Phong H. Bui in conversation with Pepe Karmel

Pepe Karmel: I went to see Phong Bui's show of drawings shortly after it opened at the Craig Starr gallery in early November 2022. Of course, I was familiar with Phong's portraits from the pages of the Brooklyn Rail, but when I got to the gallery I was blown away by the shimmering delicacy of the actual drawings. I was also mesmerized by the beauty of the Meditation pieces, each one of which feels special and unique even though they basically repeat the same composition. Charles Duncan's insightful essay, in the catalogue, made me even more excited about the work. So, I

sent Phong an email that was an unabashed mash note. Our email exchange evolved into a public conversation in the gallery a couple of weeks later. What follows is the transcript of that conversation.

Karmel: My first question is, how did you learn to draw so beautifully?

Phong H. Bui: Do we have to go back to the beginning of time? [*laughs*] I would say that I'm deeply grateful to my beloved grandmother, because she would encourage me to draw famous battles from Vietnamese history from my memory. I would draw them with colored chalk on the main floor of the living room of her home as a child; I was no more than seven or eight years old at the time. Every time I did one, she would generously offer me money.

Karmel: Artists should be paid [*laughs*].

Bui: Looking back now, she was the only one who supported my love for art. But the war was very intense, and all that continuity was lost between moving from one home to the next—I mean the Tet Offensive in 1968, and the bombing of Quang Tri in 1972, among other random acts of violence, which is hard to fathom today, for the total tonnage of aerial bombs and other ordnance used during the war was about three

times greater than used during WWII. Naturally, for the longest time, I didn't make drawings at all.

Karmel: What did it mean to draw a battle at such a young age?

Bui: I was very attracted to battles or war in general, because it surrounded us. I was born in Hue, the Imperial City. I was just a few years old when the Tet Offensive took place in 1968. So, I saw a lot of violence. And even the family members on both sides of my family were politically divided, at odds with each other, hence from the very start internal conflicts seem to be a natural, perpetual condition of my early memory, which continues to be a strong element in all that I do. I still am very political, but I'm trying to be very subversively subtle in the middle.

Karmel: At what point did you leave Vietnam?

Bui: That was in 1979. My family was blacklisted so after nearly four years in a labor camp in the Mekong Delta we fled Vietnam by boat. To avoid the Thai pirates, we went to Malaysia instead, where we spent nine months in a refugee camp, then finally landed in Bucks County, Pennsylvania in 1980.

Karmel: Such a life has an artistic tradition of its own. Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko—among others—were all born elsewhere, and then came to the US to start a new life. Once you were here, what drew you to learning about art and to making it? How old were you at that time?

Bui: I was fifteen.

Karmel: That's an impressionable age!

Bui: It wasn't really to become a fine artist per se. My initial goal was to become a Vietnamese equivalent of Mr. Alexander Liberman one day. I always wanted to work for Condé Nast, for I was trained to become an art director, not a fine artist. I had his wonderful volume *The Artist in his Studio* published in 1960 by Viking Press in my home, and as a kid I would look over the images and try to get my uncle to translate the texts into Vietnamese so I'd understand the context of how each artist, be it Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Léger, or Sonia Delaunay, created their work in their studios, and so on. Needless to say, I was very obsessed, hoping to one day work for Mr. Liberman and Condé Nast as a lifelong dream of mine. It's a longer story, Pepe, how that happened, whatever it turned into what I do today, is completely by chance.

Karmel: I think it makes perfect sense. This is a footnote or maybe even a digression, but Liberman was not only the art director for Condé Nast, he was also incredibly multi-talented. He was a painter, he was a sculptor, a terrific photographer, and above all a great art director. He commissioned Brassaï, Robert Capa, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Cecil Beaton, and a host of other talented photographers to take pictures for Vogue. He was a mover and shaker in the New York art world in many different ways. When Irving Sandler—who was a big hero for both of us—interviewed Frank Stella in 1961 about the radically impersonal paintings that he was making, Stella said, "Yes, I want to be impersonal, like Alexander Lieberman." Let's get back to you. When, specifically, did you start drawing again?

Bui: It was in my freshman year of college at the University of the Arts, I took a life drawing class and a painting class as electives. It was thrilling to re-engage fully in the act of drawing, but I didn't want such pleasure to prevent me from becoming an art director. I had a painting professor, a painter named Jane Piper, who happened to be the studio assistant of a famous American modernist Arthur B. Carles, whose daughter was Mercedes Matter, the founder of the New York Studio School, and that was how I was sent there by Jane. (Jane's husband was the American sociologist Edward Digby Baltzell Jr. who coined the acronym WASP, so I was learning about the Philadelphia Main Line inadvertently at the same time).

Karmel: Ah, the plot thickens.

Bui: In fact, when I came to New York for three different interviews, the first was with Hallmark Cards, the second was with Chermayeff & Geismar, and the third with Condé Nast. They all offered me a job immediately, partly because I was the first-prize winner in the department of illustration for my senior thesis, and my portfolio was very good.

Karmel: What was your senior thesis?

Bui: It was in design, illustration, and painting combined, a bit of Ivan Chermayeff, Robert Rauschenberg, David Carson, a bit of even Milton Glaser, and so on.

Karmel: That makes sense, since until the mid-1970s, drawing and design played a big role in magazines. It was only thereafter that photography became the preferred medium. This leads me to a question that comes from Charles Duncan's essay, which is: given your training in life drawing, how did you decide to make the drawings for the *Rail* from photographs?

Bui: It all began with my first ink drawing of William Phillips in 2002, the co-founder of the Partisan Review, whom I got to meet in the early nineties through Meyer

Schapiro. I made a portrait of him because I couldn't get the photographer to give us the reproduction rights for free. I didn't have money at the time, so I decided to make portraits of the deceased whenever I could instead. Without thinking how serious it would turn out later – I mean I didn't think I would make portraits again until the June 2007 issue. It was a very important issue of the *Rail* for me personally. I somehow managed to interview both Brian O'Doherty, one of the most interesting polymaths, the most classic fox I'd ever met, and Robert Ryman, the classic hedgehog, so it was definitely a very confusing situation. While talking to both Brian and Bob, they suggested instead of each having their own covers, that we should just have one cover completely white, for Brian had written the famous "Inside the White Cube" essay, and Bob's whole entire life had been dedicated to painting white as a color. It turned out to be the most popular cover ever. All types of artists, especially graffiti artists and doodlers, would draw on this cover and then send us the originals for our archives. It was amazing.

Karmel: I once sat across the dinner table from Robert Ryman, and the only thing he said to me all evening was "could you pass the salt please"? He really believed in minimalism. In any case, you did drawings of both of them?

Bui: Yes, I did. This whole simultaneous experience was so important because it reminded me of my meeting with Sir Isaiah Berlin, whom like most, I met again

through Meyer Schapiro in the summer of 1991. That fall, he invited me to visit him and his wife, Lady Berlin (Aline Elizabeth Yvonne de Gunzbourg) at their home in Oxford. I've been a long-time admirer of his classic 1953 essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox," which later was included in his popular volume *Russian Thinkers*, published by Viking Books in 1978. When I interviewed Brian and Bob in the same issue, I realized they represented both ends of the spectrum.

Karmel: Berlin's writing is a miracle of clarity. Unlike most of us academics, who quote chunks of text and then interpret them, Berlin would just paraphrase whatever he was talking about. These paraphrases were so beautiful that usually when you went back to read the original, you were disappointed because it wasn't as good as Berlin's paraphrase. But what's the link here? I'm missing a step from Berlin to Ryman and O'Doherty.

Bui: Well, although Berlin intended for "The Hedgehog and the Fox" to be an intellectual game, everybody in academia took it seriously. The Hedgehog describes an intellectual or artistic personality or temperament for whom everything is conceived of and judged by one single perspective, as opposed to the Fox, for whom the world cannot be boiled down to one singular point of view. In our artworld, I'd propose that artists like Bob [Ryman], Agnes Martin, or Bernd and Hilla Becher were classic Hedgehogs, whereas Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois or Jack Whitten were

classic Foxes. After having interviewed Bob, I learned that he was essentially a self-taught artist who came to New York from Nashville to pursue a career as an alto saxophonist—a jazz musician—and in order to support himself, worked as a guard at MoMA for a good seven years.

Karmel: That's a good education!

Bui: Exactly! Having rotated from one room to the other throughout the museum on a weekly basis, Bob fell in love with painting, particularly Malevich and Mondrian. It's so fascinating that from the outset Bob decided to paint in a square format, and to explore endless ways to paint white as color. He never repeated himself, and in fact, none were ever square, and none were ever white.

Karmel: I remember a comprehensive show at Dia: Chelsea, *Robert Ryman* (Dec. 9 2015–July 30, 2016), consisting of seventy or eighty paintings from six decades, from 1950s through 2000s: when you walked in, they all looked identical, but if you spent enough time there, they looked incredibly different.

Bui: I admired him immensely, but I could never be like him. The truth is I'm more in tune with and have a greater affinity for Brian, who had five different personalities.

Karmel: He was first trained as a doctor, moved to the United States in the late fifties and became a TV host, then rapidly became a critic for the *New York Times*, and went on to become editor of *Art in America*. He also played a key role at the National Endowment for the Arts. Meanwhile, he worked as an artist under the name Patrick Ireland and made a very important body of work for which he sometimes drew on his medical background. For instance, he made a portrait of Marcel Duchamp where he took his own heartbeat and somehow mechanically reproduced it as a portrait of Duchamp. He was an extraordinary man, who also wrote under other pen names.

Bui: One being Sigmund Bode, with the first name having been taken from Sigmund Freud, and the last–

Karmel: After the German curator Wilhelm Bode, right?

Bui: That's right. Then Mary Josephson.

Karmel: To what extent has O'Doherty inspired what you've been doing at the Rail?

Bui: We met in the late nineties through our beloved friend, the late legendary art historian Irving Sandler. Once I interviewed Brian in 2007, we became really good friends. I would see Brian and Barbara Novak, his wife, rather frequently. One of the

main reasons why I could identify readily with Brian, or our other friend, the late Jonas Mekas, was partly because they were immigrants like me. Jonas traveled a great deal, and whenever he went, people would ask, “Where are you from and where do you live?” and he would say “I was born in Lithuania, I live in New York, but my country is culture.” I identify with that particular condition very deeply. I think once you are an immigrant, you are forever caught between two worlds, your old country and the new land of opportunity, and you belong to neither, so the only refuge you really have is culture.

Karmel: That's a great spur to becoming a critic: when you don't accept what you've been taught or told or what everyone else is saying, but are always questioning it. Let's go back to some of these nitty gritty questions about your working method: you said a few minutes ago that you began making drawings after photographs, because it was too expensive to license the photographs themselves. How do you choose these photographs?

Bui: At the beginning I took the photographs of the featured interviewees myself. I’d ask my assistant to print them out as Xeroxes. Each is printed slightly smaller than life size, and should fit in a sheet of 11¼ x 15¼″, which is ¼ of one 22 x 30″ sheet of Arches Watercolor Hot Pressed 150 lb. paper. The goal is to bring warmth to the printed page. Each portrait takes between 10 and 12 hours to make. During the

making process, I listen to the interview with the artists or writer or whoever is being featured in the *Rail*.

Karmel: So, you listen to the recordings of the interviews with each artist while you're making the drawings?

Bui: Yes, it allows me to be more intimate with the portrait.

Karmel: You just mentioned time: that was another thing I wanted to ask you about. Charles Duncan, in his essay, says that each of the smaller Meditation Drawings takes you five hours and thirty minutes to make, whereas the larger Meditation Drawings each take twenty-two hours. This sounds like a kind of Buddhist practice. I mean, maybe I've got a kind of ADD personality, but I can't imagine sitting there so patiently doing that for five hours, let alone twelve or twenty-two. How do you stay "in the zone," so that you can keep working so carefully and beautifully for such a long time period?

Bui: Well, when I met Meyer and Lillian Schapiro in 1986, I realized that there was a potential synthesis there, with my Buddhist background and their interest in and deep admiration for Immanuel Kant, who was not a Buddhist but who had brought rationalism and empiricism together. We also admired Kant's super rigid schedule.

Karmel: It was said that he would take a walk every day and that the townspeople in Köningsberg could set their watches at 5pm when he left his home.

Bui: The Schapiros too lived according to a strict daily schedule. After Meyer died in 1993, I went to live with Lillian for two summers in their summer home in South Londonderry, Vermont, for four months straight each time. Those two summers I can easily claim to have been the most exciting, beautiful and happy summers of all my life. It just me and Lillian. In the morning, we would wake up at 5AM, eat our oatmeal, then I would read while she was working on his unpublished manuscripts. She eventually was able to get four volumes of his writing published by the late George Braziller, one being Meyer's extensive bibiliography.

Karmel: They are amazing books.

Bui: They sure are. At any rate, we would then meet at 10am to have a quick tea, then at noon we had lunch for half an hour, then we worked until supper at exactly six o'clock, then followed by leisure reading before bedtime at 9pm. We hardly saw anyone. We welcomed no more than two or three guests per summer. Lillian wore a timer on her neck. For a very close friend, forty-five minutes was allowed. A good friend, half an hour. And after that, she would ask them to leave by saying "we must

return to work, dear." I loved it. I really learned discipline from them, not at all from my upbringing.

Karmel: How did you come to meet the Schapiros?

Bui: As I mentioned earlier, I was a student at the New York Studio School, and, though Meyer never was a faculty member there, he gave four lectures, and he agreed to participate in a group show of the founding faculty members. Many of you may know that Meyer made art whenever he could, as ways to inform his perception and writing. In any case, I was asked by the Program Director—at the time Ophrah Shemesh—to go to their home on West 11th Street in the West Village to fetch one small painting of Meyer's. I was told that, as soon as I was handed the painting by Lillian, who was extremely protective of his time, I must thank her and be on my way. Surprisingly, when I got there, it was Meyer at the door. He handed over the painting and asked where I was from. I told him I was from Hue, Vietnam. Immediately, he spoke about Vietnamese politics with eloquence, including specific names of generals. I later learned through his friends Saul Bellow, Irving Howe, Isaiah Berlin, among others, that Meyer was known to have had the greatest memory among them. We got excited talking, and then he said to me "why do you want to be a painter"? So, I explained to him a little bit of my epiphany: during the break between my interviews with Chermayeff & Geismar and Condé Nast, I paid a visit to MoMA and, seeing

paintings by Picasso, Matisse, and especially de Kooning's *Woman I,* I felt compelled to give up the commercial path and pursue a Bohemian life as a painter. Meyer detected there was a sadness in me and I said to him not to worry, as I was then reading Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

Karmel: That seems like a cause for worry right there.

Bui: Well, I've had a troubled relationship with my father, so that book, with the theme being the relationship between Abraham the father and his son Isaac, was very important to me. He got excited and said the book was also one of his favorites. He then invited me to meet his wife for tea. And that was it. Soon it became a weekly ritual. Every Saturday, I would come and walk with him for half an hour, starting at exactly five o'clock. At 5:30 we would go back and eat Lillian's steamed vegetables for dinner, and a half a pear or bananas for dessert. This was to remain a ritual until Meyer died in 1993. I was their adopted Jewish grandson.

Karmel: You dedicated *Symphony #1* to Meyer and Lillian Schapiro. How did you pick the particular artists whom they're surrounded by? And what compelled you to insert the Meditation paintings in the middle?

Bui: Well, you can say that the portrait is really a commitment to elevate those unique individuals, which is a very Western idea of the uniqueness of an individual, whereas the meditation is a way to empty out the uniqueness of the individual, which is the philosophy of the East. The Meditation paintings are no more and no less than repeating the same gesture, like chanting, so to speak. Just think of the image of Jesus Christ on the cross, the incredible presence of his physical erotic aura, as much as pain and suffering being exposed to everybody frontally, whereas the image of Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree in profile, showing no drama, as he is trying to reach Nirvana. Nirvana means not being there whatsoever, whereas everything in the West is the ongoing titanic amplification of the uniqueness of the self. For example, when I interviewed Ai Weiwei, he was not conscious of the fact that he was the metaphorical Tank Man of Tiananmen Square, otherwise known as the June Fourth Incident, who was and is indeed David against Goliath. It is very troublesome when most young person desire to be unique individuals.

Karmel: How do your intentions differ in making the Meditation Paintings as opposed to the Meditation Drawings?

Bui: They both in fact share a similar process. First of all, the meditation drawings arose out of the so-called cross-hatching formation which I usually draw as the background of the portrait. Actually, it began with our first anthology of *Rail* artist

interviews, published by David Zwirner Books in 2017. The only interview that did not include a portrait was our friend, the great sculptor Martin Puryear. During his 2009 retrospective at MoMA, I asked our friend David Levi Strauss to interview him, and when it came time to make the portrait, Martin called me up and said "Phong, I'm old fashioned. I'd rather not have my portrait drawn, as I've never had a portrait photograph taken of my face. Would you instead put one of my works of art in it?" In my case, in order to keep the plate of illustrations consistent, I decided I would draw the background that would constitute Martin's portrait. Later, when Martin came to Venice for his representation of the US Pavilion in 2019, the Rail had a collateral project there that had my portraits on view. When Martin saw them, he said "Would you consider drawing my portrait, for I do not want to be left out of your project?". And I told him I would, of course, but it might take a while.

Karmel: Twelve hours per picture, it's definitely going to be a while. It's interesting that what was once a background is now a foreground as a work of art.

Bui: I felt immediately at ease in making them as it's a pleasure to empty out my thoughts. I remember growing up as a Buddhist, my grandparents were very serious Buddhist practitioners. They would meditate in such a way that they were actually not there at all. For example, in the summer of 1971, while my grandmother was meditating at exactly 5 o'clock in the afternoon, I remember a huge mosquito sucking

her blood on the middle of her shaved head. Without thinking much, I went to smack the mosquito and that did not wake her up. The next day, I realized that her Buddhist robe was so big, I could sneak slowly and delicately to take a bit of money from her wallet, which was on the floor away from her body, in order to take my friends out to the movies. That night when I came home for dinner, as soon as I sat down, she looked me in the eye and said, "next time ask, never steal again, grandson," and I never did steal again. The lesson was that you may check out and be incredibly mindful at the same time.

Karmel: I can see how that works in the drawings, where you're doing the same thing over and over again, from one drawing to the next and then accumulating them in rows and grids. The paintings seem to have more spontaneity and variety from one to the next. How different is the spiritual or psychological experience of making the paintings from experience of drawing?

Bui: Both share the same concept of repeating to attain the subtle simultaneity of similarities and differences. As with the meditation drawings, the pencil can only draw each line to the length of my wrist and fingers. I'd do the same thing with the brush. In the Meditation drawings, there's an invisible grid to keep all the lines with their rectilinearity; in the Meditation paintings, I can only carry so much paint across with the brush, therefore it makes pragmatic sense to divide them into three columns.

This allows a process of back-and-forth with the same repetition, so whatever the gesture might evoke, it's still very contained within that structure. I try to make them exactly identical, knowing that they cannot be, and that is what inspired me to do more and repeatedly more. There's a story: the conceptual artist Allan McCollum in 1968 or ‘69 got to know Vija Celmins, when she had a studio in Venice Beach. He came and he saw her making those remarkable minute drawings of the surface of water without a horizon taken from the *New York Times*, the same one that she's still making to this day, and she would make one small one per day, and she would not look back at them. So according to Alan's memory, he finally asked her why she would never bother to look back, to which she replied, “I trust that they will be mostly identical with few tiny differences”. According to Alan, she was then part of a Gurdjieff workshop. Its main philosophy is referred to as “The Work” or “The Fourth Way”, to train students how to increase and focus their attention and energy through numerous methodologies of awareness. One of the first things they must do is to get rid of the word “I” during conversations. My meditation exercise has deep roots in Mahāyāna Buddhism and my grandmother’s own practice.

Karmel: I liked what you said there about trying to do exactly the same thing, knowing that it wouldn't be the same. It reminded me of Beckett's remark “Fail, fail again, fail better”.

Bui: The aspiration behind this concept of meditation is essentially about taking the capital “I” and the small “i” out of the equation, and replacing in their place the real labor of the hand in its repetition.

Karmel: How did you decide to put these meditation paintings, which are remarkable abstractions, in the middle of the Symphonies? The format reminds me of a Trecento altarpiece, with the iconic image of say Jesus or the Virgin Mary in the middle, and the predella panels with the narrative seals around it, except in your case it’s the opposite: it’s an altarpiece inside-out, with the narrative in the middle and the icons around it. How did you arrive at this?

Bui: I think it must have been about six years ago, I was working late at night and I was listening to Meyer Schapiro's lectures on Impressionism. One very interesting thing that Meyer pointed out was that Cézanne had issues with Impressionist paintings because he felt they tend to erode and dissolve forms in favor of light and atmosphere. So, his idea was to restore the dignity, stability, and solidity of form. In order to do that he had to cool down his hot temperament. As we all know, he was attracted to dark themes: his early work included scenes of murder, rape, orgies, and so on. It was Camille Pissarro who encouraged Cezanne to paint from life, and not from imagination or fantasy. Again, I think the idea of taking away the capital "I" was so important. I remember around the same time I read the amazing essay by Meyer's

friend and mentor, a writer named Horace Kallen, called “Democracy Versus Melting-Pot”. It was written in 1915, which was an intense year with a huge, monumental influx of immigrants to the US. There was a fear of being assimilated, that the US government wanted to make them conform, and to put them in a certain category of the melting pot. He went on to give examples like the Germans chose to move to Wisconsin, or the Scandinavians, particularly the Swedish, chose to be in Minnesota, because the land and the weather recalled a certain similarity to their own. So, they could recreate their own culture, folklore, music, dance, food, and so on. What Kallen was proposing was if these different immigrants were to be thought of having their distinct sound like instruments, each is essential to the overall sound of the symphony. Democracy in its best aspiration is to embrace those unique contributions, instead of forcing them into a melting pot, which in our time is the equivalent of liberal hegemony.

Karmel: And here we are in 2022, having the same argument about accepting immigrants. Clearly, we're going to need to come back tomorrow night [*laughs*]. But let me ask you about *Symphony #2 for Agnes Gund*. Obviously, everyone in this room knows who Agnes Gund. I think it is worth recalling her extraordinary achievements over the years. She is best known for her support of the Museum of Modern Art beginning in 1967. She was also Chair of the Mayor's Cultural Advisory Commission of New York City. Nearly fifty years ago she created the Studio in a School program,

bringing professional, practicing artists in to teach children. The artists in her program have now taught over a million students, 90 percent of them from low-income families. In 2017, she started the Art for Justice Fund, which she kicked off by selling a Roy Lichtenstein painting for 100 million dollars and using the money to start this important organization. Despite Aggie's astonishing achievements, if you've met her, you know that she often seems quite diffident, even a little self-effacing, not at ease in public. But you found a great image of her where she looks happy and self-assured. How did you find that picture?

Bui: When Aggie and I get together, we are both happy. When I met Aggie, she was like an old friend. It's been a privilege to be Aggie's close friend. Of the fourteen boards I sit on, Studio in a School is definitely closest to my heart besides the *Brooklyn Rail*, because we share the same philosophy, that the greatness of the arts and humanities, especially in art, is not only to elevate and liberate us from constraints of political and social limitations, it can also bring us closer to something about the inner condition of freedom that needs to be fostered from the beginning of our early formation. Again, I want to talk about John Dewey, who is a product of something that has been cultivated longer than we think. I mean, if you go further back to the great *Dial Magazine* that was created in 1840, and lasted until 1929—the transcendentalists, poets and philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, all the way down to Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth

Peabody, and say William James, Charles Sanders Pierce, among others—I think pragmatism really grew out of that transcendentalist thinking, and it was so useful at the turn of the century, and certainly had a huge role to play in the creation of the WPA, the Work Progress Administration, and Federal Project Number One, which had five different parts. It was supported by the amazing Eleanor Roosevelt, in the background. Similarly, I think Aggie understands the power of art as an innate condition of what Meyer Schapiro referred to as "inner freedom." When children begin making art at a young age, they don't discriminate or censor their creative excitement, whether they are making a drawing, or they are building a car. The idea of democratic learning is that there should never be a separation between academic pursuit and vocational training. And I think we're in trouble because we put greater emphasis on academic pursuit, which has become an industry like the sports industry. We don't appreciate as much the people who work with their hands, who have genuine vocational commitment, who build our bridges, fix our cars, clean our homes, and whatnot. We're very lucky New York is not like that, partly because the immigrants undertake all of those tasks, but the rest of the country suffers from that divisiveness. Aggie knows all these things as well as I do.

Karmel: One last question, and then I think we should throw the floor open for a few questions before we call it a night. You've paired Aggie with John Elderfield at the bottom center of that symphony. The image of John is very dramatic, lit from the side.

It looks like one of those Alfred Leslie paintings from the early sixties. How did you pick that pairing and that particular image of John?

Bui: I didn't really curate, I just tossed them together, kind of random, even though I have great admiration for both of them. Of course, John is someone whom I had the pleasure to interview a multitude of times. That portrait was made for his great Matisse show at MoMA called *Radical Invention: 1913-1917*. It was made during that time when I had a podcast for Alana Heiss called "Off The Rail Hour" at Art International Radio. John came, and I interviewed him on the podcast. There was a tiny light, so I took a picture, which is where the dramatic shadow casting across his face came from.

Karmel: That's actually a photo you took! It's a fantastic image. One of the glass pieces of his eyeglasses is opaque and the other one is transparent. It's just shadows. Very dramatic. It's great. I think I have been talking too much. We have a few minutes left, if any of you would like to ask Phong some questions.

Audience Member 1: I have a basic question. What part of your day is the time that you make your drawings?

Bui: Usually the last five days of the production of the *Rail* each month, in which my assistant Cal has to work very hard to protect my time. I don't take phone calls, except for working with my production team while making the portraits and writing my editorial late at night. It's very exact, as I said before, everything I do every day now is already written out in my schedule a week in advance. There's no spontaneity in my life, but when it happens, it's super pleasurable.

Karmel: Other questions, thoughts?

Audience Member 2: As you were talking about Aggie Gund and the sale of Lichtenstein, it made me actually think of that story of your grandmother, and you taking the money and these things that seem monumental, can be let go very easily because they are part of a greater cause, whether it be the pleasure of a grandson going out with his friends, or the cause like the Art for Justice Fund. Anyway, an observation: in a way that this works towards a greater consciousness or a greater space where you and we all operate beyond a kind of everyday materialism. Maybe what the Meditation Drawings are trying to call out to that other space, right? It seems that there's many beautiful threads kind of going through your personal history in your current personal life, you know, where these moments of access to that space occur, then you are in the presence of actions in which–I've tried forming a question around this, but I guess it's not a question. It's just more of an observation, thinking through

this conversation. Really, it's very clear moments where you are accessing that space of materiality.

Bui: Just as effective is the space of immateriality, which can be incredibly productive. My late friend, Hakim Bey, also known as Peter Lamborn Wilson, wrote a very important book in 1993 called *TAZ*, which stands for *Temporary Autonomous Zone*. How do you activate a space in between, before the space itself gets institutionalized, or structured? How do you activate that space in between? It's like the certain condition of time the day where a dog can be a wolf. So there's a certain kind of negative capability—the phrase that was famously coined by John Keats defending poetry—which is not that different from Hannah Arendt's *Thinking Without the Banister*. This is why initially the *Rail* was created, to elevate the artist's creative energy and vision. When I say artists, I mean the creative artists, philosophers, writers, poets, musicians, dancers, all of our creative friends who have that commitment and confidence to follow their calling. Whether they're going to be praised or not, be applauded in their lifetime, or not. They will commit their whole life to that negative capability, that activation of temporary autonomous zones. I think Aggie's profundity comes from the fact that she understands this autonomous space of potential freedoms. And I do too, and I think most of us agree that culture has to be fought for. I grew up in Vietnam, my family was blacklisted, a lot of my academic family members were punished by the Communist Party, so I understand culture has

serious power. For example, I'll tell you a story about Boris Pasternak, at the Soviet Writers's Congress, a three-day meeting in 1937 when two thousand writers and poets were lined up, and one by one would walk on the stage to confess their profuse thanks to father uncle Lenin for having created a new model of truth the new model of progress, before they got killed. Of course, Pasternak was very famous by that point, and he was right next to the Stalinist killer, Andrei Zhdanov. All his friends said, "Boris, we are all going to go, but they may not kill you because you're famous, but can you say something, so we can be remembered it and take it with us"? Pastenak agreed and walked up the stage. All he said was "Number 30". Which meant "Sonnet Number 30" by Shakespeare, which Pasternak was famous for translating into Russian. All two thousand of the writers stood up to recite it in Russian by memory. That very sonnet from which we know those famous two lines, "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought/I summon up remembrance of things past". Basically, what this tells us is that you can't kill poetry, you can't kill culture, you can't kill Shakespeare. So, the arrival of the Trump presidency gave me tremendous energy, I remember clearly on Monday, March 16, 2020, he not only came on television, and announced his fifteen-day quarantine, but also he deployed that term that we all detest, "social distancing." I had a meeting with my team that evening, and I asked, "can Zoom reach more than one hundred people"? And I called Shirin Neshat and her partner Shoja Azari before midnight, as I knew they were working on a film about a young Iranian woman working for the Central Bureau collecting people's dreams,

called *Land of Dreams*. It's a wonderful film. I said, “Can you come the next day to share the making of the film at our daily Zoom call, the New Social Environment lunchtime conversation at 1pm?” And, up to today, we've done 702 episodes. What I learned in a hurry was that culture is not to be taken for granted. It can be used as an arsenal against those who wish to destroy it. The radio was to Hitler is no more and no less than Twitter was to Trump. Silicon Valley folks think they are gods, but in all truth, they have no historical memory. We need to think like what Martin Luther did with Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press. Our readership is now reaching nearly three million because we've been very aggressive, we’ve been doing it every day. And the *Rail* has an advantage because we've been doing it for twenty-two years and keeping it free, which is unusual in America. I remember the late Henry Luce III, or Hank as we called him, who was a great friend, and I spent several weekends in his home in Fisher Island, he said to me “Phong, in America, if you don't buy it, you will never appreciate it. Nothing is free in America. Your paper will die maybe in seven years”. It’s been 22 years and I feel more charged up and inspired now than ever before. Free means neither spoon feeding nor condescending to our readership.

Karmel: So, Phong, you turned into the anti-Alexander Liberman.

Bui: I'm not anti-Alexander Liberman, and at this point I'm neither on the left nor right. I'm interested in the function of the Middle Way. I regard myself as a cultural worker, like Aggie.

Karmel: That seems like a wonderful place to stop. We are all so grateful to you for your cultural work and for your beautiful drawings. Thank you so much.