

THE ARTIST UPSTAIRS

A Conversation with TRONG NGUYEN | September 2011

By Lori Zimmer



If you pay any attention to the New York art scene, you know Trong Nguyen. An industry veteran, Trong has been making art, curating, participating in lectures, writing, and enlivening the art world for years. If you watch television, then you know Trong from [Bravo's](#) art reality show, *Work of Art*; the show has been met with mixed reviews (disgruntled eye-rolls by art people / subtle feeling of slightly understanding me more by my parents). If you live in my building in Greenpoint, you know him as my upstairs neighbor.

Trong is one of those overachieving creative people that you'd love to hate, but absolutely can't because he is not just extremely talented and prolific, but is so incredibly nice and positive that hating him would be like punching a kitten. I've always liked his work because it is at the same time incredibly intelligent, but also digestible. There's no false pretense here, no glossing over the art world façade, no attempts at pseudo-intellectualism. Instead, his work is simply honest, and the truth is, the man is smart. He translates the horrors of the world with tongue-in-cheek candor, in a way that seems easy—in the same way that an ice skater does a triple axle effortlessly (i.e. don't try this at home, this is not for the novice).

His most recent show, "Domestic God____," christens Coleman Burke's new location in Chelsea, opening September 9th and showcases a broad range of multimedia talents, with pieces all loosely based on Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Dorothy's ruby slippers can be found, only clicking her way home would prove difficult thanks to repelling supermagnets in the heels. In the same vein, a *tromp l'oeil* staircase made of a carpet made of paint leaves the viewer with false promise of an escape route. Trong will also be showing his *Artist Commercials*, which feature artists in their studios selling themselves in commercial style, which in today's art market machine is sorta funny because it's sorta true.

Trong's work—both his art work and other accomplishments—leaves you thinking that someone actually, finally gets it. After this interview, I am even more impressed and inspired to push myself in every direction in the same way that he does himself.

Lori Zimmer: I can argue both sides of the *Work of Art* discussion. I can see it as both exploitative of the "integrity" of art, but also helps the world between New York and LA feel more comfortable with art (i.e. my mom). Has the art world treated you differently since the show closed? Has the "rest of the world" accepted or reached out to you that would otherwise not if you weren't on TV?

Trong Nguyen: My old next door neighbor saw it randomly and was rooting for me, but beyond that, there hasn't been any outreach from the wider public in terms of lucrative opportunities that stemmed directly from the show. But then again, I was never expecting much.

I don't think anyone cared about the show except the art world. And regardless of how much our brethren said they hated it, they nonetheless watched. One of the things I learned about television is that watchers take it much more serious than any of the contestants. I often have to remind people that it was only four days of my life, and it was filmed in New York, where I live.

Things have been pretty normal in the art world though, minus my usual jaunts to Chelsea. Someone always recognizes you, which I don't mind too much I guess. I haven't encountered any lash backs from colleagues for being on the show, as far as I know.

I've only encountered one instance where being on the show was held against me. A dealer saw an informal exhibition of mine in NoHo, and rather than actually paying attention to the work at hand, opted to pigeonhole. But much of the art world tends to think in small ways like that.

As for the rest of the world, I have enough to worry about within my little neck of Brooklyn without caring about others' acceptance or whether they've reached out to me. It's such a low plane of existence in the big picture. If I need to have a root canal, I'm going to a root canal specialist, not wondering how middle America views dentistry.

I originally opted to do the show by dismissing whether it would help or hurt me, come what may. I had to feel that my position in the art world was secure, so I just jumped right in. It was the first season of an experiment that turned out very formulaic, unfortunately. From my perspective there was a lot of distortion to the show—a common symptom of the television medium. For one, it started out being called *Untitled Art Project*, which is very different from *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*. As Simon de Pury might say, "How silly is zat?!" That isn't to say I wasn't happy I did it. I had a great time on the set and the Bravo people were incredibly nice.

LZ: You're working on a shoe with handbag designers Be & D. Is this your first foray into the fashion world? How has it differed from art collaborations?

TN: I've initiated other design and fashion projects myself, as quasi art projects. My work tends to overlap a lot, so there isn't much distinction, and I consider it all "mixing media" anyway. This particular project with Be & D arose because the owner/creative director is a good friend of mine. One evening I sent him a sketch for a shoe I wanted to make, and asked if he knew anyone in the shoe industry I could reach out to. He loved it and said he wanted to do it.

Collaborations vary greatly depending on whom you're working with, and its success usually depends on a meeting of the minds, conceptually. You usually have a lot of butting egos in art collaborations, but that didn't come into play at all with the Be & D project.

LZ: You have a busy fall coming up—can you tell me anything about the two shows you're curating this season?

TN: The first in November will be at the gallery Waterhouse & Dodd, which is this old school venue in London that just opened a contemporary wing in SoHo. It's a nice little space that is now "off the beaten path," from what SoHo used to be as a primary art destination. I like it that the gallery is among the shops and commercial stores. Why pretend the art world is any different in this regard to consumerism?

The show will be loosely an homage to New York's recent legalization of same sex marriage. I might call it "Somewhere Under the Rainbow." It won't be political, but there will be some work that I'm excited to show, shipping budget permitting.

The second will be at the Aqua Art Fair in Miami. By day I am a senior editor at [Artslant](#), and we organize one exhibition a year. I get together with a few other higher ups and we select a few artists from our "network" to exhibit at year's end. Those selected get a nice little chunk of change and a lot of exposure, and my job is to make sure all the work is cohesive and doesn't stink it up. In fact, the two shows we've done so far have been very good and there's been some excellent discoveries that I am very proud of.

LZ: You're an artist whose work cannot be classified in one medium/style. You make videos, sculpture, photography, installation, etc. To me, this makes sense—I orchestrate my life in a similar way, trying to satisfy all aspects of creativity. Do you find though, that the art world tries to put labels on you, or asks you to pigeonhole yourself into one genre? Or are they into you being all over the place?

TN: I'm not big on labels or conventions, and the art world doesn't ask much of me actually. The most difficult thing is when I have a studio visit. I really have to narrow down what I want to show, and make sure I tie it all together neatly regardless of what I throw on the table. In general, I think artists should work independently as much as possible and make the works they want to make, that allows them to feel satisfied and self-accomplished. Some artists have one or two good ideas that they run with over an entire career. Which is fine. I'm just not one of those.

Cohesion in art is a quality that spans many years and many works. I'm no different. I think if one were to look at that thread through my last decade of production, some recurring themes and ideas could be gleaned. Many of my projects tend to develop over long periods, and even though I am seeing this as a totality, the exhibition process only allows for revealing one facet at a time.

LZ: Your upcoming show at Coleman Burke, "Domestic God ____" is a range of all of these different elements of your work—almost a group show by the same artist—with the cohesive concept of "interruption" which ties the media together. What was your inspiration behind the show?

TN: Funny you should mention that, and this answer relates also to your previous question. Six years ago Ken Johnson from the *New York Times* wrote a blurb about a solo show I did at the Tenri Institute. I have great respect for him, but I guess he was so confused by the installation that he listed me as the curator and called it a group show. I suppose it does help sometimes to read the press release. Or rather, "Mission Accomplished!"

I have so many different, extensive bodies of work that have never been shown in New York. My first impulse is always to show everything, until I see the actual space, which inevitably plays a big part in determining what I can and can't show.

I don't usually like to force cohesiveness on works, or create relationships where they don't really exist. For this show, I preliminarily lined up the works I knew I wanted to show, and found that "interruption" was a shared theme. I read Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* several years ago, and the title often repeats itself in my thoughts, like a mysterious riddle, incomplete. The book is this "mis-narrative" about readers—with you literally being one of them—who are trying to finish a book, and getting thwarted over and over by "interruptions" of all sorts, from the banal to the absurd. It's a wonderful story of perseverance, sticking with an idea or obsession, and taking it to full course despite obstructions at every turn. It's a mantra for living, in a way. So that wasn't necessarily the inspiration for this show, but I've always wanted to incorporate it somehow.

My edition's cover also reproduced a painting by De Chirico—one of his typical tableaux with a train going somewhere in the distance, classical sculpture in an empty piazza in the foreground, with long melancholic, afternoon shadows. There are more questions than answers, and that is where I always like to begin.

LZ: You are an incredibly positive person, which is a little uncommon as far as artists go. What motivates you, inspires you, drives you to be so positive, in both art and in life?

TN: I might say that I am positive because it's part of our growing process and evolution, but sadly, it might have more to do with laziness. I believe that negativity is a complete waste of time and energy, and should probably qualify as a low-grade misdemeanor. I am obsessive about utilizing my time, and often I feel like five minutes is an eternity, or at least an opportunity to get something done. Life is far too short to pine over petty things that society has brainwashed us into emotionally magnifying. The world can get you down, certainly. But isn't it more fun and constructive to get back up and say "Fuck You" with a happy face? This doesn't mean I don't like to occasionally dish the dirt also.

I've never fallen into the trap of the depressed, digging-for-gold artists who "hire the mire" to produce work. It's my personal rebellion. Some people need extremes of decadence and drugs to draw dayglo skulls with snakes coming out of eye sockets. I just watch Sarah Palin and Rick Perry.

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Trong Nguyen is a Brooklyn based artist, curator and editor of *Art Slant*. His show "Domestic God _____" opens at Coleman Burke Gallery, 649 W. 27th Street on September 9th from 6-8pm.

LINKS:

[Trong Nguyen Official Site](#)

[ArtSlant](#)

[Coleman Burke Gallery Official Site](#)

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Captions:

Page 1: Self-Portrait, Vilnius, 2009

Page 2: "Marcel Duchamp Vs. Bobby Fischer" (Trong Nguyen and Tomas Lemarquis), 2008, Performance, mixed media installation, Reykjavik, Iceland

Page 3: "Gallery Trucker Hats" 2010-11, Custom caps and hats, One size fits all, each unique

Page 4: "Is It Kosher?" 2009, Acrylic paint, vinyl record, turntable, 5 x 16 x 14 inches

Page 5: "LOL (Lady of the Lake)" 2011, Silicone, toy lightsaber, acrylic paint, 24 inches tall (puddles variable)

Page 6: "Library" 2010, Rice kernels, gold paint, ink, mylar, 5 x 3-1/2 inches each

Page 7: (in collaboration with Christopher K. Ho), "Metaphysical GPS" 2010, iPhone Application

Page 8: "The Once and Future..." 2008, acrylic paint, styrofoam, foil, wood, and custom designed sword (etched steel, leather, bronze) 42 x 42 x 42 inches

Page 9: "Orphic Rug" 2011, Oil and acrylic paint, 62 x 33 inches

Page 10: "Oz Slippers" 2008-11, sequins, supermagnets, Swarovski crystals, paint, Size 6

Page 11: "Whitney" 2010-11, Archival inkjet prints, 41 x 28 inches each

Page 12: "Women's Room, Serbian Prison Camp" 1992, grass, 212 x 254 inches