

Prarthana Purkayastha

prarthana.purkayastha@rhul.ac.uk

**Visuality, Sonicity and Corporeality in Installation Art: A Conversation with Jun
Nguyen-Hatsushiba**

Abstract:

This conversation paper examines the visual, sonic and corporeal entanglements that inform the work of the Vietnamese -US American -Japanese artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba. It explores the corporeal and aural qualities that are central to an understanding and sensorial experience of the artist's installations and visual practice. In paying attention to breath, sound and motion in visual art production, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's works reveal how corporeality and sonicity can dismantle the ocularcentrism of visual art. The discussions between Jun and Prarthana map the varied traumatic histories of racial colonialism, war and forced migration that haunt Vietnam's present, and bring to the surface the artist's aesthetic and political concerns around art, performance and cultural memory.

December, 2018. Kochi (Kerala), India. A few pairs of slippers mark the entrance to a warehouse, where a hanging curtain blocks the bright glare of Kerala's hot winter sun from the dark cavernous space inside. On entering the warehouse, the body is immediately heightened to multiple sensorial registers—visual, sonic and haptic. Trousers have to be rolled up as the vast warehouse is flooded with water, almost a foot deep. In the middle of the flooded space are benches rising from the water, cueing the visitor to wade through the cool water and take a seat, to face a massive white concrete wall. On the wall, a giant projection plays on a loop a film that turns the flooded warehouse into a luminous oceanic space. A

haunting sound score fills and resonates through the still air, as viewers watch and hear the spectacular motions of Vietnamese fishermen, moving, pulling cyclos¹ and labouring several meters under the sea.

(Fig.1)

This is the underwater film installation, *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam: Towards the Complex – For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards* (2001). Conceived and created by the Vietnamese-US American-Japanese artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, the installation travelled to the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India which opened in December 2018, just four months after devastating floods submerged vast swathes of this region, causing unimaginable damage to lives.² In viewing, hearing and feeling a liquid world in this installation, we as audience become alert to the absence of those recently dead or missing in Kerala's waters, even as the film pays homage to an absence of a different kind—the departure and disappearance of Vietnamese boat people, who fled South Vietnam to escape persecution, torture and concentration camps in a mass exodus across the South China sea between 1975 and 1995.³ Nha Trang, the memorialized site for the film, is one of the many fishing villages along South Vietnam's shores where a perilous passage began for thousands of boats crammed with Vietnamese women, children and men trying to reach various refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Across a twenty-year period, this sea would become a mass grave for almost 400,000 Vietnamese lives.

While *Memorial Project Nha Trang* is filmed underwater in a place where wave upon wave of tragic events once unfolded, the film distances itself from a documentary mode of re-enacting the traumatic past of Vietnam. There are no explicit or gratifying images of violence or death to be witnessed here: the only allusion, perhaps, to the resting dead, are the mosquito nets installed on the sea floor that the camera captures towards the end of the film. For the most part, this poetic film offers images of hypnotic beauty as bodies of fishermen dive into

frame from above or swim up to the surface for air, and a mesmerising choreography is carved out of water by human limbs and cyclo wheels in motion. Instead of the debris of human life, we witness remarkable human strength, agility and grace in the bodies of the fishermen as they navigate their way from the surface to push and pedal cyclos on the sea floor. And yet, despite the phenomenal resilience displayed by the movements of the divers, the installation offers little opportunity for the listening viewer to settle into the beauty of this underwater world. The sonic dimension of this installation, full of dissonance, unsettles the viewing experience. In *Memorial Project Nha Trang*, sonicity discombobulates a straightforward viewing of the visual composition, immersing the audience in a dissonant aural experience where a voyeuristic consumption of Vietnamese waters and bodies become impossible.

As a visual artist whose art works have travelled across multiple international exhibitions and featured in numerous public art collections in the past two decades, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba brings a particular Vietnamese-Japanese political sensibility to bear upon the visual and sonic performances he produces. His career highlights include the several Memorial projects, beginning with the pathbreaking *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam* in 2001. Many of these projects were filmed under water or connected to water systems (the seas and rivers). In 2007, he began *Breathing is Free: 12,756.3*, an on-going, endurance-based project conceived to physically experience and highlight global refugee crises. Here, Nguyen-Hatsushiba aims to run a distance equal to the diameter of the earth (12,756.3 kilometres) across several cities on the planet while recording his laboured breath.

This visual interest in movements and sounds generated by bodies under some form of physical duress mirrors the preoccupation with a ‘sonic turn’ in critical and cultural theory, and precedes the current explosion of sound art within visual exhibition and performance practices.⁴ Recent sonic visual art has brought into focus the evidentiary nature of sound,

marking as Georgina Guy suggests ‘a cultural shift from visual to verbal images’.⁵ For instance, we can consider the 2019 Turner-Prize-winning entry *Ear Witness Theatre* by Lawrence Abu Hamdan (Beirut), or his 2017 work *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* where sounds allow the survivors of a Syrian prison to perceive and reconstruct space and architecture (when vision/sight is denied in the prison cell). Such works explore, as Guy suggests, ‘the capacity of testimony to simultaneously pertain both to truth-telling and to acts of [...] sonic representation’.⁶ We can consider, too, the work *Nocturnal Music* (2015) by artist Samson Young (Hong Kong), a durational performance in which muted video footage of US airstrikes in the Middle East are re-produced and broadcast as sound. These practices, spread across continents and deploying divergent methods, are nonetheless connected by similar concerns with sound as ‘the really Real’ of experience.⁷ This essay returns to a visual-sonic installation piece made two decades ago, but which remains pertinent in circuits in major visual art exhibition circuits for its visual-aural nexus.

Based on her live experience of *Memorial Project Nha Trang*, **Prarthana Purkayastha** talks to **Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba** about the people, politics and processes that inform the theatrical spectacle of corporeal labour in his visual-sonic installation work. The following conversation between Jun and Prarthana is an attempt to understand his work vis-à-vis a contemporary pre-occupation with sound as evidence, document and anti-representational experience in visual art performance. It aims to trace the role of sound and bodies in Jun’s own body of work, and to explore the specific visualisations of kinetic and sonic experience therein. In particular, Jun and Prarthana reflect on how difficult imperial histories and cultural memories are circulated and surfaced through the body, visual image and sound in his installations. The geo-political and cultural specificities of Japan, Vietnam and USA triangulate Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s lived experiences and provide the foundations for a discussion of human bodies and their political agency, their intimate immersion within

environments built or found, and their imbrication of transnational scales of knowledge and lived experience.

Prarthana Purkayastha: Jun, my first question to you is based on my experience of your 2001 film installation, *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam*, which I saw at the Kochi Biennale in 2018. In this work, I witnessed Vietnamese fishermen laboriously pedalling cyclos on the sea floor. Their under-water tasks involved co-ordinated dives, structured sequences of pulling and pedalling the cyclos, and collaborative work that is reliant on mutual trust between the divers. As a dance and performance studies scholar, I was struck by several elements in your work: the choreographed diving, the score which seems to involve task-based movements with the cyclos, the excruciating bodily labour that is made visible under the water, and the sounds that frame that labour. Can you provide some context for this piece: what inspired you to work with fishermen off the coast of Vietnam, and what did you aim to explore visually through their practice? What are the cultural and political investments attached to this work?

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba: The project began to take shape through a culmination of concerns, studies, and artworks that I had been engaged with up to that point. To simplify these concerns, some keywords I had in mind were: cyclo museum; counterparts; boat people; struggle; history; physicality. Until 2000, I had been working on the subject of cyclos, the history of these bicycle taxis, their drivers, and their lives. When I was invited to the first Yokohama Triennial in 2001, I wanted to create a museum of cyclo devoted to various aspects about the cyclo's history that I had been concerned about. Since my idea of using the triennial space to establish a multi-space museum was just too large in the context of this group show, the curator had asked me to choose one room for this concept. So I chose

the memorial room. The exhibit was initially meant to be a huge water tank with dimensions around 9m(L)x 6m(W)x9m(D). And I was supposed to be in this tank with a single cyclo suspended about mid-water to pedal. The cyclo would not go forward. I would just be pedalling the water and I would be the one to struggle to reach the surface to breathe and come back to the cyclo to pedal again. As a piece of performance, the viewers would be watching me as if they were at the aquarium looking at a large fish. Of course, there were some issues for the curator: the cost to build this large glass tank, the cost to fill it with water and maintain the tank for the duration of the exhibition, and the cost of insuring the work and the rest of the exhibition in case the tank leaked. So, the rest of the story was figuring out how to possibly produce something like this concept. The curator and I bombarded each other with ideas. Eventually, it came to the stage where I would be in the real seawater in Vietnam, the country that is home to the cyclo, and that instead of a performance at the venue, I would be creating a narrative film with a group of Vietnamese fishermen.

There was no choreographing in *Memorial Project Nha Trang* except that I directed the six fishermen to pair up: one had to pull or push, and the other had to pedal, and I showed them three or four pencil sketches of the scene I had in mind. The filming took ten days at a few different underwater sites. The script was to begin the journey from the shore into deeper water, to struggle through various underwater terrains, and then to finally arrive at a location with around thirty mosquito nets scattered on the seabed. It is conceived as a homage to the lost souls at sea. The difference between a live performance and a film is that in film production, we can be creative about the sequence of the performance within the film. The post-production process would provide me as an artist with options on how the story would unfold. The work is multi-disciplinary in nature. I could not have made it as a painting on canvas, although I worked like a painter looking back and forth from the monitor during the editing of the film. I could not have made this into a sculpture although I felt like I was

sculpting the water to position myself for the shots I needed. It was not choreographed as it might seem. Rather, most of the movements came out of a necessity to move through the underwater terrain and the most essential aspect of all, to reach the surface to breathe. There was no guidance given to the fishermen on when to go up and when to come back down. Almost all their movements were done because they needed to be done and in exactly the way they were done.

(Fig. 2)

I suppose, in the context of dance and performance studies, this might be called an improvisation? Most things I do are improvised, but not so much for the sake of aesthetics, but rather for the sake of necessity. So, I am not sure if the performance would be considered an improvisation in theatre, dance and performance studies. Even with all the planning, I had to work with existing or new situations that cropped up based on what bodies needed. Maybe it could be called an incidental or even consequential performance? How would performers dance or move incidentally? Their movements would be made only from principles that govern them (such as weight, gravity, air or its lack of).

The sound for this film was created as improvisations. The scores for the introduction and the end credits were produced specifically for this film by live musicians, after I had the rough cut of the film. The rest of the sound score was produced a few years earlier in my graduate school apartment. I think I spent almost an entire semester in my apartment making ambient 'scores' while listening to Brian Eno, Japanese Noh and Okinawan music. Back then I did not have any other objective for these tracks but to produce my first 'album' on experimental music on a cassette tape, to send back to my mother in Japan who had purchased a four-track recorder for me. That was the year I stopped painting on canvas.

Prarthana Purkayastha: This notion of movement that is incidental—i.e. movement that happens as a result of an activity, out of necessity, as non-representational motion—is utterly compelling. I want to ask you about the sound/music practices you have specified to create the sound score for this installation. What qualities in these practices, e.g. Noh theatre music or Okinawan sounds do you find particularly intriguing?

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba: Japanese music has been a very big influence on my practice. Note that much of the tracks for the film were made during the last year of my graduate program. So, we are talking about some six years before the film was conceived and shot. The summer before the last year of my graduate program, I went back to visit Japan for the very first time since I immigrated to the US fifteen years earlier. I was finally able to save some money for this trip. It was really a milestone in my life as I met up with my mother and sisters and close relatives back in Japan. I also travelled to several main cities south of Tokyo by train, going all the way to Hiroshima city to witness the site of the atomic bomb. During the two months that I was there, I re-connected with my past, meeting with a few classmates from my elementary school years in Japan. It was a special moment in my life.

Upon returning to the US, I was full of ideas and joy. My desire to return to Japan again occupied my mind. So, it was very natural that I wanted to discover more about Japan while continuing my studies in the US. I tried to consume many things related to Japanese culture, and one of them was Japanese music. I would check out recordings from the public library and just listen. What I enjoyed the most was the dissonance in Japanese Noh music. I got into the vocal arrangement (basically the script) of the Noh performer and the tone and the lines of a high-pitch flute. The second year of my graduate program was well spent on creating music that tried to express my memories of growing up in Japan. It was sort of like Japanese New Age music of the time. I also incorporated a digital sound processor unit to

experiment with vocals and whistles that I had recorded. I remember shifting the pitch or dividing it into two or three frequencies to merge them, keeping my interest in the dissonance. I also explored the melodies I recorded playing and re-recording them backward. Conceptually I was exploring the past, time, and memories. Years later, when my ideas led to making the first underwater film, I associated those melodies I had recorded and decided to use them as the tracks for the film.

Prarthana Purkayastha: In the film, the viewer encounters the diver's experience under the water as a phenomenal act of endurance, which is not mimed or represented but entirely embodied—after all the diver has limited time, based on their breathing capacity, within which they have to carry out tasks such as pedalling the cyclos on the sandy floor of the sea, several meters below the surface. How important is the idea and experience of endurance within this work, and also within your other work, such as *Breathing is Free*, where you record your own breathing as you attempt to run a distance equivalent to the diameter of the earth? How do these practices bring attention to the sound of breathing bodies, to breathing as 'real' sound generated through the actions of bodies that endure extreme conditions?

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba: Pretty much this is what the *Memorial Project* was about, to show the fishermen's struggle to move forward. And yes, the concerns are similar in my *Breathing is Free* project, except here it takes me to experience struggle. That is the whole idea behind it. Some audiences will call it a performance because I have been running to make the work. I simply call it 'experience' because I am experiencing the work while running myself. I cannot act out the physical struggle of running, nor the situations that may surround me: traffic, detours, unknown conditions of the terrain, and even the effect of the weather on my body, like running with a typhoon approaching. I get exhausted and sometimes wonder why I

am doing this kind of project! Once during this project, I had to be rushed to the hospital because of a muscle spasm while running. Later I found that I was suffering from severe dehydration. It is more like watching the news, where things happen or had happened with no prior preparation. Again, movement or sound is incidental in this work, because they happen as the result of an activity.

Conclusion

In many of his works, Nguyen-Hatsushiba relies on movement, the viscosity of bodies and repeated human actions, to reflect on violent histories, colonial pasts, and the traumas inflicted by empires or political regimes that continually haunt our present. In the exhibition *Disrupted Choreographies* (at the Carré d'Art–Musée d'art contemporain in Nîmes, France, 2014), Nguyen-Hatsushiba was one of eight Vietnamese artists to explore the idea of history as choreographed and constantly re-written, from mapping the historical scars of colonial occupation, war and migration in/from Vietnam to critiquing the country's present status as a fetishized object of western tourism. In Nguyen-Hatsushiba's practice, movement, gesture, voice and sound are mobilized to draw attention to the racialized experience of Vietnamese subjects, to what reads as an anti-racist and decolonial visual practice in which listening and seeing become deeply entangled. I want to end with the haunting image of installed mosquito nets on the floor of the sea and the sounds of a fluid world in which everyday Vietnamese materials take the place of human remains at the conclusion of *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam*. The visual and sonic metaphors in this project call into focus the anti-representation of trauma as consumable art or performance. They endorse the importance of a shared collective experience of difficult cultural memories in which, instead of watching a visual re-

enactment of trauma, we as audience are invited to participate in listening to the motions of human effort and hope.

Fig. 1 *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam: Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards* (2001). Photograph by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba.

Fig. 2: *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam: Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards* (2001). Photograph by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba.

NOTES

¹ Cyclos (also known as xích lô) are Vietnamese three-wheeled bicycle taxis. They were introduced by the French colonial government in Vietnam in the 1930s, and had remained as a popular and affordable form of transportation among locals for decades. Currently, cyclos are mainly used by tourists in Vietnam.

² In August 2018, an unusually heavy monsoon led to severe floods in the southern Indian state of Kerala. More than a million people were evacuated across several districts, with over five hundred estimated dead or missing.

³ The humanitarian crisis caused by the boat people's exodus from South Vietnam began from the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Viet Cong (the National Liberation Front of the Southern Vietnam) gained control of Saigon (present day Ho Chi Minh City) in April 1975, after a mass evacuation of US troops and civilians from the city. This began a period of reunification of North and South Vietnam. The boat people were Southern Vietnamese fleeing the aftermath of the Vietnam war, and the increasing political tensions between Vietnam, Cambodia and China. From initial refugee camps in several Southeast Asian countries, many boat people were re-settled in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. For a significant collection of first-person testimonies of survivors, see Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Quang Huynh, eds., *Voices of Vietnamese*

Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival (Jefferson, N.C and London: McFarland and Company, 2000).

⁴ Michael Eng, 'The Sonic Turn and Theory's Affective Call', *Parallax*, 23, 3 (2017), pp. 316-329.

⁵ See Georgina Guy, 'Art Museums and Audibility', *Performance Research*, 24, 7 (2019), pp. 110-116, p. 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.116.

⁷ Eng, p. 326.