

Through The Home Tunnel

by Veronica Brovall

During most of November and December 2003 I was in Chau Doc, a South Vietnamese city on the border of Cambodia. After an hour's walk up the holy Sam Mountain at around 5 or 6 am, one sees the sun rise and the Mekong Delta spread itself out like a never-ending sea.

I was in Chau Doc together with 20 Vietnamese and 18 non-Vietnamese artists. We made sculptures for the city's new sculpture park. I was able to see a great deal of the surroundings and how the party-politically-correct Vietnamese art world functions, but artistically it was difficult. I couldn't fit all the pieces together: to produce a sculpture that would be approved, that would fit into the prevailing working conditions and organisation while keeping my own ideas and forms of expression. After the opening of the sculpture park I went to Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City and bought a guided tour to the Chu Chi tunnels. The vast system of tunnels in Cu Chi where thousands of soldiers had lived underground was fascinating.¹ A strategy that tells us that we do the impossible; we do not flee from what we consider a problem: we stay where the conflict is going on.

On the way back from the tunnels to Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City I made up my mind that within a year I would do a sculpture in Saigon entitled Home Tunnel. I wanted to go back and do a piece that carried a feeling of personal freedom and a desire to abandon ideas that were limiting. A sculpture that would be MINE, my responsibility, done with my own materials, based on my own questions. The confrontation embodied in the work would come about through putting together the order that a home has - but an inactive home, locked and devoid of positive power and energy. I stole the tunnels, appropriated them, took them because I needed them. The tunnels are what exists where it is actually impossible to live. The Home Tunnel would be built in a house, an already existing home, and the furniture would be turned into traps, impossible to use. A system of tunnels would be dug through the furniture, would spread and take over the home. The Home Tunnel would not become a site-specific work - it was not about Vietnam or the Vietnam War. For me, the Home Tunnel is about a strategy, about choosing to remain in the problem, to rise above it, exist in it and in this way weaken it, destroy it, eat it up and let it go through the whole body - to go beyond itself.

I would live in the house the whole time, live everyday life there in my impossible home. I returned to Vietnam on the 4th of December 2004 and stayed two months.

Saigon is a commercial city and has none of the cultural prestige that the capital, Hanoi, possesses. In Saigon there doesn't seem any need for art: everything is commerce, traffic, development and survival. People are always on their way somewhere. One is swallowed up by everyday life; everything has a function, everyone has a task. One needs to make a place for him/herself, know what one wants, be bigger/greater than what doesn't exist. More and More Vietnamese artists are moving to Saigon where there is less political control than in the north. The city's pulse is good for them. They want to work in peace and lose themselves in the crowd.

Vietnam is not a "free" country, but my fear and anxiety ("don't do that", "be careful") disappeared when I was there. It is not possible to have a normal life in Saigon without putting these fears aside. In the "socialist" Vietnam politicians continue to control the art scene. And even if Vietnam is undergoing major and rapid changes through the loosening of laws and regulations and the pressures on artists have become milder, one still needs permission to put on public exhibitions. This means that an artist's work is dealt with and judged by several political authorities who, on the basis of documentation, recommendations and description of what is to be shown, make a decision - yes or no.

Home Tunnel was totally my own initiative: I had neither working partners, an exhibition venue nor an official invitation. Such a way of working does not exist in Vietnam and papers, certificates, and evidence were needed in order to be taken seriously and to be able to start the permit procedures. I received help from the Swedish Consulate, which having experience of what opens doors in Vietnam, stamped the king's



face and a great many other colourful and respectable symbols on a well-formulated certificate á la “Sweden supports Veronica”. “Very important for Vietnam”, I heard later. The certificate was a success and I was the king’s personal court artist.

First the certificate, then the clothes. I sewed a suit, a kind of colourful polyester pjamas, shirt and trousers. Not as wonderful as the Vietnamese women have on everyday, but still a garment I could wear to meetings, in public. Shoes, no flip-flops, but nice shoes. Hair away from the face and brushed teeth. I smiled and smiled...

I see a mobile number on the wall of a house – ROOM FOR RENT – ring it up and two hours later am sitting in a shiny black car travelling through the streets of Saigon. It is 30 degrees C and at most 12 in the car. Air conditioning is status and if one is a businessman and drives an exclusive car, the temperature in one’s car is ice cold. The owner of the car is at most 27 years old and belongs to Saigon’s new upper class that hangs out at cafés, drinking cappuccino which costs about as much as a normal Vietnamese daily wage. His family owns over 100 flats, most located in district 1 in central Saigon. They are luxuriously furnished and cost. A cd is put into the car stereo.

“I like Christmas”, he says, referring to the Christmas music in its Vietnamese version. “Yes, nice”, I say. We are going to one of his houses which lies outside the city centre, with a two-room flat which seems to be simple and possibly, I’m thinking, suitable for me. “Here you have a shopping centre nearby. Channel and Cucci, you know”, he says and nods at a high-rise building. “Sure”, I think and begin to feel more and more that I’m not the tenant he wants. “Security is important”, he says, “and that you have peace and quiet. Everyone wants quiet. The flat is new – all the furniture was moved in yesterday”. He shows the modern kitchen, bars on the balcony, the new washing machine, large beds. The lift is German – good quality. “Then you’ll have the Korean ambassador for a neighbour!” “Nice”, I say. We leave the house, nodding to the watchman. “You should buy a motorcycle, only \$1000 for a new one”. “I’ll ring you in two days”, I say before I’m let out in the backpacker quarter where hotel rooms cost a few dollars.

After two weeks’ assiduous searching, oscillating between hope and despair, I am told I can rent a typical 4 meter wide and 15 meter long house from an old lady outside the city. Her house is presently being used by the military to store various communist parade gear, for example, orange overalls worn by street cleaners, but she can take them to another storeroom. Half an hour before I am to move in I receive a message that the police have said no. They don’t want any artistic activity in the area. They don’t understand why I want to be so far from the centre and they don’t understand how I can call what I’m intending to do art.

I put on the single-coloured suit, collect all my papers and my mobile phone. Wave to the motorcycle taxi and go to the Fine Art Association. Luckily the chairman is in his office drinking coffee. I try to explain in French what has happened. Telephones ring. “Sit down and take it easy”, he says. Sweating, I’m on the verge of fainting away from exertion. I too drink an iced coffee, wondering when someone will start talking to me. So close but still not there. My artist friends arrive in an hour and everybody sighs: “We’re sorry, the police are like this. They don’t understand art, but WE support you!”

Mrs Minh Thoi sits beside us. She is going to give the office some information concerning her membership in the organisation. She’s a classmate of one of the artists and has to listen to the whole story about my sculpture, that I need a house. They gesticulate. She looks at me and she laughs. An hour later we drive out to her house on the Saigon River. Four days later, good old Viet Cong soldier that she is, she convinces the police to approve me as tenant. I can move in in three days.

“You should sit with both your legs on the same side”, says Thang, the 22 year old clarinet student. We are outside his mother’s house. The Saigon River and its boats flow quietly by. I have put on my orange-black helmet, fastened the rubber bands of the mouth mask around my ears and placed sunglasses on my nose. “Side saddle – no, I’ll die!” I answer. The necessary travelling gear can be got in 10 minutes but the feeling of being one with a motorcycle doesn’t come automatically. See myself fall off in a crooked summersault/volt, 2 points. All the fine girls of Saigon sit in tight skirts with their legs dangling over one side, reading a book, holding a baby, or doing their nails. They are born on a motorcycle seat. A mother, father, little baby and a



large box pass us on a two-wheeled vehicle and honk before the curve. “I’m not used to riding a motorcycle, I don’t do it in Sweden”, I add and swing one leg over the seat. He looks at me uncomprehending, as if I’d said, “Yes, we have mosquitoes in Sweden. Mosquitoes exist even where it isn’t warm”. My skirt is elastic and practical, it stretches and I sit comfortably and stable on the motorcycle. He will have lots to tell friends at the music academy about the western girl who is almost 30 but is neither married nor has a child. She gesticulates too lavishly and says that the food is fantastic too often. In addition, she’s going to build a sculpture in his mother’s house. And he truly wonders whether she knows how to screw a screw in the wall.

Minh Thoi is presently a single woman who won’t get remarried because she wants time to herself. She’s an extremely good businesswoman and allows me to pay three times too much, but in my happiness over finding a place for Home Tunnel I only feel gratitude.

Minh Thoi wonders why I want two women as assistants as women are so weak. I tell her my sculpture is largely composed of tape.

Women carry Vietnam. The streets of Saigon are crowded with women who make a living selling fruit, soup and desserts. The whole business is contained in two baskets that hang on a stable pole, dextrously balanced on the shoulders as they make their way through the city streets. I saw a robust Swedish man try to lift one of these fruit baskets and finally he managed to lift it 20 cm off the ground. Traditionally women do the heavy labour in the rice fields, where they have to lift ton after ton of rice.

In Vietnam sculpture is the most masculine thing around. The public sculptures are of stone and communist monumental. We know the aesthetics from Russia. Heroic soldiers. Women are considered more suitable for enamels. I am invited to an art college to show my sculptures which are made of plastic, tape and chicken wire. The teacher, a young man, wants his students to see something apart from, different from tradition. Why are there so few women sculptors in Vietnam, I ask him and get the same answer as always – women aren’t strong enough.

Phoung is 26 years old and is learning to be a sculptor. She is one of four women in the whole sculpture department in the college. After we together bent 45 iron pipes with a provisional tool, Phoung says decidedly that if you cannot do something you must think “I can, I can, I can”. Her boyfriend Tao also becomes my assistant. He cannot speak English so Phoung does the interpreting. She wants to think her own thoughts; she is angry with the education, tired of needing to stand and copy the professors’ in order to be passed – or, more often, hear that she’s number 2, that she must accept the fact that she cannot be as good as the boys in her class.

OK, social realism, symposium, monuments and memorials in stone – that’s the official, the public. Not to forget the thousands of enamels of fish which are made by the artists. But Saigon has a smaller, parallel art world. I went around with my vernissage cards to the art galleries that want to be contemporary and there I met foreigners and Vietnamese who are trying to change the system. In these artists’ galleries paintings are done that are free, the artists’ own work – the work they don’t show. They wait. In five years, perhaps. Gallery Quyen helps me by sending out email invitations to all their contacts. To the opening come people I’ve bought things from, motorcycle chauffeurs, neighbours, owners of restaurants where I’ve eaten, artists from Vietnam and other countries, gallery owners, people interested in culture, friends and tourists.

I live in the house during the construction of the sculpture. I cut myself on bamboo sticks, bump into the large spades that poke out of the tunnels. They dig, hollow out the house to make a new existence in it. I have nowhere to sit – the chairs have either knives or bamboo fastened to them – the refrigerator is covered with staples.

The sculpture is soon ready; it’s the day before the opening. My assistants and I are exhausted. My blonde Swedish friend and free-lance journalist, Anna Dahlqvist, who has joined me to write an article on my project, puts on her Vietnam vest and goes off with Mrs Minh Thoi to the police. We have just received official approval from the highest police authority in Saigon to have the place open to the public. Up till now,



it was touch and go. There's been a conflict in the Fine Art Association where not everyone on the board supports my work. The chairman has fought for my project and in the end, they sought approval for me. The decision has taken some time. I have had to go back and forth on motorcycle taxis and had confusing meetings in French and Vietnamese. Now all that remains is that the local police approve the certification from the politicians. Here is when bribes can occur. Mrs Minh Thoi has been stressed the last few days, worried about what the police will say and is very negative, doesn't believe it will go through. When Anna, favourite of all the Vietnamese, glides into the station with Mrs Minh Thoi, the police are preparing for a party and they're all in good humour. They appreciate the yellow Vietnam star on Anna's red top and receive the vernissage card with a bow before they give me permission.

It's few days after the opening. Soon it will be dusk, work is done for the day and the restaurants are filling up. The most boring bit is left: the documentation. I sweat litres despite the fans and I cut myself on the bamboo.

“VÄRooONIKA, ANa!”

It's one of the building workers shouting from the garden - or former garden. Parallel with my sculpture construction a gang of six/a group of six people have been building a two-storey house behind my house. No question of taking a break out in the hammock during the hottest hours of the day, for my garden has become a welding yard and all vegetation a mere memory. But every cloud has a silver lining: the building workers have also helped me to put together some of the parts needed to make the tunnels durable.

“COME, COME OOUT”, banging on the door.

There they are the six workers, newly bathed and with clean shirts. A table is set with ten kinds of snacks, squid and chilli sauce. A sack of ice and around 20 beers. The house is ready and now it's time to celebrate. I contribute a bottle of gin. Their eyes sparkle – they read the label “IMPORTED”, thumbs up – it can't be better!

Drunk as skunks they balance themselves amongst knives and bamboo. One of them tests the net with the taped toothpicks that cover my bed. They point at the different knives in the sofa. You kill from the back like this, and from the front like that. Yes, you can also kill with a nail. Nam feels the spiky leather stool. The tunnels, yes, they were this big. NUMBER ONE. Your sculpture is number one and we are number one. All of them were North Vietnamese guerrillas. The winners. For them my sculpture possesses realistic weapons.

Translated to English by Jan Teeland

Notes:

¹ The Cu Chi tunnels lie 35 km northwest of Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City and all together comprise a 200 km network of underground tunnels. They were built on three different levels. The tunnel system was initiated by the liberation forces, Viet Minh, during the 1940s and used during the struggles against the French. In the 60s the walkways were repaired and expanded to be able to serve as a base, field hospital, weapons factory, classrooms and housing etc for the Viet Cong guerrillas in the war against the US. The tunnels were dug out by hand and are 40-60 cm in diameter. During the Vietnam War 16,000 people lived in the Cu Chi tunnels.