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**Opening speech by Veronika Radulovic.  
Exhibition "Thu' cho me. Letters to my mother",  
25.061999**

**Nguyen Minh Thanh – a guest artist from Vietnam**

Actually it all started in France: Daniel Bérenger, Regina van Laak-Bérenger and Nguyen Minh Thanh spend a few weeks on Oléron \*). Last summer. They enjoy the sun and Regina and Daniel write postcards. Daniel remembered that he asked Minh Thanh if he wanted to write a card to his mother too. To which he replied, "For what?" That's what he told me a few weeks ago.

Yes, for what? This already points out the most important idea for this exhibition "Letters to my Mother", a title which Minh Thanh chose a year later.

Nguyen Minh Thanh was born in 1971 in a very small village about 28 km from Hanoi. During the war. In 1971, flood waters had inundated his village and the surrounding fields. It was a normal flood. His birth took place under extreme conditions. In 1972, the Americans bombed the dikes and there were floods again. Life was just a matter of survival. The children were kept alive with water, rice and at best greens, water spinach. The women stood day by day in the rice field or what was left of it to make the best of the situation, i.e. the water.

In this exhibition Minh Thanh shows portraits of his mother. If he would showed us her feet we would get a better idea of the hardships of the work and her life. As long as he can remember, he has helped his mother: Field work, herding water buffalo, supervising younger siblings, cooking (without electricity or gas), and more. It was normal child labour, which is still common in Vietnam. He himself says, "I had no idea of any other life." It was normal and when I say 'child labour', it sounds so terrible to him. He belonged to his mother and after all, her life was his too. Very easily. His mother. His mother wants him to have it better than her.

Thanh grew up in a simply structured village environment. Uncomplicated because transparent. The social structures are more or less intact. The family has a high status in society. Communication is part of everyday life. Information is passed on as people live together, everyone knows about everyone else, and there are no exclusions due to age or illness.

28 km - the distance to Hanoi - is already outside the imagination range. People live in these villages and only those who want to offer something at the market in Hanoi leave it. Why also leave the area of life?

This prompts the question: Why a passport? And I, too, sometimes quickly cite human rights when the Vietnamese government once again refuses a passport. For what? Everybody knows everybody. For example, in Vietnamese there is no word in Vietnamese for simply "going for a walk" or "going for a ride" - these terms only exist in connection with an occasion, such as visiting

relatives, going to a funeral, going to work, and so on.

Thanh wants to leave his village to study art. That was very clear to him. He once told me that in the spartan room, furnished only with the most necessary things in which his family lived was a special feature: a drawn portrait of a deceased. He liked this picture right from the beginning, he was fascinated by it and it was always his wish to be able to do something like this, also in a spiritual sense, not just in a technical sense.

Thanh begins studying at the Hanoi Art Academy, exactly at the same time as Vietnam's political reorientation, the time of DOI MOI - the new way of thinking, a necessary opening to the West, which already put the reorientation into perspective again. That was in the late 80's early 90's.

However, he found it somewhat difficult with the exclusively classical French-oriented courses and more or less made it to the student in the class for silk painting: category three. First lacquer, then painting, then silk.

He finances his art studies with all sorts of activities: Drawing postcards, making decorations for newly opened shops, writing menus and all sorts of other things. In the evenings he studies French and English and in 1993 he meets foreigners for the first time (like me, for example), with whom he develops friendly relations. There are Vietnamese who still have problems with this today, as it was a punishable offense to talk to foreigners until about 15 years ago. Thanh reads a lot

and is interested in international art and literature. He gives me a lot of support in continue the work at the Art Academy which sometimes seemed very unnecessary to me.

From 1993/1994, events literally overtook each other: Televisions, motorcycles, cell phones, Marlboro, Euro-sport and Coca Cola, as well as anti-Aids propaganda, were mixed with warnings about Western culture. All of this appears quite pervasively. January 1994 the American economic embargo was lifted and the consequences are still not foreseeable, so McDonald's does not exist yet. CD stores, computer stores, cafes with Scotch whisky and hamburgers. Italian mozzarella and the white plastic café chairs. There is everything. And everyone wants all.

The Internet has been freely accessible for a year now. Minh Thanh, by the way, is the first guest artist at Artists Unlimited to have his own Internet access. People learn quickly in Vietnam. Of course, only those who can afford it to learn and buy, and that's an estimated five to ten percent of the population. Thanh has learned a lot over the past few years, including about international art. By the way, he is the first artist who shows an installation in an exhibition building in Hanoi and gives it the title "Installation". That was in 1996.

So now Minh Thanh is in Bielefeld. And he would like to ask about 60 guests to send an envelope to his mother with his letter and something personal from each of you - a photo or something. And I would like to ask everybody to spare him the postage. Inside the

envelope is a letter to his mother. There are only a few sentences that describe his stay in Germany.

Yes, his mother, who has repeatedly appeared in his work for years. "She would think I'd gone mad if I told her that this planned letter campaign or action is part of my art, she no longer understands what I'm doing. We don't speak the same language anymore. My life no longer has anything in common with life in the village where I grew up." Minh Thanh once said this feeling characterizes an entire generation, and it is also a result of Vietnam's opening up.

One more result of Vietnam's opening up in 1996 was the cancellation of the exit visa. That's another reason why Minh Thanh can be in Bielefeld today. He suits us. And he makes it easy for us to forget that the cultural context from which his thoughts, his works come from originate, is so completely missing. A fundamental problem of cultural exchange and global communication, which has become so easy today. However, the world has not become smaller in recent years as a result, nor has it become a village, as is sometimes claimed. So here. Looking at his work, you might think at first that what he is showing here is communicative work: writing, communicating with his mother. The mail, the connection, the overcoming of distances and so on.

He himself says in his letter, which you will read later, "Isn't it wonderful, the world with these new possibilities?" For me, this exhibition is a sad work about alienation, a communication problem. The need for awkward/cumbersome, indirect, thus very complicated

communication and also the need for affirmation occur. Again and again. He wants to send her 60 letters, have them sent. They may be the first and only ones she will ever receive. One has to imagine that. Doubts become palpable. I'm your son, aren't I?

Yes, and isn't it wonderful this new world with these new possibilities. And when I suddenly see a TV with a familiar face, Derrick \*\*), in a minority village on the Chinese border in a bamboo hut without a paved/fixed floor and supplied with somewhat limited electricity for just one or two years, I also ask myself: For what?

\*) Island on the French Atlantic coast

\*\*) "Derrick" was a popular West German series with a detective named "Derrick" as the main character.

**Translated with different programs**