

George Papadimas (with Nguyen Thanh Truc).
Static Motion, 2010

***Écriture Blanche* and the Machine that Makes Art**

Feminist theorist, art critic and curator Lucy Lippard, recalling her memories of Sol Lewitt – one of the leading proponents of conceptual art – in an interview, stated, “I read . . . all the French *nouveaux romans* before a lot of people, because Sol (Lewitt) was reading them... You could just discuss all kinds of things with him” (1). This statement belies Sol Lewitt’s influence upon her generation’s reading habits.

For anyone who is familiar with the French *nouveaux romans* (2) movement, that one of the fathers of conceptual art appreciates it is understandable.

Although many authors associated with this literary movement each has her/his own concept of literature, it is their usage of – in Lucy Lippard’s words again – “object-oriented writing” (3) that links all of them together in a movement. For Alain Robbe-Grillet it is his determination to distinguish between outside reality and a human being’s anthropocentric projection; for Nathalie Sarraute it is the deconstruction of “characters” in order to unveil their psychological depths; for Michel Butor it is the recognition of historical capital in our vision of reality.

Lucy Lippard’s “object-oriented writing” in fact, is referred to as “écriture blanche” by J.P. Sartre, and later, “neutral writing” or “degree zero writing” by Roland Barthes. This writing

takes its place in the midst of all those ejaculations and judgments, without becoming involved in any of them . . . [and] is then reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or mythical characters of a language are abolished in favor of a neutral and inert state of form (4).

In her Ph.D. thesis *Alain Robbe-Grillet, Truth and Interpretation* (5), philologist Nguyễn Thị Từ Huy has tried to investigate “neutral writing” by exploring hermeneutically the operation of the collection of natural numbers in the writings of Alain Robbe-Grillet who is considered the “pope” of the French *nouveaux romans* movement.

In the section entitled “ruin, interruption, pause, incompleteness; the condition of the collection of natural numbers” [‘Đổ nát, đứt đoạn, tạm ngưng, dang dở: các điều kiện cho sự tái diễn’] (6), Từ Huy writes:

If an affair could be repeated, that is because it contains some- thing being incomplete, or not figured out yet . . . this opens up a possibility to come back, that is, to go into the future . . . it has its future because it creates an opportunity for someone to come back to it, and for its continuity (7).

Từ Huy has observed that “in Alain Robbe-Grillet’s writing, the narrative is always incomplete. It always stops at its beginning . . .” (8). “It is the operation of repetition that helps Alain Robbe-Grillet reduce [or conceal] the author’s emotion, that is, to block himself from a process of falling into the anthropocentric mentality of a “traditional” author and creates a “neutral writing,” a “degree zero writing” which makes text to be “boring and strange as well as not welcoming the

readers” (9). To enter into a text written by “transparent writing,” the reader, for Alain Robbe-Grillet, “must be really careful and thoughtful” because “this is a sort of labor” (10).

This very characteristic of the French *nouveaux romans* movement, I think, is the main reason that Sol Lewitt loved to read it, as well as recommend it to his friends and students.

Sol Lewitt’s essay “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” is considered by Alexander Alberro – a professor of modern and contemporary art at Barnard College and well-known author on conceptual art – as the “first manifesto of conceptual art” (11). In this polemic, Lewitt notes, “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art . . . It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become *emotionally dry*” (12).

A work of art created to be “emotionally dry” in order to be more “mentally interesting” must be the visual version of the literary concept of a “transparent writing,” “neutral writing,” or “degree zero writing.” In these forms of writing, by “not creating spaces for [the] readers’ imagination,” (13) there is no promise of emotional identification; it only offers to them a “lecture blanche” [transparent reading], in which “the readers must accept to be outside of the text” (14).

In a similar way, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s use of repetition in his writing shares the same aim – of the “mechanical” processes of making art by conceptual artists, particularly Sol Lewitt. Their shared target is the creation of a space in which readers/spectators of a given text or artwork forgo passive emotional identification but rather take on the active role of intellectually restructuring the creative work.

It is also the space that I think we can find in the exhibition *Static Motion*.

Mental Pleasure

George Papadimas has brought to this exhibition conceptual work: ten black painted sculptures, which relate to a collection of ten natural numbers from 0 to 9.

For Papadimas, the collection of ten natural numbers from 0 to 9 has been a long-term subject of investigation: this numerical collection is fundamental, one which envelops all possible different numerical variations.

Papadimas then separates this collection of natural numbers into five numerical pairs: 0/9, 1/8, 2/7, 3/6, 4/5. Of these five numerical pairs, four pairs (1/8, 2/7, 3/6, 4/5) share the same relationship between even-ness/odd-ness. However, the relationship of the pair 0/9 is a special one. According to Papadimas’s formulation, the number 9 is the greatest one in the collection of numbers from 0 to 9. This means all possible numbers after the number 9 are only differently and endlessly repeated compositions of the numerical numbers from 0 to 9. Because of that, the number 9, philosophically speaking, takes the middle position between *finitude* [originality] and *infinitude* [repetition]. In comparison with the number 9, the number 0 is also the mediated one, but not between finitude and infinitude, but between being and nothingness. From this point of view, the number 0 is an extreme nothing number, located at the ending point of nothingness, which is also the beginning point of being. As a result, the relationship between number 0 and number 9 is an especially extreme one between extreme nothingness and extreme being.

In this pair of 0 and 9, the number 9 (representing extreme being) could be depicted visually; the number 0 (representing extreme nothingness), however, is something that could never be depicted

visually. In other words, because the number 0 is the representation for extreme nothingness, any endeavor to represent it will come to destroy the very representation itself.

After considerable thought on how to represent the number 0 physically and after realizing that it is somewhat impossible, Papadimas has come to a solution for his *cul de sac*. For him, the number 0, symbol of extreme non-being, need not be represented. The reason for his decision is that the very existence of the extreme being has implications for the existence of extreme nothingness.

This seemingly paradoxical formulation could be articulated if we refer to Papadimas's exhibition statement on the relationship between two numbers in each numerical pair which he has formulated. For him, two numbers in each numerical pair "are bound together as parts of a mutual whole – Yin-Yang analogy."

In Asian philosophy, Yin and Yang elements essentially are inseparable. They do not exist in a relationship where the visibility of one component means the invisibility of the other. Conversely, they are two halves of endless movement which is able to create life. Existing not as two contrasting factors in a mutually negative relationship, Yin and Yang must be read as two stations in an endless circle where the existence of this factor is the condition of the possibility for the existence of the other, and vice versa, by which a dynamic equilibrium – the basis for the formation of the world – is created.

Let's return to Papadimas's work in *Static Motion*. Each of the ten pieces of Papadimas' artwork is the artist's representation of a particular numerical pair in the collection of natural numbers from 0 to 9. Nevertheless, these representations do not depend on the artist's random emotion. In fact, they were made from a rigorously logical process where each different shaped variation of a cube follows exactly a particular model formed by connecting two points in a numerical pair in a three-dimensional coordinate system, which was built in accord with that cube.

Due to this fact, Papadimas's ten representations of ten numerical pairs in this exhibition are not only purely aesthetic sculptures-in-process with which spectators need to have a particular level of emotional identification and concentration. In fact, those black, differently shaped cubes are only ten stations of an endless continuum of an object moving-in-space, which was captured by Papadimas.

As a result, what viewers will get here is not (only) a sort of Kantian aesthetic pleasure created by a "free play among the faculties: intellect, imagination and perception" when they encounter beautiful objects (15). It is in the viewer's very process of reasoning in order to capture mutual relationships in the work that a mental pleasure will appear. That is the pleasure birthed at the moment between two endlessly and mutually changeable states – the state of a dynamic puzzle and the state of a static answer.

Transitory Place

Despite its surface, Nguyễn Thanh Trúc's work in this exhibition echoes "neutral" or "degree zero writing" and the anti-representational tendencies of conceptual art. Nonetheless, the work at its discursive level translates conceptual art practice into new contexts.

In *Static Motion*, Nguyễn exhibits ten paintings; they are different in format and size but uniform in their visual shape and creation process. The surface of all the paintings are shaped similarly by thin lines of paper cut from Vietnamese newspaper and magazines collected by the artist. Therefore, in a sense, Nguyễn's ten paintings are not separate Tolstoyian or Freudian "windows" between the

artist's soul and the world outside. They are not even Foucaultian locations where the art critics could possibly find the hidden discourses or messages which together build the *episteme* of the artist's time. Similar to Papadimas's ten "sculptures," Nguyễn's paintings in the exhibition are only ten moments in an endless movement, ten stations in a flying trajectory without beginning or end, ten operations in a mechanical process – to use Sol Lewitt's words – to "make art."

In contrast to Papadimas's œuvre, Nguyễn's practice is not based purely upon the minimalizational reasoning and a self-sufficient philosophical *weltanschauung*.

Even on a practical level, Nguyễn's mechanical process of creating paintings not dependent on random emotions as well as his display of ten similar paintings create a serialized format helping him to build a minimal/conceptual environment for his artwork.

However, it is the artist's chosen material which appears to contrast completely with conceptual art: the lines of text cut from recent Vietnamese newspapers and magazines, chosen by Nguyễn intentionally to make artwork seem to show referential, narrative space.

Seen at a distance, Nguyễn's "paintings" look almost identical with all the lines of paper on their surface seemingly captured in the same way in ten similarly centripetal movements. However, the closer we come to them, the more we see that those lines of paper create different references on reality and all of them together seem to build up a greater referent space on Vietnamese social, economic and political conditions now. Although the information from those specifically chosen lines of text cannot speak completely about Vietnamese socio-economic and political events, anyone who is concerned a bit about present-day Vietnam will find there many clear references, which range from the penalty given to a Vedan factory for polluting the Thị Vải River to the exclusion of a key player from the Vietnamese national football team right before the Seagames (sort of an Olympic game among Southeast Asian nations).

As a result, Nguyễn's practice sits at the very transitory place between a non-referent, anti-narrative space of conceptual/minimal art and an informatively chaotic space which is usually seen in contemporary art practices.

Arguably, it is this transitory place that is a translated text, or in other words, a creative repetition of Nguyễn, a young Vietnamese artist, in the beginning years of a new millennium, to a western text/art movement which in a sense at this moment is at its end (16).

The Dialogues

From a curatorial viewpoint, the exhibition *Static Motion* has produced several interesting dialogues by juxtaposing the same- and- different practices of Nguyễn Thanh Trúc and George Papadimas.

In this artistic dialogue, the use of repetition, Western and Asian elements, representation and minimality are not binaries but constitute a non-dualistic whole. Within this whole, Papadimas's and Nguyễn's works simultaneously function as possibility and development, seed and fruition, call and response, backdrop and foreground.

It is this non-dualistic dialogue that becomes the material which helps them to reach a joy, to use Evelyne Grossman's words, "of dismantling factors and structures of text, of making the world to be disappeared and re-appeared in two at-the-same-time activities; dismantling and re-structuring" (17).

That is the joy coming from “mental pleasure” which the dual practices of George Papadimas and Nguyễn Thanh Trúc are offering.

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Endnotes

- (1) Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2008), 202.
- (2) “Rejecting many of the established features of the novel to date, Robbe-Grillet regarded many earlier novelists as old-fashioned in their focus on plot, action, narrative, ideas, and character. Instead, he put forward a theory of the novel as focused on objects: the ideal *nouveau roman* would be an individual version and vision of things, subordinating plot and character to the details of the world rather than enlisting the world in their service.”
“Nouveau Roman,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nouveau_roman (accessed March 4, 2010).
- (3) Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, 203.
- (4) Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 77.
- (5) Nguyễn Thị Từ Huy, *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Sự Thật và Diễn Giải* (Hanoi: Daiviet Books, 2009).
- (6) *Ibid.*, 362.
- (7) *Ibid.*, 362-363.
- (8) *Ibid.*, 363.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 365.
- (10) *Ibid.*, 249. (footnote n. 1).
- (11) Alexander Alberro, “Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977,” in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), xx.
- (12) Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, A Source Book of Art Writing*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 822.
- (13) Nguyễn, *Alain Robbe-Grillet*, 243.
- (14) *Ibid.*, 31.
- (15) Immanuel Kant, *Phê Phán Năng Lực Phán Đoán, Mỹ Học và Mục Đích Luận*, trans. Bùi Văn Nam Sơn (Hanoi: Tri Thức Publisher, 2007), 136.
- (16) For further reading, please refer to: *Art After Conceptual Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000). (17) Nguyễn, *Alain Robbe-Grillet*, 249.