

ROH

DECENTERING SELF AND RE-SELFING CENTER

HUNG DUONG

Before accepting ROH's invitation to contribute an essay to the exhibition 'There is no center', I have already encountered the works of the three artists Rab, Kanitha Tith, and Tcheu Siong. Based in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos respectively, their countries are rarely seen as 'cosmopolitan' from a global art scene's perspective. Yet, discernible to me through their works is an urgent desire to carve out their own universe, where their ideas are manifested through a variety of visual forms. While these realms differ in terms of style, material, and propensity, they remain open and in flux, inviting others to enter into contemplative dialogues.

Their trajectory of world-building—and self-positioning—through art is the foundation on which I begin to question their relationship to the idea of a center. Do they acknowledge the art world's 'centers'? If yes, how do they speak to these centers? And if not, are they interested in establishing themselves, or their homeland, as centers? Which do they define as the centers of their practice?...

The Grab motorbike screeched to a halt in front of an inconspicuous house, with a façade that recalled Saigon's architecture of the post-Doi Moi period. I glanced up, face masked, nostril tingled with construction-site dust. 2024, a year of weeding habits and replanting disciplines, was groveling to a finale. Children played around gaping holes on the road, daring each other to hop across, while their grandmothers kept vigilant surveillance.

Rab led me up a narrow, creaking wooden staircase, its steps dent from the chafing of soles. Her equally narrow room, which used to house her uncle's family of three, remained theirs in spirit: wedding photos taped to the walls, their son's face printed on the calendar, and Jesus on the cross silently watching us. Rab seemed as out of place in her private room cum studio as I was. Over sliced guavas and iced water bottles, we sunk into conversation about her upcoming performance at ROH, her complicated relationship with 'home', and the tension between 'hiding' and 'exposing' that colors her journey of self-searching.

"I am perpetually vexed by the feeling of being misplaced. I feel estranged from my own flesh and skin, even though I constantly hide beneath it... A performance thus forces me to expose myself, only to a certain degree though.

Most of my works begin with words. Scribbles sprawled across the pages of my sketchbooks. Writing helps me process and organize my ideas. The same process goes for this performance: I have written an instruction script on how to enact my performance. It originated from an early memory, when my family first moved to this outskirts neighborhood in Saigon...

We were dirt-poor, so I had few toys growing up. One time, my grandmother took me to a local park, and there was someone there teaching kids to make *bánh phục linh*¹. Even though we used cheap plastic molds to make the cake, and the sweet itself was nothing

fancy, I remember feeling loved...

I will make bánh phục linh during my performance. The floor will be covered with white flour, scooped into blocks of varying heights, a fairytale landscape. I will keep eating, eating, and eating... until I cannot.
I fear that I might throw up.

My mundane body, revolting from indulgence of childhood sweets, is now in contact with an invisible holiness, since the cake itself is also used in rituals. Maybe I will see myself through references from this spiritual realm, a center on which margin I remain...
Perhaps, then, I can reach something beyond myself...

My family? No, I don't consider it my center. I am tied to it by duties, something fastened to my back. I feel as if I cannot lay it down, this cross. Yet, I also feel safe there, within this web of responsibilities. Maybe I have grown used to it, this blockage in communication with my deaf-mute parents... I find myself in embargo, yet I still orbit around them with a quizzical gravitational pull..."

I promised Rab that I would come to watch her performance, perhaps help her eat some of the cakes. Her visceral account lingered as I boarded the bus to cross the Vietnam-Cambodia border, lugging forward through border towns dotted with palmerias, Chinese-signage casinos, and beckoning empty land.

Kanitha Tith and I reunited in a newly-opened cafe near her currently-renovating studio. Kanitha has occupied the old house of Sa Sa Art Project—a landmark for Cambodian contemporary art history. We took our leisure time to idle over our thoughts. It is not my first time writing about her metal-coil sculptures, yet they remained evasive. Or perhaps it requires more than one visit to reach them, certainly to reach Kanitha, who cannot be pushed into things. Her center—rooted in a calm synchronization of mind and body—slowly unfurled in front of my eyes: her resistance against scaling up, her musings on navigating art-world 'centers', and her self-cultivating need for slowness.

"...I create works in my studio or my house, not catering to a specific space. When I have an exhibition, I will think of how to fit them into that space. Maybe that reflects my own thinking, and my focus on being free in my practice. My focus is to maintain my creative freedom, which is why I began exploring abstract, sculptural installations. Pulling and shaping metal wires takes time, my hands have to constantly bend and twist, and I usually talk to the wires, as if they were a person, these small things of minimal value that I have to physically feel to understand...

...How can I make my work bigger? What does it mean to be big? I guess it depends on your ambitions, but why not let the center be a small design? Don't be big. I am from this environment, where we are used to small things, so it is hard to imagine ourselves as big. Also, I treasure the micro things, the devalued shit. If I don't give value to them, who will....

I need to take my own time. This slowness is the center of my practice. I also don't know how to rush through things. This demand to perform immediately is foreign to me, I need time to develop my ideas, step by step. I also don't like to put pressure on other people, perhaps I am too sensitive. We can only take on so much at a time, and I must do what I can to take care of myself. When I feel tired from making sculptures, I will breathe, eat, and rest. This pacing keeps my body and brain connected...

¹ A type of sweet cake made from wheat flour, coconut milk, and natural food coloring. Once the flour is kneaded, it will be molded into various shapes. Bánh phục linh can be eaten as treats, or offerings on the altar in Vietnam.

The word 'center' makes my heart race. Maybe I am not the kind of person to be in the center. My sculptures also scatter throughout ROH's space, blending into its architecture. I don't understand much about 'center', yet 'centers' still come to me. So I must learn to understand and negotiate with centers. If you want to define something, you need to know it. What is a center? How do people there act, think, and live? Do I want to be a center? No? Maybe? Maybe being a center for me means spending time to think....

To stay connected.

We went for dinner afterward at a trendy Mediterranean restaurant in Phnom Penh, yet another center that we haven't explored. After a full meal of hummus and baba ganoush, I dragged my suitcase to the shiny Phnom Penh airport the next day to fly to Vientiane, only to worm my way into another two-hour train (also built with Chinese government's support) to make it to my final destination, Luang Prabang.

A sleepy hill town, teeming with tourists, everyone shuffling in and out of tour buses to go to the next wat or waterfall. I anchored in a small French-style cafe and ordered myself a hot cocoa to read up on artist Tcheu Siong. I first came across Tcheu's embroidered tapestries in a spacious warehouse as part of Thailand Biennale 3rd edition in Chiang Saen. The creatures that take center stage on her white cotton seem both familiar and alienated: humanoid in shape, they vaguely resemble mythical creatures, or perhaps ancestral beings that walked the Earth before we were even aware of our humanity. Tcheu's spirits emit an alluring pull, triggering either awe, fear, or curiosity. From a Hmong woman many margins removed from any kind of art centers, come these vibrant beings who demand attention and speak through obscure expressions.

My access to her spiritual realm was thus linguistically barred, the usual Babel burden. Having to enlist the gracious support of two translators, Tanoy and Jerry (for Hmong and Lao respectively), I was able to ask her questions. The conversation was the collision and collusion of three centers: Tcheu and Tanoy's Hmong, Jerry's Lao, and my English. Voices overlapped and thoughts mingled. Many things must have been lost in translation, and many more were birthed through it. I was able to cobble together her thoughts, filtered through language layers, about her dreams, her joy, and her imagination.

What I remember most, however, was how Tcheu sat so firmly, grounded, on the doorstep of her old house, surrounded by fabric, threads, her grandchildren, and her embroidered and appliqué spirits. She looked kind and regal, a queen in her rightful throne.

She wasn't gazing at any center. Tcheu was the center.

"The small scissor is easier to cut the small details. Big ones cannot, also uncomfortable to use.

She just feels and cuts, and the images come from her head. No sketch."

Is there a spirit living in the scissor?

"She dreamed about beautiful landscapes, with spirits. When she woke up early in the morning, she would recall things from her dreams, and start making work."

Did she talk to the spirits in her dream?

"She only names the spirits when she finishes a piece. Before the last patch is embroidered, they have no name. She is happy to meet them, and also to share her vision in the dreams with other people."

Did her husband visit her in the dreams, now that he has passed?

"Yes. He said nothing, but he came in the form of an animal. A black cricket, different from all the other crickets. Singing nicely as well. She wishes he could be here to see her works hung in different countries around the world."

How does she know which dream to show on the fabric?

"Only happy dreams. No nightmares."

How does she decide on the spirits' name?

"She wants to make big works. They are more beautiful to her than small ones. Her favorite color is black.

She wants to show her works in her village, but not sure if that will happen.

She is training her children how to make appliqué embroidery. Hopefully, they will continue her path when she too passes onto the spirits' realm."

As I turned back to bid farewell to Tcheu one last time, her smile imprinted in my mind. I felt the shiver coming back. The feeling of tectonic plates sliding against one another. Of different paths crossing and reconverging. My core crumbled once more, to make room to encompass more stories. Whether still searching for a center, negotiating with centers, or radiating as a center, the three artists created works that reflect their inner journeys. They prompted even more questions in my head, about how we position ourselves while creating works from the so-called margins. Do the 'centers' really exist, or are they make-believe Leviathan's who become powerful exactly because we believe in them? How can we see ourselves, our body, our mind, our dream, as centers? What happens when centers collide? And how do we retain our integrity, while still allowing our identity to expand and resonate with others? These questions are not easy to answer, but need to be asked nonetheless.

Only the artworks know. I look forward to meeting them again with changed perspectives.

HUNG DUONG

Hung Duong is an independent writer, translator, and curator whose writings on Southeast Asian contemporary art spans a diverse spectrum of forms and themes, addressing sociopolitical issues, ecological histories, and material transformation.