

Exhibition catalogue text by Dr Barley Norton (Goldsmiths, University of London), September 2014:

**Homelands: Working the Rice, Working the Forest
(Quê: Làm Đồng, Làm Rừng)**

An installation by the Landscape Quartet featuring Nguyễn Thanh Thủy.

How might musicians perform with nature? What soundscapes might emerge from new types of human-environment interaction? And what kind of music might be created through improvising with environmental sounds? Such questions lie at the heart of the installation “Homelands: Working the Rice, Working the Forest” by the Landscape Quartet. The result of a cross-cultural collaborative project between the musicians Nguyễn Thanh Thủy (Vietnam) and Stefan Östersjö (Sweden) and the video artist Matthew Sampson (UK), the installation invites the audience to immerse themselves in the landscape and soundscape of the northern Vietnamese province of Bắc Ninh located in the Red River Delta.

The installation consists of two interrelated works, “Working the Rice” featuring Thủy on the đàn tranh zither, and “Working the Forest”, with Stefan using the đàn đáy lute. Both the đàn tranh (a 16-stringed zither) and the đàn đáy (a long-necked 3-stringed lute) are traditional Vietnamese instruments, but they are used here in unconventional ways. For “Working the Rice”, Thủy suspended the đàn tranh upside down in a paddy field near her parent’s home village of Ngang Nội in Bắc Ninh. She then played the đàn tranh literally with the rice, brushing the stems of the rice plants over the strings. Experimenting with new methods of producing sound on her instrument using the materials of the physical landscape, at times Thủy bunches a large group of rice stems and vigorously strums the đàn tranh strings, at others she uses a single rice stem to individually strike the strings. For “Working the Forest”, Stefan also harnessed the forces of nature to produce sound. He extended the three long strings of the đàn đáy beyond

the trapezoid-shaped body of the instrument and tied them to the trunks of trees so they could catch the wind. In this way the đàn đáy was transformed into an “aeolian lute” with the strings resonated by the wind. For both works, the sound inside the instruments was picked up by microphones and mixed with the soundscape of the surrounding environment, which included both natural and human environmental sounds. The installations are multi-modal, incorporating not only sound but also video projections and the musical instruments themselves. The video shot by Matthew brings attention the process of making the works with observational-style footage shot while making the audio recordings.

“Working the Rice” and “Working the Forest” are part of a series of projects by various members of the Landscape Quartet called “Homelands”, which explore the themes of belonging and human-environment interaction. While other projects in the “Homelands” series have taken place in various sites in Europe, in Vietnam the idea of “homeland” or “quê” is a powerful imaginary with a distinctive cultural history. Encompassing both the national (the country of Vietnam itself) and the local (a person’s native place), the concept of quê is a nostalgic trope that evokes patriotic, idealized images of rural Vietnam and personal memories of the past. The quê has long been a source of inspiration for Vietnamese musicians, and numerous songs and instrumental compositions eulogise the quê as a romantic idyll. The Landscape Quartet installation eschews the tendency to musically represent the quê as pretty and pristine, in favour of a more challenging, experimental sound. The installation is driven by an artistic impetus to expand sonic possibilities through forging new ways of sounding acoustic instruments in direct contact with the natural world.

As a cross-cultural collaboration by three artists of different nationalities, the installation perhaps also challenges exclusive, nationalist conceptions of the quê. For outsiders like Stefan and Matt, who visited Bắc Ninh province for the first time to create the work, engaging with the notion of quê involved ethnographic-style research of the site and the local community to deepen their cultural understanding. For Thủy, on the other hand, the province was full of memories of the times she visited the province with

her parents as a child. On returning to her parent's native village after a long period of absence, Thủy told me – from her Swedish home in Malmö where she has lived for the past three years – how she was struck by the dramatic changes that had taken place over the last couple of decades. She found that many of the beautiful places, the fields, ponds and forests, which she remembered from her childhood, were no longer there. As Vietnam proceeds at a breakneck speed on the path of economic liberalization and industrialization, the countryside and its soundscape is rapidly being transformed by infrastructure and building projects.

For a site-specific work devised in a rapidly developing rural ecology, issues of development and environmental change seem to be unavoidable. When I asked Stefan whether the Landscape Quartet had an activist green agenda he emphasized that the Quartet's objectives were primarily artistic rather than political, but he added that human interaction with nature is a key concern for the Quartet and suggested that the installation invites people to think about the relations between humans and nature. In the work we not only see and hear the artists themselves intervening with/in nature, we also occasionally hear other sounds of human activity in the soundscape mix, including a passing motorbike and distant machine sounds. An impression of the rapid development in Bắc Ninh is also gained from the video footage that shows the motorbike trip the artists took to get to the province from the capital city of Hanoi. The sprawling ribbon development along the road highlights how romantic imaginings of a pristine rural quê are often remote from contemporary realities.

Thủy's trip back to her parent's home village was an artistic as well as a physical journey. In her early career, Thủy quickly became known as an outstanding performer of traditional Vietnamese genres like chèo and nhạc tài tử. Over the last decade, however, she has extended beyond traditional idioms to forge new repertoire and has pioneered entirely new approaches to playing the đàn tranh. Recent projects have seen her experiment with a wide range of extended playing techniques in collaboration with composers and performers from across Asia, Europe and the United States. Thủy is currently engaged in doctoral research at the Malmö Academy of Music that explores

the choreography of gender in Vietnamese music, a theme that Thủy told me was on her mind when creating 'Working the Rice'. When performing traditional music in the past Thủy felt a pressure to conform to tightly prescribed gender stereotypes. According to such stereotypes đàn tranh players should display a demure femininity, have long flowing hair, wear a traditional áo dài tunic, and preferably be pictured performing with an idyllic rural backdrop. The video documenting the creation of "Working the Rice" presents a quite different image of the female musician. It shows Thủy engrossed in playing the đàn tranh almost fully immersed in the rice field and facing away from the camera, with much of her head shrouded by large headphones and dark glasses. As part of Thủy's on-going quest to take the đàn tranh in new directions, "Working the Rice" works against the gendered imagery that is conventionally associated with female đàn tranh players.

Ultimately, "Homelands: Working the Rice, Working the Forest" is as much about process as it is about product. While it does not offer a neat ending or definitive conclusion, it compels us to follow the creative process, to ponder what we are listening to and looking at, and to question how we interact with the natural world.

This text was written for the exhibition catalogue of *Hold Infinity in the Palm of Your Hand*, an exhibition of a selection of works from Southeast Asian artist curated by Annie Jael Kwan. The exhibition was held at the Embassy Tea Gallery in London from 21 October-2 November, 2014, as part fo the SEA ArtsFest 2014 <http://www.seaartsfest.org>.