

Landscapes*

**An epistolary exchange between Trương Quế Chi and Lee Weng-Choy about Skylines with Flying People 3 February 2018*

Dear Weng-Choy,

Hope you are well.

As a way of telling you about the *Skylines with Flying People 3* project, I would like to show you two images. In this first letter, let me talk about the first one.

This design forms the project's visual identity. A kind of map with dotted zones of various levels of density, superimposed. There are squares of colours, scattered, cluttered. Borderless regions, interwoven, by no means clearly isolated. They are distributed on a white surface, appearing not unlike organic forms.

In fact, these shapes have been developed from the Vietnamese geographical map. The squares are arrival-departure locations that track the journeys of the project's participants: artists, curators, scholars — from Hồ Chí Minh City to Gia Lai, from Berlin, Hawaii to Hà Nội. That was how all the squares were positioned. And from that too, the dotted zones were shaped.

This visual expresses the curatorial proposal of *Skylines 3*. An approximation of Việt Nam, from the physical body to a conceptual one. A pathway, starting in fiction and artistic sensibility, but also in scientific research. Imagined territories interrogating juridical territories.

During our preliminary conversations, it was the very impulse of the artists with regard to journeying that helped build the project. Field-trips were carried out as the main vehicle; geographical areas became research interests subject to experimentation. And through their personal artistic language, the artists translated and expanded the ideas of “voyaging” and “limits”.

Connections were made by the curatorial team to *Skylines 2*, which happened in 2012 and was curated by artist Phương Linh. At that time, it had been two years since Nhà Sàn Studio had been closed. This motivated Nhà Sàn's young generation of artists to find a mode of operation, a physical space conducive to surviving and working. *Skylines 2* saw artists and architects transforming the Japan Foundation complex in Hanoi into a temporary art factory of many studios, open to the public over the course of one month. Existing in parallel with the space of a foreign cultural institution, the artists created a transitory art space — one that belonged neither to the official system nor the commercial sector.

One could think of *Skylines 2* as a response to the context of those particular times, although the reflections and questions it brought up remain relevant to the city to this day. Skyscrapers and buildings emerge, horizontally and vertically, at an unbelievable rate, while one by one independent art spaces disappear. *Skylines 2* constituted a proposal for the examination — through the eyes of the art-practitioner — of a certain urban landscape.

It was also in the second *Skylines* that the “flying people” concept emerged. At the time, it referred to the creative freedom that went beyond the limits of censorship and one’s personal creative capabilities. As for *Skylines 3*, the flight path of the artist had more of a spatial dimension. Drawing up travels from familiar environments and places, to areas hitherto not known, that flight path opened up the possibility of other geographical narratives and writings, intertwined with those of the mainstream.

In my next letter, I will share more thoughts — as I reflect back upon all of this — for instance, the question of working on a new map while deconstructing an existing one.

Personally, I have thought about flying, about the state of the body in mid-air. Is it not the case with a “flying person” that when one looks down, the first thing one sees is a landscape? An entirety captured from an altitude. Something very close to the act of mapping. A contribution to the representation of the world we currently live in.

Yours,
Qué Chi

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Dear Que Chi,

Thank you very much for your letter. And I hope you are well too.

Your letter got me thinking of an essay I wrote twenty years ago. It’s uncanny that what I said then still applies today, perhaps even more so. I hope you don’t mind me sharing portions of it. Lucas Jodogne, a Belgian artist who had been living in Singapore for quite some time, asked me to contribute to his book of photos of the urban landscape of the island city-state. I titled my text, “Time, Landscape and Desire in Singapore”, and opened with a nostalgic reminiscence of when I used to live in the San Francisco Bay Area, opening with an image of me daydreaming that I was flying across the landscape.

Shifting back to Singapore, I noted that I had stopped thinking about flying over the city. My old hometown in California is characterised by wonderful views; Singapore, not so much — not for me, at any rate. Nevertheless, I

wrote: Singapore is perhaps the greenest of the capital cities in Southeast Asia. The tree-lined drive from the airport into town certainly gives a good and strong impression to the newly arrived. But somehow, I want more; this is the tropics. One of my fantasies is for the length of Orchard Road — the main shopping boulevard — to be covered by a canopy of tropical forest, with the buildings punching through. Nature is certainly everywhere here, but the enduring impression I have of this city is of the single-minded desire for mastery over it. Since independence, hills have been flattened and land has been ‘reclaimed’ to expand the country’s surface area. One imagines that the whole terrain of the island can be transformed by instrumental reason if so desired. This desire for mastery is of course what has been traditionally defined as the essence of urbanisation. Singapore is just a particularly successful example. If the island could be covered with a dome and entirely air-conditioned, it probably would.”

I continued, explaining that my own experience of Singapore as a place has little to do with landscapes, but with *time*. When I travel to other cities, especially to places that I know, I experience multiple times; I experience decades. I visit old neighbourhoods that seem largely unchanged since I first saw them, or will discover places which look like they that haven’t changed since the ‘80s or ‘70s or ‘60s. But in Singapore, there seems to be only one time: the present, a hurried present. Every old building seems to wear a worrisome face — of being under siege, of waiting to be knocked down or perhaps worse, renovated. Life may be more hectic in Tokyo, or New York, but I don’t know of any place else where it feels that everyone marches in the same step. The pace, although it might not be the fastest on the planet, is perhaps the most persistent.

Am looking forward to the next image, and hearing more about *Skylines 3*. And please tell me more about the research process that the artists undertook.

Yours,
Weng-Choy

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Dear Weng-Choy,

Thanks for your letter.

Most of the projects were conceived, developed and carried out over the three years of *Skylines 3*. From large cities, the artists journeyed to the peripheries. Working with and representing communities is not easy. In the awareness of a community outsider’s position, landscapes became materials and main characters in the works.

Now, when thinking about the Việt Nam sighted here and there throughout *Skylines 3* — featuring artists growing up post-Đổi Mới — I clearly sense a contemporary outlook, in relation to existing narratives. Shadows of colonisation and war loom still. But above all are stories of the present, hinting at a worrisome future. The territorial geography of *Skylines 3* exists in a contradictory ambiguity together with the Vietnamese geography-of-spectacle.

I imagine viewers to be voyagers themselves. Voyaging through fragments of space-time in each exhibition. A kind of landscape memory of the age, of exploited nature, of damaging transformations, of dissolving social formations. There might or might not be a sense of nostalgia for things that have been lost. Human presence on this landscape is neither continuous or consistent, often invisible, not stable, appearing humble and fragile.

When these factors — landscape (with regard to land and territories) as well as human — are placed alongside in the works, I wonder which particular landscape will be chosen. What would it take to be qualified as an artistic image? What of the human — what is their relationship with the landscape they are put in? For me, an inevitable connection joining these two factors, is the notion of Nation. Land - People - Nation. There is something else: Desire. A revealed reality always references thoughts of the desired, of the things we want to change, and the things we want in their stead, no matter how ambiguous. This is also art's means of commitment to reality.

And in curating *Skylines 3*, we thought of the possibilities born out of the contact made when the artists met, exchanged with, or entered various communities — not just communities in the researched localities, but also those in the fields of social sciences. Because of this, it was important for the *Skylines 3* curatorial team to organise the *Knowledge Exchange* series of seminars alongside the series of exhibitions. Artists and scholars with the same geographical territories of research shared and conversed with each other. Though differing in their disciplines — of art and science — the various practices all carried out spatial analyses and reflections. Two separate techniques of knowledge-production, seen next to each other, revealed similar concerns in the face of observed realities.

This act of “placing” is akin to facing the other — the stranger. From the very first meetings the artists and the curators both shared their concerns regarding the risk of capturing and domesticating that otherness, that strangeness — and how the research and field trips could easily veer towards exoticism. How could the project's geographical investigations avoid the traps of reproducing such power structures — as has happened throughout history — and which drives today's tourism industry? What differentiates the artists of *Skylines 3* from the tourists who are praised as icons of the age of globalisation?

Yours,
Qué Chi

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Dear Que Chi,

Many thanks for your letter, but you forgot to send the second image!

I hear what you're saying about the difficulties and challenges in working with and representing communities. The danger is that we would seek to represent in an analogous way that Singapore government urban planners seeks to "present" nature in their tropical garden city — by mastering the other, the stranger. Or even by becoming an expert in it — rather than by finding terms for mutual understanding.

But artists and writers and all manner of people have often learned most by placing themselves in new, different and difficult situations. A Singaporean travels to Vietnam to learn more about Singapore, or vice versa. The topic of place, and of other places, has become especially important to me and my work as an art critic. You could say that I became an art critic because of Singapore. It's been *in* and *through* this island city-state where I have worked out many of my ideas about art and writing.

And when I think of place, I also think of scale. I think about how scale is about being in the world, about being in a place. Different places have different scales. That is one of the first things I notice when I arrive in another country or city. The scale of Singapore is so different from Kuala Lumpur, where I currently reside, or from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City.

I often ask myself, why write about art — and these days, the answer I come up with is: one of the things that the best art does rather well is remind us of profound otherness, of radically different scales of reference, and to question what we consider our own place in the world. And no matter how small, or personal, art is never just a private enterprise; at its core, it is a public commitment, constituted by individuals reaching out to *others*.

Yours,
Weng-Choy

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Dear Weng-Choy,

This letter will conclude our conversations on *Skylines 3*, for now. These conversations have been, in themselves, a form of voyaging, between

curatorial proposals and thoughts of a Vietnamese art project, and your experiences in Singapore — a dream-model of development for my country and yours, wherever that is.

You said that you often ask yourself, why write about art. One of the things I have learned through *Skylines 3*, as a curator, is that meeting and reaching out to others also helps us with recognising ourselves.

As for the second image, it was not that I forgot. There is a time for an image to appear.

What I wanted to show you is a drawing of Huy An, a member of Nhà Sàn Collective. An artist who often paints on *dó* paper, Huy An is regarded in the community as somebody with interests in traditional art-forms, connected to local ways and values. While working on the *Skylines 3* flyers, we asked him to draw what he envisioned when thinking about the project's theme. The result is the image in question.

A person burying his head in a black hole on a flat topography.

Notwithstanding his appearance, he's a flying person.

Yours,
Qué Chi