

## Again, This Isn't an Art-World Critique: Phung-Tien Phan Stanton Taylor

Amid the slipstream of salesroom-ready JPGs, Phung-Tien Phan's offhand aesthetic almost conjures something like authenticity. Lo-fi and rough-hewn, it caters to that longing for an art that doesn't take itself too seriously. But just like everything else on-screen, her realness is about as real as reality TV. What starts off as an awkward joke soon segues into a meditation on the minutiae of middle-class anxiety—one where the confessional becomes just another mode of self-stylization, and critique gives way to parody.

Shot mostly on her phone, Phan's diaristic videos aimlessly trace the contours of everyday life: shop, clean, eat, repeat. The young men of *Actress & Actors* (2019) meander through malls, supermarkets, and restaurants to the sound of The Strokes as they lip-synch lines from Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003). Meanwhile, Phan plays herself as she makes phone calls, arranges an interior, and lists the perfect mix of theory for her morning coffee. The various references to generic bourgeois sensibility eventually culminate in a scene where one member of a picture-perfect interracial couple tells the other, "Don't be so fake." If the twee Chalk-typeface credits weren't enough, the title bluntly reminds us that it's all an act anyway: impostor syndrome with a slice of cake.

In terms of the not-too-distant past, Phan seems to be carving out a space somewhere between the kind of slacker self-parody championed by the likes of Martin Kippenberger and the politicization of domestic labor, perhaps most poignantly summarized in Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!*—between making your life your work and making your work your art. Pieces like the *Untitled* (2020) series of Post-it paintings made with Simon Mielke commodify a housewife's banal itinerary, replete with an accidental coffee stain. Simple enough, the gesture feels like a tongue-in-cheek take on the predominantly male genre of "bad painting" that Phan's native Rhineland became famous for in the 1980s. Unlike her predecessors, however, she doesn't seem so interested in challenging expectations of art—and what would be left to challenge?—and instead offers a lens for looking a little more closely at the tensions of everyday life. Phan suggests that the very sound of critique makes people tune out, no matter how much they might agree, whereas humor makes the process of reflection a lot easier.

Indeed, bad jokes abound in her work. Started in 2016 with fellow artist Frieder Haller, the ongoing series *Pain*, for example, recasts the characteristic awnings of the transnational bakery chain Paul to read "Pain"—presumably a play on the French for "bread" and an artistic-existential cliché. More recently, the video *Girl at Heart* (2020) shows Phan strolling along Düsseldorf's Königsallee as she sarcastically muses on the creative class's obsession with vintage furniture and fashion: "Like those Jean Prouvé chairs, ugh, dying for it . . . that Hermès-Margiela era, completely iconic!" By the time she passes the Louis Vuitton and Miu Miu boutiques, her auto-fictional reflections turn to a series of secondhand wisecracks from her mom: "What is more dry, my pussy or making a PhD in architecture?" Self-effacing as ever, the brisk monologue

traces a link between the arduous pursuit of intellectual self-actualization and its surprisingly standardized manifestations.

A similar vein of self-parody runs through *Untitled (Bankett Gruppe 2)* (2018), where she takes aim at the domestic obsession with eBay bargain hunting and upcycling old furniture. She outfitted secondhand designer chair legs with concrete casts of plastic trash bags. Fenced in with transparent PVC, the sculptural ensemble feels like a petting zoo of oversize fleas bloated with their own egos—again, this isn't an art-world critique.

Much like in real life, however, self-irony is usually a way of deflecting deeper anxieties, as in *Untitled* (2016), where Phan cycles through different looks in her apartment and wonders out loud whether she's becoming just another member of the "white, heterosexual, male, privileged group." *Untitled (Bankett Gruppe 1)* (2017), on the other hand, conjures an uneasy dream of a middle-class dining room. There, her haphazardly cut and burned canvas casts of furniture double as precarious ghosts, barely able to support themselves. Phan, who was expecting at the time, labeled the baby carriage with the comforting word "sleeping." The biographical roots of this unease become clearer in the *Volkswagen* (2019–20) series of sculptures. The portable shelving units combine miniature models of the cramped studio apartments common in big Vietnamese cities with reinterpretations of scaled-down Buddhist altars popular among the diaspora. Crowned by retro Italian coffee makers cum flower vases, the sculptures almost read like a multigenerational biography.

Her most recent installation, *Café Chardonmay – alles nehmen* at Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg (2020), combined the *Volkswagen* sculptures with other household appliances and architectural columns reminiscent of wedding cakes to evoke the expectations of material success that burden the children of first-generation immigrant families: money, house, kids. As Phan herself ventures, her offhand style is likely a holdover from her days as part of New Bretagne / Belle Air—a collective and project space in Essen that she cofounded and ran from 2012 to 2018, together with Frieder Haller, Anna-Lisa Högler, Alexander Schöpfel, and Niklas Taleb. Back then, it wasn't so important what people thought, as long as you got shit done.

109 Phung-Tien Phan, *Untitled III (Bankett Gruppe 3 (die for nothing))* (detail), 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne. Photo: Michael Pfisterer

110 Phung-Tien Phan, *biste links oder frustriert* installation view at Drei, Cologne, 2019. Courtesy: Drei, Cologne. Photo: Simon Vogel

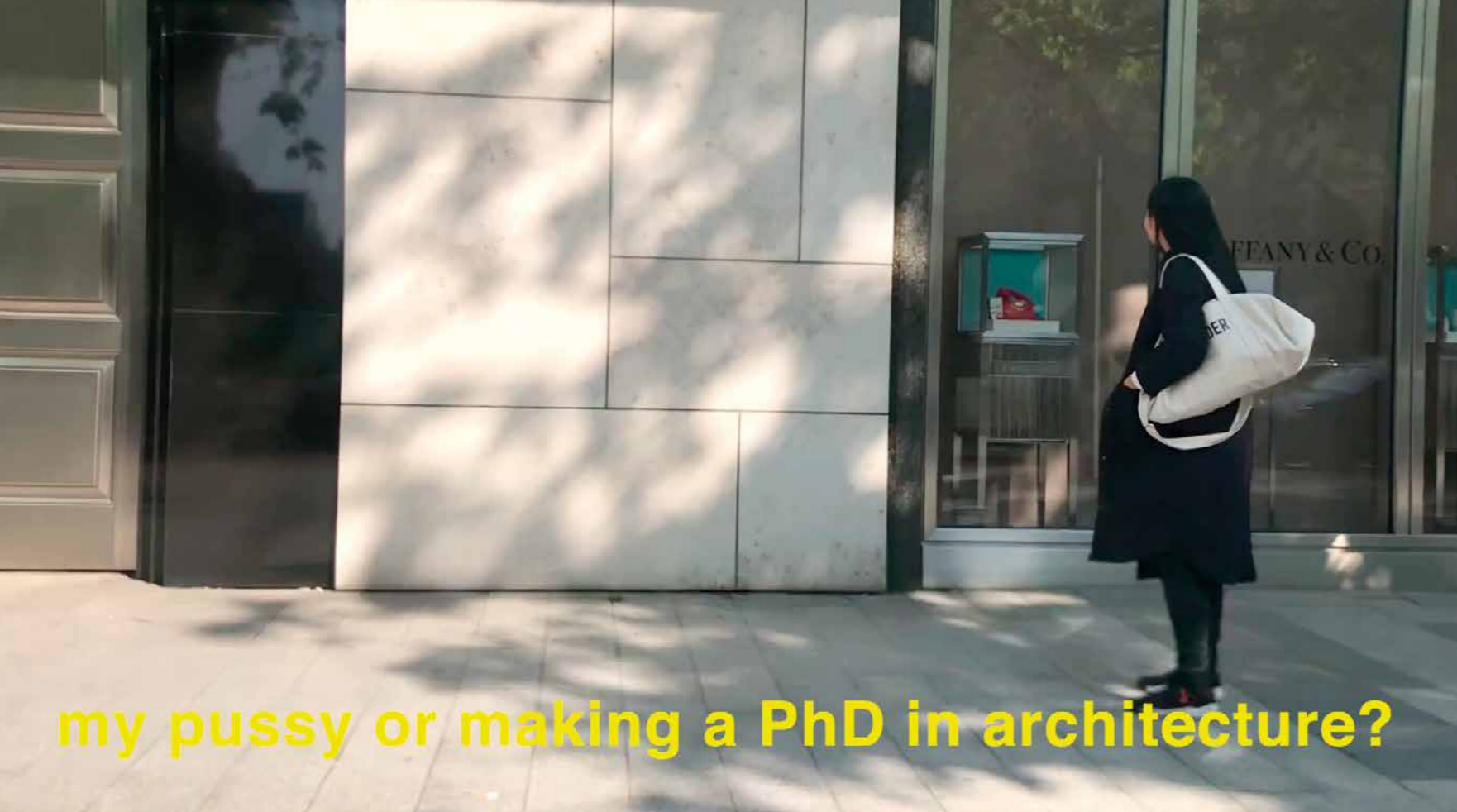
111 Phung-Tien Phan, *Volkswagen (Saigon)* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne. Photo: Simon Vogel

112 Phung-Tien Phan, *Girl at Heart* (stills), 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne

113 Phung-Tien Phan, *Actress & Actors* (stills), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Drei, Cologne







my pussy or making a PhD in architecture?



what is more dry?



a sneakers passion