

Interview with Hồng-An Trương
By Võ Hồng Chương-Đài

Q. Can you discuss why you made *Adaptation Fever*?

I first started in 2002 when I went to Vietnam to do a photo-based project on Catholics in the North. To do a history of Catholics and what had happened to them during the American War. I was interested in thinking about when does the colonized internalize one's colonization and how does one speak about the othering process. I was looking at Catholicism in terms of it being a very obvious and powerful process of colonization, and an irreversible part of the war. At what point does colonization become not objectifying. I was thinking about it in the context of politics and the wars, and Catholics who stayed in the North and what their sympathies are because we assume that all Catholics left and moved to the South. I wanted to break down what we think about Vietnamese politics and identity. I did interviews with nuns and priests. I went with my uncle.

Q. What were some of the things that you found?

I found it wasn't as straight-forward as one might think. A lot of people stayed because they were tied to the land. There were different levels of political ambiguities. It wasn't straight being against or for communism. I got into really interesting conversations with the priests. There were a lot overlaps with communism even though they wouldn't say they were communists. Some of the overlaps were about supporting the community and workers' rights. There were a lot of stories about being oppressed and having to sneak around during the American War. Not being able to have mass because of the communists. There were a lot of mixed stories.

I was doing interviews and taking pictures. I didn't feel it was a photo-story, so I started doing research on films and archival materials.

Q. "Explosions in the Sky" uses the soundtrack of "The Sound of Silence" sung in both English and Vietnamese. Can you talk about the piece and why you used that song?

I see that piece as concluding the series of four. It's about the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, which ended the French War and it's when the U.S. starts to pay more attention to what's going on. For me, it was an interesting juxtaposition, a pursuit of this question of cultural translation. It's both funny and endearing. At what point is something authentic. I'm also pointing to the future war with the U.S. by using that song, a peace protest song, and the irony of it being so popular in the U.S. and widely recorded in Vietnam.

Q. Watching it is like watching a video game, a form of entertainment.

That song resonates in the U.S. There's something that happens when you're listening to that song and watching footage that we're familiar with. It's so easily flattened. We understand archival footage, especially war footage, in a way that's rendered innocuous. I hope it's

disturbing to watch it. It's sublime and mesmerizing, but I would hope it's also disturbing and you're aware of how one is disturbed by it.

Q. It's more poignant to hear the song in Vietnamese.

Yeah, that's what I was getting at. It's different to hear it in Vietnamese. It has a different resonance for people who understand Vietnamese. I think that's something for all the pieces in terms of how it resonates for both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese speaking audiences. I address each audience differently.

Q. "The Past is a Distant Colony": can you talk about that?

That piece came out of a narrative I was working with based on interviews with nuns. I had come across footage of the two boys making the sign of the cross and that woman who's turning and crying. These two videos ["Explosions in the Sky" and "The Past is a Distant Colony"] were finished first. For this piece, a lot of the footage was of Catholics during the period from the 1920s to 1954. A lot of the piece was driven by the image of the two boys and the woman. I was also trying to excavate this footage and these people. There's something really compelling about these two boys and this woman.

Q. What is the piece about?

The piece is about the process of looking into oneself and this process of self-alienation. It's about looking at oneself and not seeing who you are. Seeing one thing and not seeing what you think of yourself. The two frames are framed by the black frame so one is always aware that one is always seeing a self that is framed, and the two frames create a mirroring. It's about how a person becomes a subject through the process of colonization. The mirror also refers to Lacan's mirror stage.

As a viewer, I'm constantly looking for my family. For me, the process of going through the archives, there's always the process of looking for family members and not seeing oneself there.

Q. Can you talk about the other two pieces?

"It's True Because It's Absurd": It starts off with a long road with bushes on both sides. There are soldiers who come in and out of the bushes. They're in camouflage so when they go into the bushes, you can't see them. You know they're there, but you can't see them. There's lyrical footage, but if you look closely, you'll see horrifying things. There's footage of a guy sitting with a person on his lap, but he's wounded. There is the voiceover of a woman speaking English with a Vietnamese accent. It's actually Ysa Le's voice [executive director of Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association]. The story comes from a story my mother had told me seeing a boy pick up a gun and accidentally shoot his mother. The piece is about the process of telling the story, the woman's voice repeating how she can't tell the story. The piece is about struggling to remember and to tell a story. It's about thinking about how war footage and stories about war have become legacy, how they have become narrated.

Q. What's the order of the four pieces?

I've played around with the order.

Q. Can you talk about "A Story in the Process of Self-Alienation"?

The story is of the Beetle Nut. It's my cousin telling the story and she's singing a song about saying goodbye to your friends. It's a song that school kids sing on the last day of school. I recorded my cousin telling the story. She gets a lot of the details wrong. The footage is of processions for Hồ Chí Minh. The piece is about nation-building through story-telling and myth-making. It ends with a song that's really nostalgic. After she sings, she says, "That's it, and that's what we sing when we say goodbye to our classmates." There's a suggestion of the continuation of myth-making. For me, there's something about that song and how we have an emotional nostalgic sensibility for Vietnamese history.

Q. The pieces in *Adaptation Fever* are set in Vietnam. You have a diasporic piece, "Wheel in the Sky" (2008), in which the characters are you and your father. Can you talk about that piece?

I'm interested in language and the problem of translation. This is true for *Adaptation Fever*, too, the translation of memory. "Wheel in the Sky" uses the image of the helicopter falling into the ocean. A lot of my pieces start when I do interviews. I started this piece when I was doing an interview with my father. What I started interviewing him about is not what the piece became. In the process of interviewing him, I thought about the difficulty of language and memory, and the difficulty of translation and the spaces in between memories, languages, lands, homes. I started to think about double images, and the image of the helicopter resonated with this for the meanings that that image evokes. A helicopter is euphemistically called a "wheel in the sky" and that's also a euphemism for the passage of time. In the film, the helicopter is always suspended, so I wanted to think about how one comes to understand language and memory in the spaces in between.

The main part of the story in which my father talks is him trying to explain to me why he loves his land. If you blink, then you'll miss it. If you listen carefully, you also realize he's talking about journeys. It's so perfect because the band *Journey* also has a song called "Wheel in the Sky" about being on the road constantly and not having a sense of home. My father was talking about how he can translate the music for himself, but he can't translate it for me. The music spoke to him, a cultural translation. At first, he said he couldn't explain to me why he liked that song so much. He said he couldn't explain it in Vietnamese, but then he goes on to talk about it in Vietnamese in a very eloquent way. He slips into Vietnamese without thinking about it. He says he can't say it in Vietnamese, but then I push him and he eventually falls back into Vietnamese when he's not thinking about it.

Q. This past year you were in the Studio Program at the Whitney Museum. You made a new video installation called "A Measure of Remorse".

In 2005, there were massive protests in Korea and China about Japanese textbooks that glossed over the atrocities committed by the Japanese in Nanjing and other places during World War II.

“A Measure of Remorse” is a single channel projection with two framed images, one of the protest and one of the official apology from the Japanese government in 2005.

The video uses as its central structural element an interview between Iris Chang, the author of *The Rape of Nanjing*; the then Japanese Ambassador to the U.S., Kunihiko Saito; and Elizabeth Farnsworth, a correspondent for the public television show *The News Hour*.

The video is nonlinear, non-narrative. It’s just those three characters interacting with one another and their gestures of contact. There is a kind of rhythm with the audio, but the structure remains the same wherein the audio is garbled and then you can hear it clearly and then it’s garbled again. Throughout the video, Iris and the ambassador are arguing about what constitutes an apology. It’s a circular argument about what constitutes an apology.

I had been thinking for a long time about doing a project about Iris Chang when I heard she had committed suicide. Her book had made a huge impact. I was interested in her because she was a public historian, who was writing about national understandings of history for a popular audience. She went through a hugely traumatic experience during the writing of *The Rape of Nanjing* and her very aggressive work in seeking reparations for Chinese people. But I didn’t want to pathologize her or do this one-to-one correlation between her life and her work. I was also interested in her being an Asian American and all the pressures she put on herself during the writing of history.

I’m still working on a project about her, so this video is just one small part of it. I wanted to think about historical justice and language, the question of apology, and translation. I wanted to make a video that wasn’t based on language, so I juxtaposed the soundtrack of the interview and the performance of care toward another person. The interview was about the use of language without communication, and what language and verbal apologies do.

This is the beginning of a series of projects provoked by her life and her work. I’m interested in historical justice and how language is used, how historical knowledge gets transferred.

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