other side of a city "where East meets West". It was a grand mockery.

Just when we were able to convince ourselves that this mockery could go on, it was abruptly ended overnight. On the 80th day, the streets were once again 'productive' and 'functional'; roadblocks and tents were gone, cars and commuters (and air pollution) were back, now with a police presence. No universal suffrage, no ending of real estate hegemony, nothing. The political condition slid down even lower, even though we thought we had already hit bottom. It felt like a dream, and waking up was tangibly painful. All the joy and release we had gotten from expressive words and images and performances also went away. Some of the artworks were destroyed, some are now stored in an archive. None of them changed anything. Now they may simply be romantic ornaments of nostalgia. And then we asked, what was the use of all this so-called art?

I raised the same question at Nhà Sàn Collective. To my surprise, many people engaged in a long discussion. Being in a communist country naturally makes you alert to the political functionality of art, so some argued that aesthetics could and should transcend the political, "poetic over politic" as they put it. Others argued for the emancipatory and emotional value of individual participation, the bonding among people towards a similar pursuit - be it political or aesthetic. My co-presenter Tuấn Mami presented preliminary research and the proposal for his next project *In a Human Breath - Nothing Stands Still*. Using old photos and Google maps, he documents the drastic change taking place in his mother's hometown, where mining is altering the lives of local people. Mining is said to be a powerful economic boom for the local society, but it turns out to be a powerful destroyer of the environment. Tuấn plans to covertly blend into the population, to investigate the on-going struggle of the locals and the dramatic metamorphosis of rural into industrial. He wants to build a utopia with materials collected from the site, and populate it with people invited from there, as both participants and audience.

Can his work change the overwhelming force of capital; especially capital that is endorsed and strengthened by state power? Probably not. Nevertheless, from his research and creation, a layer of the present is recorded in the midst of, and perhaps in spite of, fast-paced contemporary history making. His work will become one marker on the trail someone might someday want to trace back. In participating in a project like this, someone could have a say in his or her own version of modernisation in Việt Nam, and project his or her alternative of a different Việt Nam, however impossible that alternative is.

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Can art be useful? Maybe, but the question of how a specific work of art is to be used, opens up infinite and perhaps timeless possibilities. I am glad that I had the opportunity to visit Hà Nội and to juxtapose my project with Tuấn Mami's at Nhà Sàn Collective. I hadn't expected that in a parallel world, my question would be answered.

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