«I think folklores, oral histories, or just narratives in everyday life contain a higher level of truth. Even though they are full of fantasies, these are narratives in the collective consciousness of generations of people, unlike official histories which are often by a select few.»

Thao Nguyen Phan
THAO NGUYEN PHAN
REINCARNATIONS OF SHADOWS

Curated by
Lucia Aspesi and Fiammetta Griccioli

Pirelli HangarBicocca
14.09.2023 – 14.01.2024

Exhibition organized by
Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan
in collaboration with
Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen

Public Program
14 September, 7pm: Conversation between
Thao Nguyen Phan and Jaap Guldemond the Director
of Exhibitions at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam.
9 November, 7pm: Lecture with the art historian
Jennifer Higgie.
The Public Program is realized in collaboration with
Fondazione In Between Art Film.

Cultural Mediation
Cultural mediators are present in the exhibition spaces
to answer questions from the public, give information
and context elements that can deepen the fruition
of the artworks.

Catalog
A volume dedicated to the exhibition is being published
in fall 2023 and available at the Pirelli HangarBicocca's
bookshop and online.

Discover more on our website.

The Artist

Thao Nguyen Phan (b. 1987, lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City,
Vietnam) seamlessly combines video, painting, drawing, sculpture,
and installation in her practice, giving rise to visions set in lush
natural landscapes at times surreal and dreamlike. The flow of a
river, the patter of rain, and the enigmatic presence of children in
nature are recurrent images in Phan’s videos. Using this wide va-
riety of media, she retraces Vietnam’s troubled history in a narra-
tive that is also interwoven with literature, oral storytelling, myth,
and fable, offering a personal view of her country’s spiritual heri-
tage and historical events.

The artist has always conceived her works like the chapters
of a book, in which she addresses pressing issues such as
the exploitation of natural resources, food insecurity, and the
flawed account of Vietnam’s official history regarding the
conflicts that have left their mark on the country. Central
The narrative of Phan’s films is marked by a cyclical rhythm conceived as a sequence of “reincarnations.” Presented as single or multi-screen projections, the videos follow a non-chronological progression that poetically unfolds in a play of associations between the story, the sounds, and the actions of non-professional actors. Phan’s works are characterized by powerful visual imagery where human presence, nature, and architecture merge in fleeting depictions. An example is *First Rain, Brise Soleil* (2021–ongoing), where sequences of images of buildings and architectural elements alternate with moments of brightness and others of passing shadows. This approach can be likened to that of other Asian filmmakers and visual artists, such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Tuan Andrew Nguyen, with their skillful rendering of the relationship between subject and landscape and their interest in the quietness of rural life.

«I wish to construe a realm of works that are interconnected and diverse in styles and materials, where genres can coexist in a dream-like, democratic utopia.» Phan’s words underscore the constant fluctuation between reality and fiction in her oeuvre, where every element is always suspended between these two worlds. This is the case in her first cycle of works, *Poetic Amnesia* (2014–17), in which she explores the omissions in the official narratives of Vietnam’s past, revealing what she calls “a collective amnesia.” The starting point of the cycle is the video *Tropical Siesta* (2017), depicting an agricultural world ideally ruled by children; the project also includes a series of figurative watercolors painted on the pages of a seventeenth-century manuscript by the missionary Alexandre De Rhodes (1591–1660), one of the important contributors of the Latin transcription of the Vietnamese language.
Literature and poetry from different historical periods converge in numerous other projects, such as in *Becoming Alluvium* (2019–ongoing), an allegorical work about environmental changes caused by intensive agriculture in which texts from *Invisible Cities* (1972) by Italo Calvino (1923–1985), *The Lover* (1984) by Marguerite Duras (1914–1996) and poems by Indian author Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) are interwoven with folktales from the Khmer culture, the oldest and largest Cambodian ethnic group, which is also present in Vietnam, especially in the south of the country.

Another feature of Thao Nguyen Phan’s work is the Mekong, with the vernacular histories of the countries it flows through (Tibet, China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam): the river becomes an emblem of the profound change suffered by the region due to colonialism, agricultural exploitation, and climate change. In recent years, Phan has focused her research on the social and political vicissitudes of her country and its abrupt modernization through the modernist movements that emerged in Vietnam and Cambodia starting from the 1960s. The architectural style of Modernism, originating in the United States and Europe, is employed by Phan as a lens to analyze the cultural colonization of Vietnam. Key figures for the artist are the Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann (1926–2017), whose work on the fusion of modernist principles—aimed at a deep renewal of expression that favored form over ornament—with traditional ones spawned New Khmer Architecture, and the artist Diem Phung Thi (1920–2002), one of the first female modernist sculptors who lived and worked in Vietnam and France.

References to these figures and their legacies are interwoven in Phan’s production, just as the words of the authors mingle with the myths of the oral tradition and the drawings that come alive in the frames or are placed in direct relation with the videos. Speaking of her work, the artist said, «It is a poetic situation in which different types of materiality (or voices) can coexist, not in the absence of conflict, but in poetic confusion, paving the way for the potential to seek the tangible in the intangible, the real in the illusory and the illusory in the real.»

**The Exhibition**

“Reincarnations of Shadows,” the first solo exhibition devoted to Thao Nguyen Phan by an Italian institution, presents a series of installations, drawings, paintings and videos, immersing visitors in a journey that weaves together events from the history, folk traditions and oral tales from Vietnam and the broader Mekong region.

The exhibition’s title is a reference to the video *Reincarnations of Shadows* (moving-image-poem) (2023), conceived for the occasion. Inspired by the Vietnamese modernist sculptor Diem Phung Thi, the work is a reflection on intergenerational relationships between women artists in postcolonial contexts. Featuring a selection of sculptures and collages by this historical figure in the exhibition, Phan questions the possibilities of reincarnation of hidden symbols and rituals that have remained in the shadows, passed down through oral accounts and often conditioned by the effects of colonialism.

Phan’s work explores the concept of reincarnation through a cyclical narrative, transforming the Shed exhibition space into a fluid environment in which sounds and moving images combine in a temporal dimension between past, present and future.

1. **On Illusion**, 2022
2. **The Nocturnal Window**, 2022
3. **Hanoi’s Children Palace**, 2023
4. **Golconde**, 2023

The four paintings made with watercolors, graphite, and acrylic on natural silk are composed of geometric shapes and abstract architectural elements far from Phan’s characteristic figurative pictorial style. In dialogue with the video *First Rain, Brise Soleil* (featured in the exhibition), the works refer to the images of the typical *brise soleil*, perforated concrete structures placed on the façades of modernist buildings in Southeast Asia to ventilate and shade the interiors from the sun. The soft translucent hues of the panels evoke the plays of light and shadow that the *brise soleil* casts on the walls of large public buildings, such as the Ho Chi Minh City Library.
designed in 1972, which affords glimpses of the verdant foliage and changeable monsoon climate typical of the tropics. The height of the works is a reference to the Modulor, the scale of proportions devised by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965), later adopted by the famous Cambodian modernist architect Vann Molyvann and the Vietnamese Ngo Viet Thu (1927–2000). Both contributed to innovating city planning in their respective countries in the twentieth century, changing the urban landscape with a recognizable style in which centuries-old traditions are combined with contemporary styles and materials.

For “Reincarnations of Shadows” Phan has created two new panels inspired by Pirelli HangarBicocca’s industrial architecture, reproposing the distinctive “blade” elements of the venue’s ceiling in Golconde, while its grid structures are transformed into the white pages of a book that come alive in the composition of Hanoi’s Children Palace, characterized by a gold background.

5. **First Rain, Brise Soleil**, 2021–ongoing

The three-channel video, alternated in the exhibition with the projection of Mute Grain, attests to the artist’s interest in the Mekong River, a source of nourishment and connection for the people of Southeast Asia. Presented at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, the work is divided into several episodes, creating a poetic narrative between the real and the imaginary. Through first-person narration, the video describes a Vietnamese-Khmer construction worker’s metaphorical journey to Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City), at the time of the flourishing period of construction of modernist buildings under the pro-American South Vietnamese government (1955–75). The images then move to the city of Phnom Penh (the Cambodian capital) and recount the 1994 fire that destroyed the Preah Suramarit National Theatre, designed by Vann Molyvann. The footage focuses on showing the traditional technique of brise soleil construction, in a montage that alternates images of architecture and watercolor drawings by Phan.

First Rain, Brise Soleil ends with the legend of a love story between a Vietnamese man and a Khmer woman, symbolically represented by the tropical fruit called durian (or thouren) that the artist uses to evoke the historical conflicts between Vietnam and Cambodia (1977–91), triggered by territorial disputes between the two countries. The video contrasts the loneliness and chaos of the urban environment of Ho Chi Minh City with the fertile landscape of the Mekong River, where still images are accompanied by contrasting vibrant soundscape that mark the beginning of the monsoon season. Interweaving the public and private dimensions, the video’s storylines immerse the viewer in dreamlike settings inspired by the collective memory and myths of the two countries, exploring universal themes relating to the environment, colonialism, and industrialization.

6. **Becoming Alluvium**, 2019–ongoing

Set amidst the lush landscapes along the Mekong River, the video Becoming Alluvium addresses the issue of environmental exploitation using evocative visual imagery and watery sound effects that show how human intervention has irrevocably altered the river’s habitats and courses. The story revolves around an event occurred in 2018: the collapse of a dam on the Mekong that caused the death
Perpetual Brightness consists of a series of lacquer paintings on wood and silk made in collaboration with artist Truong Cong Tung, designed for the Becoming Alluvium project (2019–ongoing). Here Phan reveals a part of her art connected with the traditional painting techniques learned during her studies in Ho Chi Minh City. As she explains, «I’m still most comfortable with drawing and painting, so I start there, then I turn them into sculptures or develop a script for a video work.»

The six works composing Perpetual Brightness are presented on a structure of double-sided folding screens inspired by the lacquered wooden panels by Irish designer Eileen Gray (1878–1976), a pioneer of Modernism. One side depicts allegorical scenes, including a group of adolescents gathered around a stranded whale. The opposite side features a fragmented lacquer-painted map of the Mekong Delta inlaid with eggshell and silver-leaf, evoking the constantly changing courses of the river’s waterways due to human intervention and climate change. With its more abstract lines and golden hues, Delta (from Perpetual Brightness series) continues the artist’s musings on the river basin.

As Phan herself suggests, the significance of lacquer in her practice has parallels with what the famous Japanese author Jun’ichiro Tanizaki (1886–1965) wrote in In Praise of Shadows (1933), an essay that explores traditional Japanese culture’s fascination with shadow as opposed to the dazzle and excessive light of Western civilization: «Darkness is an indispensable element of the beauty of lacquerware [...]. The lacquerware of the past was finished in black, brown, or red, colors built up of countless layers of darkness, the inevitable product of the darkness in which life was lived.»
10. **Untitled (Heads)**, 2013

12. **No Jute Cloth for the Bones**, 2019–23

In the installation entitled **No Jute Cloth for the Bones**, the artist hangs long fibers of dried raw jute from the ceiling. As the title suggests, the stalks of this inexpensive, hardy plant, normally used as firewood or building material for temporary shelters, resemble bones in Phan’s work. The metaphor is derived from accounts gathered in the provinces of North Vietnam, which revealed that the dictum of the Japanese army during the occupation in the Second World War was “uproot rice, grow jute.” By forcing the inhabitants to uproot their food crops, the invading army exacerbated drought conditions and flood damage, causing an unprecedented famine. The large installation delineates two rooms within the exhibition space and is positioned as a ritual pas sageway that must be traversed to access the works. In the artist’s intentions, the sound produced by the rustling of the stalks becomes a lullaby about the inconsolable loss of life during the great famine and the impassable border between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

**Untitled (Heads)** is a circular hanging sculpture inspired by the sacred Ma Mot trees made by the Thai ethnic minority in North Vietnam, who hang objects such as amulets and animal bones from their branches to symbolize evil spirits or dead people to be set free. The work is composed of jute fragments that Phan has interwoven with rattles, small sickles, and bronze heads portraying the various farmers with whom she came into contact during her research in the provinces of the Red River Delta region. **Untitled (Heads)** slowly rotates, evoking the cyclical nature of the seasons and weather events.

9. **Mute Grain**, 2019

**Mute Grain**, presented in loop with **First Rain, Brise Soleil** is inspired by the short story **Starved** by the well-known Vietnamese writer and journalist To Hoai (1920–2014), who described the agony of the great famine of 1945 with crude accuracy. Phan reconstructs the collective trauma by interweaving historical oral testimonies and photographic archives, combined with fictional representa-

iations with great poetic impact. Her research consists of an extensive body of work spanning moving images, paintings, and installations, weaving narratives that are both imaginary and documentary.

In the three-channel black-and-white film, archival images from the photographer Vo An Ninh (1907–2009) intermingle with the fictional stories of a teenage brother and sister March and August, left alone in a desolate rural landscape with no adults. They are named after the two poorest months in the Vietnamese agricultural calendar, when the new harvest is not yet ready and the previous one has run out. The two siblings are shown on the three screens that mark different times and spaces in the story together with inanimate features such as architecture and landscapes. The dialogues are conveyed by subtitles only, while the typical sounds of the Vietnamese countryside and oral testimonies of famine survivors account for the main part of the soundscape.

Following her death in an accident caused by March, August is transformed into a ghostly presence who wanders around the various frames, constantly eluding her brother. The two only manage to reunite in a dreamlike limbo of enchanted caves and children hunting crickets in idyllic landscapes. Their supernatural encounters infuse **Mute Grain** with optimism in the form of apparently surreal visions that reveal a deeper level of truth about the collective trauma of the food emergency.
11. **Dream of March and August**, 2018–ongoing

The series of paintings entitled *Dream of March and August* executed in watercolors and natural pigments on silk resumes and further develops the stories of brother and sister March and August who appear in the film *Mute Grain*. In 2018, Phan expanded her painting repertoire by adding silk as a support. The handcrafted strips of fabric are inspired by the lush environment of the Red River and are suspended in the Shed in a fluid spatial installation consisting of several diptychs that can be viewed from both sides. The episodes portray stories of everyday life, such as a child riding a motorbike or a girl engrossed in reading, and are painted in fantastical shades that evoke the scenarios shrouded in magical realism typical of the tales of the writer and Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972), one of the greatest twentieth-century Japanese authors. The paired arrangement of the various canvases follows the parallel, sometimes dreamlike existences of the two siblings who—unable to survive without each other—continue to pursue and meet each other at the intersection of text, video, and drawings extrapolated from the magical multimedia world of *Mute Grain*.


The flying dove dotted with twinkling lights of *The Rise* and the radiant blossom of *The Flower* are both fabric and chalk sculptures, backlit by LED lights and suspended in the exhibition space. Found by the artist on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City on the occasion of the Lunar New Year celebrations, these joyful relics conjure up feelings of peace, prosperity, and unity, while alluding to symbols, such as the sunflower, used by communist propaganda to denote allegiance to the party. The urban artifacts collected by Phan trigger collective memories that recount Vietnam’s complex, layered history. They are part of the *Poetic Amnesia* (2014–17) body of work, an ongoing project in which the artist travels between her country’s past and present.

15. **Magical Bows (Lacquered Time)**, 2017–ongoing

*Magical Bows (Lacquered Time)* is an installation of seven crossbows suspended between the floor and ceiling. Some of the wooden bows on display are anchored to the ground by white marble bases shaped like the six tones of the Vietnamese alphabet. Each crossbow was painted with Vietnamese traditional lacquer in collaboration with the artist Dinh Van Son and some crossbows feature mother-of-pearl inlays with phrases from the writings of the Vietnamese evangelist Bento Thien (c. seventeenth century), who was among the first to write a brief history of Vietnam in the Romanized Vietnamese script, which also included legends such as “The Magical Bow.” The story of the bow that inspired the artwork is the tragedy of a betrayal as a consequence of the lust for power between kingdoms, similar to the Greek myth of the Trojan war. Once again, Phan draws on ancient traditions to reflect on highly topical geopolitical issues, underscoring the cyclical nature of events.


The work consists of a series of watercolors commenced in 2014 and painted on approximately 100 pages of the ancient travel book *Voyages de Rhodes* (1653) written by the French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes, a missionary in Vietnam for over twenty years and a witness to the country’s first encounters with the West. De Rhodes is famous for being one of the contributors in transcribing the local language into Latin alphabet to spread the gospel, compiling a new dictionary that established the bases for the Vietnamese writing system still used today.

Phan extracts pages from his book and paints dreamlike scenarios on them with delicate strokes, reminiscent of Belgian artist Francis Alÿs’ political yet poetic drawings, visually interpreting particular episodes from the original text that can still be seen through the watery pigments. They also include sinister narratives, somewhere between fable and folklore, which tell of children engaged in collective activities, climbing water towers, marching in line with drums or undergoing a metamorphosis in which their sexual organs become tropical plants. The same scenes return in animated form in
the video *Tropical Siesta* (2017), not featured in the exhibition, whose protagonists inhabit a fictitious agricultural commune where they isolate themselves from everyday life through play and idleness.

The episodes of *Voyages de Rhodes* are interwoven with images tracing Vietnam’s contemporary history, reflecting on issues such as the land reforms following the First Indochina War and the colonization of the landscape, superimposing the voices of the present on those of the past. The drawings are arranged in a fluid composition and installed perpendicular to the walls of the exhibition space, as if to evoke the multiple voices and viewpoints involved in their creation and emphasizing how historical writings are often subject to processes of erasure and reinterpretation.

19. **Man Looking Towards Darkness, 2016**

The work consists of a large dark curtain installed at the end of the exhibition path that acts as a spatial and temporal threshold. In the center, a black fabric is adorned with embroidered human figures portrayed from behind as they perform everyday activities; the scene is framed by a hand-dyed indigo band on either side. The embroidery that glimmers in the darkness is made using a traditional method that is dying out due to the laborious process that uses only organic materials. A photograph of a banyan—a sacred tree in Buddhism—is set on the floor next to the fabric. In the picture, stones used on farms to soften jute fibers during the Japanese occupation appear at the foot of the plant.

*Man Looking Towards Darkness* highlights the recurrent relationship between myth and ecology in Phan’s art, where ancestral knowledge is restored to contemporary discourse as a legacy for future work.

17. **Works by Diem Phung Thi**

Phan has chosen to include in the exhibition “Reincarnations of Shadows” a series of works by the artist Diem Phung Thi (1920–2002), who has deeply influenced her oeuvre and is considered one of the greatest Vietnamese modernist sculptors. In 1946, Diem Phung Thi was the first woman in Vietnam to graduate in dentistry, and it was only in the late 1950s that she left the medical profession to devote herself to sculpture. The transition took place while she was in Paris, where she lived until her permanent return to Vietnam in 1992. There she began experimenting with sculpting under the guidance of Antoniucci Volti (1915–1989), a French sculptor with Italian origins.

During the first decade of her artistic career, Diem Phung Thi abandoned the figurative style in favor of greater formal simplification that led her toward more abstract creations. Her oeuvre ranges from monumental scale and public commissions in gardens and urban spaces to more intimate artworks, some of which were selected by Thao Nguyen Phan for the exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca. Diem Phung Thi’s installa-
tions embrace a wide variety of materials, such as terracotta, stone, metal, wood, and lacquer, and often evoke the bodies of women, children or soldiers in poses with strong religious connotations. Although France was her artistic country of choice, she refers to the history of Vietnam in her work, along with the war and political events that have marked it, expressing an idea of resistance and rebellion without ever being didactic.

Her poetic is expressed through seven modules arranged in infinite compositions, like an alphabet. Each element has a distinct form that is different from the others, but finds its fulfillment only when placed in relation to them. The art critic Raymond Cogniat (1896–1977), one of the greatest experts on Diem Phung Thi's work, described the authenticity of her art as thus: «Each object created by this artist is as free as a word, but, like the word, it is enhanced when it participates in a sentence to become a poem or prayer. [...] What was initially considered modest and solitary imposes the obsession of its mute presence.»

On display are several groups of sculptures produced between the 1970s and 1990s along with paintings and collages, which are interwoven with Thao Nguyen Phan’s imagery. Indeed, the artist uses as a starting point Diem Phung Thi’s modules to create the seats and tables featured in the exhibition. The result is a dialogue that combines shared expressions and thoughts, the concept at the heart of Phan’s work. As she explains, «My encounter with Diem is a convergence of languages, the metaphor of the Romanization of the Vietnamese script. We are two women and both of us have studied in the West. [...] For me, Diem's language is a sophisticated, well-established writing system.»

18. **Reincarnations of Shadows (moving-image-poem), 2023**

The new video is inspired by the historical figure of Diem Phung Thi, a Vietnamese female sculptor whose presence materializes through fragments of interviews and is also evoked in the flow of subtitles citing texts that Thao Nguyen Phan drew from Diem Phung Thi’s personal archive. Through a delicate and sincere narrative, the work connects the private and public dimensions of the modernist artist’s life, letting her silent but deep desire for resistance and freedom emerge. The two screens, arranged vertically one next to the other, are a direct reference to the classical portrait tradition in art history, while the images are rhythmically accompanied by the sound of the *dan tranh*, a traditional Vietnamese string instrument.

Phan explained, «I would like to further develop the relationship between moving image and drawings, how the act of drawing can coexist in the video medium as an ecosystem, and to continue to explore the poetic relations within pioneering female artists in post-colonial geographies—a hidden part of art history that shapes how we are and what we will become.»
Selected Exhibitions

Several international institutions have organized solo exhibitions by Thao Nguyen Phan, including: Tate St Ives (2022); WIELS, Brussels, Chisenhale Gallery, London (2020); Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, (2019); Para Site, Hong Kong (2018); Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City (2017); and Bétonsalon, Paris (2016). The artist has taken part in numerous group shows, including 59th Venice Biennale, Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2022); New Museum Triennial, New York, MOMENTA Biennale de l’image, Montréal (2021); Lyon Biennale, Sharjah Biennial (2019); Dhaka Art Summit (2018); Nha San Collective, Hanoi (2017). Between 2016 and 2017, she was included among the Protégé Rolex, accompanied by Joan Jonas as a mentor, one of the most renowned living artist and performer. In addition, in 2019 she was shortlisted for the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award and won the Han Nefkens Foundation – LOOP Barcelona Video Art Award 2018. Thao Nguyen Phan is co-founder of the Art Labor collective, which explores interdisciplinary practices and develops art projects to benefit the local Vietnamese community.

This publication accompanies the exhibition “Reincarnations of Shadows” by Thao Nguyen Phan

Lenders
Galerie Zink Waldkirchen; KADIST;
Private collection, Bruges;
Private collection, Vietnam;
The Saastamoinen Foundation Art Collection / EMMA - Espoo Museum of Modern Art and the artist

A special thanks to Fondazione In Between Art Film for the co-production of the video Reincarnations of Shadows (moving-image-poem) and for supporting the activities of the Public Program

Acknowledgments
Sofia Baronchelli, Aurora Bartoli, Massimo Berardini, Amina Berdin, Eddie Bertozzi, Leonardo Bigazzi, Alessandra Biscaro, Henriette Bretton-Meyer, Beatrice Bulgari, Truong Cong Tung, Francesca Colussi, Angela Della Porta, Roberto Dipasquale, Jenni Enbom, Jaap Guldemond, Christoph Härtl, Jennifer Higgie, Alice Labor, Mariagiulia Leuzzi, Andrea Lissone, Gry Kjærulff, Ok Kyung Yoon, Luca Mosso, Han Nefkens, Roger Nelson, Quyên Nguyêń-Hoàng, Alessandro Rabottini, Filipa Ramos, Cristina Piccino, Lauren Pirritano, Antonio Scoccimarro, Marco Secondin, Ly Sokvichea, Bianca Stoppani, Sami Supply, Hilde Teerlinck, Michael Thouber, Truong Minh Tuan, Michael Zink

The artist personally thanks Zoe Butt, Phan Dinh Hoi, Diem Phung Thi, Le Thuan Uyen. The air, the trees, the rivers, the mountains and the spirits of Hue

For all images, unless otherwise stated: Courtesy Thao Nguyen Phan

Printed:
September 2023
Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art. This dynamic center for experimentation and research covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and cultural mediators are on hand to help the public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todolí has been the foundation’s Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo. As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer’s most important site-specific works, The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015, commissioned for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca, while the exterior area hosts La Sequenza (1971–81) by Fausto Melotti.
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