

1999-Article-NW-Wolf-Schimmang-English

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### **New thinking, old tenderness Artists-Guest Artist Nguyen Minh Thành Exhibits: "Letters to my Mother"**

By Wolf Schimmang

**Bielefeld.** A letter to his mother in Vietnam: "Dear Mother, I am currently in Bielefeld, a city in northwest Germany. There I have an exhibition entitled, Letters to my Mother'. I'm showing drawings with portraits that look like you - and now everyone here knows what you look like." Nguyen Minh Thành wraps the portraits of his mother ("as I imagine her as a young woman") in transparent fabric with his and his mother's address written on it, like an envelope.

The artist has written 60 (real) letters and had them translated, photocopied and prepared for the opening of his exhibition next Friday at the Artists Unlimited gallery. For their dispatch he hopes for the help of the exhibition visitors.

After Nguyen Quang Huy (1996), the 27-year-old Thành is the second artist from Hanoi who has moved into the guest studio at Artists Unlimited for a few months through the mediation of the Bielefeld artist Veronika Radulovic, who works there as a lecturer. Thành, Huy and the third in the group, Nguyen Van Cuong, are

considered by the Parisian "Le Monde" as "La Triade de Hanoi".

The three are friends, often appear together (in two exhibitions in 1995/Kunsthalle and 1997/ZiF also in Bielefeld) and differ clearly from each other in their artistic works. What they have in common is their success in the international art scene from Tokyo to Paris to New York. Thành's works were recently on view in Aachen (Ludwig Forum), Berlin (Haus der Kulturen) and Japan (Fukuoka Art Museum). Starting in August, the renowned Mizuma Gallery in Tokyo will present his works for the second time.

### **"We don't live in the same age"**

Thành's exhibition ("Thu' cho me. Letters to my Mother") at the Artists Unlimited gallery can be seen as a tender but essentially ineffectual attempt to let his mother, a simple country woman, share in his present life. An expression also of his appreciation and gratitude towards her. "My mother and I - I'm very close to her, although I feel I don't know anything about her, nothing personal - we don't live in the same age anymore" Thành said in an interview in Time magazine. "I find myself in an in-between, between times, between the country and the city." It's the same for a whole generation of young Vietnamese, now, ten years after the introduction of "Doi Moi," the "New Thinking." The opening of the market economy and political perestroika pose new tasks and offer new opportunities. Already during his studies at the art academy in Hanoi, Thành began to disregard their regimented teaching

program and to develop his own artistic identity. He is just as open-minded and unprejudiced about the traditions of his country as he is about the currents of contemporary art in Asia and the West. The result (as with his two friends from the "Triade de Hanoi") is forms of expression that, as Vietnamese avant-garde, can certainly measure up to the art of the West - and are respected in the international art world.

Thành's artistic source is his biography, his relationship to the family, which in Vietnam is dominated by women. While he began with melancholy self-portraits full of irony, Thành soon moved on to room-sized installations that critically echo the tradition of picture scrolls and depictions in temples and pagodas. Women appear in Vietnamese iconography mostly as mothers, grandmothers - sacrificial heroines, depersonalized, exemplary.

## **Ambivalent feelings**

In the „crypt“ of the Artists Gallery, Thành has put incense sticks in Styrofoam plates and covered the plates with sand. Now it looks like a rice paddy that the mother is working on at home. The niche on the wall above is bordered with white gauze ("against the mosquitoes"). 80 slides, detailed views of his portrait series, are projected there non stop. Very directly, very personally, Thành articulates the "ambivalent feelings towards the strong integration into the family unit, whose expectations," as it was said in the introduction to the exhibition at the Ludwig Forum Aachen, "often weigh very heavily especially on the sons."

Nguyen Minh Thành, "Thu' cho me. Letters to my Mother," Artists Unlimited Gallery, Viktoriastr. 24. Through July 18, Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays from 5 to 8 p.m.

Opening today, 7 pm, introduction by Veronika Radulovic, lecturer at the Hanoi College of Fine Arts. Nguyen Minh Thành will perform an action. Followed by birthday party for Artists co-founder and board member Daniel Bérenger, who turned 50 yesterday.

((Photo captions)):

Photos (3): Regina van Laak-Bérenger.

Portrait of a mother as a young woman, painted by her son who is staying in a foreign country and addressed to her as a letter, a tender greeting from a foreign country that helps to overcome the separateness.

Nguyen Minh Thành, one of the "Triade de Hanoi", lives and works for a few months in the guest studio of Artists Unlimited.

"I am in an in-between, between times, between city and country. My art is an expression of this state" - Thành about his work.

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Translated with DeepL-Translate