

BEING CONTEMPORARY: THE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES IN THE ART PRACTICE OF VŨ DÂN TÂN

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ABSTRACT

A significant methodological shift towards holistic approaches to reality in the sciences and humanities could be observed in the last quarter of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st as a result of growing attention to the nonlinear nature of the world and the corresponding nonlinear modes of thinking. The alliances forged among scientific disciplines in the 20th century demonstrated the necessity of overcoming the fragmentation of knowledge and encouraged the development of integrative thinking – an intellectual mode that unites reason, intuition, and imagination in the human mind. Such pluralism gradually advanced from multidisciplinary in which disciplines cooperate without meaningful interaction to interdisciplinarity, characterized by the integration of distinct discourses, and ultimately to transdisciplinarity, which seeks to embrace reality in its entirety and to achieve a unity of knowledge.

The creative arts have also responded to these epistemological transformations by incorporating interdisciplinary strategies into their practice. Contemporary interdisciplinary art, in particular, reveals an engagement with critical thinking and cross-cultural references, demonstrating a commitment to social issues, with a view to fostering meaningful interaction with the audiences. In light of the mentioned development, the present paper will analyze the interdisciplinary approaches in the art of Vũ Dân Tân (1946 – 2009) that appeared at the early emergence of Vietnamese contemporary art. The analysis will focus on selected works that exemplify the integration of disciplines, methods and ideas, while simultaneously establishing dialogue with the public, articulating a new creative language.

Keywords: *art practice; contemporary interdisciplinary art; Vu Dan Tan.*

TÍNH ĐƯƠNG ĐẠI: TIẾP CẬN LIÊN NGÀNH TRONG SÁNG TÁC NGHỆ THUẬT CỦA VŨ DÂN TÂN

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TÓM TẮT

Có thể thấy đã có sự thay đổi phương pháp luận đáng kể hướng tới các phương pháp tiếp cận toàn diện về thực tế trong khoa học và nhân văn diễn ra vào khoảng 30 năm cuối của thế kỷ 20 và đầu thế kỷ 21 do sự chú ý ngày càng tăng đến bản chất phi tuyến tính của thế giới và các phương thức tư duy phi tuyến tính tương ứng. Các mối liên kết được hình thành giữa các ngành khoa học trong thế kỷ 20 đã chứng minh sự cần thiết của việc vượt qua sự phân mảnh kiến thức và khuyến khích sự phát triển của tư duy tích hợp – một phương thức trí tuệ kết hợp lý trí, trực giác và trí tưởng tượng trong tâm trí con người. Chủ nghĩa đa nguyên như

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vây dần dần phát triển từ đa ngành – khi mà các ngành hợp tác nhưng không có tương tác có ý nghĩa sang liên ngành – đặc trưng bởi sự tích hợp của các diễn ngôn riêng biệt, và cuối cùng là xuyên ngành, tìm cách nắm bắt thực tại một cách toàn diện và đạt được sự thống nhất về kiến thức.

Nghệ thuật sáng tạo cũng đã đáp ứng những chuyển đổi nhận thức luận này bằng cách kết hợp các chiến lược liên ngành vào quá trình thực hành nghệ thuật. Đặc biệt, nghệ thuật liên ngành đương đại thể hiện sự gắn kết với tư duy phản biện và các tham chiếu xuyên văn hóa, thể hiện cam kết đối với các vấn đề xã hội, nhằm thúc đẩy sự tương tác có ý nghĩa với khán giả. Dựa trên những phát triển đã đề cập, bài viết này sẽ phân tích các phương pháp tiếp cận liên ngành trong nghệ thuật của Vũ Dân Tân (1946 – 2009) – một nghệ sĩ xuất hiện vào giai đoạn đầu của nghệ thuật đương đại Việt Nam. Bài viết sẽ tập trung vào các tác phẩm tiêu biểu như là những minh họa cho sự kết hợp giữa các ngành nghệ thuật, phương pháp và ý tưởng, đồng thời các tác phẩm cũng tạo ra những cuộc đối thoại với công chúng, hình thành nên một ngôn ngữ sáng tạo mới.

Từ khóa: thực hành nghệ thuật; nghệ thuật liên ngành đương đại; Vũ Dân Tân.

1. INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinarity can never be imposed from the outside. It necessarily comes from the living consciousness within each of the limits of their own discipline and the challenges to be overcome to respond to the complexity of the world today.

(Raynaut 2014)

The epigraphic quotation that opens this essay, drawn from the social anthropologist Claude Raynaut, was previously employed by Rogério B. Parra in a conference paper discussing aeronautics in relation to interdisciplinarity in art, focusing on the scientific enquiries conducted by Leonardo da Vinci more than five centuries ago. Guided by his curiosity, da Vinci engaged in the study of anatomy, mathematics, physics, botany, paleontology, and geography. Besides producing extraordinary paintings and drawings, he demonstrated musical talent, and made important contributions to the fields of physiology, optics, mechanics, and aeronautics. In his projects, he often applied the knowledge and skills acquired from different disciplines, thereby challenging boundaries between sciences or arts. His example demonstrates that principle of interdisciplinarity, though unnamed at the time, was operative long before our era

albeit not always popular. Nevertheless, his ideas and personality continued to influence generations of artists over the centuries.

The creative arts also adapt to emerging trends in the cognitive approach, integrating interdisciplinary strategies into their practices. Furthermore, contemporary interdisciplinary art reveals an engagement with critical thinking and cross-cultural references, showcasing its social responsibility, and seeking to foster interaction with the public.

2. METHODOLOGY

Considering the aforementioned arguments, this paper will examine the interdisciplinary approaches found in the works of Vũ Dân Tân (1946 – 2009), one of the pioneers of Vietnamese contemporary art. The focus will be on particular pieces that illustrate the integration of various disciplines, methods, and ideas, and establish a dialogue with the public, creating a new form of visual expression.

Rather than systematically identifying specific indicators of multi-, inter-, or transdisciplinarity in the art of Vũ Dân Tân, the discussion emphasizes the essence of this phenomenon and examines his works in chronological order, tracing their progression in sophistication and the conceptual growth.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. 1970s – 1980s

Vũ Dân Tân, who has had a passion for drawing since childhood, became captivated by mask-making during the 1970s and 1980s, in addition to his drawing and painting pursuits. Despite the widespread belief that literature on foreign art was largely inaccessible in Vietnam during this period, his library was found to contain books and catalogues on masks from Korea, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Furthermore, he expressed admiration for the masks associated with *commedia dell'arte*, the Italian street comedy theater that flourished in Western Europe from the 16th to the 18th centuries. Another notable reference to *commedia dell'arte* within Vũ Dân Tân's work extends beyond his fascination with its masks to the recurring figure of Arlecchino (Italian) or Harlequin, a trickster character endowed with intelligence and/or magical abilities, who employs these traits to defy conventional social norms and is often described as “boundary-crosser”.¹ Harlequin, or Arlequino which is how the artist names this personage in mixed Italian-French-Russian manner, appears repeatedly in

Vũ Dân Tân's artwork, both in his objects and drawings, often with incorporation of textual elements. The artist frequently identified himself, for instance, in self-portraits, with this theatrical personage from the past.

In the process of producing preparatory drawings or intricate sketches for his masks, Vũ Dân Tân frequently combined the features of masks from different epochs, countries or ethnic groups into unified images. This approach highlighted the universal symbolism and functions of masks, emphasizing their capacity in negating original identity and transforming into another persona or force whether with benevolent and malevolent spirits. Beyond the ritualistic functions and social implications linked to masks, Dân Tân was equally concerned with the technology of mask-making, employing local materials that had not been used for this purpose previously.²

In 1970s, he used such materials as dry fruit-shells or seeds, and bamboo-trunks for his masks, in 1980s and early 1990s – baskets woven from bast or traditional fans for winnowing rice.³ It should be mentioned that from the early stage, the artist has consistently shown a desire to create his works using



Figure 1: Vũ Dân Tân's masks from different local materials.

Image courtesy: Natalia Kraevskaia

¹ See for details the following publication of Lewis Hyde (Hyde 1998).

² It is important to note that for Vũ Dân Tân, a mask was not merely a wearable accessory, but rather an artistic object imbued with symbolism, meaning, and aesthetic value.

³ Vũ Dân Tân's unconventional approach to utilizing materials for mask-making was featured in both local and international publications as early as the late 1990s. (Howard 1997: 58-59), (Vân 1997).

unconventional materials or prefabricated items obfuscating the distinction between fine art and applied arts. According to art historian Iola Lenzi, “Vũ’s masks defied the norm in their medium, imagery, lack of signature, and purpose” (Lenzi 2012: 23).

The masks created by Vũ Dân Tân in this stage do not embody a complete form of interdisciplinarity. Nevertheless, their multimedia nature suggests a potential for the artist’s forthcoming interdisciplinary endeavors.

3.2. 1990s – 2000s

3.2.1. *Artists books*

A particularly noteworthy, though relatively obscure, early artist book by Vũ Dân Tân was compiled in 1994, derived from the photo-documentation of his proto-installation created in 1991.

The concept of the ‘artist book’ inherently assumes a multi- or interdisciplinary approach. So, what precisely constitutes an artist’s book? They are, first and foremost, artistic creations. They are produced by artists, illustrators, printmakers, writers and poets, and collaborative creative collectives with the aim of crafting a distinctive art object. Based on the form or function of a book as an idea and a source of inspiration, artists’ books could adopt diverse formats beyond the form of the book, including scrolls, accordion, sculptures, or a collection of assorted small items housed in a box. They might be produced through printing or photocopying, resulting in a limited editions, or meticulously hand-crafted as a singular, unique piece.

Though juxtaposition of the artists’ books to standard books’ publishing could be traced back to the early twentieth century avant-garde – including Surrealism, Dada, Futurism, Constructivism, and Fluxus -, the medium

only crystalized as a distinct practice within Conceptual art during the 1960s and 1970s. These days, artists’ books occupy a unique space at the intersections of visual art, graphic design, photography, experimental literature, employing a diverse array of techniques that range from traditional to experimental. Creating artist books is also an opportunity to operate beyond institutional or commercial constraints, allowing for a critique of conventional and market-driven practices.⁴

The artist’s book “Compositions”, subtitled “Silence of Silence”, exemplified this practice. The book compiled in 1994, features photographs capturing the intricate details of the coconut-scoop installation, which was produced by Vũ Dân Tân at Salon Natasha in 1991. Although this installation was still formalistic, it had a transformative and performative quality: the artist altered the arrangement of the coconut scoops over several hours, engaged in performance with them and invited others to photograph the process. These images were subsequently assembled into the artist’s book in the following years.

Throughout his career, Vũ Dân Tân produced approximately one hundred artist’s books, often combining conceptual rigor with emotional resonance. Vũ Dân Tân appears to have inherited a special passion for book production from his childhood years. His father Vũ Đình Long, a renowned Vietnamese playwright, was also a founder and owner of the notable Hanoi publishing house “Tan Dan” located at 93 Hang Bong Street, and the family resided on the upper floor of the building, so Tân, as a young boy, often watched manual typesetting and printing of books and magazines. In his own book-making process he combined the concept of reproduction provided by

⁴ Vũ Dân Tân created a significant number of art books during the early to mid-1990s. This early output of contemporary and conceptual works demonstrates that Vietnamese contemporary art, even in its formative years, was not entirely disconnected from global artistic movements. While the early 1990s may not have marked a collective shift towards innovation in visual art, they were nonetheless characterized by remarkable individual experimentations.

printing method with notions of originality and singularity. Almost all his pieces retain the crucial features of a book which allows physical moving through an artwork by turning pages. Consisting primary from visual images they also contain the specific details of books' textual layout such as signs of copyright, year of production, title, subtitles, name of the author, and so on.⁵

This ability to observe, dismantle and connect features and ideas across disciplines can be seen in later, more conceptual works by the artist, created in 1990s and 2000s. The main connections and relationships in the interdisciplinary art of Vũ Dân Tân, along with the context in which it was produced and presented, will be discussed in the following section.

3.2.2. *Mythology, literature and language in Vũ Dân Tân's art*

One of the most prominent and earliest dimensions of interdisciplinarity in Vũ Dân Tân's oeuvre is the integration of mythology, literature, and language – often through linguistic play – into the visual fabric of his works. The deployment of language, and its fusion with imagery, varies both in formal strategies and in intended effects..

1) There are a limited number of works or series that consist solely of linguistic elements or text, whether authentic or invented, without any supplementary figurative imagery.

The earliest documented work that incorporates language is the artist's self-portrait, dated 1975, which is designed by using sentences in Spanish and can be interpreted as both a formal experiment and a manifestation of the artist's personal affinity for the Spanish language. The work also bears a reference to his trip to Cuba, where he worked at the animation studio of the Cuban television in 1973-1974 as

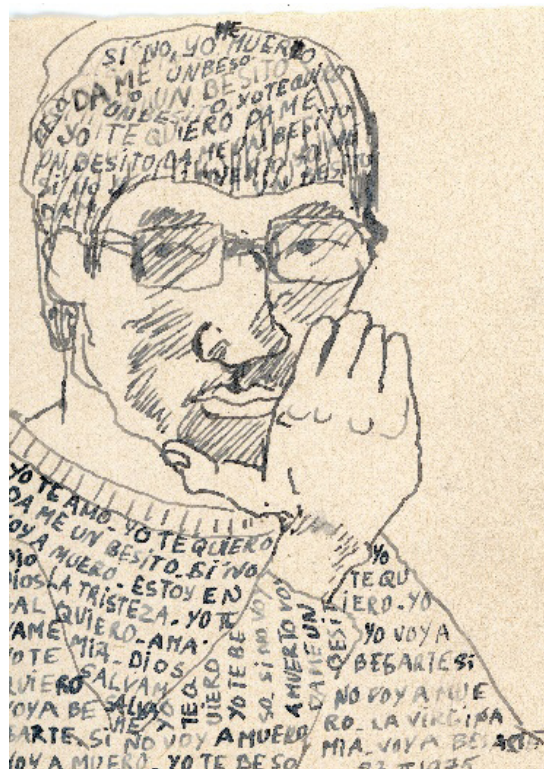


Figure 2: Vũ Dân Tân. Self-portrait, ink on paper, 14 x 8,7 cm, 1975.

Image courtesy: Natalia Kraevskaia

part of a professional exchange. Vũ Dân Tân's legacy also encompasses a series of small drawings from 1989, which showcase abstract texts composed in invented alphabets, following a style akin to his larger gouaches produced in 1986. Although these works may seem formally incomprehensible, they evoke associations with poetry or musical scores. Furthermore, several pieces are titled "Poem" or "Sonata", establishing links to the domains of literature and music.

2) The artist consistently integrates slogans, aphorisms, and literary quotations into his works, employing them in both their original context and a rephrased, ironic manner.

A prominent illustration is the well-known slogan used by Republicans during the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939, which later became linked to the Cuban revolution:

⁵ A comprehensive examination of the genre of the artist books of Vũ Dân Tân is provided in the article by the author (Kraevskaia 2015: 52-53).



Figure 3: Vũ Dân Tân. Beauty will save the world. Money series.

Gouache, acrylic, and ink on paper, 21 x 30 cm, 1998-1999.

Image courtesy: Natalia Kraevskaia

“Patria o muerte!” (“Motherland or death!”). In his series entitled “Money”, the artist alters this phrase to “Millionario o muerte!” (“Millionaires or death!”), thus ironically alluding to the rise of a new class of nouveaux riches in the post-Đổi Mới Vietnam.

The slogan that is originally attributed to Napoleon, “Everything or nothing!” was reformulated by the artist to read, “Napoleon or nothing!” (“Napoléon ou rien!” in French). This phrase appeared on his currency bills from a series of money, serving as a sardonic critique of those who seek excessive rewards. Among other well-known quotations he employed, including the Latin phrase “Quo Vadis?” (“Where are you going?”) and his own coined expression “L’homme sans pays” (“A man without a country”), the most frequently cited was Dostoevsky’s declaration, “Beauty will save

the world”, a belief he held with great fervor.

3) Text also appeared in Vũ’s works as a background for paper support: the artist frequently chose to draw and paint on repurposed materials: newspapers, magazine pages, advisements, utilized pages from pupils’ notebooks, or envelopes.⁶ This connection between image and language was not accidental; rather the artist intentionally harnessed the presence of words to amplify the visual message conveyed through his compositions.

4) The intersection of literature and culture within the artist’s visual repertoire is marked by the inclusion of figures such as Helen of Troy, Esmeralda, Carmen, Don Quixote and Sancho, Magdalena, and Charlie Chaplin, among others. It is essential to acknowledge that the artist incorporated quotations and figures from global

⁶ See the comment of Pamela Corey about the artist’s particular passion for “reworking objects and surfaces that were themselves products of graphic reproduction” (Corey 2024: 25).

mythology, literature, and history into his creations not merely to demonstrate his wide erudition or to narrate historical accounts. Rather, his primary purpose was to respond to contemporary events, evoking complex associations with the past while prompting the viewer to contemplate significant universal themes.

3.2.3. *Coalescence of Art and Music*

Music constituted another profound passion of Vu Dan Tan and represented a central axis of interdisciplinarity within his oeuvre. In his adolescent years, Vũ Dân Tân commenced piano lessons with his cousin, who was a trained pianist. He subsequently attained a professional level of proficiency. Each day, he devoted several hours to listening to music, which cultivating an extensive appreciation that ranged from classical music and jazz to folk tunes, and modern experimental compositions. However, his enduring admiration remained with Mozart, whose first name, Amadeus was incorporated into Vũ Dân Tân's signature on his artistic works. Besides performing, Vũ Dân Tân also composed classical pieces and popular songs, while also engaging in improvisation.

Between 1993 and 1996, Tân produced the majority of his transformed and deformed vinyl records, using those he had previously gathered for both music appreciation and artistic purposes. The idea of object transformation was earlier explored in his more famous series, “Suitcases of a Pilgrim”, featuring cut-outs from cigarette boxes, which introduced the notion of object metamorphosis and reflected his persistent ambition to breathe new life into discarded materials.

This reconceptualization of objects is also apparent in the vinyl records that were warped with heat, embellished with abstract or figurative illustrations, and reworked in the records' paper sleeves.

Two portable transformed record players “Mefisto” and “Arlekino” bear inscriptions of their titles and locations that match the artwork's journey alongside the drawings. According to art historian Iola Lenzi, these elements evoke the concept of transcending borders, inviting the viewer and listener to engage with global cultures and civilizations (Lenzi 2016: 24-25).

These pieces, although produced in 1996, were subsequently displayed at Salon Natasha during the exhibition titled “Thanh Sắc” (2000). The title, which has its roots in Chinese, encompasses multiple interpretations and can be translated as sharp sight, clear sound, color of sound, precise intonation, or distinct appearance, thereby blurring the lines between visual and auditory experiences. The exhibition was accompanied by two sound performances of Vũ Dân Tân and Lê Hồng Thái, reinforcing this crossdisciplinary exploration.



Figure 4: Vũ Dân Tân. Transformed and deformed vinyl records (detail from the exhibition). Vinyl LP records, acrylic and paper, d – 30 cm, 1993-1999.

Image courtesy: Natalia Kraevskaia

Music related installations of Vũ Dân Tân demonstrate the interdisciplinary approach more obviously. In 1999, during the extensive group exhibition “Gap Vietnam” at the House of World Cultures in Berlin, the artist produced an installation named “Spring”. This piece consisted of three antique pianos adorned with pfennig coins, alongside sizable cardboard cutouts that mimicked lively plant forms. The installation symbolized the looming phase-out of local currencies in European countries and the advent of the Euro. As a result, the artwork proposed a novel type of unity, and when paired with the artist’s piano improvisations, it evoked a sense of a global renewal.

The installation titled “Piano – Icarus” was created concurrently with the renowned Cadillac-Icarus in 1999 at the Pacific Bridge Gallery in Oakland, USA. This work merges the sculptural elements of an antique piano with metal wings, implying that they would not succumb to melting like the wax wings of Icarus. The installation was enhanced by a musical performance from Vũ Dân Tân, with lights that were mechanically activated by a special device each time the artist struck the piano keys.

Visuality and music are also linked in a video film that captures Tân’s sound performance where he used old transformed piano and cardboard objects in the shape of his own hands. The artist himself is not visible; only his painted hands were shown. After each strike of the piano keys, the cardboard replicas of his hands, positioned on the hammers and keys, fall and vanish. This Vũ Dân Tân’s performance was filmed by the artist Nguyễn Quang Huy for the exhibition “Fairy Tale Soup” curated by Trần Lương in 2000.

Another important example is the sound installation *One Day* (2005), created for the exhibition *Out of Context* at the Huntington Beach Art Center, California, USA. For this exhibition, a vinyl record was produced featuring Vũ Dân Tân’s one day long piano

improvisation, which was inspired by the sounds and noise of downtown Hanoi, particularly the ambiance of Tân’s Hang Bong Street. The record was played on three vintage record players sourced from Vietnam and the USA, with the sound being transmitted through old loudspeakers commonly used for broadcasting news on the streets of Hanoi. This interdisciplinary installation, which incorporates elements of visual art, photography, music, sound, and technology, serves as a complex response from the artist to the rapidly evolving urban environment of contemporary Vietnam. It also demonstrates the artist’s passion for “visualizing the invisible and vice versa” (Kraevskaia 2005: 8).

In his music related works the artist uses “the power of music-as-idea to create visual art that is both formally accomplished and underpinned by concept. Music in Vũ Dân Tân’s oeuvre is repeatedly a potent signifier of transformation, rebirth, and freedom...” (Lenzi 2016: 25).

3.2.4. The integration of technique and architecture within the art projects of Vũ Dân Tân as a prime example of interdisciplinarity

The third direction of interdisciplinarity of Vũ Dân Tân’s artwork in the 1990s was intersection of his art with technique and architecture. Vũ Dân Tân demonstrated a distinct fascination with repurposing technical devices to grant them new and often unexpected functionalities, as illustrated by his transformation of pianos and record players. In his 1997 exhibition installation titled “Collection of Insects of the Scientist Amadeus Vũ Dân Tân” at the Hong Kong Art Center, the artist presented insects crafted from various packaging materials, primarily displayed in glass-topped boxes akin to those found in natural history museums. In a creative twist, he also incorporated ‘insects’ fashioned from portable cassette players, ingeniously transforming their antennae to resemble those of actual insects. Furthermore, he identified a radio frequency that emitted a faint, sharp, and sporadic sound reminiscent of various insect noises,

suggesting that the persistent tone of certain radio channels bears a resemblance to the annoying buzzing of insects. His aspiration to convert vehicles into artistic forms, thereby imbuing them with new symbolic and aesthetic value, culminated in 1999 with the creation of Cadillac-Icarus. Produced during his residency at the Pacific Bridge Gallery in Oakland, this monumental work transformed a white 1961 Cadillac into a sculptural object. Through cutting, reshaping, and applying a gold finish, the artist reconfigured the automobile into a hybrid emblem of modernity and myth.

In 2000, the Pacific Bridge Gallery took the initiative to transport Cadillac-Icarus to Vietnam and produce a film documenting its journey, titled “Icarus – the Art of Vũ Dân Tân”, directed by Nick Brooks. The Cadillac, positioned on a large truck with the artist performing a driver, traversed the streets of Hanoi, captivating and astonishing hundreds of onlookers.

This artwork conveys a multilayered meaning: the Cadillac, emblematic of American affluence and success, arriving in Vietnam refers to the new economic growth in the post-Đổi Mới era. However, its association with Icarus – who, in his attempt to escape the labyrinth, flew too close to the sun and fell into the sea as his wings melted – serves as a cautionary tale, indicating that not all transformations in a rapidly evolving society will yield positive outcomes. The culmination of this project featured a reception for the Cadillac-Icarus at its final destination, which evolved into an all-day improvised performance. Đào Anh Khánh portrayed Icarus, while a collective of Vietnamese visual artists, including Vũ Dân Tân, Quách Đông Phương, Lê Hồng Thái, Nguyễn Văn Cường, Nguyễn Quang Huy, and Trần Anh Quân, provided musical accompaniment using traditional instruments and discarded car components.

Vũ Dân Tân’s desire to employ various vehicles in his installations is perhaps more



Figure 5: Vũ Dân Tân. Cadillac – Icarus. Cadillac 1961, recycled, gold-painted, 1999.

Image courtesy: Natalia Kraevskaia

vividly manifested in his extensive sketches' collection for the outdoor sculpture project.

In 1997, he received an invitation from Hong Kong-based curator Oscar Ho to take part in the international exhibition "Being Minorities", which showcased Asian artists at the Hong Kong Art Center, and where, as previously mentioned, Vũ Dân Tân presented his installation "Collection of Insects". During his two-week stay, he resided with fellow artists in a shared apartment arranged by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. As a sign of appreciation for this gesture of goodwill from the university, the artists were offered to spontaneously create a satellite exhibition at the University Art Center supervised by center's artistic director, the renowned cultural activist and experimental art pioneer Danny Yung.

This second spontaneous exhibition, which showcased the artists' immediate reactions to their experiences in Hong Kong, was likely well received by both the public and the university administration. Shortly after its conclusion, several artists, including Vũ Dân Tân, were invited by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology to participate in a project aimed at creating permanent outdoor sculptural installations on the university campus. The invitation, signed by Danny Yung, emphasized the organizers' encouragement of new ideas and creativity in alignment with the ethos of the new era – a philosophy that resonates with the university's commitment to diversity and innovation. In response, Vũ Dân Tân promptly began developing multiple iterations of the project.

The artist's first proposal, entitled "Giant Insects of the Private Collection of Amadeus" centered on the creation of sculptures utilizing various modes of transportation. The artist's request for materials to realize

his vision underscores the unconventional and somewhat unrealistic essence of his endeavor. To transform vehicles into insect sculptures, Vũ Dân Tân requested old automobiles, trains, helicopters, airplanes, ships, and even a satellite, noting that these items could be broken or previously used.⁷ In the artist's view, this project, more than others, was intricately linked to the curator's concept regarding the interplay between science, technology, and the distinctive features of the local landscape.

His second proposal was named "A Wonderful Landscape of Gulliver". The artist asserted that his inspiration stemmed from Jonathan Swift's timeless satirical fantasy novel "Gulliver's Travels", as well as from the breathtaking scenery of the expansive university grounds. By illustrating the realm of Lilliput and the land of giants, Vũ Dân Tân attempted to replicate the visual effects of these two fictional settings by altering the scale of the natural and material world in relation to human height. In this pursuit, he also continued the ironic and philosophical themes of his literary inspiration, portraying miniature elephants and colossal insects. Throughout his artistic journey, he remained preoccupied with the subjective nature of defining "importance" within the framework of human values.

The third initiative, referred to as "Architectural Fantasies" integrated architectural features such as towers, pyramids, and multidimensional spaces, while also embracing zoomorphic designs. These designs are predominantly represented through high-rise structures that seem to be crafted from large, intricately carved metal boxes, reminiscent of Vũ Dân Tân's earlier works from small carved cardboard packages shaped like both real and mythical beings. Many

⁷ The author of this essay is inclined to believe that requirement for a satellite led to the overall failure of the project. Although there was a prior consensus to supply bicycles and used cars, the organizers ultimately found that the project was unfeasible. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the curator faced additional obstacles that prevented the execution of the initial concept. Consequently, the project has been suspended for all participating artists.

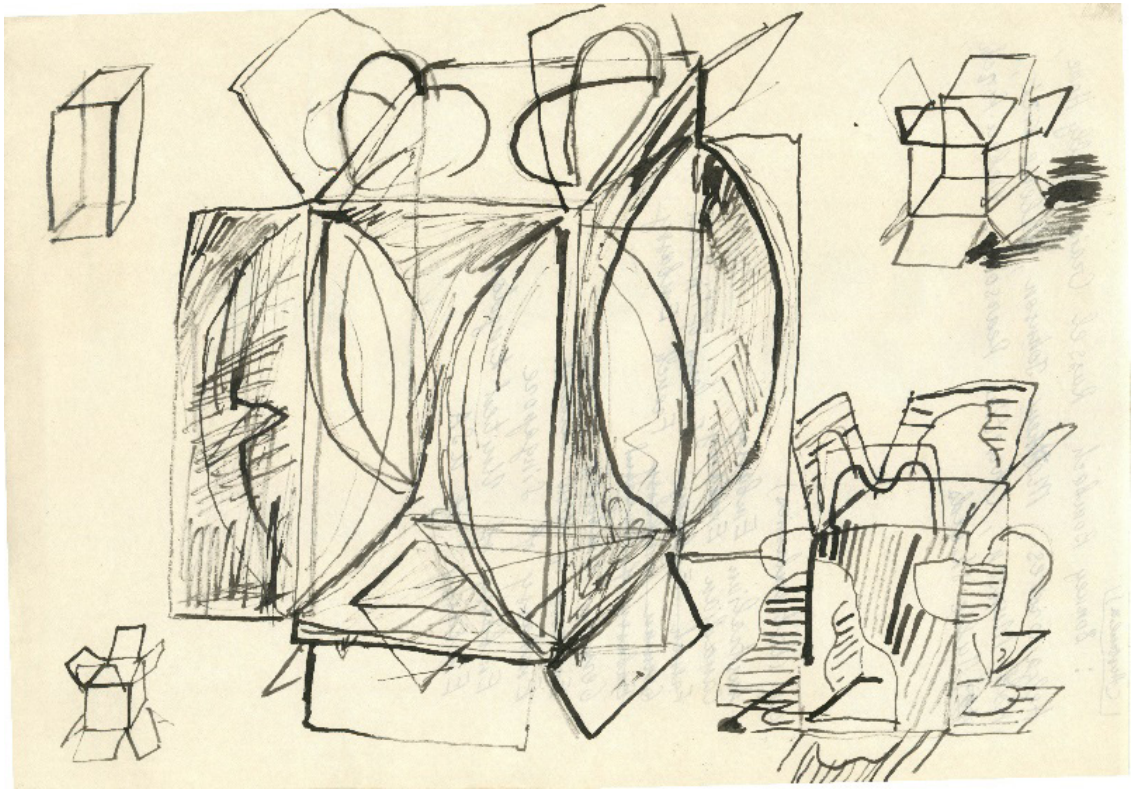


Figure 6: Vũ Dân Tân. A drawing from the unrealized project of outdoor sculptures, “Architectural fantasies” series, ink on paper, 15 x 21 cm, 1997.

Image courtesy: Natalia Kraevskaia

of these structures besides the external viewing also permitted human access to their interiors, embodying the artist’s vision through the use of various cardboard boxes: the act of looking inside transforms the originally sealed object and alters its fundamental nature. The location of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology on the Sai Kung Peninsula, adjacent to the bay, motivated Vũ Dân Tân to create the fourth version of his project proposal as installations that extend along the shoreline or are situated directly on the water’s surface. The visual concepts for these installations were influenced by the artist’s experiences during a 1997 visit to Cheung Chau Island, located 10 kilometers from Hong Kong. At that time, the island had not yet become a favored tourist spot and still retained the characteristics of a

fishing community, which is visualized in the artist’s sketches.

In addition to his primary proposal, Vũ Dân Tân created a series of sketches for sculptures that pay homage to Charlie Chaplin, titled “L’Hommage (a tribute) to Charlot”. He also produced designs for modified pianos and stylized sculptural interpretations of Venus. These designs were conceived as grand tower structures, resembling a simplified yet recognizable torso of the ancient Roman goddess of love.

Lastly, the initiative “Traveling Circus of Amadeus Vũ Dân Tân” comprises drawings of sculptures, installations, or performative actions associated with a circus performance. The drawings featured here are largely derived from lithographs the artist previously made on the same subject,

and now reimagined in three-dimensional form.⁸

Although none of the outdoor sculpture and installation projects outlined above came to realization for practical reasons, most of the sketches were published in 2002 in an art book that closely preserved the artist's original designs. More than two decades later, in 2024, curator Lê Thuận Uyên, together with her team, sought to honor these unrealized visions by reconstructing four of Vũ Dân Tân's sculptures and installations as part of the Hanoi Festival of Creativity and Design. Their execution was enhanced by a game created by the curator that involves the audience, effectively realizing the artist's conceptual goal of fusing fine art, literature (the stories behind the artworks), and architecture, with a view to producing a work that provokes mental, tactile, and emotional reactions from the audience.

4. CONCLUSION

The works of Vũ Dân Tân, as explored in the preceding discussion, stands as a compelling testament to his interdisciplinary approach to artistic creation. They illustrate how the interplay between fine arts, literature, language, technique, music, and architecture fosters experimentation and transcends traditional boundaries in artistic creation. Moreover, these artworks are not merely formal amalgamations of elements from various disciplines that yield visually appealing or even striking pieces, similar to those seen in the early 20th century avant-garde. Instead, they embody contemporary thought and art, where concepts are presented in a holistic manner, and the artist's critical engagement with current realities prompts the audience to contemplate broader cultural contexts and investigate new multidimensional viewpoints.



Figure 7: Vũ Dân Tân. Sculpture from the “Architectural fantasies” series (see figure 6), realized in the frames of Hanoi Festival of Creativity and Design 2024, curator Lê Thuận Uyên.

Image courtesy: Natalia Kraevskaia

Ultimately, the interdisciplinary strategies evident in Vũ Dân Tân's work reveal how contemporary art in Vietnam began to evolve in the early 1990s. This evolution, as art historian Iola Lenzi stated, was more closely linked to the significant transformations brought by Đổi Mới and the artists' expressive reactions to the ‘open doors’ policies, rather than being primarily influenced by external factors.⁹

⁸ A series of lithographs dedicated to the travelling circus was made by the artist in 1996 in Auckland (New Zealand) in the lithography studio “Muka” as a part of its “Youth Prints” initiative.

⁹ Our analysis proves the previous conclusion of Iola Lenzi, formulated in a number of her publications including (Lenzi 2022: 74).

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