

# Listening to the *White Noise*

In Vietnamese, listening is encapsulated in the term “lắng-nghe.” This verb carries a connotation within the act of hearing and listening. Before engaging in the act of “nghe” (listening), there is a prerequisite of “lắng” (depositing, sedimentation). It entails a process of concentrating our attention, putting all parts of our being together, and constituting a solemn attitude before we can truly listen to someone. Painstakingly listening to the white noise, what might we discern? Curator Van Do guides us into a conceptual operating theater to listen to the muted sounds of fractured bones, the microscopic cacophony of decay and spoilage. *White Noise* exhibition reconfigures bodies on the map of human experience and shoves them in an unexpectedly dystopian ambiance. In addition to its intriguing curation, this exhibition also metamorphoses itself into the curator’s artwork that slackens off the ropes of fixated contexts and hammered meanings.

Displayed in EMASI Nam Long (District 7), the *White Noise* exhibition aligns with the 2023 theme “Community and Compassion,” established by the Nguyen Art Foundation, a Saigon-based private art collection. The exhibition features a diverse array of artists, spanning from the past to the contemporary, from Vietnam to Korea, and from veteran to newcomer, including Dao Tung, Tran Tuan, Nguyen Phuong Linh, Lai Dieu Ha, Nguyen Huy An, Dinh Q. Le, Nguyen Tran Nam, Jeamin Cha, Cam Xanh and Nguyen Trung. Their works were once displayed in other exhibitions or displays, and they now arrive here together and have a dialogue with each other. The artworks’ original milieu and meaning are renegotiated in a constantly shifting network of relationships, which enhances their interpretative flexibility. This exhibition focuses on the human body less in its day-to-day activities than in its sedimentary forms of posthumous experience.

We are incarcerated within our own body, a biological cell bounded by its physiological limitations. The paradox here is how we can scrutinize and examine our bodies when we cannot expel ourselves from our bodies along with their biological functions and bodily sensations. Furthermore, how can we know about the posthumous experience? Have we ever genuinely known death and its consequential continuation? Posthumousness is an irreversible experience that cannot be documented or revisited, sinking deep into the earth in an instant after a casket is buried or a body is disintegrated into ashes. What we know about death, no more than that, is the imagined descriptions and performances of death. People just die. The living must stay, continuing the duty to extrapolate and contemplate the experience of death. What remains after death is a sedimentation of imagination and interpretation, which is nothing more than a mere speculation of the living. The unknowable infinity of experience is encapsulated in an expirable body. This exhibition sheds a conceptual light on such undocumented experience which might expand while challenge our understanding of the posthumous body.

Body and its uncanny experience are dismembered and scattered throughout the curatorial space: a hypertrophied forefinger impotently lays flat in the middle place, a removed tongue hung in the air tries to taste the nothingness, many animal bones and their failed attempt to translate a poem, an ant stuck in its Kafkaesque daydream, many imagined clocks do not how to capture the passing of time, layers of dried pork skin continues to decay regardless of preservation, some afloat alien entities resulted from an odd collage of human protests from all over the world, a re-formulated 'Braille' language rendering us equally blind, and an anonymous handprint leaving its existential mark on a painting.

While appearing scattered and displaced at first glance, what unifies and threads together these disintegrated segments is the implementation of a specialized lighting system within a dimly-lit room. At a deliberately unhurried pace, this automatic scan light frigidly sheds a seemingly objective medical light on the operation and examination of artworks. In her curatorial statement, Van Do defines this illumination as her "intervention in the mode of viewing of the artworks on display." By de- and re-contextualizing these artworks in a new light (the curator's own light), the exhibition considers the artwork's reincarnation in a possible new life. Going hand in hand with the darkroom setting, the lighting system provides a provisional time and space in which these artworks resettle themselves in a temporary realm of interpretation. Despite its rigidity, the automated scanning light scan proves the most crucial aspect of this exhibition: the ever-changing state of artworks that goes beyond contextual specificity. In other words, the exhibition concerns not only the posthumous condition of human, but also the very afterlife of artworks. The curator handles these artworks not as immortalized or canonized objects but as a living continuum that is as ephemeral as the human body. Contrary to the impersonal scanning of the light, the artworks are displayed as living bodies that continue to alter, grow up, and even decay during the exhibition. Moreover, this automatic light also situates Van Do in the position of curator-artist and amplifies the curator's voice in speaking for her own re-interpretation.



Image 1. Van Do, The automatic scan light as curatorial intervention of the exhibition, Motion engine, stainless steel, iron, LED light ray, 2023, *White Noise* exhibition.

The exhibition accumulates a tremendous amount of sediment of lived experiences, which are often unspeakable, and hence, unheard-of. It is sedimentary since the exhibition is less about what is going on than what has been going on. What was once a symphony is now white noise merging with other indiscernible sounds. What was once a body is now dismembered parts of it, resulting from societal castration. Who was once history is now countless unidentifiable shadows. Hence, this exhibition emphasizes the relics of lived experience, which still lingers as sediments of history. Positioned in the central place of the room, Tran Tuan's *Forefinger* (2021) unyieldingly brings out the dialogue between other artworks, and between exhibition visitors with their own knowledge about the Vietnam war. This hypertrophied forefinger consists of nearly 5,000 metal dog tags used as identification for American soldiers during the Vietnam War. The artist collected dozens of dog tags, along with 4,900 blank ones. Laying flat in the middle, this work conjures up an abandoned history of the Vietnam War when people had to give up on the war by cutting off their forefinger, which signifies the act of pulling the trigger. More profound observation reveals that the hypertrophied forefinger also points out the process of castration in which the gun - as phallus, gets emasculated. The gun has chronicled the modern history of war, where forefinger played a pivotal role in shaping our contemporary living conditions. The cut-off uncanny forefinger can be read as a sediment at the bottom of history, which remains haunting with those who pulled the historical triggers.

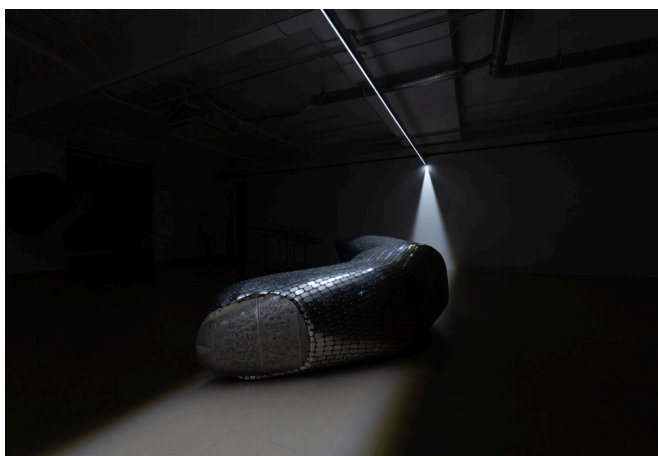


Image 2-3. Tran Tuan, *Forefinger*, Iron frame, packaging foam, burlap, rivets, stainless steel, 300 x 80 x 130 cm, 2021, *White Noise* exhibition, accessed October, 2023, <https://nguyenartfoundation.com/exhibitions/white-noise/>

In the vicinity of Tran Tuan's artwork, we may encounter Lai Dieu Ha's *Hurt in Here* (2011), which consists of dried pork skin boxed in a plexiglass cube. This work archives remnants of Lai Dieu Ha's body performance art in 2011, during which she ironed her body covered by skin pork. The artist emphasizes the specific locus of her pain, stating, "In here." This phrase underscores that the source of bodily pain is internal, not external—a deeply personal ache. After twelve years, this work uncompromisingly lingers and persists that the body should be considered an accumulative site of meaning, which is irreducible. Although the body is vulnerable and ephemeral, what the body has experienced remains permanent. Bruises, scars, traces of abuse. They last out the history. Dried pork skin is the sediment of violence, prejudice, and discrimination. Preserved within the plexiglass box, the pork skin retains its odor and undergoes decay, which indicates a demand for the right to exist even within a seemingly extratemporal, sterilized exhibition space. When scanning this artwork, the automatic light meticulously illuminates the detailed decay process of dried pork skin, which alludes to the mortality of the artwork itself.



Image 3-4. Lai Dieu Ha, *Hurt in Here*, Dried pork skin, plexiglass box, 70 cm x 70 cm x 35 cm, 2011, *White Noise* exhibition.

Positioned in a secluded corner of the room, Jaemin Cha's artwork delves into a timeless human theme that has persisted since ancient times—the awareness of the inexorable march of time and our quest to comprehend it. *Crushed or Unfolded* (2020) illustrates a temporal disjunction, challenging the notion that time is a tangible entity. Instead, it suggests that time is a construct born out of human efforts to capture the immeasurable. Initially, this work was created to document the experiences of the artist's mother, who suffered from a condition akin to Alzheimer's. The piece reveals not the expansion or gradual evaporation of time, but the disappearance of time within the memories of those afflicted by this disease. Set within the broader context of the entire exhibition, this artwork serves as a temporal marker, akin to a clock representing the exhibition's duration. In this realm of sediments, where time warps and the space rendered dim, it propels us into a curious land of bodily experiences, where linear time is suspended the moment we step through the door.

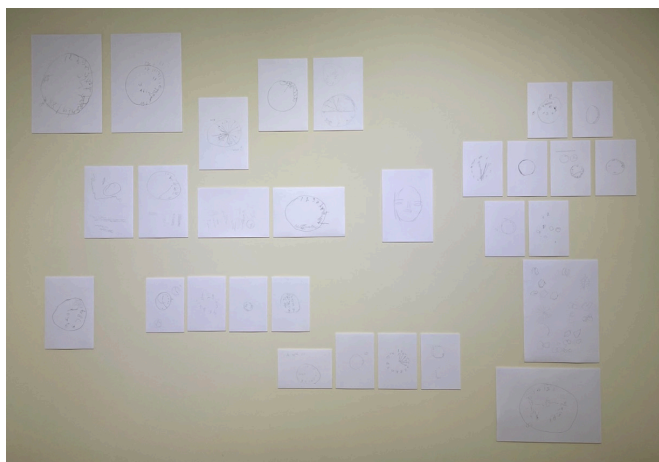


Image 5. Jaemin Cha, *Crushed or Unfolded*, Carbon drawings on paper, 2020, *White Noise* exhibition.

In contrast, Dinh Q. Le's artwork, *Adrift in Darkness* (2017), portrays a spatial compression. These spheres not only encapsulate existences and protests but serve as a representation of these existences—a condensed amalgamation of past events encapsulated within an enigmatic sphere afloat in space. The artwork dissects, reconfigures, and reassembles historical protests, presenting them as sediments accumulating beneath the surface of modern society. It serves as a constant reminder of those who once lived and have now faded away. This piece emphasizes our own transient existence—we, too, have existed, and inevitably, we will vanish. Together, these two works detach themselves from their original contexts, establishing an eerie and distorted time-space that permeates the entire exhibition.

The *White Noise* exhibition offers a thought-provoking and eye-opening exploration of the human experience, with a keen focus on bodies, and their accumulation of lived experiences. The curatorial approach illuminates many. The interplay of light within the exhibition space adds a profound layer of complexity and intrigue to the overall concept. "White Noise" is a must-see exhibition for anyone interested in the profound and multifaceted aspects of the posthumous body, which is considered a more socio-cultural than biological complexus.



Image 6. Dinh Q. Le, *Adrift in Darkness*, Digital print on Awagami bamboo paper, laser cut and woven onto cane structure, 2017, *White Noise* exhibition, accessed October, 2023, <https://nguyenartfoundation.com/exhibitions/white-noise/>

## Bibliography

Do, Van, *White Noise* Exhibition Brochure. Nguyen Art Foundation. October 13, 2023. [https://nguyenartfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/WhiteNoise\\_Brochure\\_EN\\_Final.pdf](https://nguyenartfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/WhiteNoise_Brochure_EN_Final.pdf)