



ON BELONGING, LOGIC, AND LAUGHTER
An interview with Tammy Nguyễn and Hà Ninh Phạm
Conducted by Zoe Butt

On the occasion of 'Necessary Fictions' – a duo exhibition at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, curated by Zoe Butt and Bill Nguyễn (on view 9 August – 27 October, 2019)

Zoe Butt (ZB): So the intention of this interview is to highlight how two artists, of Vietnamese background, find themselves buddies in New York. I've been curious about the role of friendship in cultivating artistic practices for a while now, predominantly triggered by my own experience of isolation in a Western arts infrastructure that felt suspicious, cold and overly competitive. When I moved to Asia from Australia I was struck by how artists came together to intellectually challenge and motivate each other, of how their passion fuelled commitment, way above and beyond the presumed and known systems for 'Art' in their locale. You may or may not know that The Factory started an ongoing program - '[Spirit of Friendship](#)' - in 2018. I hope that this conversation between the three of us will become a part of this platform, revealing the experience, motivation and inspiration behind how and why creative minds, such as yourselves, have 'bonded'; perhaps revealing the role of cultural identification, migration, study and ultimately the need for nurturing (and thus friendship) in this devotion to making art.

So to begin, you have both been living and working in New York, regularly seeing each other, working together, for the past 12 months or more. How did the two of you meet? What was the motivation behind the kindling of contact?

Hà Ninh (HN): First of all, thank you for bringing up your experience of isolation in the Western arts infrastructure. To me, it is a really worthy topic. Moreover, it is also specific, in a way that it can be very hard to have a fruitful conversation about isolation with people who don't have such experience themselves.

I relate to that deeply. I went to Philadelphia three years ago for school, when I was 25. I was young, but my background was really traditional. For me it was challenging to adapt to the American culture. Although I enjoyed my education there, I felt miserably isolated in my social life. It was hard for me to have a community no matter how hard I tried.

My school had only one professor of color, Didier William, who was the chair of my MFA program. He seemed to understand my situation and encouraged me to move to New York after graduation. It was an excellent idea.

Didier introduced me to Tammy, and the first time we met was at her house, the evening before I went to Skowhegan. I still remember everything, including the spicy smell of Tammy's kitchen. We talked about the different histories of our families, one from the North, the other from the South, like we had been siblings. It was an amazing dinner, because of the food, but also of the missing feeling of belonging and intimacy that was

recovered in me immediately. I took that feeling for granted when I was in Vietnam. Only from my experience of isolation can I recognize and understand it specifically.

Tammy Nguyễn (TN): As Hà Ninh said, he had only one professor of color Didier William, who happens to be a dear friend. Didier had told me about his Vietnamese student Hà Ninh from time to time, and upon Hà Ninh's graduation, Didier put us in touch. I think after that Hà Ninh came over to my place in NYC where I made dinner--some kind of bún, maybe it was bún riêu-- he met some of my friends, and also my husband Davey. It was a lot of fun, and I was particularly excited to hang out with a Vietnamese *painter* in New York. I am emphasizing *painter* because while Hà Ninh and I share many conversations about Vietnam, and Vietnam versus America etc., we have many conversations about form, mark-making, paper, which are conversations that I rarely have in Vietnamese, and within a Vietnamese context.

Months after our first interaction my publishing platform, 'Passenger Pigeon Press', was reviewing applications for our inaugural Open Call for collaborations and a solo exhibition. I took myself out of the first two phases of review and when I received the finalist files, the panelists had selected Hà Ninh as one of five of the very extraordinary artists. I interviewed all of the artists by phone and one reason I ended up picking Hà Ninh as the winner was because I was drawn to his answer to my question: "*What is a book?*" Hà Ninh said that a book was a logic system and therefore it also inherently possessed a moral or ethical code. I was so excited about this way of thinking about a book, it was refreshing, and also unfamiliar to me as I had never applied language like that to my relationship with books.

Soon after that, Hà Ninh moved to New York, and we frequently saw each other and he also became a huge help and important team member on various Passenger Pigeon Press projects.

ZB: Love it. I find the encounter of familiarity so intriguing, especially when we are craving it, for it can reveal heightened synergies - for example I think I can read between the lines that you both love food, that you both love painting, but you do also seem to share a love of the book! I am also hearing the impact of not being around much 'color' in a learning environment and I must admit that I share experience there too - my university days were around some very inspiring anthropologists (though all white and exploring the 'exotic' Pacific at the time). I found myself hiding in the library, scouring the shelves for the presence of my cultural ancestry and relevance to Australia (and finding it rather difficult to locate). It was my passion for history that got me through, even to this day. So on that note I wonder, how has painting and a consideration of its learning (for we do learn through books of course) - how would you argue your art as a kind of 'logic system'? Is it too far-fetched to consider it so? Did you both talk about this as a consequence of working together?

TN: I have never really thought of the term 'logic system'-- but after learning of Hà Ninh's work, I was interested in it as a way of thinking about rules and laws, and as you expand on that you can go from rules to law to government to countries and to cultures, onward. I don't recall talking about this as directly related to our work... but over the course of the year, I think that many of our conversations have been about "*what is Vietnamese*", "*what is Northern Vietnamese*" and "*what is American*". We have talked about customs, language, "*how to do things*"-- and sometimes I think we have misunderstood each other because we are indeed from two different logic systems. Nonetheless, these kinds of glitches are what make our friendship pretty entertaining... in hindsight. He's kind of become my little brother who asks a lot of questions.

As far as thinking about logic systems in art, I think that I would consider my practice as a world-building process — which inherently implies a logic system. I usually start my bodies of work by expanding on a story or a small analogy. For example, in the body of work for this show, 'Necessary Fictions', I started by thinking about green colonialism, a

concept/process wherein plants are brought to a new place for a multitude of reasons, but those plants in turn take over the landscape... This has long fascinated me. I grew up in San Francisco where folks who were part of the Gold Rush imported the Eucalyptus tree – originally from Australia – to help with the production of wood. The tree itself grows very quickly, and the Gold Diggers thought that it could produce wood for building. However, once the tree grew and grew, the wood was realized to be very brittle and totally unsuitable for building. By then though, the tree had integrated into the landscape of San Francisco. As a young girl in San Francisco, I loved these trees, they are so big, they look like guardians, and they smell amazing. I couldn't imagine San Francisco without them, and this joy, collapsed with the knowledge that this tree took over the indigenous landscape, is confusing.

From this point of tension, I went out and looked for mythologies about love and multiplying. In the story of 'Echo and Narcissus', Echo is cursed to become nothing but a voice that echoes the last words that she hears. She falls in love with Narcissus, and can only express her love by repeating him. Narcissus is loved by all, and mostly, loved by himself. He falls in love with his own reflection that he sees in a pond and can't understand why he cannot get closer to his own image, until one day, he falls into the pond and into his own demise — sprouting into clumps of daffodils. I think that this mythology is related to the story I just told you about the San Francisco eucalyptus tree — it was man falling in love with his dream, chasing his ambitions, chasing an image that he created himself, that led to the demise of the landscape, and now – with climate change – our planet.

As imagery, my paintings use a lot of repetition: seeds are eyes (but it's literally the same shape casted in different spaces); skin is land (but because of composition it is read as skin or as land sharing the same color, textures). I suppose this is a logic system.

HN: Wow! The more we talk, the more I realize that we share a lot of experiences and interests!

I don't know if my art practice itself can be considered as a logic system by definition, but I think in my life I have always been dealing with some sort of logic systems. I think we all do. I am just particularly sensitive to them and let them come into my art.

An example of such logic systems is the book format. Indeed, a book has a cover that covers everything said in the book, literally and figuratively. Then it has a table of contents which presents a strict hierarchy of sections and chapters. This hierarchy runs all the way down to the order of pages, then the paragraphs and finally to the composition of each sentence. This is why a book is always a system with strict underlying principles, no matter what content it delivers.

Furthermore, I think a logic system can be an ethical system, in a way that it does not only employ certain rules, but also guides certain behavior. The system distinguishes what is considered correct from what is considered incorrect. The book format has a strong ethical dimension because it affirms the correct way for knowledge to be delivered. It suggests what you should do: follow the book hierarchy, read from left to right, page by page, word after word. If you fail to respect these rules then you may risk your chance of having the correct knowledge.

This way of thinking about the format of a book, of course, can be applied to other things as well, like cooking or painting. These activities can be also reluctantly considered as logic systems if we really want to. But for me the main difference is that, although the book format is strictly specific, it seems to be timelessly official, remaining remarkably unchanged over time. As we can see in a library, books from different eras don't look that much different, and this is why a library looks totally different from an art museum. As artists we question the format of art itself all the time. In our collaboration, Tammy and I

want to bring this exact attitude to the making of our art book, so we started to play with the format of the collaboration.

We designed the book to have multiple ways of reading and turning pages. The page order can be read differently according to how you fold the book, and no matter how much you flip the book, it can still form some sort of meaningful information. It is an unconventional way of reading for anyone, from any culture.

I want to say that by doing this I personally don't think much about criticizing the conventional book format. I just want to fulfill my curiosity of remaking some things in the world new and fresh again. I enjoy this feeling of genesis and want to share it with people.

I do feel like a lot of things in this world are not really made for me, and I share with Zoe the feeling of belonging by having books around. I collect a lot of books on very different topics, many of which I have not read, and maybe never will. But they give me a strange feeling of 'being home,' like I can know what is going on, I am not being left behind, or getting lost as insignificant in this world. I feel that it is really similar to my practice of map-making in that way, like I want to learn about the positions of different systems without worrying too much about trusting any of them.

ZB: I can hear learning through a study of past narrative, a learning via a study of systems, and an ethical learning anchored in trust (this trust between the two of you, but also with your relationship with your own practice – and I do think that it is the artist's relationship to practice that grounds an artist's success). But what particularly strikes me is how both of you discuss 'logic' without at all mentioning the word 'history', for me at least, when I look at both of your practices, you are both mining the logic of history – peeling away stereotypes; revealing the irony within myth; usurping the recording of symbols; distorting the picturing of space surrounding the past – and it is this disruption of 'logic' that I think exactly what artists of 'color' are most attuned to (for their cultural and social histories are dotted with the trauma of being subjected to foreign control). The shared love of the 'object' of history – i.e. the book – is a pertinent juncture between you both, a mechanism of popular familiarity that I think embraces the experimental and imaginative quality of both of your methodologies (Tammy with a constant referencing of literature, of a textual research of human fallibility; Hà Ninh with the picturing of navigation, of the cartography of human habitat and the imprint of its psychological behavior). Both of your approaches to 'making' involves the practice of drawing, of the absorption of paper; and yet you both also challenge the 'logic' of these mediums, near refusing its fragility by your chosen methods of display. How do you both discuss paper and your individual experimentation? Can you share a little about the processes of display for your works in our exhibition 'Necessary Fictions'?

HN: That is a great observation. I feel like, in my practice, there seems to be an incompatibility between the reason why I do the work I do, which is probably my particular political, historical, and social circumstances in the world; and the concepts that move my practice forward, which are somewhat of an idealist and timeless belief.

I am personally torn apart by these two fundamentally incompatible worldviews. In 'My Land', I visualize the former as the Pink Army and the latter as the Yellow Army. These two colors of different temperatures compete for the [Wax Fortress] at B5 in the [mothermap]. By using this type of narration, I can be an observer and distance myself from resolving that conflict. This position of not seeing the world as "*it must be black or white*" makes my life healthier to be honest, and I deserve it.

In my life, I have come across countless situations that were unfair, even unjust sometimes. The anger of being subjected to foreign judgments has always been in the deepest part of my heart. But I think my art doesn't always have to be revenge. As an

artist, I want to make room for the different things I bring to the world, and forgiveness is one of them.

And paper is indeed a forgiving medium. You can do many things, such as erasing, cutting, folding, or adding more paper. Obviously, for an indecisive person like me, this is more than great! I usually display my drawings on paper in a fairly conventional way, mostly because of pragmatic reasons. However, in 'Necessary Fictions', Tammy and I have an amazing space and great support from the exhibition team at The Factory. This has led to the decision to place the paintings in the central part of the space, on separated walls 'rising' from the ground if you will, on both faces of each wall, in opposing directions. I hope the syncopation with Tammy's works creates an interesting psychological experience in 'Necessary Fictions'.

TN: I do not think that I am challenging the 'logic' of paper – rather, I am totally obeying it, even honoring it; and I am doing so in such a way that is attentive to its integrity, meaning the kind of paper it is, the fibers that it is made of, the color that it was manufactured in etc. But, let me backtrack a little bit.

When I was in grad school, my professor, Sara Oppenheimer, who was a big influence on me, was in my studio. I was struggling. My work was over-worked/cooked, and I was insistent on making my work about a kind of collision between power and tradition. "*How does one obtain power or control while still being respectful to tradition?*" This was one of the biggest questions that I had after returning to the US after living in Vietnam for four years. I won't tell you the story here, but this inquiry eventually led me to working as a taxidermist at the Yale Ornithology Library where I helped the collections skin birds on Friday mornings. I would also create drawings on paper, and one way I was drawing a feather was by making a 'washy' smear of ink, and one broad ink stroke to indicate the rachis (the stem of the feather). So in the studio, I remember Sara pointing at an otherwise insignificant work and telling me about the tension created by the blurriness of the edge of the feathered area and the sharpness of the ink stroke – that such a tension also simultaneously created space, as one form would vibrate – or be in constant agitation – to the form next to it.

This tension is so obvious to me now, but it was a profound formal observation then. I started to see it in other places, Ken Price's drawings, Tyrus Wong's *Bambi* illustrations, comics, and in moku-hanga (Japanese wood-block) prints, such as in one of my favorite artists, Yoshitoshi. This tension, I thought, could give color and mark-making a felt experience, rather than just an imaginative one, and it is felt by the constant oscillation of spaces between paint effects. Furthermore, I thought then, that this formal occurrence could be the core syntax of how I want to convey and depict what I feel about contradictions in life and history.

The more difficult task, which ended up taking nearly four years out of graduate school, was to find a surface which could carry the breadth of water effects which range from visceral, almost oceanic bleeds/waves to tight, dense, and ever-still shapes. For a few years, I was pouring diluted acrylic paint onto sized canvas, then I would glaze over the canvas to make the surface no longer absorbent in order to support slick and fluid lines. While this was happening, I was a scholar at the Center for Book Arts and was rapidly learning new ways of working with paper and I was also editioning etchings and silkscreens in the other realms of my practice that were not painting.

Then... one night, like a bird had taken a shit on my head, the most obvious thing occurred to me – why not stretch the paper over a panel – exactly in the way that I make hard book covers?! In bookbinding, we often use a mix of methyl cellulose and PVA. PVA is a plastic glue, is super strong, and dries quickly. Methyl cellulose is a plant-based binder that is used in a lot of paper-making, it slows down the drying time. By combining these two adhesives, you create a mix which allows you to paste paper or cloth down to a board with ease. More significantly to my process was that after I pasted the paper to the

panel, every time I would re-wet the surface to paint and the paper would revive itself, it would take in the pigment/water by absorbing it, constantly re-stretching its body back to the panel, only with new pigment now part of its 'flesh'. This was the surface that could carry the breadth of what I wanted to say with water and pigment. I am totally obeying the logic of paper, but perhaps I am working with it in a dimension of its grace that can carry the illogic, confusion, and contradictions in my mind.

I want to also enter what seems to be a theme in this conversation – which is the sense of not belonging, whether it is at school, or in history, or by the systems around you. I share some common feelings with Hà Ninh and Zoe, but I would also add that I love my studio for its solitude. I suppose I could also think of it as a fort, where I make things to catapult back into the world. I don't know if my artwork aims to be inclusive, or forgiving, I think it wholly embraces particularities and really tries to stay away from others.

ZB: I really enjoy the way you both refer to your love of your mediums with human characteristics/capacities — words such as 'forgiving', 'revive' — as if it is a breathing malleability. There is a respect here that I wish was more present in our social worlds. One where we understand that time and matter does not stand still, that it is a gift to which we explore and innovate, but must be wary of exploiting. I find artists relationship to materiality demonstrative of how a human should labor with its own humanity, though sadly we seem to not understand the necessity to do so with our voiceless inanimate beings in our environment. To wrap up this conversation, I'd like to ask how you both see your need / search for belonging to be of impact on your message-making in your art. One of the aspects of committing my personal practice of curating towards artists, who have experienced political poverty, is that their social status (often as refugee, asylum seeker, exile or economically/culturally disenfranchised) often marginalizes their role in society. Thus I find it so powerful when such figures are the ones whose art is so bold and certain with their perspectives. What role do you perceive artists to have in your world? Do you feel a need, or search for, or perhaps already belong, to an intimate artistic community (e.g. possessing trusted mentors) in which you are engaged and nurtured?

HN: Yes, the feeling of belonging is important to me. I was made in Vietnam and I have never succeeded in getting rid of my emotions when thinking of it. It has been two years since the last time I had bún ốc and tiết canh dê. I miss trà đá, thuốc lá, bánh giò, and my beloved scooter, the haptic horse that flies me to freedom.

As much as I love my country and am proud of it, to be honest, I am still worried about my return. From my past experience, I know how unbalanced and isolated the Vietnamese contemporary art community was. We have talked about the marginalization based on political and social status, but to me there is one more crucial thing: the marginalization based on the mode of practice itself.

Speaking from a statistical standpoint: Within Vietnam, there are more than 70 universities that have visual art training, among them 22 are producing professional visual artists. There are about 30 BFA and from 5 to 10 MFA programs, depending on how you define it. All of those schools and programs contribute at least 1500 visual artists to society each year. I can say with no doubt that 100% of those people are traditionally trained. They are either painters, sculptors, printmakers, or any combinations of those things. They are the vast majority of Vietnamese artists. Now we take a look at the CVs of the ones who are having exposure internationally. I am afraid that there are very, very, very few of those traditionalists. Must it be that all the stream of those 1,500 Vietnamese artists per year is absolutely so bad that almost none of them has been able to rise to the top?

If the answer is yes, then we know that we have not done enough. If the answer is no, then we are facing a serious ethical issue regarding our definitions of marginalization. I have been thinking about this a lot. It curls in my anxious head all the time.

I don't consider myself a painter. My practice, as you can see, now deals with some conceptual stuff that I am interested in. In the future, it will take any form as it needs. But I was trained as a painter, seriously. My formal training started when I was 10. I know that there are concepts in each composition, and meanings in each brush stroke. And even if I did not have such a background, I would still get irritated when someone says, "*painting is obsolete*", or "*painters are provincial*". Some people actually said that to my friends and I when we were students in Hanoi. It was really unsupportive.

We all know that the art world now demands artists to have some sort of dialogue, and sometimes what artists say is considered more important than how they say it. That is fine. But at the same time, if we fail to support the efforts, and recognize the achievements, of the very people who spend days and nights to find their answers for the 'how', we will also have to pay for the costs of losing aesthetics. And an art community that allows the extinction of an aesthetic compass to exist is not a healthy one, because it then has the potential of being not even about art anymore.

I did not feel supported when I was home. That was one of the reasons why I decided to study abroad. I was fortunate to choose the right MFA program and to have Didier William and Kaitlin Pomerantz who supported me. Then I was accepted for the 'Materialize' program at The Factory¹. This meant a lot to me. For the first time my traditional approach was accepted by a contemporary art organization. Bill Nguyễn and I became close friends. We have been exchanging and I feel grateful to have his insightful support. The time following my graduation was exciting but challenging. I decided to move to New York, and I met Tammy, Téa and a lot of other artists who work seriously with traditional media. It's already extremely hard to work as an artist in New York, but if you are a painter, a printmaker or a sculptor it is even harder. It was this community of the traditionalist hardcores who accepted me and helped me to overcome the difficulties in that crucial time. I cannot thank them enough, the people who maintain their intense practices but at the same time have tremendous generosity to give back to the community.

The people I mentioned above have taught me that I can be accepted anywhere on this planet as long as I am a good person, I work hard, and I can find the right people in a balanced community. This is why I am going back to Vietnam. The fact that you, Zoe, a contemporary art curator; Tammy, a painter; and I, a draftsman, are now in this conversation is evidence of how we can create a more balanced and diverse community. This has brought me hope. I am sincerely willing to connect and contribute to the community in Vietnam.

Thank you very much Zoe and Tammy for being with me in this conversation.

TN: There are so many different kinds of artists, some are assholes. There are so many different ways to make art, and for some types, I would rather watch Netflix, go shopping, and cook for my friends. There are so-so artists and so-so kinds of art, which just happens to not be my cup of tea, because not all art will speak to me. Then, there are artists who are the devils that I want to be around constantly, who feed me with truth, contradiction, and nuance, whose work gives me pleasure, thought, and spiritual salvation. And for all of these kinds of artists, those who are assholes to me are the beacons of hope for others, and those that are so-so to me are profound to another, and of course, as I age, my perception of artists that I did not prefer will speak to me at a later point in my life. All this is to say that artists are many and what they make adds to a complex ecosystem without a moral code; and it is an exciting vast space, passionately filled with love and hatred all twirling around like weather systems. Artists are not

¹ Hà Ninh Phạm was initially selected as an artist for the 'Materialize' program of The Factory, however upon further discussion, The Factory and jury realized that his artistic practice was accomplished, critical and with flair that deserved the focus of a ground-floor show in our Arts Centre – thus The Factory invited him to undertake a duo show with Tammy Nguyễn, resulting in 'Necessary Fictions'.

magical people; we happen to love creating things, that are sometimes special, for a multitude of consumptions, which have a multitude of consequences, big and small, good and bad, important and insignificant.

On a daily basis, I try to surround myself with laughter, shared amongst friends (or comrades). It is the kind of laughter that is critical, gleeful, and humble at all of those intersections that simply don't make sense. These are people who constantly ask questions, not necessarily because they are curious, but rather because they are confused, and create 'things' to untangle some of those knots, to find a little bit more clarity until the next knot in the ball is found. I consider such friends and colleagues to be my artistic community. These are all day text exchanges, meals, drinks, and just goofing around with Emmy Cathedral, an artist who explores astronomy and other scientific systems that distort our stability in Western logic; Meena Hasan who creates incredible paintings of napes, hands, and fabric, using absurdly thick and plastic-looking paint, foreshadowing a kind of artifice to the human race; Ronny Quevedo who explores ancient and modern sports with gold leaf and pattern paper to think about colonial legacies and alternative modes of thinking from the Americas; Didier William, who creates epic figurative images that expand from his Haitian ancestry into courageous and refreshing interpretations; Nontsi Mutiti whose work resurrects anything that needs to come forward from Zimbabwean history; and Rafael Sanchez who creates performances, often honoring less known historical figures, moments, and music. There are also other people in my art community who are not visual artists, like Paolo Javier, who creates these poems that are contradictions, but in such a way where the sounds of the words kind of smack your brain with a 'pang'; and then there is Jacob Hughes, whom I have taught a course on cannibalism with and is obsessed with Lord Byron and William Blake. Then, there is Lovely Umayam who is a nuclear policy analyst and teaches me just incredible things that more (most) people should know. And, of course there are my mentors, like Tomas Vu who has carved out an opportunity for me to have a studio space; John Yau who supports my work by consistently coming to my exhibitions and listening to my ideas; and Josephine Halvorson who I can talk to about so many things that I am trying to hope for myself as I evolve as an artist. And then there is my chosen little sister and studio assistant Téa Chai Beer, who is so damn smart and sensitive and creates these memorable paintings that will never let you forget your own body. There are many, many others, but I really want to mention that on top of all this, my artistic practice would be nothing without my actual little sister, Emily Nguyễn and my husband David Barr, both of whom I love so much and who love me too.

Finally, I want to address Zoe's inquiry about how our search for belonging impacts our 'message-making' in art. I think that when I make art, I strive to create poetry. I believe and have had experiences where beauty and poetry offers me a kind of salvation — and I believe that some art has the profound possibility of delivering us from spiritual harm and poverty. While I say that my art is about many things — in the case of 'Necessary Fictions', it is about green colonialism, Echo and Narcissus, Nusantara, to name a few themes, I think that I scaffold all of these topics in order to probe at this kind of poetic sensation. I am able to scaffold all of this because I indeed belong to my unique artistic community; that gives me the foundation, comfort, and care providing me the spiritual health to create. This is all of the laughter, the inappropriate jokes, the whip smart critiques, the fast judgements, the changing of those judgements, the delicious meals, the bad meals, the gossip and dark humor. I am very lucky.

This interview was commissioned as part of 'Spirit of Friendship', an ongoing program platform of The Factory, initiated in 2017. <http://www.spiritoffriendship.org/>. Initiated by Zoe Butt on the 7 June 2019 and conducted over Google Docs within a 6 week period.