The Year Is 2025

left column
left to right

Phan Thao Nguyen
The Rise
2016
Steel, fabric, chalk, LED lights
80 x 55 x 10 cm

Lap Phuong
***Womb* (No. 3, *Yin Yang* series)**
2020
Translucent glass
79 x 32 x 20 cm

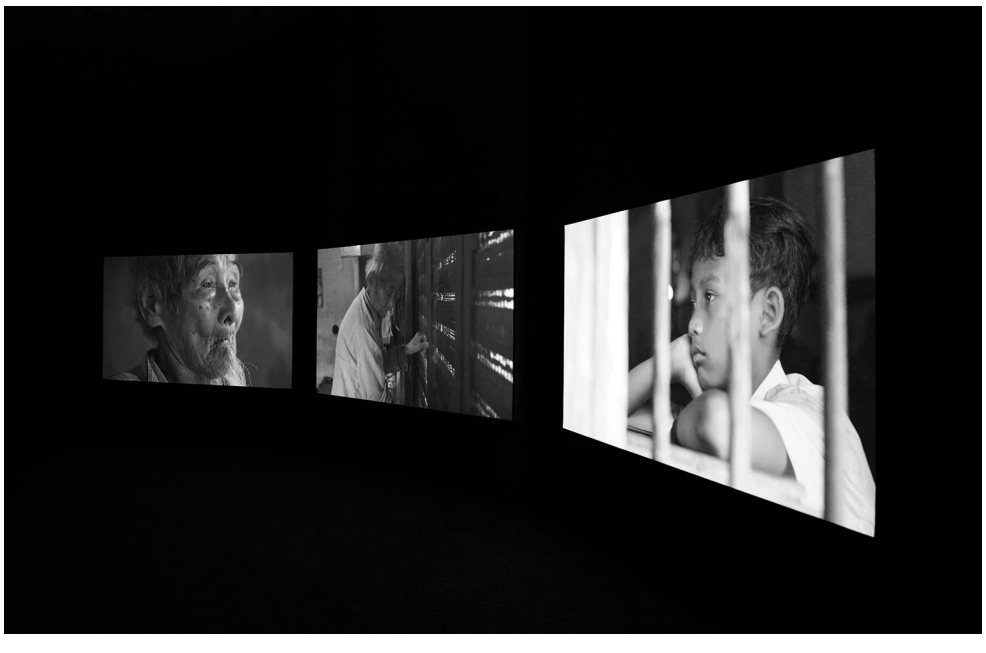
Phan Thao Nguyen
Mute Grain
2019
Three-channel video installation
HD, color, sound
00:15:00

right column
left to right

Orejarena & Stein
Vietnamese Veteran Testimonial
2019
Archival inkjet print
21.5 x 27.9 cm

An-My Le
Đó Là Thế Giới Của Đàn Ông
2021
Vintage lighter
16.5 x 10.8 x 3.8 cm

Tuan Andrew Nguyen
To Make A Life Is To Make A Circle
2020
Singing bowl pounded from 130 mm brass, artillery shell, tuned to note D#3 at 152.74 Hz, wood and rubber mallet
22.3 x 30.5 cm



Operation Ghost Story

In the beginning, there was a spectator. Now there is a specter.
There is plasm, and then there is ectoplasm.

She wakes and cannot find her bearings, though in this plane, she realizes she cannot think in terms of the past, present, or future. These words do not come to her. She is somewhere between, as if these states were unfolding all at once.

Though she cannot see them, she can feel many presences transiting around her – specters that glimmer and swirl like tea leaves in a hot brew. They are invisible but felt; in particular, she feels their invisible eyes burrowing into her. They announce themselves and demand attention without speaking. She is overcome with flickering feelings: pangs of dread, repression, fear, yearning, of a profound emptiness that cannot be filled. It strikes her that she cannot even remember her own name.

She hears birds, insects, and the wind: the ambient sounds of nature consume her.

Phantom jets fan out over the trees. Artillery shells carve a white arc against dusk.[1]

In the grassy landscape she sees spectral figures mulling, scenes passing. She watches as centuries of history unfold in accelerated time lapse. Many different people speaking foreign languages come and go. Emperors, generals, and farmers take turns altering the land. They build structures: castles, rice patties, schools, sugar cane fields, temples, rubber plantations, barracks. They do battle. They languish with bouts of engineered famine and merciless disease. Their structures crumble in seconds and new ones emerge on their bones. She sees blurry figures standing around, rolling across the landscape. They wander without purpose, motionless for a long time in one place, then moving, standing again, while empires grow and then fall around them like dominos. She can't tell if they are moving forwards or backwards.

"Girl, what are you dying for? You know that you're a dead girl, don't you?"

I can't be dead, she thinks. But it's true – though she can feel the heart beating in her chest as real and true as the rain beats down on the land, she senses that she has lost her identity: everything about her has been side-lined, forgotten. She cannot speak, as she will not be heard. Vision at least once allowed her to navigate the many waking worlds she found herself in. But now, caught in a dialectics of visibility, she is squarely in the shadows and cannot touch the lives enacted around her.

She realizes she may not be able to access people, but at least she can affect objects. She watches a soldier drop a small glimmering rectangle. She picks it up and a stout flame shoots out of it. She runs her fingers over the engraving: *"Đó Là Thế Giới Của Đàn Ông".* Nearby, she watches metal being dug out of the earth. The vast sheets are pounded into various shapes, one of them a small bowl. She picks this up, too. She wishes she could fill this bowl with rice, but there is none to be had – the fields now harbor a strange, inedible crop. Instead, she strikes it and a clear sound rings out. The body of a white dove rests on the ground nearby. Just seconds ago she saw this bird flying free into the air. Now, she is a martyr.

Collecting the totems, she senses a strong presence watching closely over her. Though these figures once made her uneasy, she now feels a push of encouragement from the phantom presence behind her. She realizes she is standing over a blank headstone. She assembles the totems closely together and bends into a deep bow. She bows to everything she has witnessed. She bows to acknowledge some profound sadness she has not seen, but feels in the pit of her stomach.

Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.[2]

She tastes her own name on the edge of her tongue, coming to her like the blossoming of the seasons. But then suddenly, as if she has been carrying the weight of several centuries, she is released again into a dark, sweet sleep...

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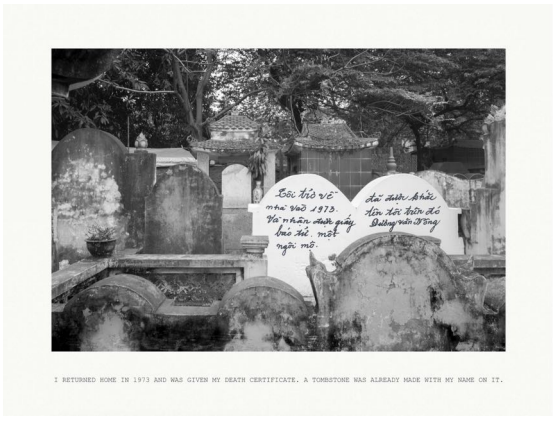
1. Yusef Komunyakaa, "Hanoi Hannah", *Dien Cai Dau*, Wesleyan University Press (1988): 13.
2. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press (1997): 8.



WITH GUEST ARTISTS | CÙNG CÁC NGHỆ SĨ KHÁCH MỜI
LẬP PHƯƠNG, AN-MY LÊ, TUẤN ANDREW NGUYỄN
OREJARENA & STEIN, PHAN THẢO NGUYÊN

WITH GUEST CURATOR | CÙNG CURATOR KHÁCH MỜI
SOFIA THIỆU D'AMICO

The Year Is XXXX

Curator's Note

Words Sofia Thiệu D'Amico
Translation Doan Thanh Toan

With the text and exhibition *Operation Ghost Story*, the next chapter of Thái Hà's creative narrative, my desire was to weave together multiple references into a hybridized tale that encourages exploration both within and outside of the show. It is a small part of what I hope is a much longer research inquiry. Recently I have been thinking quite deeply about Operation Wandering Soul: a psychological war tactic utilized by US forces during the war – largely unsuccessfully – in which helicopters projected "Ghost Tape" recordings, pretending to be the ghosts of fallen Vietnamese soldiers. Since discovering it, I have been interested in the overlap of the paramilitary and the supernatural: two forces seemingly entirely at odds, but which come together in specific historical contexts. This intersection is also enacted through the practice of spiritual mediums used to locate the remains of soldiers, for example, or votive paper clothing in the shapes of military uniforms. Perhaps at its core, the overlap of these two realms signifies taking a leap of faith or calling on the intangible in order to attempt to grapple with social conflicts and violent histories. This phenomenon is also explored in the book *The Imagineers of War* by Sharon Weinberger, which describes the transition of wartime strategies from pure militarism towards tactics of the imagination.

My text for *The Year Is XXXX* is also informed by *Dien Cai Dau*, a book of wartime poetry by the American Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa, suggested to me by my friend Luong Quoc Bao Nguyen. The lines beginning "Phantom jets..." is taken directly from his poem *Hanoi Hannah*. A notorious Vietnamese radio personality known for her English-language broadcasts from the North Vietnam Defense Ministry targeted at American GIs, the voice of Hanoi Hannah also rings through this text. I hear Hanoi Hannah in a call-and-response with the Ghost Tapes: a fierce counterpoint and insurgent anti-imperial voice. Cathy Linh Che's recent book of poetry *Becoming Ghost*, which grapples with refugeeism and familial estrangement, also inspires the text's opening lines.

Approaching the Nguyễn Art Foundation collection, there are many works that feel as though they have an aliveness or spiritual resonance. Tuan Andrew Nguyen's sculptural works using scrap UXO metal speak directly to the physical remnants and emotional after effects of war. Following the spectacle of armed conflict, who picks up the pieces? Who will clean up the streets after the revolution? The form of the singing bowl alludes to the possibility of transcendence and spiritual awakening amidst an earthly destruction. An-My Le's work *Đó Là Thế Giới Của Đàn Ông* similarly deals in the psychic residues of the war, GI materialities, and Cold War anxieties. Phan Thao Nguyen's works are suffused with magical storytelling, and the poetic treatments of difficult histories. The incredible film *Mute Grain* narrates the story of Japanese imperialism in Vietnam with an emphasis on resurgence. The white dove, meanwhile, is a resonant votive image. Lap Phuong's sculpture *Womb* (No. 3, *Yin-Yang* series) is sharp and modern, yet quietly comforting. To me, this work resembles a spectral figure that exudes a feeling of harmony: simultaneously a womb, or the ultimate seat of life, while resembling an elegant spirit that has emerged from ruin.

Orejarena & Stein's surreal work *Vietnamese Veteran Testimonial* comes from the series *Long Time No See* (2018–2020), a multigenerational, collaborative look at the memory and legacy of the American War in Vietnam in which the artists worked closely with a group of North Vietnamese veterans and their descendants. One anonymous veteran narrates their experience of returning home in 1973, handwriting on a photograph taken by the artists of a blank tombstone. Here, the many times that one metaphorically dies as a part of a political–military machinery is foregrounded.

Together, each of these works – even as they are staged within an imagined adventure tale – communicate the exhibition's primary maxim: beyond fantasy, most often the true reality of individual lives is the most critical form of storytelling.

My own matrilineal heritage – with family hailing mostly from Saigon – has long been steeped in tales of ghosts, demons, psychics, the improbable, and the spiritual. Perhaps this is part and parcel of the Vietnamese experience: superstition seems to suffuse our conscience as tea steeps in hot water. My thinking around ghosts and specters also pulls from Avery F. Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, suggested to me by the choreographer and writer Anh Vo, which posits the social and political dimensions of the ghostly. Especially, it describes a phenomenology of feeling that renders hauntings accessible to us. As he writes: "Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look."[1]

The fantastical, revolutionary quality of *giang hồ* – 江湖 which Nguyễn Art Foundation channels with this project, to me, possesses the same energetics imbued in the traditional ghost story. Common to nearly every world culture, the possibility of ghosts or hauntings displaces and subverts the powers of the living. In simplistic terms, the ghost forces a reckoning with unresolved trauma and demands retribution for historical social ills. In many ways, the ghost is a force of justice that, in order to contact, requires an attunement to quiet, unseen, subaltern forces. This is also in opposition to materialist, empirical ontologies which demand an eschewing of "occult virtues" of "natural magic and the popular superstitions"[2], as theorist Silvia Federici notes. In *Caliban and the Witch*, a favorite text of mine, Federici writes: "Equally incompatible with the capitalist work-discipline was a conception of the cosmos that attributed special powers to the individual: the magnetic look, the power to make oneself invisible, to leave one's body, to chain the will of others by magical incantations."[3] Perhaps this relationship of the supernatural and the ghostly being at odds with our contemporary world system and all its colonial trappings, makes superstition, storytelling, and subversive characters like the hungry ghost or the young girl of *The Year Is XXXX* all the more heroic. My deep congratulations go to Nguyễn Art Foundation, Bill, Thái Hà, all its team, the contributing artists, and the spirit of imagination and collaboration that they have cultivated with this project.

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1. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press (1997): 22.
2. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia (2004): 139.
3. Federici, *Caliban*, 142.

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