



Title

Phung-Tien Phan

Author(s)

Elaine M.L. Tam

Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/phung-tien-phan>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Elaine M.L. Tam: 'Phung-Tien Phan', *Burlington Contemporary* (26th January 2024),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/phung-tien-phan>

About the author(s)

is a curator and writer based in London. She is an editor at Fieldnotes and White Cube.

Cover image: **Fig. 10** *Nico/as*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2023. Aluminum, cable ties, cloth cord, digital print on paper, marble, paper napkins, steel wire, stone, tape, varnish and wood, 162 by 107 by 36 cm. (Photograph Philipp Hanger).

Phung-Tien Phan

by Elaine M.L. Tam • 26.01.2024

Women are home to him, she thought, big comfortable houses. And if representation has to do with re-presenting something, what is it we repeat over and over but our sense of home, which may become a very abstract thing indeed. She imagined another sign. It read: Representation – A Home Away from Home.¹

Defaulting to socially determined roles can be read as an appeal to legibility. One might choose to follow a pre-existing script in order to inhabit the world of representation, even if it means becoming approximation or fiction. In her video and sculpture works, the German-Vietnamese artist Phung-Tien Phan (b.1983) engages with ideas of performativity, the creation of selfhood and archetypes. In Phan's practice, the absurdity of how personas are composed and recomposed, ascribed and occupied, is exacerbated. A detail of *Untitled* [FIG.1](#) for example, shows quotidian cosmetic products embedded in a large piece of Styrofoam: a fossilised toolkit for contemporary life, one that is flimsy, makeshift and mass-produced.

The passing of decades haunts the idealised persona of 'the young girl' in ways that it does not any other. Indeed, the title of Phan's solo exhibition *STOP DREAMING* rings like a command from mother to daughter, teacher to daydreamer. Shown at Schiefe Zähne, Berlin (10th September–14th October 2021), the installation [FIG.2](#) comprised a series of white fabrics hung from the wall, marked with iron burns in the shape of cursive letters spelling out 'TRIPLETS' or 'LETS TRIP', and three tables bisected by circular saw blades. Here, age becomes a defining descriptor inasmuch as titles can implicate the reading of a work of art: one table assumes the flippancy of a 'twenty-something', another the confidence of one's 'mid-thirties', and the third an almost dismissive 'Ü40' ('over forty'). The choice of materials may refer to feminised labour, although this is complicated by the serrated blades protruding from the tables. The extremity of this gesture conjures up an image of outlash after prolonged repression, not unlike that of the titular character of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), whose violent climax finally disrupts the three-hour doldrum of household chores and indifferent sex work, only for her to return to sit quietly at her dining room table.

Phan's work and exhibition titles – from the insistence of *STOP*

DREAMING to the saccharine nostalgia of *girl at heart* (2020) – speak to her interest in the self-consciousness and anxiety that pervade the onset of adulthood. In her solo exhibition at Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg (1st August–4th October 2020), child’s play and pre-teen dreams collided in the works *Volkswagen (Mary-Kate)* (2020) and *Volkswagen (Ashley)* **FIG.3**, named after the Olsen twins, who were prominent young television stars in the 1990s and 2000s. Each cabinet-like work houses a doll’s apartment **FIG.4**, which evokes forgotten and familiar ambivalences. At times fastidiously tidy, at others woefully messy, these small studies rendered in plastic are an expression of a prematurely introjected adulthood. The young girl left to her own devices becomes the consumer and the consumed. As the French collective Tiquun succinctly stated in *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young Girl* (2012), ‘consumer society now seeks out its best supporters from among the marginalized elements of traditional society – women and youth first, followed by homosexuals and immigrants’.² As frivolous as these tawdry objects may appear, they allude to a specific form of loss: the usurping of selfhood by narrativised living and the imposition of coded femininities. What is the mobilisation of aspiration and its active transformation into desire if not a capitalist jackpot?

Phan’s single-channel video *Actress & Actors* **FIG.5** begins with footage of the artist’s hand, her fingers arranged to resemble a gun – a parodic first-person-shooter scene. This simple gesture recalls the lexicon of violence in image-making practices: shooting, capturing, splicing, cutting. In vignettes of prolonged boyhood, the video then trails two white men through the city and landscape as they giddily share a cigarette and blather playfully, discussing Marilyn Monroe and USM furniture. Phan, meanwhile, appears to go about her daily tasks: making a phone call while wearing a face mask, detailing the recipe for her morning coffee that lists intellectuals as ingredients (‘2 spoons of Lacan, 2 spoons of Arendt’) and arranging the set for a short interview with a couple who describe their engagement proposal. At one point, an acoustic cover of Carly Simon plays in the background, teasing ‘you’re so vain’.

Early on in her practice, Phan worked primarily with photography, before turning to video and sculpture. Her film works present the daily dramas of existence in a jostling aggregate and make for – in the loosest and least formal sense possible – a sort of artistic style, which defers to that of the amateur, do-it-yourself ‘content creator’. It is, then, no surprise that she is currently avidly watching the YouTube channels of Phillip Le, Mai Pham and Paolo from Tokyo: ‘This whole new genre of “a day in the life”, “what I eat”, “behind the scenes”. It’s so entertaining to me’.³ Phan’s artistic practice employs a vernacular that, in its own lo-fi chaos, threatens to disband, disturbing the integrity of both fine art sculpture and traditional filmic rules. As she states, the ‘mix of

underwhelming, minimum effort stands for something really interesting to me. [...] It's always adding or taking away and very much intuitive [...] the incidental is kind of the opposite of produced or perfect'.

girl at heart begins with a man shouting 'Lunch!' before cutting to the preparation of food in a kitchen, as though the video were conceding to his demand. This sequence, which recalls the format of online home-cooking videos, is mostly withheld from the viewer, instead superimposed with found images of supercars in flames **FIG.6**. Such images seem to literalise Sigmund Freud's notion of the 'death drive', or Georges Bataille's theory of consumption, particularly what he referred to as the 'accursed share': the excess of an economy that is squandered or lavished. When cooking is made visible, the banal sound of tofu sizzling is intermingled with a scene from *Mad Men*, a television series set in the 1960s about New York's ruthless advertising industry. The five-minute video culminates in a long scene of Phan walking down a high street with a white duffel bag emblazoned with 'MURDER', an edition by the artist Shannon Cartier Lucy (b.1977). The voiceover draws:



Fig. 1 Detail of *Untitled*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2020. Chipboard, silicone, chair, nail varnish, acrylic paint, cotton fabric, satin, chandeliers, spruce wood, glass, miniature staircase, mirror, incense candles, can, lamp, casters, veneered chipboard, Styrofoam, Dickmann packaging, cosmetic products, engine hood, baking oven, T-shirt, jeans, earrings, Murakami book and miniature altar. (Courtesy the artist and Schiefe Zähne, Berlin; photograph Michael Pfisterer).

I've noticed one thing lately. Man, people love vintage stuff. Like those Jean Prouvé chairs? Ugh, dying for it. Or those Charlotte Perriand dining tables? Uh-mazing! Are those like, uh, when Vietnamese cuisine was enhanced through French colonial leadership? Are those Hermès Margiela era? Completely iconic.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Phung-Tien Phan: STOP DREAMING* at Schiefe Zähne, Berlin, 2021. (Courtesy the artist and Schiefe Zähne, Berlin).

This humour is, as Phan suggests, ‘a silence breaker within an awkward conversation – like saying the obvious’. Parodying the contrived casualness at which the post-internet generation is so adept, her deadpan manner brings to bear a larger project: one of questions and quandaries concerning the continuous realms of private and public, interior and exterior, reality and artifice, authenticity and performance. As Judith Butler asserts in *Gender Trouble*:



Fig. 3 *Volkswagen (Ashley)*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2020. Oak, miniature furniture, acrylic paint, lamp, altar, espresso machine and flowers, 40 by 40 by 110 cm. (Courtesy Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn; photograph Michael Pfisterer).

The loss of the sense of 'the normal' can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when 'the normal', 'the original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived.⁴

Phan's recent solo exhibition *is blue* at Edouard Montassut, Paris (4th March–15th April 2023) **FIG.7** developed from the artist's obsession with transformation sequences in the manga series

Sailor Moon and a stroll she took through a local hardware shop, both of which were instigated by the fact that she was moving houses at the time. These seemingly disparate points of reference are perhaps reflected in the transformation of commonplace materials into works of art, including plastic wrapping, Styrofoam and string. The upright forms evoke the domestic altars often found in homes and businesses in Phan's native Vietnam, which are used to pay respect to one's ancestors and in turn inform the altar-keeper's fortune. The austerity of these sculptures is tempered by the addition of personal detritus and clutter: a plant cutting in a plastic cup, photo-booth pictures of Phan, cigarette and cosmetic boxes and folded sheets of tin foil. It is precisely these intrusions, stray personal touches, which humanise an otherwise alienating suite of formal and synthetic materials.



Fig. 4 Detail of FIG.3. (Courtesy Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn; photograph Michael Pfisterer).

The video work that accompanied the sculptures, *Tragic Triangle Trip* (2022), begins in much the same way as *Actress & Actors*, with Phan's hand posed in the shape of a gun, before what appears to be a real one flashes momentarily on screen. While the film lingers over a camera lying on a bed, Phan reflects on the stakes of video-making: 'I feel like starting is the hardest part. You know, like, all over. I heard a couple of times there are directors or authors that – put the ending when they work and – or they have a vision of it'. Later, she switches to an interview format, posing questions that become increasingly intrusive:

What's your name? English. How do I spell it? And how old are you? And where do you see yourself in five years? What's the financial situation like? Did you have an eating disorder? Was it bulimia? And what are you

working on right now? Do you talk to your parents often?

During this unanswered interrogation, Phan draws eyeliner over her face in the shape of what appears to be a clumsy superhero mask [FIG.8](#); she places her identification card onto clingfilm-wrapped chicken breast in a supermarket, and shows us images of a car boot filled with flat-packed furniture. Finally, the video cuts to footage of a road filmed from a car window, with a silhouetted hand dancing carefreely against the sun. After all, our protagonist is just – as her previous work attests – a ‘girl at heart’.

Phan’s most recent exhibition, *Kartoffel* at Kunsthalle Basel (25th August–12th November 2023), is no less reflexive [FIG.9](#).⁵ However this new work also infers a concern with the intergenerational, as it stages meetings between her father and his past, and between her son and his future. In the main exhibition space a series of plywood altars bore printed film stills of actors, such as Christoph Waltz in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and Nicolas Cage in *Vampire’s Kiss* (1989) [FIG.10](#), alongside neatly laid out dolls’ clothes. One work is anomalous in this respect: in place of a recognisable male star, *Fallen Angels 2* [FIG.11](#), titled after Wong Kar-Wai’s 1995 film, includes a black-and-white passport photograph of Phan’s father as a child. Considering the themes of personal biography, identity and memory in her work, Phan muses that ‘sometimes these sentiments translate in a more cold and direct way, sometimes more airy’.

Indeed, the video *Toni 3* [FIG.12](#) affirms this variation in approach, combining a slideshow of grainy, analogue family photographs – some of which include young Phan – with footage of her newborn son. In the voiceover, Phan lists ‘girl’ archetypes, verbally packaged like characters from a film or television synopsis: ‘There are so many lives out there to choose from: Corporate-New-York-Girl, Move-to-Indonesia-and-Live-by-the-Beach-Girl, Settle-down-Girl, Move-to-Paris-and-Learn-French-Girl’. The short video concludes with a countdown from five and the screen transitions to white with a sunburst effect, as though it were an echo or reply to Phan’s earlier instruction to ‘stop dreaming’.



Fig. 5 Still from *Actress & Actors*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2019. Video, duration 8 minutes 12 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

At the service of her practice, 'Phung-Tien Phan' becomes both a character and an authorial entity through which she explores the production of the self. Ditching the script, her work risks a reality of slippages and interstices that admits its own open-endedness. As she muses in *Tragic Triangle Trip*, 'So I wondered: could this be the ending of something? Basic stuff. This is the location. That's the director [...] but now, where's the story line, where do I go'.



Fig. 6 Still from *girl at heart*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2020. Video, duration 5 minutes 9 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Phung-Tien Phan: is blue* at Edouard Montassut, Paris, 2023. (Courtesy the artist and Edouard Montassut, Paris).



Fig. 8 Still from *Tragic Triangle Trip_*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2022. Video, duration 4 minutes 25 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).



Fig. 9 Installation view of *Phung-Tien Phan: Kartoffel* at Kunsthalle Basel, 2023. (Photograph Philipp Hänger).



Fig. 10 *Nicolas*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2023. Aluminum, cable ties, cloth cord, digital print on paper, marble, paper napkins, steel wire, stone, tape, varnish and wood, 162 by 107 by 36 cm. (Photograph Philipp Hänger).



Fig. 11 *Fallen Angels 2*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2023. Aluminium, cable ties, cloth cord, digital print on paper, doll clothes, marble, paper napkins, silicone, steel wire, stone and wood, 153 by 38 by 23 cm. (Photograph Philipp Hänger).



Fig. 12 Still from *Toni 3*, by Phung-Tien Phan. 2023. Video, duration 2 minutes 37 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).

Footnotes

- 1 L. Tillman: *The Madame Realism Complex*, New York 1992, p.49.
- 2 Tiqqun: *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, South Pasadena 2012, p.15.
- 3 Unless otherwise stated all quotations are from a conversation between Phung-Tien Phan and the present author, 21st January 2024.
- 4 J. Butler: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1999, p.176.
- 5 See E. Tam: 'Phung-Tien Phan: a trial of many outfits', *Doris Press* (3rd December 2023), available at www.doris.press/blog/https://www.dorispress/blog/uhnel318386rep19lj77fnx1402r3f, accessed 25th January 2024.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved
ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ