

Bold and Eye-opening Interactivity

A bright room is what first meets you as a visitor at Verkligheten, a gallery run by 10 artists in Umeå. This is the first of two exhibition spaces, the artists name is Nguyen Thu Ha, she comes from Vietnam and the exhibition is called "Shadow". It consists of the new work with the same name and "Where do YOU go next?"(2008), together with a documentation of five older pieces. The documentation serves as a presentation of the artist's earlier work but it is in the meeting point between the two interactive installations "Where do YOU go next?" and "Shadow" that the real reward is to be found.

Nguyen Thu Ha is in Sweden for three months through the Umeå-based exchange program Iaspis. Before this she was in Luleå to talk about her work and show parts of it, after she is visiting Berlin. She says that she is seduced by the process of not just exploring the harmonious sides of life but also the contradictions hidden under the surface. The shadowy sides help us to seek our own truths. With these words in my head I enter the Gallery Verkligheten. It turns out that the artist is there, open for discussion and reflections, something which gives me a richer experience of her artwork.

"Where do YOU go next?" explores the essence of postcards. Nowadays postcards border on kitsch or historical documents, but their origin is of another kind: a greeting in the form of a short letter, with a photographic front that shows a place from its most flattering side, or its glossy surface, depending on how you see it. On the table is what looks like real printed postcards, but with another image in black and white printed on the normally blank reverse side. In the contrast between the postcards beautified buildings, monuments, white beaches and green oceans and what is written on the back, questions are being posed about where the real experience is concealed.

The artist has noticed that we often experience the real journey when we're on our way to the goal. One example of this is a video installation that is projected on the wall over an enlargement of the back side, the letter side, of the postcards. Nguyen Thu Ha tells me that the boys in the film are from Kambodja and that they are on a boat. The experience of both an inner and a geographical journey is personal and complex and is evoked by other factors than tourism's chase for happiness or top-ten destinations. In the same way we experience life, not in achieving the big goals but in the small moments in between.

On the second floor of the gallery you find the piece "Shadow". A dark material is hung inside the door to stop the light from coming in. Inside, the darkness takes over completely. The only thing you see is a pale gleam in the middle of the room. This turns out to be a film on a screen, wrapped in black plastic with a hole to peek through, where we see the silhouette of a hand and a penis, a masturbation scene. If the hand is one's own or someone else's, we do not know.

When my eyes have gotten used to the darkness of the space, a blurred shadow of the movements on the film appears on the wall. If the former work with postcards gave an opportunity to look out into the world, "Shadow" rather addresses the inner and the un-definable. If it gives a feeling of pleasure or if we dismiss it as obscenity, this really says more about the beholder than it does about the piece in itself. But the sexual act we see on the screen hovers between humor, something ultimately private, at the same time as we are confronted by our own ideas about pornography and taboos.

All reactions are just as welcome, says Nguyen Thu Ha. She is conscious of having touched upon a sensitive topic. But it's just this combination of the un-definable, private and daring that I find to be a refreshing element in art. This is not just an experiment for the artist to enjoy, it touches something in each and every one of us, whether or not you choose to be open for it. Nguyen Thu Ha says that she thinks the work is something to think back upon much later, since the experience is so personal and hard to express.

A global recognition exists in both pieces, even though they approach their topic from two different sides. The shared human experience says that most of us have a connection with "Shadow", even if it's on a personal level. On the other hand "Where do YOU go next?" makes something as trivial as a postcard the essence of a journey, by posing questions about where the real experience of a journey is, and in this way by seeing life as a journey of sorts.

This exhibition is done with such natural confidence, without simplifying things. We have to think for ourselves. Nguyen Thu Ha isn't working with rhetoric for emotions, her art isn't heavy to see, she doesn't give us a bad conscience. On the contrary, she touches with her art perspectives that we all carry inside. The world is not an evil place, but it doesn't hurt to once in a while force our thought out of its shell in a discovery of world inside us and outside.

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Translated from Swedish by Gerd Aurell.