



Vunkwan Tam
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HONG KONG

The Last Laugh

VUNKWAN TAM

"F"

EMPTY GALLERY

27 AUG – 19 NOV 2022

I had not envisioned spending my Saturday night looking up body bags on Amazon, but that's what I found myself doing after encountering Vunkwan Tam's *Untitled (The traffic noise arched over a bubbling mass of public conversation and pattering footsteps on concrete)* (2021). Part of the Hong Kong artist's solo debut, "F," at Empty Gallery, the floor-based arrangement consists of twin black body bags that Tam bought on an e-commerce platform. This work is characteristic of his recent practice, which often melds found images and objects with elusive titles drawn from various texts, including the artist's poetry. Visually spare but densely associative, "F" brings together installations and assemblages that loosely coalesce around themes of death, decay, and late-capitalist malaise.

Bringing body bags into an art space could easily come across as cheap and calculated to shock, but the formal simplicity of *Untitled (The traffic noise ...)* belies its nuanced evincing of banality and commodification, of death subsumed under the imperative of same-day delivery. Complicating this reading is the notion that it could also be a joke; the show's title is derived from the use of the letter "F" in chatroom banter to express commiseration or mockery at another's failure, which had morphed memetically from an oddly crass prompt in *Call of Duty* to "press 'F' to pay respects" to dead video game soldiers.

Tam is clearly fluent in the slippery registers of internet culture, with their sly imbrications of irony, hyperbole, and half-truths. Likewise, his

works are exercises in interpretive evasion, veering unpredictably between sincerity and jest. *78i78* (2022) is a case in point. Lying on the floor in a room near the gallery's entryway is a bedraggled L-shaped blanket, which a gallery assistant dutifully spritzes with synthetic doe urine every day to keep it pungent and sodden. The exhibition text describes the work's performance of "a perpetually drenched sadboi minimalism" – artificial excreta as a metaphor for dramatized emotional wallowing. The work also apparently winks at "insider signifiers of contemporary art discourse," as doe urine is attractive to stags but displeasing to humans, just as artspeak is somewhat legible within art circles but generally repugnant. It seems the exhibition text would make viewers catch on to Tam's cheeky insouciance, yet it's hard to ignore a genuine undercurrent of menace given the use of fake urine as a lure in hunting. What does *that* say about sadboi poseurs (and their marks)?

Tam examines a different kind of prey in *XXX* (2022). Glued to a portable photographic reflector are fragments of bronze crucifixes that spell out the work's title, an act of semiotic shapeshifting from religious symbology

to letter to sleazy shorthand. *XXX* conjures both the devouring of fetishized subjects by way of mass-circulated images and the invisible exploitation of workers involved in their production. The reflector is smeared with dirt, a rebuke to the seedy excesses of the image economy in an era of celebrity worship and internet porn.

"F" abounds with such minor defilements and eerie residua. *L.O.* (2021) features a grimy t-shirt hung in the curved crook of a bisected PVC pipe. Allegedly stolen from a mechanic, the readymade is particularly effective in its site-specific evocation of precarious and overlooked blue-collar labor due to the actual presence of auto body shops next to Empty Gallery, implicating the art world in the inequities of gentrification and capitalism. Tam makes compelling use of ghostliness as a conceit, emphasizing not absence per se but the (willful) failures of perception. Take *Untitled (You Control Climate Change)* (2022), a grainy found photograph of a façade emblazoned with the titular slogan. Shot at night, the banner is barely legible, backlit at the edges by a spectral fluorescence; one can just make out commands to "WALK," "CYCLE," and "GO BY BUS." At a time when the mega-rich can



78i78, 2022

Blanket, water, synthetic doe urine
145 x 140 x 18 cm

HONG KONG

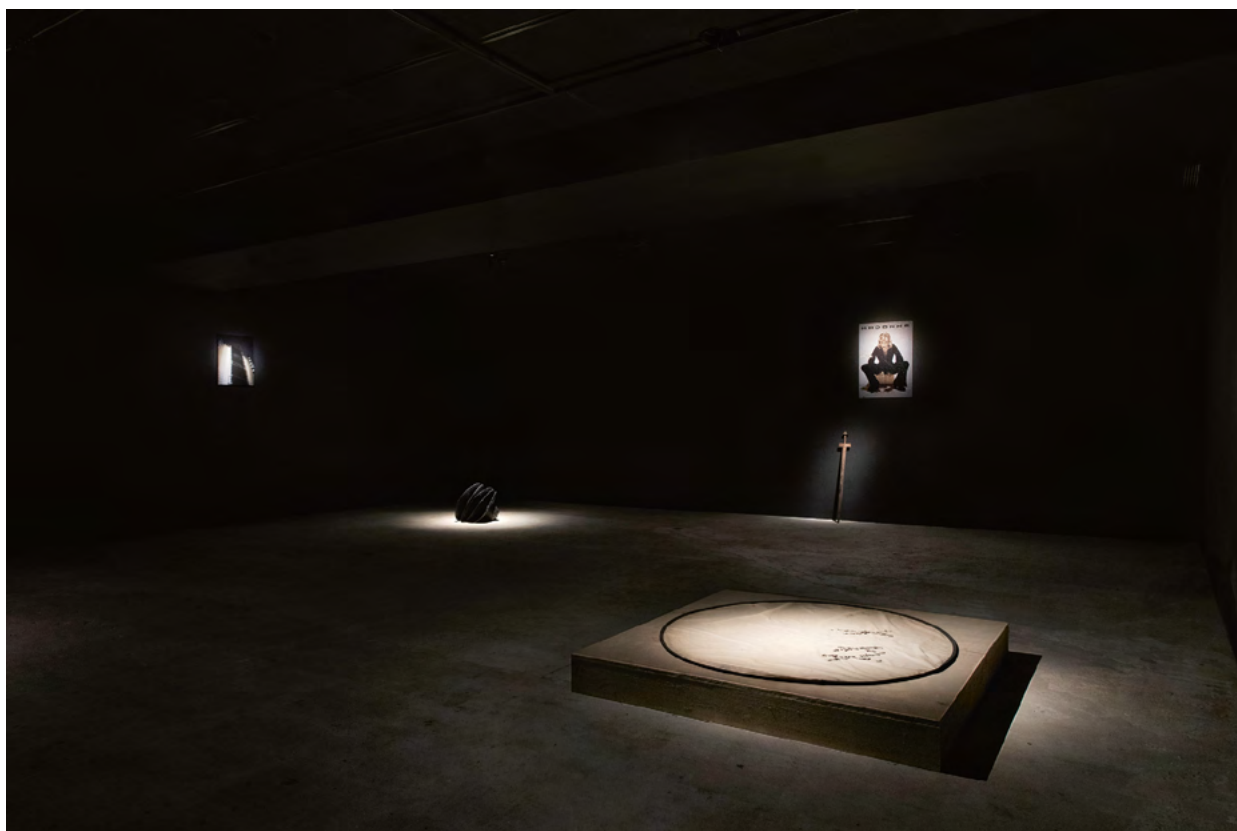
take ludicrously short private jet flights while preaching on Instagram about plastic, one might reasonably assume that *Untitled (You Control Climate Change)* is a found meme about green gaslighting. In fact, a quick Google search reveals that it may well be an undoctored image of a 2006 environmental awareness campaign by the European Commission directed at “people who *sometimes* make the effort” (emphasis in original).

For its heavy thematic concerns – death, depletion, climate disaster – “F” is buoyed by a strange lightness of touch. As perplexing as it is to parse the works’ unresolved ambiguities and vacillations between earnestness and irony, “F” skirts solipsism to make canny observations about absurd, infuriating, and disturbing aspects of life in the 21st century. By turns quietly thoughtful and mordantly funny, “F” suggests that if we’re already doomed, we may as well laugh about it.

Ophelia Lai



Untitled (VIII, a Quiet Life), 2021
Straw hats, enamel paint, spray paint
44 x 44 x 40 cm



View of “F,” Empty Gallery, 2022



「一切陰謀都通向死亡」

張煜航

2022-10-07



Exhibition installation at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo credit: Michael Yu. Courtesy of the artist Vunkwan Tam and Empty Gallery.

2004年2月8日上午9時，一名巡邏警員在抱川市蘇邑二橋裡的一個排水管道裡發現一具裸體女屍，屍體上半身已經嚴重腐爛，但下半身依然保持新鮮。屍檢中並未發現明顯外傷或淚痕，也沒有檢測出精液或暴力侵犯和痕跡，而死者的手指和腳趾均被脩剪，並塗上了紅色的指甲油。這起震驚韓國的案件，在事發18年後的今天仍然沒有告破，警方掌握的唯一關鍵線索，只有屍體指甲上的紅色指甲油。

利奧塔在《非人》的開篇即發問：「地球死亡，思想會怎樣？」¹。「一切都已經死亡。這一災難已經發生」，由此，利奧塔開始了他關於太陽災變、死亡、有機和思想的發生與結束的論述。但是很顯然，利奧塔的末世論（或者說《非人》中那對男女的末世論）還是顯得相當樂觀，而Ray Brassier則做了更徹底的發問：「宇宙死亡，思想會怎樣？」² 宇宙將在大約1040年的時間裡逐漸死亡³，物質本身將不復存在，任何形式的身體與現象也不可能存在，自然的，對於紅色指甲油案的追查也會停止，甚至紅色指甲油的物理存在——作為證物進行了千萬年物質轉化之後殘留的亞原子——也將消逝。那麼，如果我們假設，紅色指甲油案始終沒有告破（這是最可能的情況——就像宇宙中的大多數事件一樣），隨著宇宙的死亡，紅色指甲油所唯一剩下的就是標記——對這最後作為事件的死亡的標記。

綜上，與其說展覽《F》是對災異進行哀悼，不如說，正如紅色指甲油是對災異過程做最後的標記，是服務於此的一整個陰謀。標記始於對於被消耗完的廢料徒勞的重複勞動，這種勞動本身不只是後福特的乾潔辦公室中的精神分裂，而是所有兇殺懸案的兇手和警方所必須做的。不出意外的，其中一個也必須返回現場每天在黃布上添加鹿尿（作品「78i78」）。而受到鹿尿刺激的鼻腔神經，對屠殺外層細胞以形成無機創傷的隔膜的過程，本身就是對原始有機體進行此番死亡政治的勞動之後的高技術化成果。但是很快，神經系統本身也在作品「Untitled (The traffic noise arched over a bubbling mass of public conversation and pattering footsteps on concrete)」的絕緣材料上遭到剔除，必須以詳盡的文字描述來輔助高智能類人生物額葉切除後的冷漠。而被擱置的帽子超出了可感的消耗的範疇，以常新的塑料姿態為最後的消亡計數。塑料的永恆也聯動了氣候變化（作品「Untitled (You Control Climate Change)」），完成了經典的陷阱模型。Surely you control the climate change, and you can control everything for fuck's sake. 你也可以控制你的死亡，因為控制本身就通向死亡。

接下來，《F》標記的是災異對物理屬性的清算。在這一部分，事件甚至不能被稱為「被拼湊在一起」，因為結局本就不在物理層面上發生，肉和骨早已被剔除。作品「L.O. (liquid ownership)」不需要依附於任何ownership，在被直立的一瞬間，即被取消，而麥當娜（作品「lest you-will-strike against-the-stone your-foot」）也並不需要拼圖來對媒介的剝削現場進行重新組織，她的眼睛被（她自己）挖出，成為安裝在每一個觀者身上的自毀程序。作品「Untitled (a shadow falls upon my leg)」的光亮，或許只是保留了藝術家最後一點諷刺性的仁慈——為上帝埋葬自己的墓穴指明通路。

從1970年到2022年，加拿大淚水公路（Highway of Tears）沿線有超過40人被謀害或失蹤，也就是平均每年有一人會在淚水公路消失。不出意外的話，這一情況將繼續持續下去，直到萬物終結。

「一切陰謀都通向死亡，這是陰謀的特性。政治陰謀、恐怖主義陰謀、愛情陰謀、敘事的情節謀劃、兒童遊戲中的計謀，概莫能外。每一次我們策劃陰謀時，我們就一步一步接近死亡。它好像是我們必須簽署的合同，陰謀策劃者和陰謀的對象都無法逃避。」

—— Don DeLillo, 《白噪音》

注釋：

1 《非人：漫談時間》The Inhuman: Reflections on Time 讓-弗朗索瓦·利奧塔 Jean-François Lyotard

2 Ray Brassier, 'Solar Catastrophe: Lyotard, Freud, and the Death-Drive' Philosophy Today, Volume 47, Issue 4, Winter 2003

3, F. C. Adams, "Long-term astrophysical processes," in Global Catastrophic Risks, eds. N. Bostrom and M. M. Cirkovic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

本文是對藝術家譚煥坤在香港Empty Gallery的展覽《F》之回應，展覽日期是2022年8月27日至11月19日。



78i78, 2022, Blanket, water, synthetic doe urine. Photo credit: Michael Yu. Courtesy of the artist Vunkwan Tam and Empty Gallery.

FRIEZE

Vunkwan Tam's Frustrated Ghosts

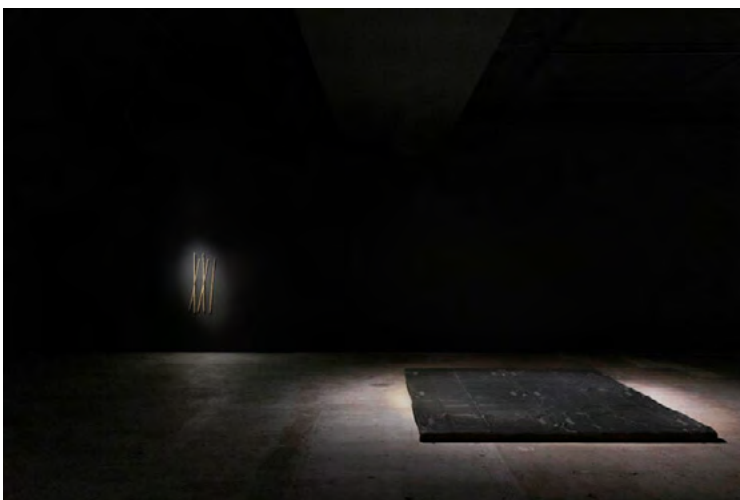
With simultaneously mournful and irreverent works, 'F' at Empty Gallery is haunted by our inability to process grief in the internet age

BY CASSIE KAXIN LIU IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS , REVIEWS ACROSS ASIA | 16 SEP 22



At first glance, the room evokes a windowless morgue. Inside a dark gallery illuminated by a dim spotlight, a pair of empty body bags lie flat on the floor. Part of Vunkwan Tam's installation *Untitled (The traffic noise arched over a bubbling mass of public conversation and pattering footsteps on concrete)* (2021), the black bags are an ominous greeting for visitors as they step into the artist's debut solo exhibition, 'F', at Empty Gallery, hinting subtly at trauma and tragedy. Comprising ten installations, photographs and readymade sculptures, 'F' is haunted by the fractured, apathetic and frustrated cultural expressions of the internet age, which manifest most clearly in responses on social media to devastating events.

Comprising a stack of straw hats painted with black enamel, *Untitled (IIIIII, a Quiet Life)* (2021) brings to mind funeral attire. Modifying a common fashion item, the work has seemingly been casually tossed onto the floor, as though thrown down by someone who has reached their limit for grieving. Nearby, *L.O.* (2021), its main element a 1.5-metre-tall PVC half-pipe, stands upright on the floor and suggests a shrine. Hanging from the pipe's interior surface, a dirty shirt is covered in machine oil. Devoid of any corporeal presence, the recycled shirt seems like the memento of a deceased mechanic, conjuring the imagined memory of an absent body. Complicated by the fact that Tam pilfered the objects from an actual (still living) mechanic, this funereal narrative calls to mind viral stories fabricated on the internet for sympathy or Likes.



Vunkwan Tam, 'F', installation view, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery; photograph: Michael Yu



Vunkwan Tam, 'F', installation view, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery; photograph: Michael Yu

The exhibition title, 'F', is taken from the phrase 'Press F to pay respects' – a popular internet meme commonly used both sincerely and sardonically in response to events that range from humorous typos to mass deaths. For Tam, this contemporary behaviour encapsulates the absurdity of the compression and contortion of (as well as disengagement from) feelings of sorrow and frustration – feelings that reached full expression in the failure to fully manifest a communal sense of mourning in the wake of the protests in Hong Kong in 2019 over encroachment by the mainland Chinese government and the way the region's authorities were dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. 'F' reflects, resurfaces and grieves those simmering, ineffable feelings with works that are simultaneously mournful and irreverent. In *78i78* (2022), a woollen blanket – an enduring symbol of human comfort – has been soaked with synthetic doe urine, a substance often used on deer hunts to target a stag seeking a mate. The work seems to function concurrently as a warning, memorial and trap for the imagined deer, a creature with the potential to symbolize both laudable earnestness and punishable vulnerability, and which as such might stand in for all of us.

Vunkwan Tam's 'F' is on view at Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, until 19 November.

Paying homage to the late American artist Félix González-Torres, Tam often names his works using the word 'Untitled' followed by a descriptive text set in brackets. Like González-Torres, Tam is interested in the intricate process of the production of meaning in visual practice, particularly in found objects. Yet unlike the work of González-Torres (who died in 1996), Tam's explores ideas relating to the internet age, which flattens culturally significant objects of all eras into a single consumable mass. Consisting of a rusty 19th-century 'North African' sword Tam purchased through an e-commerce platform, the readymade sculpture *Untitled (00044 N.O.W.R.F.Y.H.)* (2020) is balanced against the wall on its tip, right next to *lest you-will-strike against-the-stone your-foot* (2022) – a partially damaged puzzle featuring 1990s-era Madonna. While the former object implies a lost personal history, the latter conjures the mass-produced, omnipresent imagery of the cultural industry. Tam seems to suggest that these two seemingly unrelated objects are simultaneously undergoing a process of cultural decay, one that will eventually leave both as inscrutable ghosts of our history.



Vunkwan Tam, 'F', installation view, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery; photograph: Michael Yu

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谭焕坤

EMPTY GALLERY

香港田灣漁豐街3號大洋中心18及19樓

2022.08.27 - 2022.11.19

昏暗的房间正中，微弱的射灯下，一大块湿透的不规则形状布片紧抓着地面。靠近观察，异味愈发明显。那是水和人工尿液的混合物，猎人用它诱捕雄鹿，而生于1997年的香港艺术家谭焕坤用它诱捕观众。这气味隐隐贯穿在他于Empty Gallery的首次个展“F”中，注释着从一个

湿漉冰冷的梦中刚刚醒来般的一刻，如首次踏入真实，踏入熟悉又陌生的“似曾相识”。

谭焕坤，“F”展览现场，2022。

湿漉冰冷的梦中刚刚醒来般的一刻，如首次踏入真实，踏入熟悉又陌生的“似曾相识”。

“F”取自2014年电子游戏《使命召唤：高级战争》（*Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*）中的操作提示：按下F键致敬（press f to pay respects），在原游戏里让玩家可以为阵亡队友献上哀悼的键盘操作后来蔓延到游戏世界之外的网络空间，逐渐成为聊天室中对悲剧性事件表达关注的通用缩写。只需一个字母的回应，高效而通用，关注却疏离。像许多互联网用语一样，跨度颇大的复杂情感状态被扁平地压缩于极简的同一性符号中，以消极抵抗的形态回应着符号资本主义（semiocapitalism）对人类情感和关注力的索取和剥削。艺术家在此次展览中呈现出典型的Z世代虚拟世界原住民视角，并以一种互联网一代特有的幽灵学式回返重新进入现实。

无论是尸体袋、非洲古剑，还是被涂黑的草帽、PVC管和浸满机油的衣服，展出作品的许多原材料都是网络购得的现成物，或是身边废弃物的改造品。这些与身体保持微妙联系，但又始终被“剩余”所标记的物似乎试图在一片荒废的景观中恢复某种人类的历史性主体，并介入更广泛的公共情感讨论，但同时又是疲惫的、退弃的，是对后福特式劳动和耗费的背反，也是互联网算法驱动的欲望机器所决定的放任流动，令人联想到马克·费舍（Mark Fisher）所说的在无止境的重复中必然走向的“对未来的取消”。这种矛盾的心态与疏离的情绪除了与信息科技异化下的后人类状况有关，也部分带有时代和地区的独特历史创伤症状。

Empty Gallery标志性的黑盒子空间在此展中亦呈现出另类的潜质。它不再是纪念碑性的叙事剧场，而更像是一种去空间和去时间的互联网界面，一种从虚拟往返现实的沉积层。与这种“去时空的效果”同时向内坍塌的，是本雅明意义上的“灵光”：现成物组成的作品呈现证物般的冷冽姿态，物与物之间的黑暗如同网页与网页之间的虚无地带，物则成为了漂浮在黑暗中的孤岛。艺术家以此无人的视角再次遥看人类文明，无论是《XXI》（2022）中的向日葵杆或《XXX》（2022）中十字铜饰组成的神秘原始标记，还是《无题（你控制气候变化）》（Untitled [You Control Climate Change], 2022）中不知名的大楼外立面上那句与作品副标题相同的口号，或是《免得你-会-撞到-石头-你的-脚》（lest you-will-strike against-the-stone your-foot, 2022）中麦当娜《枕边故事》专辑封面的拼图，它们指向的时间和空间都不具体也不重要，却暗示着某种失落和虚无中对非人文明再创造的想象。或许梅亚苏（Quentin Meillassoux）所谈的“原化石”（archifossile）不只存在于前历史中，对非人的后人类想象同样可以在人类历史的进行时中发生，特别是在当下充满矛盾和痛苦的世界动荡中。