

JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA
CHICAGO

Since his underwater *Memorial Project Nha Trang: Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious, and the Cowards*, 2001, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba has addressed issues of national identity, displacement, and alienation in Vietnamese culture through performance and video installation. Moving away from Vietnam as site—where most of his work has until now been made—his exhibition *Breathing is Free: 12,756.3* takes on a more expansive and personal representation of the refugee struggle [Betty Rymer Gallery; January 30—March 26, 2010]. In this project, the Japanese-Vietnamese-American artist plans to run a total of 12,756.3 kilometers—the diameter of the Earth and the most direct path to the other side of the globe. The exhibition presents his first videos, recorded between 2007 and 2009, in twelve different locations across the globe, accompanied by a map of the route he has taken in each city.

His first performance in the United States—the video of Nguyen-Hatsushiba's Chicago run was filmed in October 2009—plays on a loop at the entrance of the gallery. Inside, eleven video monitors are chronologically arranged to line one wall. Each video shows the artist running in a different city: Taipei, Manchester, Singapore, Luang Prabang, Taichung, Tokyo, Karlsruhe, Ho Chi Minh City, Lucerne, and Geneva. In Karlsruhe for example, Nguyen-Hatsushiba winds through a wooded area peppered with green shrubs; in Lucerne, only a river divides him from medieval castles, and Tokyo, where the artist was born, is a whirlwind of mostly cosmopolitan storefronts. While the footage is identically framed and edited, subtle differences become noticeable—the artist's change of clothing or alterations in his appearance call attention to the work's performative aspect.

On the opposite side of the wall, Google Earth maps show the artist's route through each city. Each course presents a metaphor for that particular place: a lotus flower for Ho Chi Minh City and a prehistoric fern in Manchester, to name only a few. Following directions on a GPS watch, the artist encounters the physical terrain for the first time on the day of the run. On occasion, unexpected circumstances—such as an unseen break in the road or, in Chicago, a yellow school bus sneaking up on the runner—interrupt the run, making each minute detail of the performance more visible while highlighting the physical struggle. In his twelfth and most recent video, *Chicago Microscope (A Self-Portrait)*, 2009, the artist uses the symbol of the microscope for his run, highlighting his return to familiar neighborhoods. The piece is also a self-portrait of sorts, in that Nguyen-Hatsushiba received his BFA from the School of the Art Institute in 1992.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba's single-video installation *The Ground, the Root, and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree*, 2007, accompanies the *Breathing is Free* videos and maps. Here, allegory illustrates the tension between symbols of traditional culture (Bodhi tree) and contemporary Vietnamese culture (art students).

As with Nguyen-Hatsushiba's previous interrogations of the nature of the contemporary Vietnamese struggle, geopolitics, metaphor, and symbols dictate the ambitious 12,756.3 kilometer run. Bringing a concrete declaration of distance to the otherwise fleeting idea of a refugee running to an unknown place, Nguyen-Hatsushiba insists on the necessity—or at least possibility—of anchoring

the mythical dimension of the refugee struggle in a physical location. Nguyen-Hatsushiba's runs become meditations—and more personal, deeply metaphorical portraits—of an identity existing simultaneously between a geographically and metaphorically distant location.

—Alicia Eler + Beatrice Smigasiewicz