

Again, This Isn't an Art-World Critique: Phung-Tien Phan
Stanton Taylor

Amid the slipstream of salesroom-ready JPGs, Phung-Tien Phan's offhand aesthetic almost conjures something like authenticity. Lo-fi and rough-hewn, it caters to that longing for an art that doesn't take itself too seriously. But just like everything else on-screen, her realness is about as real as reality TV. What starts off as an awkward joke soon segues into a meditation on the minutiae of middle-class anxiety—one where the confessional becomes just another mode of self-stylization, and critique gives way to parody.

Shot mostly on her phone, Phan's diaristic videos aimlessly trace the contours of everyday life: shop, clean, eat, repeat. The young men of *Actress & Actors* (2019) meander through malls, supermarkets, and restaurants to the sound of The Strokes as they lip-synch lines from Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003). Meanwhile, Phan plays herself as she makes phone calls, arranges an interior, and lists the perfect mix of theory for her morning coffee. The various references to generic bourgeois sensibility eventually culminate in a scene where one member of a picture-perfect interracial couple tells the other, "Don't be so fake." If the twee Chalk-typeface credits weren't enough, the title bluntly reminds us that it's all an act anyway: impostor syndrome with a slice of cake.

In terms of the not-too-distant past, Phan seems to be carving out a space somewhere between the kind of slacker self-parody championed by the likes of Martin Kippenberger and the politicization of domestic labor, perhaps most poignantly summarized in Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*—between making your life your work and making your work your art. Pieces like the *Untitled* (2020) series of Post-it paintings made with Simon Mielke commodify a housewife's banal itinerary, replete with an accidental coffee stain. Simple enough, the gesture feels like a tongue-in-cheek take on the predominantly male genre of "bad painting" that Phan's native Rhineland became famous for in the 1980s. Unlike her predecessors, however, she doesn't seem so interested in challenging expectations of art—and what would be left to challenge?—and instead offers a lens for looking a little more closely at the tensions of everyday life. Phan suggests that the very sound of critique makes people tune out, no matter how much they might agree, whereas humor makes the process of reflection a lot easier.

Indeed, bad jokes abound in her work. Started in 2016 with fellow artist Frieder Haller, the ongoing series *Pain*, for example, recasts the characteristic awnings of the transnational bakery chain Paul to read "Pain"—presumably a play on the French for "bread" and an artistic-existential cliché. More recently, the video *Girl at Heart* (2020) shows Phan strolling along Düsseldorf's Königsallee as she sarcastically muses on the creative class's obsession with vintage furniture and fashion: "Like those Jean Prouvé chairs, ugh, dying for it . . . that Hermès-Margiela era, completely iconic!" By the time she passes the Louis Vuitton and Miu Miu boutiques, her auto-fictional reflections turn to a series of secondhand wisecracks from her mom: "What is more dry, my pussy or making a PhD in architecture?" Self-effacing as ever, the brisk monologue

traces a link between the arduous pursuit of intellectual self-actualization and its surprisingly standardized manifestations.

A similar vein of self-parody runs through *Untitled (Bankett Gruppe 2)* (2018), where she takes aim at the domestic obsession with eBay bargain hunting and upcycling old furniture. She outfitted secondhand designer chair legs with concrete casts of plastic trash bags. Fenced in with transparent PVC, the sculptural ensemble feels like a petting zoo of oversize fleas bloated with their own egos—again, this isn't an art-world critique.

Much like in real life, however, self-irony is usually a way of deflecting deeper anxieties, as in *Untitled* (2016), where Phan cycles through different looks in her apartment and wonders out loud whether she's becoming just another member of the "white, heterosexual, male, privileged group." *Untitled (Bankett Gruppe 1)* (2017), on the other hand, conjures an uneasy dream of a middle-class dining room. There, her haphazardly cut and burned canvas casts of furniture double as precarious ghosts, barely able to support themselves. Phan, who was expecting at the time, labeled the baby carriage with the comforting word "sleeping." The biographical roots of this unease become clearer in the *Volkswagen* (2019–20) series of sculptures. The portable shelving units combine miniature models of the cramped studio apartments common in big Vietnamese cities with reinterpretations of scaled-down Buddhist altars popular among the diaspora. Crowned by retro Italian coffee makers cum flower vases, the sculptures almost read like a multigenerational biography.

Her most recent installation, *Café Chardonmay – alles nehmen* at Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg (2020), combined the *Volkswagen* sculptures with other household appliances and architectural columns reminiscent of wedding cakes to evoke the expectations of material success that burden the children of first-generation immigrant families: money, house, kids. As Phan herself ventures, her offhand style is likely a holdover from her days as part of New Bretagne / Belle Air—a collective and project space in Essen that she cofounded and ran from 2012 to 2018, together with Frieder Haller, Anna-Lisa Högler, Alexander Schöpfel, and Niklas Taleb. Back then, it wasn't so important what people thought, as long as you got shit done.

109 Phung-Tien Phan, *Untitled III (Bankett Gruppe 3 (die for nothing))* (detail), 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne. Photo: Michael Pfisterer

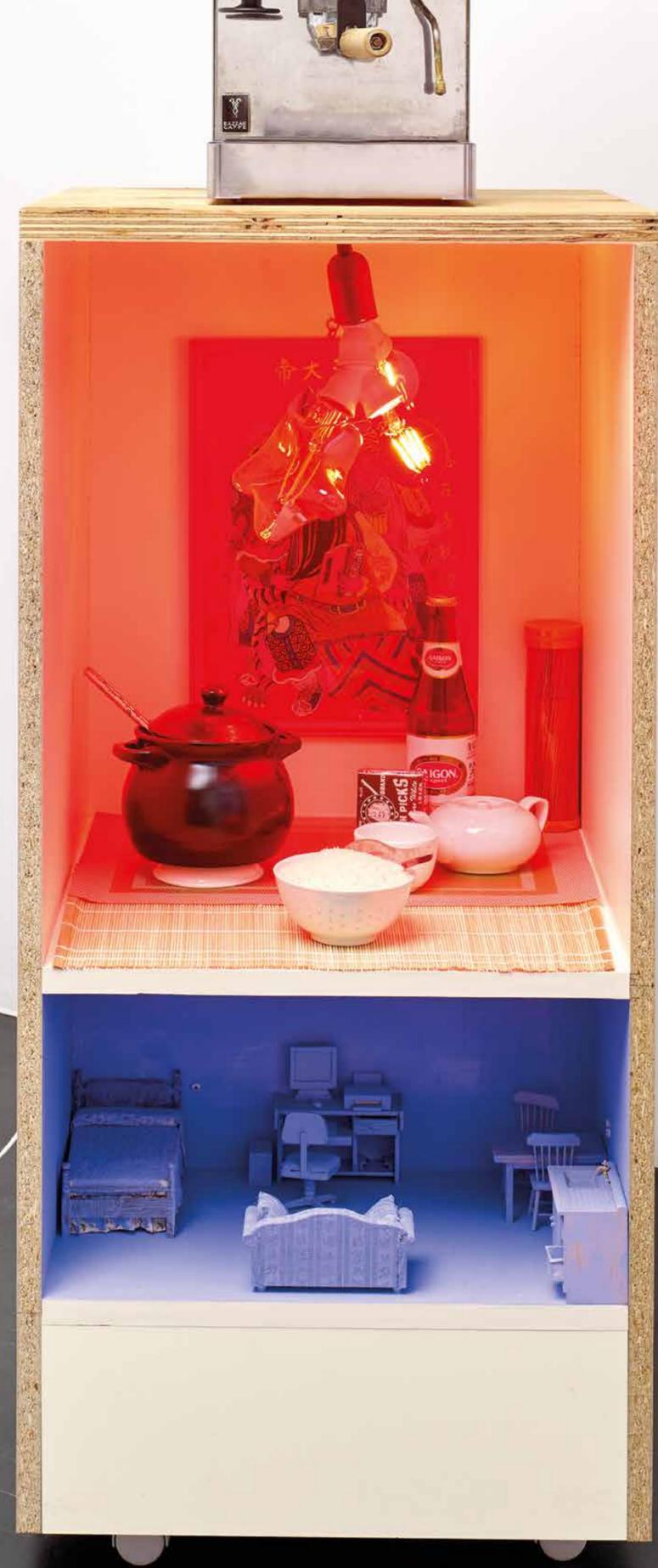
110 Phung-Tien Phan, *biste links oder frustriert* installation view at Drei, Cologne, 2019. Courtesy: Drei, Cologne. Photo: Simon Vogel

111 Phung-Tien Phan, *Volkswagen (Saigon)* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne. Photo: Simon Vogel

112 Phung-Tien Phan, *Girl at Heart* (stills), 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne

113 Phung-Tien Phan, *Actress & Actors* (stills), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne







my pussy or making a PhD in architecture?



what is more dry?



a sneakers passion



Phung-Tien Phan
„Bankett Gruppe 0“ 2016

Die Essener Künstlerin
Phung-Tien Phan



Junge
Kreative aus
KUNST,
ARCHITEKTUR,
DESIGN
und MODE
öffnen ihre
Türen

Emerging
Creatives in
ART,
ARCHITECTURE,
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STUDIO VISIT

ZWISCHEN SOCIAL MEDIA UND TRADITION

Die Essener Künstlerin PHUNG-TIEN PHAN lässt Welten aufeinanderprallen
Essen-based artist Phung-Tien Phan juxtaposes worlds

Schnittblumen in der Espressomaschine, ein buddhistischer Altar und Puppenhausmobiliar, edle Gründerzeitfassaden und Rapmusik – in Phung-Tien Phans Objekten und Videoarbeiten passt einiges nicht zusammen, und trotzdem ergeben sie zusammen ein fein austariertes, stimmiges Bild. Große Fragen ihrer Zeit und Generation – Wie wollen wir leben? Was bedeutet Wohlstand? Woran glauben wir? – bricht sie runter auf eine Essenz, ob eine Videosequenz oder eine Skulptur, zu der man unmittelbar einen Zugang findet. Das Aufeinanderprallen von Welten, das sich in ihrer Kunst im Kleinen zeigt, steckt auch in ihrer Biografie. Phans Eltern kamen als Boatpeople aus Vietnam ins Ruhrgebiet, sie ist in Essen geboren und aufgewachsen, hat hier noch im Studium mit einer Gruppe von anderen Studierenden der Folkwang Universität den temporären Projektraum Belle Air gegründet und bis 2019 geführt – Teil einer zunehmend vitalen Offszene in der Stadt, in der die Mieten immer noch günstig sind. Inzwischen lebt Phan mit ihrer eigenen kleinen Familie hier.

In ihren Arbeiten schwingt die vietnamesische Kultur oft unterschwellig mit: in den privaten Videoschnipseln, die sie zu nonlinearen Erzählungen collagiert, oder eben in den rollbaren Skulpturen, den „Volkswagen“, in denen spartanische Altäre, wie sie in Vietnam typischerweise in privaten Wohnräumen zu finden sind, auf funktionale Einraumapartments treffen, die die Künstlerin mit Miniaturmöbeln ausgestattet und einheitlich in je einen Farbton getaucht hat, jede Spur von Individualität verbergend.

„Mich interessiert einerseits, wie Social Media funktioniert, mit welcher Geschwindigkeit Dinge parallel passieren und sich Zugänge ergeben, und auf der anderen Seite Tradition und gesellschaftliche Normen, die sich nur sehr langsam verändern“, sagt Phan. Wenn sie an neuen Projekten arbeitet, verbringt sie Monate damit, alles aufzusaugen und zu recherchieren, bevor sie sich in eine konzentrierte Phase der Produktion begibt. In der vielfältigen Ruhrgebietsstadt findet sie die Inspiration, aber auch die Ruhe dazu: „Die Stadt ist eine Mischung aus Aufbruch und Abgehängtsein, das ist ein ganz guter Spiegel dafür, wie der Durchschnitt von Deutschland sein kann“, sagt Phan. Für sie ist es genau der richtige Ort, um etwas Gutes zu produzieren. ●

Text
Leonie Pfennig

Cut flowers in the espresso machine, a Buddhist altar and dollhouse furniture, exquisite fin-de-siècle façades and rap music: in Phung-Tien Phan's sculptures and video works, things don't always fit together, but nevertheless they create a delicately balanced, harmonious whole. She breaks down key questions of her time and generation – “How do we want to live?”, “What is wealth?”, “What do we believe in?” – into an immediately accessible essence, whether in the form of a video sequence or a sculpture. The collision of worlds evident in her art on a small scale is also echoed in her biography. Phan's parents came to the Ruhr region as boat people from Vietnam, and she was born and raised in Essen. She founded the project space Belle Air with a group of fellow students at Folkwang University, which she led until 2019 as part of an increasingly lively alternative scene in the city where rents are still low. Nowadays Phan lives here with her own little family.

Vietnamese culture is often felt subliminally in her work: in the personal video clips she collages together to create non-linear narratives, or in the sculptures on wheels, the “Volkswagen,” in which spartan altars – typically found in private living spaces in Vietnam – fuse with functional studio apartments, which the artist has furnished with miniature furniture and uniformly painted in a single color, concealing any glimmer of individuality.

“On the one hand, I'm interested in how social media works, at what speed things happen in parallel and grant access, and on the other hand I'm interested in tradition and societal norms, which are still only changing very slowly,” says Phan. When she works on new projects, she spends months absorbing and researching before entering her focused production phase. She finds inspiration in the diversity of the Ruhr region, but also in its quietness: “The city is a mixture of awakening and dormancy, and that's a really good reflection of how Germany can be,” says Phan. For her, it's the perfect place to produce something excellent. ●



Phung-Tien Phan Unfolds the Many Roles We Play in Life

The artist's first exhibition at DREI, Cologne, reflects on the social implications of everyday objects and the permanent switching between self and role

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Phung-Tien Phan's name has been circulating in the Rhineland art scene for some time now. Born in Essen, she studied at the city's Folkwang University of the Arts and then at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Some were struck by her tombstone sculptures at Bonner Kunstverein in 2016; others know her as the co-founder of the project space Belle Air (2014–17) in Essen. Nevertheless, her exhibition 'biste links oder frustriert' (Are You Left Wing or Frustrated) at DREI in Cologne marks the artist's first solo show in a commercial gallery.

As in many of her previous works, the sculptures *Volkswagen (Longevity)* and *Volkswagen (Saigon)* (all works 2019) explore the social implications of everyday objects. Both take the form of wheeled wooden cabinets that follow the same set-up: the bottom compartments are painted in monochrome – one in cream, the other dark violet – and equipped with doll's house furniture, resembling sparse studio apartments. Beds, computers, hot plates and record players re-create a miniature interior that recalls urban dwellings. The shelves above are dedicated to shrines resembling those found in Vietnamese Buddhist households, which are central to ancestor worship. Here, plastic rice, tea, a bottle of beer and a can of condensed milk are placed as offerings for the dead. Instead of the traditional candles, yellow and red lightbulbs illuminate the altars. Atop each cabinet, espresso machines serve as vases for bouquets of bamboo twigs and flowers. With their cheerful compositions, Phan's sculptures seem to explore the elements of singledom and family life, basic comforts and material aspiration.

That the transition from childhood to adulthood (and, eventually, parenthood) isn't always smooth is reinforced by a scene from the video *Actress & Actors*, which focuses on a man's marriage proposal. In the presence of his wife, the husband tells us that his plan was set up perfectly during a family vacation in Hong Kong but, right after he popped the question, one of their children wet themselves. Just as life can't be scripted, so Phan's video has no overarching plot; rather, individual shots and sequences stand out in their own right.



Phung-Tien Phan, *Volkswagen (Saigon)* (detail), 2019, presspan, wood veneer, Multiplex plate, wheels, dollhouse furniture, acrylic paint, lamp, devotional picture, teapot, pot with chopsticks and coaster, bowl of rice, spoon, beer, toothpicks, incense, sieve carrier espresso machine, plant, 141 x 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy: the artist and DREI, Cologne



Phung-Tien Phan, 'biste links oder frustriert', 2019, exhibition view, DREI, Cologne. Courtesy: the artist and DREI, Cologne

Actress & Actors has a wonderful medley-like quality, tacking together disparate elements through highly stylized edits and unusual shots, blending them with pop songs and dubbed dialogue from Hollywood films. The video's opening scene shows the artist shifting from her role as an actress to that of a director, emphasizing the many parts that we have to play in life. Elsewhere, two young men who are sometimes filmed in private and sometimes perform stilted dialogues in scripted situations highlight how people play up for the cameras. The line between filming oneself and being filmed, between being oneself and playing a role, becomes increasingly blurred.

The great thing about this exhibition is its accessibility. We can all relate to playing roles in public or private, to growing pains and a version of adulthood that isn't what we had envisioned for ourselves. In spite of this, Phan manages to wrest so much beauty from the everyday, reminding us why we go on nonetheless.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Phung-Tien Phan, 'biste links oder frustriert' is on view at DREI, Cologne, from 9 November 2019 to 18 January 2020.

Main image: Phung-Tien-Phan, Lil Emo, 2019, toy trucks and photographs in presspan collecting vitrines with sliding glass panes, 6 parts, each: 60 × 80 × 9 cm. Courtesy: the artist and DREI, Cologne

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MORITZ SCHEPER

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View of "Phung-Tien Phan," 2019–2020. From left: *Volkswagen (Longevity)*, 2019; *Volkswagen (Saigon)*, 2019. COLOGNE

Phung-Tien Phan

DREI

Jülicher Strasse 4

November 9, 2019–January 18, 2020

The unspectacular drama of Phung-Tien Phan's recent show unfolds around a European vision of Millennial respectability: spacious prewar apartments, retro kitchen appliances, and carefully curated pop references. Aimlessly quotidian, the video *Actress & Actors* (all works 2019) follows cultivated white men as they flaneur their way through posh neighborhoods and lush fields to the sounds of Carly Simon or the Strokes. Meanwhile, Phan herself makes phone calls, brews coffee, arranges an interior set. The cuts in *Actress & Actors* are abrupt, and the audio rarely syncs. At one point, the men suddenly seem to be miming a passage from Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003)—but, as the work's title reminds us, they've probably been performing all along. Though these might sound like the hallmarks of avant-garde

montage, the effect is less Brechtian alienation than awkward self-deprecation: Phan's film is the kind of funny where you want to laugh but are never quite sure if you're supposed to.

The ambivalence underlying Phan's role as bourgeois European grows deeper with the two sculptures titled *Volkswagen (Longevity)* and *Volkswagen (Saigon)*. Decidedly shabby, these portable shelving units each contain one scale model of a cramped studio apartment—like those common in Vietnamese cities—and one reinterpretation of the kind of scaled down Buddhist altars popular among the country's diaspora. Phan contrasts these homages to her ancestral home with relics from her actual one: vintage European espresso machines, humorously repurposed as floral vases resting on top of the sculptures. Much like the cuts in *Actress & Actors*, the assemblages suggest that biography can be shown not through a single location or scene, but rather through what happens in between.

—Stanton Taylor