

## Plaza Plays Place

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[See table of contents](#)

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## Plaza Plays Place

Tak Pham

**NEUTRAL GROUND ARTIST-RUN CENTRE  
REGINA  
FEBRUARY 1 –  
MARCH 21, 2020\***



“Have you ever noticed the sounds that your neighbours make?”—as an urbanite, I certainly have and more so in the last few months. At the moment of writing this review, I have been self-isolating in my apartment for over 40 days—exceeding the conceptual limit of “quarantine.”<sup>1</sup> Restless days filled with anxiety about the state of the world, I have grown more acute to cues that signal movements of anybody approaching my door. I still do not know the names of my neighbours, or rather other tenants on my floor. But through my poorly soundproofed apartment, I can tell them apart from conversations muffling down the hallway, or how heavy their feet land on the stairs.

It was that interest in how unique individuals would live together and among each other in cities that inspired the conception of the exhibition *Plaza Plays Place*. For some time, artists Hannah Doucet, John Patterson and Rachael Thorleifson were roommates in Winnipeg where they were art students. When they took up residence in an apartment building, they quickly realized that they did not share the space just among themselves. Over time, they became familiarized, not only with each other’s routines, but also with those of the neighbours inside and outside of their building.

You could hear the pathways that our neighbours took through their apartment. When they played music, their footsteps would occasionally synchronize with the drum tracks. We also pounded around our apartment. We walked repeatedly with the same gait over the worn-out sections of floor. You could see the reactions on the floor’s surface. Clear coat is stripped away and replaced with dust.<sup>2</sup>

Asking “what are the sounds of our periphery life?” the trio started tracing the layout of their apartment, accounting for every corner, column, doorway and windows. Inside the gallery of Neutral Ground

Artist-Run Centre in Regina, the artists’ living space emerged from a series of wide-open doorways and opaque facades. Presented as a bricolage of each artists’ unique aesthetics, the exhibition was an expansive installation composed of multiple monochrome spray-painted steel frames and panels. Resembling doors and wall panels, these frames invited visitors to enter the space; but more importantly, they delineated and constructed a conceptually generic layout that would host and nurture a variety of lifestyles. Within the square footage of a space, different occupants could invite a myriad of uses. “Would my bedroom be their bedroom?” “Would they work from their kitchen table or from their bed?” These sorts of the questions not only sketch a rough picture of the neighbours through their behaviours and movements, but also impact other tenants relative to how similar their lifestyles are.

Urban dwelling is a symbiotic relationship. The proximity between people occupying the same space, on top of one another, is poignantly reflected in a steel sign that was hung from the column nearest to the entrance of the gallery. The sign reads “I CAN IMAGINE US SITTING IN A TRIANGLE, CROSS LEGGED AND KNEE TO KNEE.” The same message is then repeated in a video installed across the room and seen through a cut out on a panel. The text is part of a video montage that features lines such as “DUST LIFTED FROM THE FLOOR. WE MOPPED IT UP?” “WHAT ARE THEY MOVING DOWN THERE?” “HARDWOOD SAWDUST WORN BY BAREFEET,” “ANARCHY, INTUITIVE DESIGN, INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY, WISDOM OF CROWDS,” and “SOMETIMES OUR NEIGHBOURS WOULD ARGUE.” Silently emitting into the open space of the gallery, these messages read like thoughts that people would say to themselves inside their home. These internal non-articulated thoughts lingered as the visitors maneuvered their way through the doorframes and around the panels to advance further into the gallery.

At the back of the gallery, attached to surfaces such as wallpaper or window curtains, photos printed on fabric and decals depicted idle urban scenes: a lawn chair on the pavement, a moon over townhouses, a water bucket on the ground, etc. These structures, images, spatial interventions constructed a room that was neither inside nor outside. Trapped in a hallway, the visitors could feel the enclosure while encountering cues that suggested the greater outdoors beyond the walls. *Plaza Plays Place* poetically captured the tension and the melancholy of becoming accustomed to a sound, a sight, a moment, or any ordinary phenomenon—without ever knowing the other people with whom you shared your living space; as they would only take up space in the periphery of your daily life.

All these marginal elements would make up what I call an “urban blue”—a tune that is both nostalgic and phantomic, both comforting and alien. It is the soundtrack that routinely plays in your background, until one day you notice that those familiar morning footsteps have ceased to come from the apartment above. You start to wonder what has happened to that tenant. Did they move out? Or have they gone on vacation? What about those Saturday night parties that kept you up until 5 in the morning? Through *Plaza Plays Place*, Doucet, Patterson and Thorleifson wanted to make us aware of those peripheral moments.

Due to COVID-19, the exhibition did not finish its full run. It was closed a week early in response to self-isolation measures from the international governments and local authorities. Like myself, the exhibition is trapped

in this peripheral state. We both circle around a layout of a space that we can still afford until the floors beneath us are worn out and the dust starts to settle.

1. As an effort to curb the spread of the plague epidemic in the 14th century, coastal cities in the Italian peninsula such as Venice mandated crews on ships arriving from infected ports to remain on board for at least 40 days—or *quaranta giorni* in Italian.
2. Hannah Doucet, John Patterson, and Rachael Thorleifson, *What Are the Sounds of Our Periphery Life?* 2020. Exhibition multiple. Editions of 50.

\* The exhibition closed on March 17, 2020.

Tak Pham is a Vietnamese art curator and critic. He is a graduate of Carleton University and OCAD University. His critical writings and reviews have appeared in *ESPACE art actuel*, *esse arts + opinions*, *Canadian Art*, *The Senses and Society Journal* and *The Dance Current* among others. Pham is currently Assistant Curator at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota and on the homeland of the Métis Nation.



## Thao Nguyen Phan, *Monsoon Melody*

Antoinette Jattiot

### WIELS

#### BRUXELLES

1 FÉVRIER –

16 AOÛT 2020\*

*Monsoon Melody*, la plus grande exposition à ce jour de l'artiste vietnamienne Thao Nguyen Phan, se dévoile comme l'architecture d'un opéra dont chaque décor accroché à un cintre défilerait au gré de l'histoire contée. Pour cette présentation au WIELS à Bruxelles, les œuvres de l'ensemble des trois chapitres sont donc, pour la plupart, suspendues dans l'espace et dialoguent en diptyque, entre images animées (*moving images* comme l'artiste aime les appeler) et peintures.

Dans la première salle, le cadre d'abord plus documentaire de *Becoming Alluvium* (2019, 16 min 50 s)<sup>1</sup> nous plonge dans l'héritage écologique, colonialiste et historique du Vietnam qui imprègne l'œuvre tout entière. La zone est chaude, sans saison ni recommencement. Une force calme émane d'une voix hors champ, marquée notamment par le souvenir de l'*Amant* de Duras. Le film, empreint de mysticisme, se déploie peu à peu le long des images du fleuve Mékong, puis au cours de libres associations qui lui répondent : accumulations matérielles d'offrandes et de décors de temples, tas d'ordures, rats en cage... Se dessinant comme le propre mythe de l'artiste, un dernier chapitre s'ouvre au travers d'une animation de collages inspirés d'un conte khmer et d'histoires de réincarnations. Les boîtes du paravent en laque sur bois de *Perpetual Brightness* (2019) faisant face au film laissent apparaître des cartes fragmentées, donnant une vue d'ensemble aux ramifications multiples du fleuve. Abstraites et pourtant si concrètes, les couches de matériaux scintillants composant les panneaux du paravent rappellent aussi les précieuses strates de sédiments – géologiques, spirituelles, culturelles – du fleuve nourricier. Sur les peintures de soie, au verso, Phan fait suite aux mythes du film grâce à la représentation de chérubins, dont certains ressemblent à des figures primordiales de l'hindouisme. Du territoire aux mythes, entre création et destruction, l'ensemble de l'installation illustre l'inextricable dichotomie du Mékong dont l'artiste déplore la tragédie écologique et économique, exhortant pourtant à la sauvegarde de sa beauté.

C'est à partir des textes d'Alexandre de Rhodes, un missionnaire jésuite du 16<sup>e</sup> siècle ayant transcrit la langue vietnamienne en latin, que s'écrit le second chapitre. Du corps central en images-mouvement sur deux écrans de *Tropical Siesta* (2017, 13 min 41 s), l'histoire se déploie ensuite comme une figure tentaculaire dans les salles adjacentes. Dans cette fable en couleurs, Phan étire, dans toute sa longueur, un univers champêtre atemporel a priori onirique, et pourtant discrètement funeste, et où les formes fluettes et endormies des enfants se teintent à nouveau de rouge. De part et d'autre de la vidéo, l'accrochage sur la tranche du cadre de la quasi-totalité des pages de *Voyages de Rhodes* (2014-2017), les feuillets du livre sur lesquels l'artiste a peint des motifs