

White Noise
exhibition review

Artmaking and Curation as critical empathy

White Noise curated by Van Do in collaboration with the Nguyen Art Foundation is an effective and emotional experimental exhibition. The exhibition's bold lighting concept champions the idea of curation as art-making, simultaneously evoking robust interpretations from the works and highlighting each work's essence. In *White Noise*, as the curator enables us to think of art as an alternative form of communication besides the transparent written or spoken language, exhibition-making and artmaking become a way for us to embrace what we cannot fully understand – the pain of others. Playing with art's interpretative nature, *White Noise* is a practice of truly critical and self-aware empathy. The artworks and the curation concept offer various ways to translate one's experience of pain into the language of visual art, which can be collectively understood, thus enabling connections beyond words and reason, through emotions and imagination.



Figure 1. Installation view (author's image)

Featuring a diverse group of Vietnamese and Korean contemporary artists, the works of *White Noise* share the common purpose of representing various forms of pain – from war-torn sentiments, old-age memory

deterioration, and physical impairments to dealing with backlash and mobilization pressure. Instead of written didactic labels, *White Noise* invites interpretation through a booklet and a brochure, which resemble a diary. These two are filled with sketches of the exhibition in its making alongside personal stories of artists and curators behind each work. This more personal approach to textual elements turns the exhibition into a vessel that gives access to various experiences of pain by reflecting on the personal (backstory) and the collective (exhibition experience).

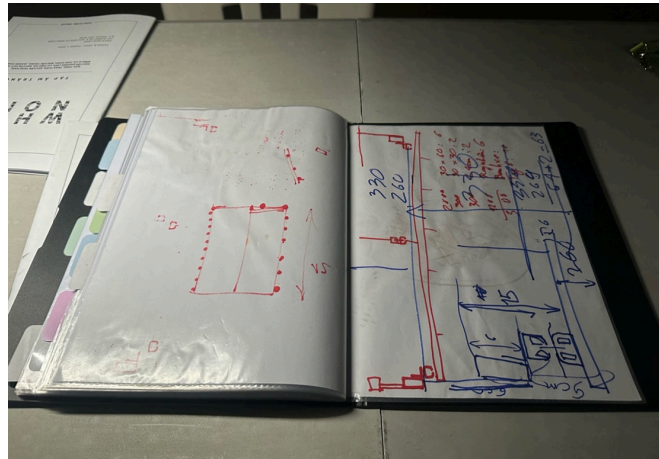


Figure 2. Exhibition's planning sketch

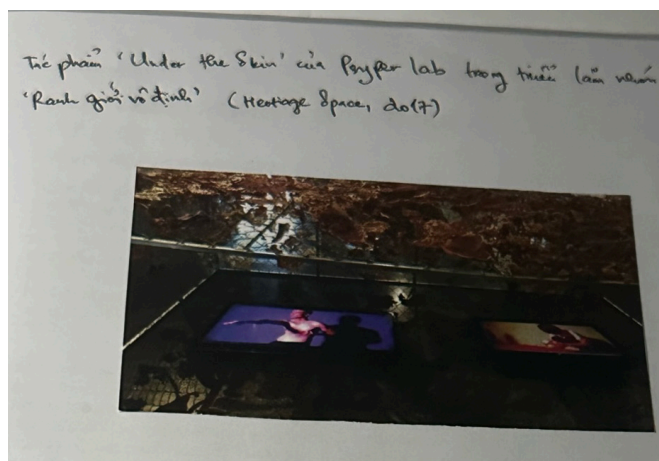


Figure 3. Booklet's image of past performance by Lai Dieu Ha and Psyber Lab (author's image)

On first impression, *White Noise* has an unconventional lighting practice. Instead of keeping the white cube space well-lit with directional lights for each artwork, the only source of lighting in the exhibition is a long fluorescent light that stretches from one end of the room to another. With a specially designed motor engine, the light scans through the exhibition, gradually shining upon the artworks one by one, resembling scanning lights in MRI machines, evoking a sense of surveillance and investigation (see Fig. 4). The light moves in a non-stop cycle - scanning from one end of the room to another and repeat. When the light moves away, the work submerges into darkness, losing much of its formal quality. The limited lighting duration forces the visitors to revisit one work multiple times to see more intricate details or consolidate their understanding of the works. As each time the light returns you realize there are more details within the work, it seems as though one would never fully see or know an artwork here.

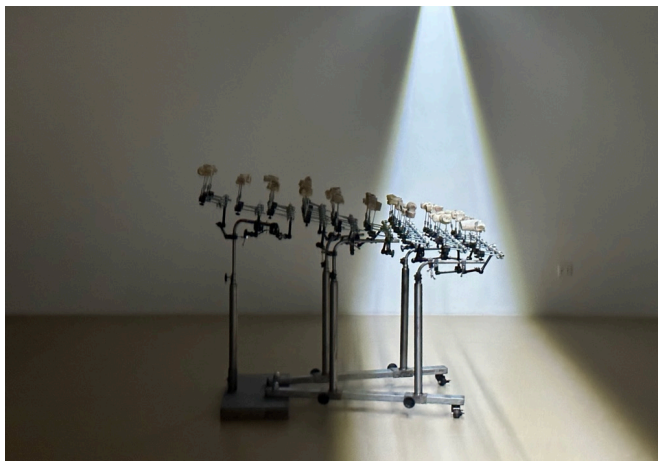


Figure 4. Unconventional lighting concept (author's image)

This suspenseful lighting practice effectively turns the exhibition experience into a process of contemplation – ponderous and challenging. In embracing the limitation of vision and time, critical empathy emerges. With its dramatic lighting practice, *White Noise* entertains this idea of art as a language that is only partially intelligible. Like voices muddled with the surrounding chatters and sounds of a communal space, the lucid and pristine white cube is now disturbed with looming darkness. This deliberate opacity enabled by the eccentric lighting concept indicates that one could never fully understand or articulate one's pain. Regardless, like how we keep chasing the light, people keep trying to reach out to one another, finding solace for one's pain in common understanding. Works by Tran Tuan, Jeamin Cha, Cam Xanh, and Lai Dieu Ha are demonstrative of this practice.



Figure 5. *Forefinger* (2021) by Tran Tuan – Installation view (author's image)

Monumentally laid in the middle of the space is the sculpture *Forefinger* (2021) by Tran Tuan - a giant metallic index finger. The finger's body is covered in steel dog tags, which were used to identify American soldiers during the Vietnam War, and then collected by artist Nguyen Van He to pay tribute to lives lost in battles. Yet, upon closer examination, one will

realize that many of these tags are blank. Additionally, the cut-off forefinger was initially an artistic concept by Tran Tuan to represent how men used to cut off their fingers to avoid military duties for his artwork in a past exhibition. Entwining these two narratives, *Forefinger* allows us to experience war-inflicted pain from both the perspective of people in past wars and that of people in the contemporaneity, who are helplessly collecting remnants, piecing them together to make sense and empathize with a painful history. The work thus represents the layered process of coping with historical war-inflicted pain as it invisibly rippled into our present.

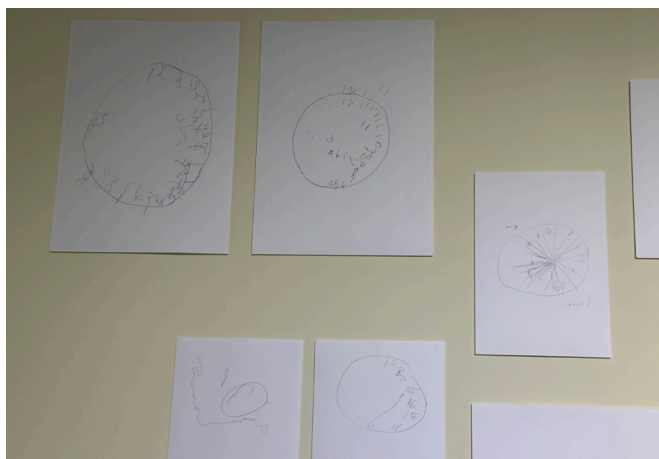


Figure 6. Clock drawings in Jeamin Cha's *Crushed or Unfolded* (2020) (author's image)



Figure 7. Installation view (author's image)

Tackling a more personal pain, Jeamin Cha's *Crushed or Unfolded* (2020) is a series of clock drawings by dementia patients found on the internet and transferred onto carbon paper. The work was inspired by Jeamin Cha's experiences with her mom's undiagnosed mental illnesses. The artist, in coping and caring, has looked to drawing to understand her mother's illnesses. And clock drawing is a diagnosis method applied at Korean nursing homes or hospitals to examine patients with light cognitive deterioration. Even when Jeamin Cha admits that she is never capable of understanding the experience, both the artistic and the curatorial practice assert that not understanding fully does not mean one should stop caring or trying. This shows especially in the way the curator displays and defines the work. The work, which comprises a multitude of small sketchy A4 drawings with

deformed clocks hung upon a pastel yellow wall, interestingly resembles its original form - mural art as it is “framed” by two white empty walls. This is also the only work that is fully and continuously lit in the exhibition with its own secluded space. Exclusive, glowing, and untampered by receding light, the work looks sacred. Cannot be sold nor kept, existing only for the purpose of exhibition and then destroyed, the work’s entire being is truly dedicated to the tireless pursuit of understanding and caring.

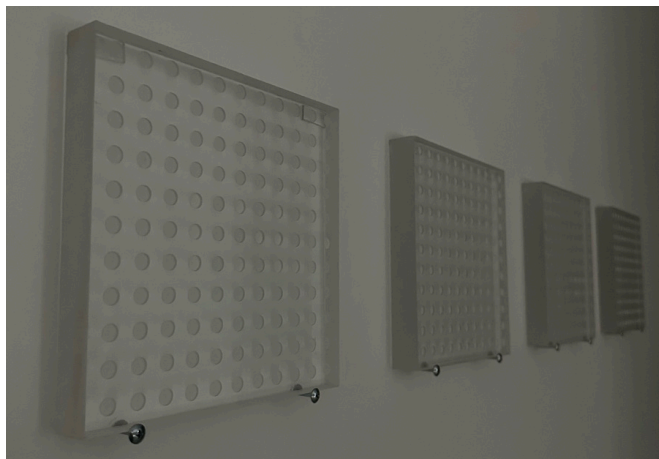


Figure 8. Close-up of *Equally Blind #1* (2018) by Cam Xanh (author’s image)

Small in scale and minimalistic, *Equally Blind #1* by Cam Xanh is easy to pass by in the exhibition. Yet, regardless of the understated appearance, these simple dotted squares will keep us thinking. *Equally Blind #1* speaks to experiences of visual impairments and toys with incomprehensibility as an integral part of the spectator’s meaning-making process. Cam Xanh made the work by punching holes in four mica squares, filling them with white paint, then covering these holes with the flat, seamless plexiglass surface. The dots loosely resemble the Braille alphabetic system. However, as they are under a flat glass surface, they lose their ability to convey meaning. No one can touch and thus read this text. Articulation has turned into meaningless utterances. You cannot see. I cannot see. You cannot see what I cannot see or want to see. From the tension of abstract forms’ incomprehensibility and one’s urge to understand, the work escalates a fathomable sense of uneasiness from not knowing, thus enabling connections beyond the barriers of language and our physical bodies.

Viewing Lại Diệu Hà’s *Hurt in here* (2011) - an installation of ironed moldy pork skins in a glass box, I felt a pit in my stomach but I could not look away. Like many of her works, it evokes a grotesque yet emotionally contagious pain. She translated the pain of the mind – the pressure she felt receiving intense backlash for her practice in the early 2000s into bodily sensations - a universal and comprehensible “language”. To make the work, the artist ironed the pork skin and the skin on her arms, then immersed them under water as self-soothing. She then picked the skin off the blistering bubbles on her arm, put them into the ironed pork skins, and folded them as if she had made a gift, which is now boxed and sealed for us at the exhibition. Around thick piles of pork skin, dried-out flakes of human skin scatter. From our sight, gradually, pain echoes into our body through imagination. Pain has materialized into something physically transmittable – an artwork, which one can leave for another to collect. Through this process, one finds solace in other’s acceptance of their pain.



Figure 9. *Hurt in here* (2011) by Lai Dieu Ha - Installation view (author's image)

Other artworks by Dinh Q. Le, Dao Tung, Nguyen Tran Nam, Nguyen Phuong Linh, Nguyen Huy An, and Nguyen Trung also attempt to translate experiences of pain from many personal registers into the universal language of arts where one can always find answers or ways to make sense of others' conditions. However, in not giving us the satisfaction of having complete knowledge, *White Noise* makes us aware of our ability to understand and connect with others but also reminds us of our limitations in knowing, evoking a form of critical and self-aware empathy. Overall, the exhibition is a moving attempt to comprehend others' pain, reaffirming the power of art in connecting people beyond the boundaries of words and reason.