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# A VOICE FROM THE SILENCE

BY OPHELIA LAI



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TUAN ANDREW NGUYEN

*The Island*, 2017, still from film: 42 min.  
All images courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York, unless otherwise stated.



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An unexploded bomb left in a forest since the Vietnam War wonders at reincarnation. A child at the end of the world converses with a bodhisattva statue about god. Spirits of extinct animals debate the overthrow of humans. These characters populate the moving-image works of Tuan Andrew Nguyen. I caught up with the Ho Chi Minh City-based artist to discuss his recent projects, and how their complexly orchestrated polyphony uncovers hidden narratives, conflicts, and discursive modes of resistance.



*The Boat People*, 2020, still from single-channel digital video transferred from Super 16 mm film: 20 min.

**Your moving-image works give voice to mythical figures, spirits, and even objects as a means of elucidating their settings' histories and generating new ways of talking about past and future. What is the significance of the voice to you?**

I think of voice as the medium that connects us through time and space. Voice has a way of triggering memory in visceral ways and helping us process those memories. Voice is also the apparatus by which we make and share myths. And since voice is the medium connecting the spaces of memory with the present and the imaginative possibilities of the future, it possesses a transformative power. With many of the histories and communities I am drawn to, that transformative power takes the form of resistance and healing.

I try to build a practice at those intersections, where memory and history converge and collide, where voice and aesthetics merge. Building spaces for voices to explore obscured or obliterated histories is a process that is humbling and in line with a longer-term practice of developing empathy. For me, the act of listening to stories is a step that leads to empathy and a radical solidarity. I think this is where we can engage with the past and future simultaneously. The voice that carries the stories of trauma and triumph from the past, that sees the imaginative space of the future as fertile grounds for building and rebuilding in the voids of those things that were decimated, is a voice that can offer those magical possibilities of moving beyond just pure recovery or repair.

**What's your process for developing characters and devising how their voices interact or even conflict?**

We're the product of so many voices and stories—some haunt us, some influence our worldview. I think it's the process of filtering that becomes our subjectivity. A huge challenge for us today is that we're caught in our own monologues. We're not listening to one another, and our echo chambers are reinforced through various things like social-media algorithms.

So I've taken up the challenge of writing and listening to multiple voices in my moving-image work. Writing dialogue allows me, in some ways, to break out from my own echo chamber and challenge my own point of view. But I am a conflicted human being, with perspectives that are sometimes contradictory, and writing dialogue helps me work that out. A resolution isn't always the objective though, and I never want any one particular point of view to win. I always prefer if both subjects walk away a bit destabilized, affected by the other.

The process of writing and editing multiple voices is a process where things come together and fall apart in cycles. Sometimes I'll write a few drafts, other times the first draft sticks to the end. The differing viewpoints will often arrive early in the conceptualizing stages, during research, and become guides that help the work unfold.

In *Crimes of Solidarity* (2020), which follows a group of asylum-seekers living in Squat Saint-Just, Marseille, there's also the displaced voice. For the live performance, the film's audio was turned off, so the subjects on stage had to speak the missing lines. By eliminating the recorded track in favor of the contingent voices of the live performers, you emphasize their agency. Asylum-seekers are often forced to recount their circumstances to the state as a test of their claims; here, the reiteration of their stories is their choice, and the audience's privilege. What are your thoughts on the intersection of disclosure and power?

Language is power; because of this, speech is often used as an oppressive tool. One kind of space where that is most evident is in the border space.

I remember sitting in the immigration office while my parents were being interviewed to become naturalized citizens in the United States, and even as a child, I could sense how the immigration officer, through her use of language, was able to render my parents, whose handle of spoken English wasn't so strong at the time, quite helpless. I also noticed how my parents would confer with each other in Vietnamese between the bombardment of questions. They would choose to not answer certain questions by remaining silent. I used to think of those moments as moments of defeat. Looking back, these moments of refusal to accommodate questions outside of what they thought was fair was a way of subverting that power of language. Here I think Édouard Glissant's ideas of opacity are useful.

It's necessary to amplify voices; in *Crimes of Solidarity*, it was important to also connect a physical presence to the voices

that needed amplifying. I worked with the tenants of Squat Saint-Just to write their stories, which became the dialogue in a feature-length film.

We showed the film on a large LED screen that stood about five meters tall in the Music Conservatory of Marseille with the collaborators positioned on stage facing the film, their backs to the audience. Behind the audience was another large LED screen, also five meters tall, with the live feed of the actors as they were filmed on stage. We turned off the dialogue in the film, and the tenants performed the dialogue live on stage. So the film was completed (and could only be completed) with the actual presence of the voices that made the film. A kind of magical ventriloquism happened, bringing extra focus and attention back to the bodies from which the voices emanated. Because the bottom line was about the people who were facing the neglect of the European state and dealing with the urgency of physical survival.

There are moments in the film where various collaborators articulated a refusal to engage. These are expressed in some pre-recorded scenes as well as moments where the collaborators speak directly into their smartphones as they address me, the filmmaker. There is a scene where Treasure Omorowa is on stage auditioning for a part in an unknown film; as she's asked about her story, the scene cuts to a conversation inside an immigration office where her story and its authenticity get put on the table. Treasure uses both refusal and well-articulated logic to subvert the power of the state.

Memory survives by the repetition of a story, and there is real political resistance in keeping memory alive. But there are poignant moments of refusal where power is subverted. It is the application of these two strategies together where dignity and power is reclaimed.



Installation view of *Crimes of Solidarity*, 2020, two-channel video installation: 71 min, at Manifesta 13 Marseille, 2020. Photo by Anaïs Baseilhac.



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We see a kind of ventriloquism in *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming* (2019) too, albeit with a fictional bent. Here, the descendants of the French-colonial Senegalese Tirailleurs who were deployed to Indochina speak for and to their ancestors. In one segment, for example, one channel shows a woman named Anne Marie in a sound booth, narrating an imagined argument between her parents about their future, while the other channel simultaneously depicts actors performing this scene. Can you elaborate on the power of imagination?

I wanted to move more toward poetry and away from documentary. I think about poetry and its ability to create alternative spaces for meaning through slippages. It was important to me to give those slippages a strong presence and not try to downplay or hide them. This imaginative space is where we build and create circumstances for counter-memory. This is something I began experimenting with in *The Island* (2017), which happens in a distant future and reimagines an island called Pulau Bidong, off the northeastern coast of Malaysia, as a last refuge for humanity at the edge of extinction. The main character maintains what's left of the relics and builds a new monument in place of one that was destroyed for political reasons.

But this imaginative space of resistance doesn't have to be activated in the time-space of the future. In *Specter* it happens in the present as a response to the past. For *Specter*, I first met the Senegalese-Vietnamese community on a research trip to Dakar in 2017, about a year before we began the production of the

film. A lot of story-sharing happened and we slowly developed deeper relationships. Three particular stories kept coming back to the table: stories that spoke of erasures of the past that also expressed the complexities of the relationships that came out of colonial disruptions.

My research assistant Jane (who was also my translator) and I worked closely with *Specter's* three main protagonists to write their scenes. They were already writers in their own capacity. We discussed the memories that had impacted them and their sense of identity, and the potential of fiction and poetry to deal with those moments where voices were silent or silenced. We challenged ourselves to think whether new memories are possible.

Anne Marie's scene is of her parents discussing a departure from Saigon after the French army was defeated. Merry Beye recounts how her grandmother saved the life of a Senegalese soldier—her grandfather—in the First Indochina War, and her memories of combing her grandmother's hair. Macodou, a lawyer, mentioned how he always imagined confronting his father about the fact that his Vietnamese mother was hidden from him, but could never do so while his father was alive because of the customs dictating parent-child relationships in Senegal.

It was quite organic how we came to these stories and how they took form. It felt serendipitous that we were all thinking along similar lines in regards to memory and fiction. And the collaborators were courageous in their openness to experimenting with me and allowing the process to take the film to the places it did.



Installation view of *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming*, 2019, four-channel video installation with inkjet on canvas, oil on canvas, graphite on paper, c-prints, and sand: 28 mins, overall dimensions variable, at Sharjah Biennial 14, 2019. Courtesy the artist; James Cohan, New York; and Sharjah Art Foundation.



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Top: Partial installation view of *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming*, 2019, four-channel video installation with inkjet on canvas, oil on canvas, graphite on paper, c-prints, and sand: 28 mins, overall dimensions variable, at Sharjah Biennial 14, 2019. Courtesy the artist; James Cohan, New York; and Sharjah Art Foundation.

Middle and bottom: *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming*, 2019, stills from four-channel video installation with inkjet on canvas, oil on canvas, graphite on paper, c-prints, and sand: 28 mins, overall dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist; James Cohan, New York; and Sharjah Art Foundation.



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**A poignant, affective vocal form in your work is song, which I find an apt link in your broader investigations of history and storytelling because song has this ancient cross-cultural function as a vessel for historical and mythic narratives. What’s the importance of song in your films, and how does the music-video format enable a different mode of storytelling?**

The music videos I made with The Propeller Group were a great opportunity to practice and experiment with how to weave images and music to create an affective experience and multiple understandings.

I think song is voice and speech reaching the level of something like mantra, or of the sublime, something beyond the pragmatic or prosaic. I am reminded how we often return to song in times of crisis.

Song also carries a political dimension. I’m interested in how song has been used politically by the marginalized, and how music has been politicized. There are many songs in Vietnam that are not permitted in public. Then there are songs that express political criticism but because their lyrics are so coded through poetry and abstraction, they are still played.

Because political struggle has such strong ties to memory, I’m fascinated by how songs become containers of memory. An example is “Biển Nhớ” by Trịnh Công Sơn, which appears in my film *The Island*. “Biển Nhớ,” which translates to “The Ocean

Remembers,” was written in 1962–63. After 1975, there was an exodus of refugees by boat and many landed on Pulau Bidong, which became one of the largest and longest-running refugee camps after the Vietnam War. Every time a refugee boat arrived or departed, the camp would play “Biển Nhớ” on the loudspeakers as a welcoming and a farewell. It became a sound embedded into the landscape of the island and the psychological terrain of the waves of refugees of that era.

I have a small obsession with Trịnh Công Sơn and the way that he inspired a generation of youth who were caught in a complex war that they never asked for. My parents were definitely part of that generation, so his music was embedded in my upbringing, but it didn’t really spark a significant interest until I was in college and had begun thinking about history, politics, and resistance.

Trịnh Công Sơn offered a perspective of war that was hopeful and critical and deeply entrenched in an idea of compassion. His lyrics processed the disasters of war and brought it down to human terms, saturated with personal reflection and intimacy. The unfortunate consequences of a civil war in which both sides were encouraged by the main antagonists of the Cold War to believe that violence was the only resolution is that those who wanted peace and dialogue within the country were criminalized by both sides. Trịnh Công Sơn was one of the most notable examples of this. His story is still quite mysterious. The younger generations in Vietnam are affected by his music but know less of his story.



*The Island*, 2017, stills from film: 42 min.





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Top: *The Boat People*, 2020, still from single-channel digital video transferred from Super 16 mm film: 20 min.

Bottom: Installation view of *Mile 00 Everywhere OR Replica of Bataan Death March Marker Mile 00*, 2019, hand-carved gmelina wood, 151.1 x 41.9 x 41.9 cm, at "A Lotus in a Sea of Fire," James Cohan, New York, 2020.



A recurring idea in your films is the object as witness to time. Histories are encoded in objects, such as the unexploded bomb in *The Sounds of Cannons, Familiar Like Sad Refrains* (2021) and the statue head in *The Boat People* (2020), which vocalize their testimony in your films. On top of invoking Southeast Asia's animist heritage, your approach to objects points to a subtle destabilization of memory and memorialization. People typically conceive of memories as immutable stored objects, but researchers have demonstrated that memory is inextricable from the unstable act of memory-making. To me, this idea comes to the fore when you turn an object into a subject that can talk back, that has its own fraught narrative.

We're facing the crises of not only death as a personal experience but the death of species, and the speculative narrative of human extinction. I'm obsessed with death not in a morbid way, but as a transformative space and as the crux on which memory wavers. It's almost as if we approach objects as our "antidote" to death. Because objects have the possibility to outlast human life, we've used objects as carriers of memory beyond our deaths. Objects are intensely tied to memory. I think about testimonial objects as mentioned by scholar Marianne Hirsch. I also think about the Tibetan Buddhist ritual of using objects belonging to departed monks in order to locate their reincarnations.

I think it's our fear of death that urges us to think of memory as a solid and stable phenomena, and hence creates a desire in us to encapsulate those memories in objects also seemingly solid. When the object speaks, those conceptions of memory get destabilized, as you said. The question, then, is from what point of view does the object speak? And can the object destabilize its own act of memorialization?

My work is interested in the strategies within the realm of memory that are enacted by marginalized communities as ways to resist erasure or silencing. So for me, the focus isn't so much on how the act of memory-making is fluid, but how marginalized communities could use that very understanding of fluidity to their



advantage. That's why I continually return to the question of perspective.

Let's take a look at monuments as an example of memorial objects. These last couple of years have seen an intense struggle to remove the numerous monuments upholding racist or colonialist agendas. In September, the contested monument of Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, was finally taken down after a long struggle with the government. The monument was erected after the end of the American Civil War that abolished slavery in the US. The monument's very presence is at odds with history, yet it stood for over 100 years as a threatening reminder of White supremacy. It is precisely these collapses in the process of memory-making that the remaining proponents of the Confederacy took advantage of as they reinstated their own memorialization. All of the Hollywood films about the Vietnam War are another example of memory manipulation.

What is the relationship between narrative and object? And how does that relationship expose the various politics affecting our lives? That's the question that holds my fascination.



**What political tools are available to you as an artist?**

I am always wondering what effect artists have. I think it's easy to become disenchanted because of the way that things are going. I've been thinking about the various protests that have erupted globally over the last several years, and how effective some have been in generating positive change. As daunting as the world is to navigate, I want to think that art could make positive change.

I don't want to be idealistic or naive though. It can be problematic, for instance, to think that you can go in and help a group of people, and then show your work at a museum that has a board member who invests in military equipment, the same equipment used on the people you're trying to help. That's why it's important for me to think about empathy and solidarity as part of a practice and not just as a singular gesture of "helping victims." When I think about solidarity I think about really working with people, sharing stories instead of mining them. It's easy to just take a photograph of people, but to build collaborations is a different story.

I received an opportunity to make a film in Western Australia with the Nurrara people for the Sharjah Architecture Triennial. What I was reminded of is that one can't just go into a community and make a film about that community if they don't want you there. I felt close to their story because it is one of forced migration: they were extracted from their ancestral land, removed from their Country, and made into exiles. I was able to share how compelled I was by telling them my own story, which is also one of becoming a refugee and losing my country, and that suddenly gave us a different way of working together. Empathy and solidarity were the tools that opened up a beautiful collaboration.

I ran into the filmmaker James T. Hong in Manila, where we were both giving workshops for Eskwela, Bellas Artes Project's educational program. In his talk he said that he makes films as a way to "alleviate suffering." I thought that was a brilliant way of looking at artistic practice. Art has the ability to shift perspectives—a valuable and effective way to alleviate suffering—but if an art practice could be a way to care for others, then, for me, it is situated as an important and relevant political strategy, or a form of political art.

**Could you shed some light on your upcoming projects?**

With travel being less accessible during the pandemic, I've returned to a topic that I've been interested in for a long time but haven't been able to get into, and that's unexploded ordnance (UXO). Quảng Trị, a province located in central Vietnam, right below the 17th parallel, is one of the most heavily bombed regions in global war history. The US used 15 million tons of ordnance during the Vietnam War and about ten percent didn't explode. The short film I made from my trip there, *The Sounds of Cannons, Familiar Like Sad Refrains*, was my first engagement with the topic, looking at how this memory of war is still live and embedded in the land, which at any moment can be triggered to catastrophic results.

During my research, I came across this story of a temple in Quảng Ngãi. In 1967, two bombs were dropped from a B52. The first bomb exploded, damaging the facade of the temple; the second bomb landed right beside the temple but didn't explode. The head monk of the temple saw the bomb as a compassionate sentient being because it decided not to explode and kill people, so he defused the bomb himself and turned it into a temple bell, and every time he rings the bell it's a reminder of the compassion of this bomb, which hopefully can inspire people to be more compassionate in their daily lives. I thought this was an amazing approach to forgiveness and overcoming trauma.

At the same time, I met a young man who makes wind chimes and other bells tuned to solfeggio octaves, which are healing frequencies that scientists have been playing with since the 1970s. There's currently much experimentation with these frequencies to heal post-traumatic stress disorder and intergenerational trauma. I'm developing a narrative film that explores ideas of reincarnation, paralleling human and nonhuman reincarnation, based on stories shared by various people in Quảng Trị who I'm working with. The crux of the narrative has to do with the transformation of bombshells into bells that are tuned to emit healing frequencies—turning what once was destructive into instruments of healing—by a scrap-metal dealer whose memories of a past life as a famous artist bleeds into his postmemories of war.



This and opposite page: *The Sounds of Cannons, Familiar Like Sad Refrains*, 2021, stills from two-channel video: 9 min 41 sec.