

# **A FABRICATED INVESTIGATION**

OR A DEDUCTIVE REASONING EXERCISE  
TO SOLVE A MYSTERY

*<Linh Lan's notes as a training journal  
during the thought experiment to address the hypothetical case of  
Nguyễn Trần Nam's 'In spaces of every scape, at time without end' >*

**BASIC GUIDELINE :**  
**THE KEY PROBLEMS TO OBSERVE AND ANALYZE**

*Problem #1: Deduction about **the setting of the case** -> To define and analyze about the space and time for it to take place*

*Problem #2: Deduction regarding **the individuals engaged** in the case -> Examination can be carried out based on four elements of crime, namely mens rea (or "guilty mind"), actus reus (or "guilty act"), concurrence, and causation*

*Problem #3: Deduction from **the physical evidence and witnesses**. A hunt for credible testimony*



## **#1: SPACE & TIME OF THE CASE**

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In his earlier painting practice (whether sketches on paper, oil on canvas or lacquer), Nguyễn Trần Nam has always provided a specific context in which the events happened. Such context was constructed using obvious indicators and precise setting: we can see how the perspectives, the elements in the foreground & the background were calculated; the intersections of planes formed a clear-cut corner. The space in his paintings, therefore, though an imaginary realm unbound by truth, real place or time, has been considered a true and valid existence, featuring the geological and physical characteristics: solid as rock / smooth as water; wide / narrow, luminated / dark. Overall, it provided an excellent arrangement (both in terms of scenario and atmospheric aspects), as if a stage was set up for a crime to be committed or a punishment to be executed. Such a situation of being surrounded and ensnared in an predetermined location, Nam's paintings, thus, are so heavy with ominous implication for an irrevocable triumph of violence and loss.

However, the artist's narrative space in this new series, after shifted onto the surface of a different material - dzo paper - has undergone a drastic reform. With a candid and uncompromising nature, dzo paper seems to allow rigid boundaries to obscure, putting the aforesaid chronic context on the verge of vanishing. The perspective layers are now constructed carelessly, defying the principles of three-dimensional space. Along with that authorized illogicality, the settlement of 'absence and presence' is liberated: the room ceases to be suffocating, the exit is open in sight and accessible, while the fractured elements in the space (such as a gaping hole, a dark chasm and a black void) no longer arouse suspicion and anxiety. Instead of setting a trap or catching us off guard, they suggest a meeting-and-escaping point, an in-and-out loop, or a type of 'Anywhere door' that opens up the infinity of space. The 'literal two-dimensionality' inherently grounded in the medium is hollowed out, lightened and finally levitated!

With these characteristics, 'in spaces of everyscape, at time without end' may seem to be refreshing and much more enjoyable for many viewers, as opposed to Nam's previous practice of ever-toiling with burdensome and stark brutality. The context becomes imprecise, purposefully deviating from the realistic depiction. Dimensions falls into accute absurdity. A slip of space..., the familiar linear structure with supposed beginning and ending has been corrupted, crumbled up into a ball.

**Like a mirror ball!**

Spaces, from that point of view, now co-exist with each other, reflecting fragmented pieces of a whole. Such a simultaneous & unified structure, the co-presence of space allow for a novel effect of transformation, as if a mirror ball is rotating, scattering light and creating a profusion of moving spots: one spot looks like a deleted cut from a film noir while the other spot projects an abandoned stage of a drama; in one place we catch a glimpse of a laboratory experiment in a sci-fi horror, and elsewhere we get lost in an ancient archaeological site.

The space, in short, serves as an archive of a dozen scenarios based on the artist's personal recollections and obsessions, as well as on the collective history of his nation and its people, including both sociopolitical episodes in the past, and the unsettling climate of today.

That's done for context and space. Next, let's move to the problem of time. What can we deduce about the time captured in Nam's paintings?

'Time without end', as declared in the title of this series, will suffice? It's quite a self-evident proposition that the linearity of time has been demolished by the co-presence of space. Consequence is : no hope to define what's before and what's after, a farewell spell of the passing and the coming vanished. Instead, each moment, though frozen in a different style in each painting, is merely a variation on the same theme of one original tune; depicting several angles of one single event. The time, (enclosed by an exhibition room) used to be lost in distorted fragments; now they have found each other and are reunited in a coexistence - an infinite loop. The time is nothing but *an eternal recurrence*.

Time and space, in the core of such stillness and endlessness, must reveal a kind of great event, which is probably a key to solving our mysterious case. So, let's examine and speculate about the possibility of this **great event**, no need to refrain from any fictionalization or interpretation:

a/ **A great event within a narrative** that drives the plot's progression. This pivotal occurrence tends to unfold a moral guidance or a relevance of sustaining faith, as can be found in thousands of fairytales and myths: The moment of repentance, punishment, purification, of execution and rebirth - is always a moment of truth (*side note: prominent and familiar motifs: the sacrificial fire or the symbol of the stag - significant points we will continue to speculate on in PART THREE*).

b/ **A great event in a situation of a psychological study**: in one's psychoscape, one of his unconscious streams rises onto the consciousness surface: in the form of a dream during a sleep or a hallucination in a psychedelic haze. It may be an exciting experience, similar to scrying into the future or horrifying recollection under the manipulation in hypnotism.

c/ (A rather palpable nonsense but no less intriguing interpretation) **A great event in a catastrophic adventure**, when an accident or a laboratory error stimulates a series of happenings that would upend all established order and replace our world with a surreal realm. A myriad of references to speculative fiction are brought to mind, with scenarios of fantasy / horror / science fiction / dystopia / (post-)apocalypse / alternate history, multi-universe theory,...

All things considered, the timeless scapes and their co-presence in Nam's paintings construct a maze with countless entries and turns. Lurking around this tricked and twisted labyrinth is likely a model of the world where *'everything is permitted'* as examined in Dostoevsky's *'The Brothers Karamazov'*. When *'nothing is immoral'*, such a great event, such a great hour! A legendary yet brutal world in which crime and all forms of violence are conceivable.

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**(The dead end no.1)**



*CONCLUSION OF THE PROBLEM #1:* 

*NOTES ON THE DEDUCTION ABOUT SPACE-TIME OF THIS CASE:*

CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS TO BE EXPLORED, SUCH AS  
BLURRY BOUNDARIES,  
DELIBERATE BLANK SPACE,  
THE SIMULTANEITY AND ETERNITY,  
THE POSSIBILITY OF FICTION,  
& PROOFS OR IMAGINARY FINDINGS OF A GREAT EVENT

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## **#2: SUBJECTS ENGAGED IN THE CASE**

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In this latest series, Nam continued to let us encounter some familiar characters - the defining elements of his artworld: human-shaped figures with no face, whose identity is blank and unlikely to be filled in. Prevailing in all scapes, these mysterious characters are carrying out undecipherable actions, including the basic movements such as standing, sitting, kneeling and lying down, as well as more intentional activities like pushing, pulling, and digging,... which are aimed at specific objects. Whatever and however the behaviors are, all performance of these figures seem to be plainly powerless, innocent and non-dangerous.

Wait a second... Be alert and careful! Let's observe and examine our whole picture surrounding their acts: the target subjects are motionless and silent, just like corpses, the perspective and gloomy lighting are concealing and deceptive, the shadows are warped on the distorted ground; everything turns out to be malformed and nonsensical.

Then, it is reasonable for us to question the characters: are they actually weak and desperate, or are they all a ruse to cover their true intentions and abilities? Unfortunately, along with the absence of a weapon and any solid evidence of a plausible hazardous source/maiming method, there's no way for us to be sure. However, one thing can still be reported in the conclusion: the undeniable absurdity that controls every subject. How ridiculous they are, as all intent on pursuing a goal that is completely unknown to them/ beyond their capacity to explicitly claim for. Their participation and involvement are persistent even when the cause urging them is missing or ambiguous; the emptiness of what's absent is aching while the tightness of what's presented and repeated is also piercing and equally intensely. Absurdity intertwined with Consistency! In this approach, logicity, albeit reformed based on entirely fictional tactics, still managed to be reconstructed into an effective manipulative regime and controlling system, as if in **a roll-playing game**.

But after all, a game is just a game, comes with no real responsibilities or consequences. All of us must acknowledge, nevertheless, that genuine games are actually quite serious. Flash back to some experiences from our childhood memories: A game of *hide and seek* or *tag as police chasing thieves*. While we were fully aware that this is just a fictional game, we played with sincerity and wholeheartedly became one with our roles from start to finish, until we reached a certain conclusion (as all cheating or lack of engagement would eliminate the magic of this game).

Here, too, the subjects in Nam's paintings are helpless and dishonest, but it's a realistic vulnerability of the roles driven by a guilty-or-innocent game. If this type of simulation game ever makes it to the finish, its fictitious power would ultimately corrupt and enslave the player, won't it? Or rather, the players themselves take over as the host and have a complete control over the game in the aftermath. If so, they can ultimately use a new set of irrational rules to cheat and win every time!

Either way it is, absurdity and consistency still connect in a vicious circle.

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**(The dead end no.2)**

*CONCLUSION OF THE PROBLEM #2:*

*NOTES ON THE DEDUCTION ABOUT THE SUSPECTS AND INDIVIDUALS  
INVOLVED IN THE CASE:*

*WHAT'S THE USE OF DEFINING SUSPICIOUS SUBJECTS ...  
IF ALL IS JUST A SCENARIO OF A GAME / A PLAY?*

*“Are you genuine? Or merely an actor?  
A representative? Or that which is represented?  
In the end, perhaps you are merely a copy of an actor.  
Second question of conscience”.*

*Aphorism number 38 from the "Maxims and Arrows" section, 'The Twilight of Idols' by  
Friedrich Nietzsche, English translation by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale*

## **#3: PHYSICAL EVIDENCE AND WITNESS**

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So far, what meets us at the end of every analysis is nothing but a dead end, leaving more questions than answers. Deduction requires more input data. Let's shift our focus to searching for more credible traces and information : The Evidence and Possible Witnesses.

Nam has constructed a striking personal tone in all his paintings: a dark and frigid color palette that primarily consists of black and blue, with the odd touch of dark red, producing a typical dismal, dreary aura. With 'in spaces of everyscape, at time without end', the stifling atmosphere is alleviated not only by the blank spaces, but also by the bizarre presence of a set of new features and unusual shades: brilliant yellow, neon pink and light green, quite eerie and out of place they include:

A fire

A deer carcass.

A ladder

A fallen out eye

Bone fragments

A slimy, extended structure looks like an internal organ (a section of intestine?)

...

These details abruptly and urgently catch our eyes, as if they are afraid of being neglected, unnoticed, removed, or silenced! Such a struggle to be seen, awkwardly cast doubt on its authenticity and motives: The presented features are witnesses or victims, substantial proof or fabricated evidence? Whether or not all key pieces of evidence have been obliterated, leaving only hurdles to fool our deduction. Without any guidance of a precise context, metaphors and analogies will take us far down a rabbit hole by endless historical, cultural, and mythical allusions. For example:

**a/ The fire:** who started the fire, was it by mistake or on purpose, and for what reason? Fire can be summoned as an ultimate purifier in religious and ritual performances, but fire can also be a tool of torture and horrific punishment. In one context, burning is a type of mystical sacrifice in which miracles might be done for canonization, while in other circumstances, the pyre is set up to execute the evil force (as in Middle Ages witch-hunt)...



Arson, in a warscape, provides an effective and rapid way for the winner to destroy the relics of the defeated regime, desecrate the local belief, as well as to bring the crime to an end, wipe out the past, and usher in a new period of power and domination control.

**b/ The pupil/ an isolated eye:** what did it see and witness? Was it part of a deceased person, or did it exist on its own and possess magical abilities? A few sources were evoked that either supported or confounded our deduction:

The gouged-out eye of King Oedipus in Greek tragedy;

The Eye of Horus: a significant symbol in ancient Egypt: having a blessing & protective power in the spiritual life of the people and becoming a calculation tool in their daily lives;

The Eye of Providence, representing the all-seeing eye of God, associated with Freemasonry;

The Third Eye of theology: where the human soul rests...

**c/ The bizarre thing** resembles a bit of intestine being dragged out, still gasping...It is impossible not to recall the *seppuku* of Japanese samurai, which involved stabbing oneself in the belly with a short sword, slicing open the stomach, and then turning the blade upwards to ensure a fatal wound. This form of ritual suicide, though grisly and agonizing, was a noble privilege to pursue death by which the samurai could solve any honor-related problems: he could avoid the humiliation of surrenderation and be executed by the enemy, admit guilt and be punished while still redeeming his dignity, or manifest his innocence in a case of wrongful conviction and prove his integrity and loyalty.

**d/ The deer and its carcass:** From a cultural symbolic perspective, we are all familiar with the idea of the deer as a link to the sacred realm, a messenger or a manifestation of a deity, a beautiful embodiment of freedom and innocence. However, the deer in Nam's painting is suffering a tragic end: being hunted down, captured and slaughtered. The deer carcass might be a hunting trophy, or be sacrificed as an offering to summon the mercy of supernatural beings. These backdrops of faith and hope, once stripped off, would reveal a deplorable condition of the deer: whether an innocent victim of frivolous entertainment or a trophy pursued for the ridiculous flaunting of illusive power. Regardless of the scenario, the humiliation of the deer is a clear

manifestation: the profane to overpower the holy, the sacred voice and truth be silent, and freedom too far gone.

*"Look here!"* - All the mysterious objects in the painting seem to be shouting.

*"Listen to me, I can give testimony!"* - They keep calling.

We try to follow their traces and instructions, observe, collect, and interview, but only to be utterly led by the nose. Our deduction get lost, scattered by distracting information and signals. Despite our effort and resilience, the more we look for traces, the more we lose them all; the more we unravel them, the more they become entangled. Suddenly, it dawned on us how strange and absurd the entire case was: the last-minute escape was flawlessly accomplished every single time. There is only one feasible justification for us to accept: the studied case is nothing more than a sophisticated script of conspiracy in which every subject and object was reciprocal in both treachery and collaboration. The offender, the false / real witnesses, and even the victim all operate in a secret collusion to ruin and disguise one another.

There is no way to catch the ultimate mastermind behind this case. He/They could be any of these roles: Victim - Assailant - Witness, or none at all.

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**(The dead end no.3)**

*FINAL CONCLUSION:*

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**The great event was unable to be defined**

**In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it should be assumed that there is no suspect**

**The investigation was postponed.**

**The case was temporarily closed, awaiting for a breakthrough finding in the future.**

