



Tiffany Chung | Mapping crisis through memory

28-10-2016 Anne Maniglier

“I once watched a BBC documentary film, in which an Afghan man said that he would rather die once in the sea whilst escaping from his country than risk dying every day whilst staying in Afghanistan. This has had such a profound impact on me and reinforced my commitment to the work that I do.”

Tiffany Chung is in her studio in Saigon, about to leave for Hong Kong, then Ecuador, Los Angeles and the rest of the world. In 2015 she exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale in the “All the World’s Futures” exhibition curated by Okwui Enwezor. Installed in the Arsenale, The Syria Project moved many with its originality: 40 hand-made maps retraced the humanitarian crisis in Syria from the first protests against the regime in 2011 to the ensuing mass exodus towards Europe.

At the 2016 edition of Art Basel Hong Kong, her gallery [Tyler Rollins Fine Art](#) exhibited the first part of The Vietnam Exodus Project, an in-depth study of the post-1975 Vietnamese exodus that focuses on the largest group of the Vietnamese refugees that left the country after 1975, and who were reductively termed “boat people” by the international community. The Hong Kong chapter of this project presents paintings, texts and maps charting yearly arrivals and departures of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong, detention centers and refugee camps that housed them, and examines the impact of various asylum policies on the Vietnamese at that time.

Based back in Vietnam since 2007, Tiffany Chung is an artist who has known war and exile. Today, she gives us a different version of history.



13 Oct 2013 *NY Times* UNHCR Syria 4,250,000 Jordan 543,000 Turkey 504,000 Lebanon 790,000 Iraq 19,700 Egypt 126,000

Used frequently by officials and politicians in the context of an incessant flux of statistics, maps allow these figures to establish their power. At the same time, new worlds have been “discovered” thanks to maps, even if they have been misrepresentations. How can we understand the various facets of your work through maps? What is the relationship between the real and the technical, and the artistic and meditative.

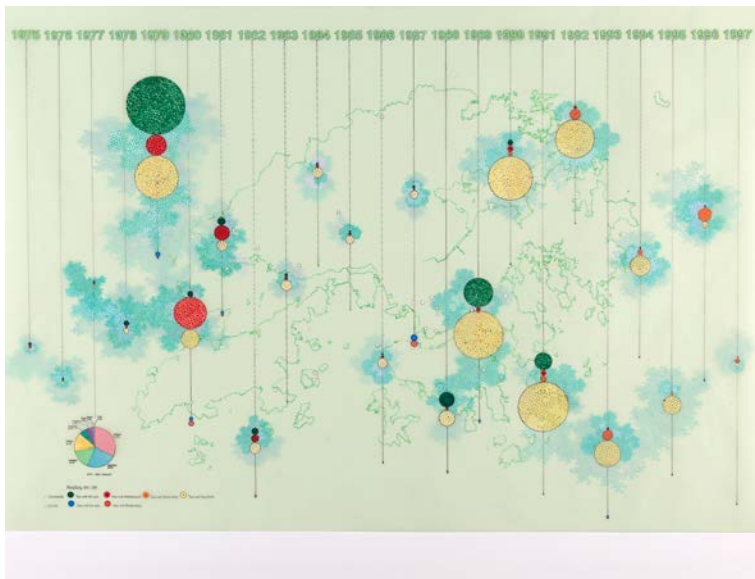
I usually don't create new maps but remap what already exist, to present history from different angles. As you say, people use maps for all sorts of reasons, but maps are, inevitably, never objective. Maps are always subjective and serve particular political ideals and motives.

To create interventions into the narratives that were produced through statecraft. I aim to bring in the hidden ‘micro’ histories of ordinary people to juxtapose with the grand history – the official accounts of a nation. I choose to focus on the personal and collective histories such as those of the refugees, for instance. To conduct comprehensive studies of certain histories and conflicts, I have to accumulate figures, statistical data, information and archival records that are not always easy to gather and seldom distributed. In tracking the Syrian humanitarian crisis for The Syria Project, I have been collecting statistical data since 2012. Watching the number overwhelmingly increase day after day has given me an understanding of the extreme urgency of the situation.

We live in a world where fact and fiction is inextricably intertwined. I use the aesthetics of beauty as a strategy to draw people to my maps – employing colors with various dots and lines to create exquisite drawings. The audience approaches the works before realizing they are being confronted by realities that they could have never imagined. I also do map-making workshops with refugees,

teenagers in particular. Through working with young people, we discovered the enormous number of problems they are faced with. The trauma they've experienced is so significant that to revisit it is the last thing they can envisage. In this sense, as you mentioned yourself, maps provide a kind of therapy.

I do not ask them to recreate the things they've seen, or to disclose information, of course. I have no desire to revive their traumas. Instead, I teach them how to create a map with colours and dots, and they are transported elsewhere. I teach them a new gesture. I want to help give them the hope of returning to a normal life.



HKSAR statistics on yearly arrivals and departures of V refugees from 1975 - 1997 MR

Do you think art can change politics?

The million dollar question!

Art poses questions and raises awareness. For me art is a tool or a vehicle to serve a certain purpose. But if art ceases to serve that goal, I'm not afraid of using other means such as writing, staging public discussions, or delving into international policy making... After studying numerous archival documents and records on refugees, what I find disturbing is that for decades no action has been taken to change the way we respond to refugee migration fluxes and the treatment of asylum seekers. We are making the same mistakes again and again.



Straight Line carved and shaped the region the secret deal of the 1916 Sykes & Picot Agreement / UNHCR records and figures remapping regional movements arrivals and resettlements of V refugees in 1979

What are you doing at the moment?

I'm continuing to work on The Syria Project and The Vietnamese Exodus Project as a comparative study. As a former refugee, it is a profound responsibility for me to continue my work on unpacking refugee and asylum policies – not just as a compelling gesture of acknowledging a traumatic chapter of Vietnam's history, but also to ensure that past struggles will not go unmentioned or wasted but instead, potentially bring positive changes to the current and future refugee crises around the world.