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*Immigrating Garden* : An Interview with Tuan Mami

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# ***Immigrating Garden:***

## **An Interview with Tuan Mami**

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**TUAN MAMI in conversation with EVA BENTCHEVA**

**Eva Bentcheva:** Mami, you have described your recent practice as moving away from ‘performance art’ towards ‘performative installations’ or ‘environments’. Could you explain what these terms mean for you?

**Tuan Mami:** I had been doing ‘performance art’ since the early days of my art practice, such as in the series *The Cover* from 2007 until 2009 where I used condensed milk. On other occasions, I used the body and environment as materials in works like *Let It Grow Up On* (2010). I found the language and possibilities of performance art very open-ended and empowering for artists to explore different ways of thinking.

A few years ago, I started to feel a need to push the limitations of this art form, especially after I began engaging with social issues and taking on a more research-based practice. I realized that there is scope to transform and develop performance art beyond its form and physical presentation. I have since been developing my art practice as ‘performative installations’. For me, this is art defined by the creation of environments, platforms or situations, rather than the representation of the body. It can include actions, objects, installations and so on, but they all need to be involved in a performative-dialogic progress. In this structure, the artist and all participating elements/

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FIGURE 1: *The Cover*, Berlin, 2009.FIGURE 2: *Let It Grow Up On*, Tokyo, 2010.

collaborators/visitors play certain roles and contribute to a journey of experimenting within a situation. This new orientation of my practice takes me away from seeing performance art as having separate parts between the artist-audience-object-space and, instead, it brings them all together via sharing/creating the artwork.

**EB:** Thinking about this understanding of the ‘performative installation’, you also became increasingly interested in migration and human movement. What prompted this interest and how have you developed it as performative artistic research?

**TM:** Actually, my interest in migration and human movement goes as far back as 2011. I was invited to make a performance piece in South Korea after

staying for an artist residency in the Nettle Hooyong Performing Arts Center. During my residency, I had researched Hooyong Village where all the inhabitants are now old people since the young moved to live and work in big cities. I became friends with the grandmas, and we would drink together every day outside their houses. This was a kind of ritual of waiting and welcoming home people and family members after a long day's work. But now, these same elderly are alone and nobody goes home after work because they live far away. I invited these grandmas to make a work about their situation and this ritual. During the performative event, many tough and sad stories were told. I think the questions about human movement started growing in my mind since then.

**EB: How have you continued to develop this via other performative projects in Korea, Cambodia, the Czech Republic, and most recently Taiwan and Germany?**

**TM:** The starting point for many of my works is research and observation. Each of my projects has its own pattern, which is adapted from reality and actual social issues. I first seek to learn about each community and society, then develop my project around a special situation encountered during my study. For example, in my project *Myth East Mist* in Korea, I worked with what is considered an almost invisible community—the mothers of Vietnamese brides who come to Korea through brokers in order to marry Korean men. Their mothers come to Korea with them to help raise the grandchildren. They also have a chance to work and earn money which they then send back to their poor families in Vietnam. They mostly live alone and are isolated. My project was about creating a holiday for them, and inviting them to come together and share their lives with us.

For another project, I found a Vietnamese community whose members have been based in Cambodia for generations. Yet, they have always lived on rivers at the edge of society and have often needed to camouflage themselves in order to blend into society to avoid all political conflicts. Based on their lived realities, I created a work in which Cambodians and members of the Vietnamese diaspora were invited to come to my exhibition and exchange their life stories alongside my art objects. After a while, all the stories and objects blended together to tell us about a tale of life without borders, but with memories and care.

**EB: It seems that the 'pathways' of overseas communities have played an important role for your practice. How have such contacts with migrant communities shaped your approach to performativity?**

**TM:** I consider learning, understanding and working with the social issues of immigrant and diasporic communities as an important part of my art practice. These connect closely to my other research areas in Vietnam which I consider as dialectical dialogues, much like two sides of a coin, between spaces and relationships of local and global issues. Somehow, when working with immigrant communities, the ‘subjects’ whom I ‘research’ end up teaching me; they guide me on how to present their issues, and how to create a form or format for my project. Working with communities, especially with Vietnamese immigrants, is a very special experience. People from different communities have very different actions and behaviours. In order to develop an artwork, I have to live and learn about their lives. From the very beginning, it is already such a performative process and integral part of my work.

**EB:** Your current ongoing project, *Immigrating Garden*, deals with the Vietnamese communities and diasporas in Taiwan. Yet, in contrast to your previous projects in which people are represented, this work tells of their lives via the histories of illegally imported plants into Taiwan. How did this project evolve?

**TM:** Over the course of months of research, I had the chance to meet many Vietnamese people living in Taiwan—from refugees during the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 to people who came to Taiwan as Vietnamese brides, imported labourers, students etc.—and many of them who were living there still missed their homeland, especially the smells and foods from Vietnamese vegetables and herbs. Many of them had gone to great lengths to collect Vietnamese plants and grow them on the small rooftops of their houses, the balconies of school dormitories, the back sides of the factories where they worked, or even on random empty small plots of land on the sides of street. For many though, it proved difficult to make even that little wish come true. Not only did many of these people work very hard every day, their little informal ‘Vietnamese gardens’ faced the added challenge that it was—and still is—illegal to bring seeds, plants or even fruits onto the island of Taiwan.

One time, I visited Mrs Dung who lives in the countryside and who has a big garden with all kinds of Vietnamese plants. She said, “Sometimes when I have headaches, a sore throat or stomach ache, I just go to my garden to pick some herbs to use, like how my mom and my grandparents taught me since I was young. Also, it is very helpful to cook something home-like from your motherland, vegetables when you feel homesick or miss your family.” It inspired me deeply.

*Immigrating Garden* is a performative installation based on the story of Mrs Dung's garden. She immigrated to Taiwan from the northern part of Vietnam 20 years ago to work as a labourer in a factory. Since then, Dung's mother and father have come to Taiwan frequently to visit their daughter, each time secretly/illegally bringing seeds or small trees to make a garden



FIGURE 3: A Vietnamese garden in public space (research in New Taipei City).



FIGURE 4: Mrs Dung's garden (research in Hsinchu).



FIGURE 5: Mrs Mong's garden (research in Chaiyi).

for her. The idea was that Mrs Dung could use Vietnamese plants for traditional medical treatments or for cooking, to have familiar tastes and smells, and also to see her hometown's garden view and feel less nostalgic. My project is built upon Mrs Dung's idea of a garden, as well as from other stories and resources by many Vietnamese people living in Taiwan. The garden as a 'performative installation' is a reflection of deeper political issues around migration which have shaped our minds and culture, and a symbol of how our mentality is related to our memory and daily life. This work is a progressive process. Ultimately I wish to build a garden as a platform for encounters, exchanges and discussions of human movement. In a sense, it will also be a 'library' of Vietnamese seeds, plants and 'immigrated stories' to share with people.

**EB: Thinking about this garden as a 'performative installation', how are visitors in Taiwan and beyond, particularly members of the Vietnamese community, meant to interact with it?**

**TM:** The garden is meant to be built using 'immigrated' resources which already include many actions and stories which aren't necessarily visible (illegal transportation, planting in secrecy, etc.), but which are imprinted on the plants themselves. The garden is meant also to be built with a lot of help and actions from Vietnamese people living in Taiwan. Once complete, it will turn into a social platform for interactions, exchanges and working

together to shape and maintain the garden. General visitors and key figures who contributed to its making will sometimes gather together to learn and share Vietnamese plants, immigrant stories, cooking and eating together, and so on. This for me is the true value of making a ‘performative installation’ as a journey that we walk together.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Tuan Mami** lives and works in Hanoi. Mami is an interdisciplinary-experimental artist, working with site-specific installation, video, performance and conceptual art, who constantly explores new mediums, means and methods of evolving with reflective questioning and social research.

His focus deals with questions about life, social interactions between people, and people with their environment, to reconstruct situations into ones that engage people or objects from a particular reality to enter and be involved together in a social process. Other than as a creator, he is co-founder of MAC-Hanoi (2012); co-founder and board member of Nha San Collective in Hanoi (2013–ongoing); visiting faculty at San Francisco Art Institute, USA (2013); co-founder and artistic director of Á Space—An Experimental Art Space (2018–ongoing).