Running the Earth: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s *Breathing is Free: 12,756.3*

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**An Artist of the World**

If art is supposed to speak of where and when it was made, then what do we make of an artist who no longer lives where he was born, whose nationality is not the same as his parents, who doesn’t exhibit his work where he lives, and whose work appears in Bienales under the national flag not of his passport but of his place of residence yet shares little with the other artists living there? What is the critical framework for an artist who challenges the national and temporal parameters of contemporary art discourse, whose work transcends conventional notions of place, and who is literally constantly on the run—a misfit in a global art world that values and “curates” according to the local? This essay presents the case of an artist of mixed heritage whose practice has been to simultaneously engage and erase the boundaries of his nationality, his place of residence, and the medium with which he works. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba was born in Tokyo in 1968 of a Japanese mother and a Vietnamese father. His parents, who met in Vietnam, left before the end of the war and settled in Tokyo. After they separated some years later, his father moved to Texas, where Nguyen-Hatsushiba joined him as a teenager. Nguyen-Hatsushiba graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1992 and went on to get an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Although he had visited Vietnam once as a child in the mid-1970s, after his graduation from Maryland he made his first trip as a tourist. There, he made contact with a few artists and showed some of his work in a local art space. I encountered his work at that exhibition toward the end of my second extended research stay in Vietnam, where I overheard what some of the local artists were saying about it. Because half his name happens to be the most common name in Vietnam, Nguyen, he was presumed to be a “Viet Kieu,” or a diasporic Vietnamese, both foreign and familiar.

The term “Viet Kieu” often carries a negative association in Vietnam. A Viet Kieu is someone who left Vietnam during or after the war and settled elsewhere, usually with family. A Viet Kieu retains his or her Vietnamese identity, though one that is somewhat altered. The pejorative sense of the word comes both
from post-war nationalist discourse condemning those who left as traitors and from a kind of jealousy from those who remained behind under less favorable conditions. The term is associated with a stereotype: a Vietnamese who does not know what it was like to live in poverty, a Vietnamese who knows nothing about Vietnam.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s appearance in the Vietnamese art world drew my attention because his work did not quite correspond to what was being exhibited in the local galleries. The artists and friends who attended the show discussed his work in ways that indicated that his presence was disruptive. It forced them to rethink the national boundaries of their own art production, because previously no international Vietnamese or hyphenated Vietnamese had exhibited in Vietnam. Although it seemed the only term that could apply to him at the time, Viet Kieu was not a term with which Nguyen-Hatsushiba identified: he had never lived in Vietnam, he did not speak Vietnamese, and he had never carried a Vietnamese passport.

Following that first tourist visit, he later chose to settle in Ho Chi Minh City, which encompasses the greater metropolitan areas of Saigon, Gia Dinh, and Cho Lon, and is now divided into some fourteen districts and growing every day. Like other transnational artists, such as Francis Allys, a Belgian who resides in Mexico, Nguyen-Hatsushiba has been labeled by art writers and curators a “Vietnamese” artist. For instance, when he arrived in São Paulo for the Biennial in 2002, he noticed the Vietnamese flag flying among the other flags representing the nationalities of the participating artists; it took him a while to figure out that the flag stood for him. Yet, unlike Allys, Nguyen-Hatsushiba is neither an artist in exile nor an expatriated artist, for it is not clear where his “homeland” lies. Like other “Third Culture citizens,” as they might be called, he has grown accustomed to his in-between status. His case may not be surprising to those familiar with the politics of displacement; indeed, nomadism is fashionable in art circles these days. But his situation is unusual in Vietnam where artistic success is traditionally linked to an artist’s ties to the homeland. Furthermore, outside of Vietnam, curatorial trends that place value on ethno-national identity in the name of diversity tend to locate Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s work firmly within Vietnam, disregarding the complexities of his sense of self. Curators and art institutions continue to assume that his work “represents” Vietnam, when in fact it is entangled in the politics of national discourse within Vietnam in ways that are not recognized by certain international audiences. His case points to some of the contradictions, or as
Homi Bhabha has called them, the "disjunctures and ambivalences" present in any attempt to value locality and ethnic heritage in the work of an artist. More importantly, it serves to demonstrate how artists often defy the expectations of their audiences by refusing to follow a certain set of prescribed conditions relative to "nation" and "identity." Nguyen-Hatsushiba has opted deliberately not to resolve the complexities of place, thus leaving curators guessing about where he belongs. This strategy has evolved and become particularly salient in his latest and most ambitious project: running a distance equivalent to the diameter of the earth over the course of one decade. Breathing is Free: 12,756.3 is also his most powerful personal statement about human peregrinations and his trajectory as an artist.

**Migrating to Vietnam**

In 1995, when Nguyen-Hatsushiba first exhibited in Vietnam, the Vietnamese contemporary art world was at a pivotal stage in its history. For decades, since independence in 1954 in the northern part of the country, and since the end of the war in 1975 in the south, the country’s artists were isolated from international art movements. Contact with foreign artists was restricted to encounters with those from Soviet-bloc countries on cultural exchange trips, and access to art books was limited. The situation began to change in the early to mid-1990s. Foreign students and tourists were granted visas to visit Vietnam and the government opened its doors to international trade following the institution of economic reforms known as Đổi Mới. Tourism increased after the United States–led embargo was lifted in 1994. By 1995, artists in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City were receiving a steady stream of international visitors to their studios and participating in regional exhibitions. That year also saw the Singapore Art Museum open its doors to the public, and its curators embarked on several research trips to Vietnam intending to add Vietnamese art to their growing collection of contemporary Southeast Asian art. In 1996, Nguyen Xuan Tiep became the first Vietnamese artist to participate in an international biennale, the second Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia. In 1997, Sotheby’s sold its first painting by a Vietnamese artist at auction in Singapore. By 2000, Vietnamese artists were beginning to engage in conversations about contemporary art through Internet forums and as participants in international symposia.

I witnessed many of the dramatic transformations that took place over the next decade in the contemporary Vietnamese art world. Artists grew increasingly familiar with art trends from around the world and experimented
with different media such as installation, performance, film, and video. What had once been a homogeneous group of individuals from similar backgrounds—the educated cultural elite whose parents and grandparents had been writers, artists, or musicians—was now made up of various groups with different interests and different backgrounds. A younger generation of artists attended art school not because their parents had done so but because they wanted to rebel against their parents’ more conventional proletariat upbringing by choosing a creative profession. Some produced works that sold well commercially, landscapes and city scenes that appealed to tourists, while others were experimenting with different genres and going against the popular market. Still, the art community has remained relatively small, and most artists are familiar with one another. Thus the arrival of an artist such as Nguyen-Hatsushima, with a foreign art education and no ties to the community, presents a challenge.

“Where are you from?” a common question that is asked in casual introductory conversations in the United States, does not have an equivalent translation in Vietnamese. In Vietnam, one asks “Bằng ở đâu?” or, literally, “where are you?” It means not “where are you from” but “where do you live?” The elimination of the word “from” should not be mistaken for a lack of value placed on origins or an indication that Vietnamese merely take origins for granted. Rather, it demands a consideration for the here and now by stating the place where one currently resides. A resident of Hanoi would answer, “Hanoi,” or the street where he or she lives; a Viet Kieu visiting Vietnam would reply, “California” or “New York.” In America, the same Viet Kieu would say, “Vietnam.”

This linguistic anecdote illustrates how Vietnamese view what Americans call identity. There is a gap between the way in which Vietnamese and Americans situate themselves vis-à-vis an interlocutor. In the Vietnamese version, since one locates oneself in the present, the answer is relative and varies, a kind of self-professed identity, whereas in America it is more of an unchangeable and fixed identity linked to one’s past. This can lead to fabricated narratives designed to satisfy the curiosity of the interlocutor. The need to understand where one is “from” as opposed to where one “is” applies to situations in the art world. Nguyen-Hatsushima is often asked to answer to where he lives, Vietnam, as if it were where he is from, thus enforcing an identification with Vietnam that is confused with identity.

In conversations with me over the past five years, Nguyen-Hatsushima has offered varying explanations for his move to Vietnam. Initially, he said that he was attracted to the dynamism of Ho Chi Minh City, which appeared focused
on the future. Yet he was also drawn to it by a personal connection to the city and his heritage, sharing a desire to honor his father and pay respects to his father’s country. In the rapidly changing environment of contemporary Vietnam, wartime memories are receding. The younger generation, some eighty percent of the population, all of whom were born after the war, are more focused on the new image of Vietnam as a “rising economic tiger.” Today, Nguyen-Hatsushiba is not the only international artist living in Ho Chi Minh City. Since 2000, a growing number of second-generation Viet Kieu artists have chosen to “return,” literally for some and metaphorically for others. Most have settled in Ho Chi Minh City where the majority of their parents grew up and where their relatives still reside. (I know only of one, Nguyen Oanh Phi Phi, who opted for Hanoi.) There, artists such as Dinh Q. Le, Tiffany Chung, Sandrine Lhouquet, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Erin O’Brien, and Rich Streitmatter-Tran have created their own community of expatriated—or, rather, repatriated—artists who have been gradually altering the landscape of the local art scene.

Some have described Ho Chi Minh City itself as a giant studio, a source of inspiration for their artistic production. Nguyen-Hatsushiba has talked about how Vietnam gives him material for his work that he may not be able to find elsewhere. This partly occurs because Viet Kieu artists did not find themselves immediately accepted or understood by the local artistic community, so they had to find creative ways to adapt their work to the local vernacular. And the foreign influence they have introduced has also forced the Vietnamese artists to adapt. Over time, this dialogue will attract the attention of increasing numbers of curators from around the world, and doors will open for both local and Viet Kieu artists. Eventually, the distinction between a Viet Kieu and a Vietnamese artist will dissolve, and the former’s increased visibility in international exhibitions will transform, in turn, their relationship to Vietnam and the way this theme is articulated in their work.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s first works made in Vietnam were not necessarily about Vietnam, but in them he used local materials and began to reflect on Ho Chi Minh City’s spaces for viewing and making art. In 1999, for example, he created an installation for Blue Space, an alternative art space operating out of the Ho Chi Minh City Museum of Art, which drew attention to the courtyard. The museum is housed in a former colonial building, a Catholic school consisting of four wings surrounding an open interior space. On repeated visits, he noticed that the courtyard was not used as an exhibition space, but was only used in the
mornings by the staff for their badminton games. He proposed installing there a large tentlike swath of mosquito netting on which he stitched a mazelike pattern. The finished piece hung above the courtyard and fluttered in the wind. In an article written by Joe Fyfe for Art in America, the installation was associated with post-Vietnam war narratives; Fyfe suggests that the maze, a recurring theme in Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s work, is a metaphor for the displaced and “the complex paths taken by individuals buffeted by political forces.” He did not discuss the mosquito netting. The artist said that he was drawn to the space of the courtyard as both an enclosed and open space. “It is an architectural structure that is both inside and outside or neither.” The maze pattern created a drawing in space, highlighting this previously overlooked location, an action that he repeated later in the Breathing is Free project on a much larger scale.

Like other “foreign” artists living in Vietnam, Nguyen-Hatsushiba began to reflect on elements of local culture; in 2000 he focused on the cyclo—xích-lo in Vietnamese—the colonial hybrid of a bicycle and a rickshaw. For his contribution to the 2001 Yokohama Triennial, he originally planned a site-specific work related to the cyclo: a cyclo museum or a memorial to the cyclo. However, due to a number of reasons including lack of space, and at the suggestion of the curators, he instead produced a film made in Vietnam. Rather than a cyclo memorial, the artist invited fishermen from the coast to ride cyclos underwater. Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam: Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious, and the Cowards (fig. 1) created a sensation at the Triennial, in part because of its title and the seductive symbolism of the cyclo, and more so because it was shot entirely underwater off the coast of Nha Trang, the site where thousands of boat people fled the country because of their economic and political despair.

Memorial Project Vietnam became an overnight sensation and was exhibited, along with three other films shot underwater in what became a series of Memorial Project Vietnam, at thirteen biennales and triennales around the world, making Nguyen-Hatsushiba one of the most represented Asian artists to exhibit at biennales. Films from the series were exhibited at the New Museum in New York and the Berkeley Museum in California in 2003, and at biennales in São Paulo and Sydney (2002), Venice and Istanbul (2003), Seville and Shanghai (2004), Moscow and Lyon (2005), and Gwangju and Singapore (2006). The films Memorial Project Vietnam and Happy New Year: Memorial Project Vietnam II (2003), Ho!Ho!Ho! Merry Christmas: Battle of Easel Point—Memorial Project (2004), and Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either: nor Neither—A Love Story (2005) resonated
profundely with international audiences who shared a compassion toward the plight of war victims and those who suffered under colonial oppression. Holland Cotter, in his review of the show at the New Museum in New York, described the “dream-like quality of the films.” He also suggested that they belonged in the American Museum of Natural History’s exhibition on Vietnamese culture and religion. Like Fyfe’s comments in relation to the maze suggest, Cotter’s reading of these films as ethnographic added a burden on the artist to become a spokesperson for displacement and the politics of migration. The popularity of the work shows that Nguyen-Hatsushiba satisfied a need in the art community to bear witness to the politics of war, and that he did so in a way that no other artist had. For him, cyclos carried yet another significance, perhaps lost to the Yokohama audience or to those who have never traveled to Vietnam: in the 1990s cyclos were the only source of income for would-be refugees, those whose attempts to leave the country were unsuccessful. He recounted conversations with cyclo drivers, and how for him the cyclo was a metaphor for failing to leave Vietnam, rather than a symbol for success. 

Lee Weng Choy has cleverly noted that, “we—enlightened postmoderns,
postcolonials, cosmopolitans—immediately recognize local individual political identity [but] we have also placed a burden on contemporary art to represent culture, place, and identity. . . . Because of the inadequacies of our discourses in Southeast Asia, identity politics, by default, is the predominant frame for contemporary art, and, at the expense of a fuller understanding of both the possibilities for art’s publics, and the individuality of artists and their works.”

Memorial Project Vietnam resonated with publics at biennales and triennials because it appeared to represent Vietnam, or at least provide a view of Vietnam that spoke to the needs of the West. Yet elsewhere Nguyen-Hatsushiba has expressed unequivocally his reluctance “to speak for Vietnam.” His silence on the issue communicates his ambivalence about the complex nature of associating one’s work with a nation. This conscious detachment from Vietnam has led him to take a different approach to his work, developing a unique artistic strategy aimed at avoiding interpretations of his work as Vietnamese and which speaks personally about the complex relations in which humans engage with the world.

Before discussing the project that is specifically associated with this strategy, let me return to how Vietnamese art historians have articulated these issues, for Nguyen-Hatsushiba is not just part of the global art world, he also plays an essential role in the reception of Vietnamese artists around the world. Although here I shall not go into lengthy discussion of the debates surrounding the issue of national identity in Vietnamese art and the contradictory ways in which the State has applied the term “national” or “Vietnamese” to works of art, it is worth recalling that the concept of Vietnamese identity in Vietnam is not simply a matter of identity politics. When applied to art, Vietnamese does not reflect the artist only, but also the work he or she creates. Under the strict regulations advocated by the Communist party in the 1950s, which lasted until the 1980s and the onset of economic reforms under Đổi Mới, artists were encouraged to portray Vietnam in idyllic landscapes or portraits of peasants, soldiers, and workers. The current generation of Vietnamese artists, as much as it tries to break away from State ideals, continues to feel the pressure to continue to produce officially sanctioned work or appeal to vague popular nationalistic concerns.

Viet Kieu artists come with their own sense of Vietnamese identity, one that is no less influenced by ideology. Growing up in families and communities that rejected the Hanoi regime, they learned to believe in a “good Vietnam” and a “bad Vietnam”: a Vietnam that is more democratic and prosperous, what they imagined it would have looked like had the South won the war, versus a Vietnam
that is corrupt and destitute. The contrast between these two types of Vietnamese is most apparent to the Vietnamese themselves, and not so evident to outsiders who are not as emotionally connected to the geo-politics of Vietnamese history. What appears to be a case of insiders versus outsiders is rather competing versions of a single identity, not merely of two competing definitions of identity.

Since the 1990s, artists in Vietnam have received a fair amount of attention from international curators, perhaps, as stated above, because of the strong visual associations that connect Vietnam to war and exile in the popular imagination. As with the focus of the acclaim that Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s underwater cyclo films received, there has been a problematic conflations between an artist’s ethno-nationality and his or her work. This creates a quagmire for artists, a rut out of which they find it difficult to emerge. They are included in exhibitions because of their nationality, but also excluded from the Western art historical canon because of it. As I have argued elsewhere, artists from a marginal place like Vietnam rarely receive attention in international art circles without being identified by their ethno-nationality because the powers that dictate which artists circulate in the global art community ensure Western hegemony.16 Scholars such as Xiaoping Lin and John Clark have argued that this is achieved partly by further segregating artists from outside of the West through stressing their non-Western origins.17 An American or a French artist will be identified by name, while an artist from Iceland, China, or Brazil will be abeled by his or her ethno-nationality. In the case of Vietnam, artistic identity is heavily overdetermined by images of the modern nation’s history and geography, and it has become increasingly difficult for Vietnamese artists or Vietnamese American artists to detach their work from viewers’ associations of their country. From the first exhibitions of Vietnamese art in America, such as As Seen by Both Sides, an exhibition from 1992 that toured Boston, Atlanta, Missouri, Hanoi, and Ho Chi Minh City; or An Ocean Apart, organized in 1994 by the Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibition services (SITES); or even A Winding River, organized by the Meridien International Center in Washington, D.C. in 1998 and shown amid protests at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California, the burden has been placed on artists to narrate their country’s events, even to push for peace or changing perspectives.18 It is an ongoing struggle for artists, particularly from Vietnam, to disentangle their work from their ethno-nationality.

In my research on painters in Hanoi, I demonstrated that Vietnamese artists have been studied for their contributions to social history, for their contributions
to the imaging of the Vietnamese nation, and for their connections to the artistic community. Artists traditionally belong to families of artists, to the intellectual middle class and the educated elite. Since the founding of the Indochina art school by the French colonial administration in 1925, artists have been integrated into a canon of painters that are seen as corresponding to nationalist representations of the country. In Vietnam, as elsewhere, the act of selecting artists and locating them in a historical framework is part of a process of writing an art history for the nation. Such a nationalist art historiography has involved classifying artists along the lines of twentieth-century Vietnamese history rather than by artistic style. Artists who studied under colonialism, for example, are considered colonial painters, artists who participated in the revolution are considered revolutionary painters, and so forth. This process has continued through the war years and the Đổi Mới and continues today. The struggle for contemporary artists has not been one of wanting recognition as contemporary artists but wanting to be treated as individuals rather than part of a collective. As Wu Hung noted in the case of China, the shift from modern to contemporary art took place when artists broke away from a collective identity to an individual one. Similarly, Viet Kieu artists have had to forge their own path within the Vietnamese art world and avoid being grouped under a collective label.

**Breathing is Free: A Work of Global Proportions**

In what appears to be an effort to transcend the seemingly endless associations made between artists’ identities and their work, or perhaps an effort to move beyond the concept of a single place, in 2007 Nguyen-Hatsushiba developed a project that explores the idea of transnationalism physically and literally. For the project, titled *Breathing is Free*, he proposes to run 12,756.3 kilometers, equivalent to the diameter of the earth. The “running drawing,” as he calls it, is performed in increments, in cities in which he happens to be exhibiting. The routes are traced on Google Earth maps. Each of the “drawings,” realized with the aid of a GPS wristwatch that the artist wears while he runs, takes a distinctive shape determined by chance and circumstance: a water hyacinth (Ho Chi Minh City), a fern (Manchester), a root (Luang Prabang), the Chinese character for the number ten (Taichung), imaginary plants (Tokyo), and a microscope (Chicago). He is accompanied by a cameraman and a photographer who document the run in footage that is later exhibited as projections on flat screens, alongside previous runs and prints of the Google Earth maps with the drawings outlined and enhanced digitally.
The project is a work in progress that evolves with each subsequent run. The inaugural run occurred, symbolically, in Geneva, Switzerland: the site where the Geneva Convention was signed in 1954, which divided Vietnam into North and South, and the home of the United Nations and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The Geneva itinerary led him past the United States Embassy and the site of the UNHCR, as if drawing a direct line between the two. Since then, he has run in Lucerne, 2007 (21.3 km); Ho Chi Minh City, 2007 (118.3 km); Karlsruhe, 2007 (32.4 km); Tokyo, 2007 (68 km); Taichung, 2007 (127.2 km); Luang Prabang, 2007 (89.6 km); Singapore, 2008 (70.6 km); Manchester, 2008 (92.6 km); Taipei, 2008 (84 km); and Chicago, 2009 (88.5 km). He conceived of the project while watching a movie on a transpacific flight. The idea that he could traverse the globe on a more human scale than that afforded by air travel came to him as he watched scenes in the film Blood Diamond of people running for their lives during the ransacking of local villages in search of potential slave labor for the diamond mines. He felt uneasy, sitting comfortably in his seat, traveling great distances effortlessly, while in the film locals had to run on the ground and suffer under terrible conditions. He wanted to experience for himself that kind of exertion and pain.

The preliminary press material for Breathing is Free describes it as a continuation of Memorial Project Vietnam in that it is a partial homage to the plight of those who have to “run” away. As the project website states: “Breathing is Free: 12,756.3 is [a] culmination of artist’s memorial projects to-date to challenge his own mind and physique to discuss layers of ideas through the action of repetitive foot strikes, running. As a form of memorial, as so many refugees had and are running away from their homes for [a] better life and sometimes for mere survival, the artist’s running, his experience and struggle, sets the backdrop for this long-term project.” Nguyen-Hatsushiba explains in his own words: “It is my reflection and offering to the refugees whose lives are to run or to perish. And this is what I see as the desire of refugees running from their circumstances; they want to be on the ‘other side’ instead.” In running, he is trying to simulate or empathize with the physical pain endured by refugees in flight. Running is a natural function of the body, but in this project it carries a deeper meaning: it becomes a metaphor for fleeing and for deportation. The title of the project is equally laden with symbolism. Breathing is a necessary human function. Adding the word “free” to the title suggests it is also an entitlement, a condition to which all human beings are privy. There is no cost to breathing. Further, it alludes to freedom in the sense
of human rights, but it could be interpreted in more ambiguous ways, as both a reference to its use in the West to signify democracy and its use in Vietnam in the national motto “Độc lập—Tự do—Hạnh phúc” (Independence—Freedom—Happiness). But it may also be an illustration of what Homi Bhabha calls “identity as a kind of authorization.” 24 Nguyen-Hatsushiba may be referring to the need and entitle for human beings to be free of an overburdened identity.

Although the project requires the artist to subject his body to rigorous physical training and endurance, Nguyen-Hatsushiba does not entirely submit that the piece is a performance, and remains unsure how to define it. In the statement on his website, he calls it “conceptual yet physical; a real struggle, not a performance.” 25 And yet he concedes that “the word performance can also refer to athletic performance and the achievement of a personal goal. Like an athlete, I would like to be recognized for this feat.” 26 Although he may not call it an artistic performance, the work does show the artist in action presenting and representing himself “in the process of being and doing . . . in a cultural context for a public to witness,” as Kristine Stiles has sought to define performance in Critical Terms for Art History. 27 At the very least, the work eludes conventional definitions of performance and defies the notion of a fixed, end result: it is not object based, it is in process and in progress, and like his earlier video performance under water, it involves bodies in space (figs. 2–6). It is curational and empathic, components that are closely related to engaged performances by other artists.

Performances that involve travel and long distance as emblems of human suffering are not uncommon. For example, there is Kim Sooja’s eleven day, 2,727 kilometer performance-travel through Korean cities for the 1997–99 touring exhibition Cities on the Move: Urban Chaos and Global Change, East Asian Art, Architecture, and Films Now, co-curated by Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. 28 In that performance, the artist traveled with bundles of cloth
as luggage, called Bottari in Korean, in reference to the items carried by women and as a “metaphor for movement.”

In 1998, the Chinese artist Ma Liuming walked naked a substantial length of the Great Wall in a piece titled *Walking on the Great Wall*, highlighting China’s authoritarian rule, its isolation from the West, and internal human rights abuses. Marina Abramovic and Ulay made a piece at the same location in 1989, *The Great Wall Walk*, which entailed the artists walking toward each other from opposite ends of the Wall, two thousand kilometers apart, until they met in the middle, as a test of their relationship. These works do more than test the limits of human endurance, they comment on the politics of separation, movement, and their effects on the human mind, body, and spirit; ideas that are captured convincingly in the art of performance.

The documentation of *Breathing is Free* also recalls the itinerant work of the Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom and his Pink Man performances, which he began in 1997, in which he travels the world dressed in pink and pushing a shopping cart in order to comment on global capitalism and tourism. These travels are photographed and then exhibited as large-format prints, much as Tseng Kwong Chi does in his series *Ambiguous Ambassador*, which shows the artist dressed in a Chinese worker’s outfit, shutter release in hand, in front of various American monuments, or the Singaporean artist Lee Wen, in his *Journey of Yellow Man,*
in which he appears in various cities around the world covered with a full-body coat of yellow paint as a commentary on race and Asian Identity. But, unlike those performances and actions, Nguyen-Hatsushiba is not interested in portraying himself as a visitor, a traveler, or a tourist. He doesn’t remark on the strange juxtaposition between himself and the backdrop of the city in which he runs. He is not interested in drawing attention to his Otherness. Rather, he seeks to simply be himself and blend in. However, his conscious act serves as both background and foreground. The footage shows him running as if he were any other ordinary jogger in a city, and yet, as the camera follows him, Nguyen-Hatsushiba also stands out. He is the only one running in the picture, for example; at times he is the only Asian, at others, the only person period. While he may not call it a performance, in subjecting his body to strain in front of a camera, he becomes a performance artist of sorts.

His earlier projects shot under water also pointed to human suffering, presented in an aestheticized manner. In Memorial Project Vietnam, the cyclo drivers held their breaths while riding, rising to the surface to breathe before returning underwater, thus communicating the pain of gasping for air and the discomfort of the body struggling for oxygen. Nguyen-Hatsushiba explained that he had not wanted to choreograph the riders, but had wanted to allow them to
choose when to rise to the surface and when to swim back underwater in order to capture the natural human need to breathe. Similarly, in *Breathing is Free* the films document Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s rhythmic breathing, the physical strain of running, sweating, inhaling, and exhaling. In her essay “A Punch in the Gut: Empathy and Meaning in Performance Art,” Lynn Charlotte Lu explains the need for humans to know something through direct experience. “Identification with others in similar situations,” she states, “is grounded in physical and psychological sensation, and is reciprocal and interactive.”

Lu relates performance art practices to Buddhist meditation as acts of empathy for the suffering of others. The rhythm of breathing in and out, apparent in Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s rhythmic breathing, also recalls this idea. Nguyen-Hatsushiba has not stated an interest in Buddhism per se, although in 2006 he did make a film shot in Luang Prabang, Laos, that made more explicit references to Buddhism. Titled *The Ground, The Root and The Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree*, it was commissioned by the Quiet in the Land project under the curatorial direction of France Morin. In the film, art students stand facing their easels in motorized river boats. They travel upstream until they reach a Bodhi tree on the side of the river, the boats dock facing the tree, and a few of the students jump in the water. The artist explained that he was trying to convey the idea of impermanence. “As locations and moments are left behind by the flow of the river, so will this symbol of Buddhism gradually fade away from the view of the painters, leaving them with some measure of doubt about the journey they have started.” The footage is interspersed with scenes of other students exercising in a run-down stadium and of the lighting of lanterns along the river, which refer to the Communist past and the traditional festival of Boun Ok Phansa, respectively, or the pursuit of modernity versus the preservation of tradition. Nguyen-Hatsushiba says, “images of revolution—the youths running around the perimeter of the stadium, the lanterns revolving in darkness, a whirlpool in the river—suggest that this journey, seemingly linear, is actually a cycle, in which tradition and modernity constitute a dialectical rather than a binary opposition that is subject to continuous synthesis.”

Nguyen-Hatsushiba ran a portion of *Breathing is Free* in Luang Prabang. His run through the treacherous terrain of the Laotian jungle contrasts sharply with the orderly calisthenics performed by the students in the dilapidated stadium. I asked him if he saw a connection between his run and the students’ athletic activities during a conversation in Chicago. He replied that they were meant
to stand in contrast to one another. The latter was a collaboration, a community project, whereas the former was a solitary endeavor. This difference between his individual “performance” and the group project points to a fundamental aspect of the Breathing is Free project, namely, that the artist is running alone. The distance that he plans to travel or this solo voyage is daunting and his ambition to complete it articulates a kind of need for him to be alone, to be detached from others, to isolate himself from the rest of the world. And yet the irony is that he is traversing cities at a relatively slow pace, slow enough to soak in the environment, to witness what others are doing, to catch the gaze of pedestrians and automobile drivers, but too fast to engage in conversation or interact with his surrounding. When he describes running through a city, he speaks of obstacles, of rugged terrain, of streets to cross, vehicles to avoid, and crowds to avoid. He is not interested in stopping to absorb his environment, to learn the language, or to buy a souvenir. However, he is interested in the scenery. At one point, he spoke of projecting the films in stop-motion. When he showed me a preliminary cut of the Tokyo run edited in this manner, he was excited about the possibility of the buildings coming to a near standstill as opposed to the fleeting glances that define his runs. It is as if he enjoys the sensation of simultaneously belonging and not belonging to his surroundings, a feeling that simulates perhaps the peculiarities of his relationship to the world.

In spite of its measured distance and calculated dimension, it is hard to predict what the piece will look like when completed. So far, the thousand-some kilometers that he has executed have amounted to eleven films, several prints of drawings over Google Earth maps, an overhead projected map (Taipei), and a digitally animated drawing over a map (Chicago). The scope of the project is made visible only through these filmic segments and linear prints. The end of the project, when the 12,756.3 kilometers are completed, will presumably add at least one hundred more films and drawings. Even then, will these images capture what the artist has accomplished or will they become an entirely different event? In addition, there is the question of time. If the work will take over a decade to finish, things will have undoubtedly changed. Most notably, the artist will have aged, technology may have advanced, and the landscape of some of the places where he has run will also have been transformed. Nguyen-Hatoshiba has admitted to me that he had not considered the permutations of the piece over time but that he enjoyed the unpredictability of it.

The scale and scope of the piece have been equally difficult for curators
to grasp, and are a challenge to the conventions of curation and exhibition. The locations of the runs have been determined by the invitations that Nguyen-Hatsushima has received to exhibit his other works, mostly the Memorial Project videos. The institutions then agree to sponsor the runs as part of the exhibition process, including several visits by the artist beforehand to prepare and realize the run. In e-mail exchanges with me, Tim Wilcox, curator at the Manchester Art Gallery at the time that Nguyen-Hatsushima exhibited and ran there in 2008, explained the difficulties in organizing the logistics of the run in his city. “We had not anticipated the complexities of navigating the run, nor how the adverse weather conditions might affect it. He wanted to run alone, but we were worried about his safety.” In Chicago, besides questions of insurance, the School of the Art Institute, which had funded the run, had to seek permission from the city, which requested that the artist be followed by a police escort. “Curating” Breathing is Free, then, is not simply a matter of hanging works in a gallery, but entails securing necessary permissions from municipal authorities and mediating communication between the artist and public institutions. This process is not a hassle for the artist; on the contrary, he has expressed its appeal. It becomes part of the draw, part of the challenge, a simulation of what refugees have to endure. Most recently, in an e-mail, he became interested in the Luanda Triennial in Angola and wondered what it would be like for an Asian to run through an impoverished African city.

Conclusion

In running the diameter of the earth, Nguyen-Hatsushima wants to feel what it would be like to traverse the globe lengthwise, to cut through the center of the earth, to see the world from the other side, to challenge the way in which humans travel by air by actually running on the ground in patterns determined by chance and circumstance. In choosing to run through the earth rather than over it, he has also challenged the way in which artists have been presented in global art exhibitions as belonging to one world, one universe, for no human can actually experience the world that he is presenting. The privilege of the artist is to imagine what cannot be imagined, and I would add, in his case, to turn things inside out and upside down. His project might be conceptualized as critiquing the utopian models of globalization that imagine a world of equal players on an even field. By breaking up the globe and replotting its coordinates according to his own imaginary patterns and drawings, he is subverting the very premise of global art.
Where his fellow Vietnamese artists have been trying to find a location in the world of contemporary art, a place where they can feel at home, and as art writers, curators, and art historians have been trying to chart paths and trajectories for artists from this place to that, from one location to another, and claiming their epistemological and theoretical territories, Nguyen-Hatsushiba has been drafting his own path along a world that only he knows and experiences. That might be the prerogative of the artist more generally, but few have addressed the issues of cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, dislocation, and exile in such a way as to both mark and erase them. His runs are recorded with his GPS, but they disappear just as quickly as they appear, while he simultaneously manipulates the mediums of video and performance. Neither ethnographic nor conceptual (or both), Breathing is Free refuses to be a metaphor for the displaced: it is a kind of reality that only the artist can experience. In the process of making the work and calling it art, he is drawing on his viewer to contemplate not the complex paths of individuals in the collective sense, but rather the complex paths of the artist himself, both as an artist and a global citizen, through this world and out of it. The world that he has created in his art is a world in flux in which the concepts of “Vietnam,” “Performance,” and “the World” are multiple, complex, and fluid.


3. I am grateful to Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba for his trust and confidence in generously agreeing to share details of his life and work with me these past five years. I also thank Saloni Mathur for her editorial guidance and comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I also thank Barley Norton, Lisa Drummond, Pamela Corey, Heather Sealey Lineberry, Mary Jane Jacob, Rich Streitmatter-Tran, Dinh Q. Le, Diem Nguyen, and Jun’s Studio for helpful ideas and intellectual support.

24. Homi Bhabha, “Guggenheim Museum’s Asian Art Council Symposium,” 76.
28. The exhibition traveled to the CAPC, Musée d’Art Contemporain de Bordeaux; the Hayward Gallery, London; the Vienna Secession; and PS1, New York.
30. Manit Sriwanichpoom conceived of the persona of the Pink Man during the 1998 Amazing Thailand tourism campaign. He states: “The Pink Man, a symbol of conspicuous consumption and vulgarity, trundles along with his pink supermarket cart, chewing up the scenery, shopping for tourist attractions. Like most tourists today, he travels not to learn but to consume: to collect exotic destinations, to shop, to show off, to stay in resource. . . .” See http://www.rama9art.org/manit_sl/ (accessed 5 Apr. 2010). Documented initially as Pink Man I, II, III, Sot Lalaisap, Slikom Road, Bangkok, 1998, but continued with such photographic series as Pink Man on Tour, 1998; Pink Man on European Tour, 2000; and Pink Man—The Icon of Consumerism, 2007–8.
34. For further information, see Carol Becker et al., The Quiet in the Land, Luang Prabang, Laos (New York: The Quiet in the Land, Inc., 2009).
35. Ibid., 138.
36. Ibid.
37. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, conversation with the author, in Breathing is Free: 12, 756-3, brochure
published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 30 Jan.–26 March 2010).


39. Ibid.

40. The exhibition ran at the Manchester Art Gallery, 23 Feb.–1 June 2008.

41. Tim Wilcox, e-mail communication with the author, Sept. 2008.

42. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, e-mail communication with the author, Feb. 2010.