

From object-lab (“object as laboratory”) to text-lab (“text as laboratory”). A Vietnamese journey.¹

A Bui Lê Tran painting is hanging up on the wall. Another by Hong, they are *untitled*. A reproduction of a Huynh Van Thuan poster is hanging up too. Here, on the walls, there are photographs, old and recent, of different sizes, aluminium mounted prints, framed, printed and simply held with Blu-Tack prints. Some photographs came from private collections, along with private letters. Here is a travel photo diary, dated summer 2013 from Hanoi, Hoa Lu, Ha Long Bay, Hué, the 17th parallel north... collected or bought trip memorabilia. A few press clippings about the Công Binhs or Linh Thos, the displaced Indochinese workers forced to move to and work in France, is laying. Film and soundtrack clips are also piled up.

The exhibition is set up within a shimmering aspect of shapes and points of view, of personal, intimate, familial and even shared elements – politics, geo-strategy, colonization and independence history... And set up somewhere in-between the artificial pictures, the memories that need creating, somewhere within the wavering knowledge and memories, where all possible interactions are reflected.

Like a filing cabinet full of actions to be imagined, a paradoxical collection of implicit information, or a laboratory transmitting creative doubt. They are intended to be formed, brought together and consumed with no limits. They are intended to be disturbed, deployed and spread, swapped, exchanged and traded. Adjustable, surprising, extensive, the set-up is part of a disturbing, deploying and disseminating game. A piece of lambrequin or terracotta acroterion, a glazed vestige, tiny and delicate, from an ancient palace, which architecture was thousand times rebuilt, challenges the cut-out red star on a cap for tourists. Old tree seeds, collected on a beach, interplay with Hồ Chí Minh’s face on the 2000 Đông note. Huynh Van Thuan’s *Brave and Steady* poster interacts with Hong’s *Untitled* painting. A photo of the Mobyette, witness to the colonial rule and French commercial influence, echoes Bui Lê Tran’s scooter painting. Nguyen Van Thanh’s interview echoes the recent reviews of the *Immigrés de force*² book and the *La longue nuit indochinoise*³ film, in a weekly newspaper.

The objects come together and they come apart through the visitors’ memories and discussions. According to personal history, the situation or the people present, with whom the visitors are talking, a family photo of a great-uncle and uncle, wearing a military uniform in Saigon in 1952, and the framed portrait of this same great-uncle wearing a Navy uniform in 1928, can bring representations together, or break them apart. The photographs move towards the combination of colonial exhibitions (The “Indochinese” Hindu of the 1906 exhibition in Marseille), and towards the welcoming of the Indochinese⁴, the “Indochinese mutiny”⁵, and towards the repression of Yen Bai’s nationalist uprising (1930). They then progress towards postcards showing the celebrations of Khai Dinh and Bao Dai’s reigns, shots taken by Charles Lansiaux of the Annamite troops’ parade on the Champs-Élysées on the 14th of July 1916, and monuments from the Indochinese section of the 1931 colonial exhibition. They bring together the images from school books, tourist posters⁶, invitations to shows⁷, anti-imperialist posters⁸ and leaflets⁹.

1 ¹ [The exhibition](#) and the text refer to [EMEE COP 1, 2 and 3](#), and toolkits 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

2 Pierre Daum (2009). *Immigrés de force : Les travailleurs indochinois en France (1939-1952)*. Arles : Actes Sud.

3 Lam Lê (2012). *Công Binh, La longue nuit indochinoise*.

4 Jean Ajalbert (1906). *L’Indo-Chine en péril*. Paris : P.-V. Stock. p. 82-83, footnote 1.

5 ⁵ *Le Petit Journal*, Sunday illustrated supplement of April 1, 1900.

6 Pia (1930). *Tonkin Delta. Gouvernement général. L’Indochine française*. Poster. Hanoi : Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient.

Vincent Guerra (1950). *Air France Extrême Orient*. Poster. Paris : Imprimerie Alépée et Cie.

7 André Desmeures (1931). *Le tour du monde en un jour*. Poster of the International Colonial Exhibition.

8 Anonymous (1931). *La vérité sur les colonies*. Poster. Archives du Parti Communiste Français.

9 Collectif de douze surréalistes (30 avril 1931). *Ne visitez pas l’Exposition Coloniale*. Archives of the French Communist Party.

They encourage the reading of Léon Werth's, Paul Louis' or Georges Altman's texts in *Monde*¹⁰, another old weekly newspaper.

There are other memorabilia too: Dien Biên Phu, Central Park, the Tet Offensive, the Fall of Saigon... Helicopters flying to the sound of *the Ride of the Valkyries*¹¹ brings the conversation to the Rolling Stones' *Satisfaction*, to the Doors' *The End* or Vincent Scotto's *La petite Tonkinoise*. The conversation is diverted again: Woodstock, *Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag* as well as Nick Ut's, Marc Riboud's, Don McCullin's and Raymond Depardon's photographs, Chris Marker's and François Reichenbach's *The Six Side of the Pentagon* or Jasper Johns' *Flag*.

Times get confused, causing a factual anachronism where the object becomes “object as document”, “object as laboratory” to borrow, to collect, to handle, to experiment with in the here and now, when the mind begins to listen to the exchanges, files them, scatters them and disposes of them in a bundle of memories, thoughts and mixed accounts. The work of art is no longer what is observable, stuck in a display case, hanging from a rail, or perched on a stand, but rather what, in the temporality of perception, research, realisation and thought, is constantly revised, thanks to the involvement of every new contributor, and every new co-author, present at the event or not. The potential classification of a track, a clue, a testimony, whether or not they are kept for the time of their activation, and possibly beyond, whether or not they are enhanced by contractual archives, work notes, markings and recordings (audio, video, computer...), whether they are systematically or randomly collected. There is a hybridisation of the exhibition, whose presentation – the exhibit that is traditionally exposed to the public is replaced by a plastic notation that needs to be interpreted – relies on its activation, transformation and documentation – the research and transmission protocols (cartel, catalogue, dedicated website...) -, which are constantly self-produced by the questioning of visitors, authors and guides, as the scenography, museography and mediation.

The public invades the laboratory – a real and virtual setting and support, more or less defined within an open network -, subverts the exhibits – the materials of experience – to lead their own experiments, exchange with others, and invent their own replacements. Because it is perpetually formed by the co-authors' decisions, actions, and their ability to change its pattern, scenario and context, the project's status cannot be limited to that of a stable exhibition; it is open to a random multiplication. The “object as document” becomes plastic, and simply a stand for a notation, a collection of stories and conversations, adapted to interchangeable presentation methods. The exhibition becomes an interplay of elements, a collective and creative act relating to everyday life, and activated by the transformation of mental depictions and the reliance on memory.

Just like the object, the cartel, the accompanying text, and the catalogue, become part of the laboratory. The texts are open to being cut and pasted, to having labels and comments sewn onto them, to having glosses and annotations added next to them; they are open to any form of cooperation. They are unstable, modular, maybe even recyclable, and purposely interactive; they are the experimental material of a score, where each word, each expression, each sentence, each discrepancy in meaning, allow exchange as much as they allow disturbance, disruption, cross-contamination, and insurrection, by the interplay of temporalities, the activation of stories, other discourses and new mediation.

Jean-Marie Baldner. Auvers-sur-Oise, January 18, 2014.

10 ¹ *Monde*, Weekly (1928-1935) directed by Henri Barbusse, special issue of August 29, 1931.

11 ¹ Francis Ford Coppola (1979). *Apocalypse Now*.