



Sung Tieu

Text by Paul Rekret
Portrait by Diana Phammatter

In *The Stars Down to Earth*, his 1953 study of the *Los Angeles Times* astrology column, Theodor Adorno reads the horoscope as a mechanism that places the structures that govern our lives beyond the bounds of criticism or confrontation. Where they are given a cosmic character, anonymous social forces take on the quality of immutable fate. By doing so, they demand conformity from the reader; rebellion becomes irrational where the circumstances in which we find ourselves are inscribed in the fabric of the cosmos.

It seems to me there is a corresponding set of concerns at the core of the Vietnamese-German artist Sung Tieu's recent 2020 exhibition at London's Emalin Gallery, *What is your |x|?* On the far wall of a rectangular white room hangs a large stainless steel mirrored wheel upon which is depicted Tieu's astrological birth chart, the position of the planets, sun and moon under which she is born. Running along two other walls stand eight immense steel doors, four to each side. Affixed to each door are smaller, reflective windows, each printed with texts developed from the artist's own conversations with an astrologer.

These texts mimic the horoscope's tone but, by intersecting cosmic forces with social and economic ones, they also depart from it in significant ways. One text begins: "Your quest for freedom will lead you to new shores." But it goes on: "How will you continue to bask in entertainment when the banking system collapses and the city catches fire around you?" Another text gestures towards a punishing contemporary entrepreneurial ethos: "What will you do when your weakness is there for everyone to see? Of course, you already know what to do in that case, which is to whip yourself into shape, go for the fight, and find the right self-help book for you to succeed in doing so." The authoritarian, commanding tenor of the astrologer ("you will find"... 'be resolved...') is amplified in being affixed here to doors that conjure a prison, asylum or office.

A concern with the features of carceral space, with design for enclosure and control, has been an abiding theme in Tieu's recent work. It is especially prevalent in *Zugzwang*, an exhibition held at Munich's Haus der Kunst in 2020. Mounted to one wall of the gallery are steel stools facing large reflective surfaces that seem to imply interrogation or interview rooms. That we're in the orbit of the contemporary regime of immigration enforcement is made apparent by the large desk of

a high-ranking European migration policy bureaucrat placed in the room's center as well as the artist-modified asylum, residency, and naturalization applications hung along the gallery's walls. These bureaucratic forms are drawn over with the moves of a notorious chess match. Indeed, the term 'zugzwang' is itself a bit of chess nomenclature, referring to a position where the player is compelled to make a disadvantageous move. That the thing that harms is also what saves might also describe the experience of migration itself especially well.

This all brings to mind a slogan prevalent among migrant justice campaigns in the early 2000s: "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us." It's a phrase that serves neatly to oppose the inhumanity of state boundaries, the arbitrariness of the hierarchy of rights and privileges accorded by the circumstances of one's birth. Not unlike the reader of the horoscope then, the migrant forced to submit to the overwhelming power and brutality of the border experiences it as if it formed part of the cosmos; as a seemingly inalterable fate.

Themes of carceral control are also prevalent in *In Cold Print*, Tieu's exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary held concurrently to the show in Munich. Here too we encounter the heavy metal furniture typically used in custodial settings. Still more suggestive is the way the gallery has been divided up by a three meter-high corrugated steel fence. The material for the fencing is inspired by a design originally deployed by the U.S. military for mobile helicopter landing mats in the Vietnam war and, more recently, repurposed for the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall. The fencing also happens to resemble the grid-like patterns prevalent in the work of artists Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. In this regard, the title to the book published in 2020 to accompany *Zugzwang* and *In Cold Print*, *Oath Against Minimalism*, seems particularly suggestive.

Here, one recalls critic Anna Chave's association of Minimalism with American imperialism. For Chave, Minimalism is a movement ultimately defined by its aggressive and unapologetic occupation of space. But Tieu also uncovers a certain 'rhetoric of power' in its ambiguity. The modular nature of minimalist design principles, which she shows, permits objects to circulate frictionlessly across institutional contexts and purposes, from gallery to prison or battlefield and back again. Her work also helps us to uncover an aestheticization of authority more broadly, as it operates in the stylistic

conventions of institutional furniture or bureaucratic documents, as well as architectures designed to distribute and divide human bodies.

But Tieu's examinations of the aesthetic principles of power further imply, I think, the capacity to repurpose these forms so they become a contested terrain once again. The object is made to reflect back on the position of the viewing subject, so that the reception of a prison chair, for instance, is profoundly dependent on where and how it is encountered. This, in turn, might insinuate still other deployments of materials that until now have been the means of our incarceration. Tieu has spoken of her work as an attempt to dislocate the object. But equally, it puts the dislocation of the viewing subject at stake too.

It is in this light that we might consider the autobiographical elements in Tieu's work. The traumas and struggles associated with migration from Vietnam to Germany have been an abiding theme. In *Zugzwang*, for instance, she becomes the daughter of a fictional EU migration bureaucrat; photos of her as a young girl standing with her mother are placed on his desk. In *What is your |x|?*, the central object of the show is the natal chart depicting the exact moment of the artist's birth in Hai Duong, Vietnam. In the 2017 video work *No Gods, No Masters*, Tieu films her aunts praying for her future on a visit to her hometown.

Across her work human experience often appears, to return to astrology, as a struggle with fate. Whether we conceive of this in terms of the physical spaces to which bodies are restricted (the detention center or the low-wage job, for example) or the psychic states that govern us (of feeling alien or the desire for success, say), these tend to appear as unyielding as if they were written in the stars. But Tieu's work also bears the desire of their transfiguration.

This text was originally published in CURA. 36, 2021.

Song for VEB Stern-Radio Berlin, 2021, installation view, Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, 2021 Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul
Courtesy: the artist, Emain, London and Galerie Stéir-Semler, Hamburg/Beirut (pp. 262-263) Multiboy, installation view, Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, 2021 Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul Courtesy: the artist and Emain, London (p. 264)





Natal Cham (b. 1987), Sun (6x6, US24 - 07:00 Ltd.), Duong, Vietnam, 2019, N65 - 106°E19' Geocentric Tropical Porphyry True Nodedo
Sun (6x6, US24 - 07:00 Ltd.), Duong, Vietnam, 2019, N65 - 106°E19' Geocentric Tropical Porphyry True Nodedo
Plastiques Courtesy: the artist and Emain, London (p. 265)

