

Foraging in the ruins: Nguyễn Trinh Thi's mycological moving-image practice

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Sensing a connection between her creative practice and Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000), a film about people who make use of items that have been discarded by others, Vietnamese moving-image artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi has described herself as a 'gleaner' by virtue of her ecological approach to producing moving-image works.¹ Nguyễn uses montage to explore processes of historical erasure through found materials mostly sourced from the internet, due in part to the difficulty of accessing such materials via Vietnamese institutional archives.² Collectively, these materials – including press photographs, tourist and colonial postcards, archival newsreels, drone footage, ethnographic film, popular and art house cinema – envisage the history of Vietnam through colonial, state and cinematic imaginaries. Nguyễn brings these found objects into dialogue with her own video and audio recordings in her non-linear, experimental documentaries, essay films and audiovisual installations. This essay focuses on Nguyễn's Landscape series – *Landscape Series #1* (2013), *Letters from Panduranga* (2015), *Fifth Cinema* (2018) and *How to Improve the World* (2021) – and explores how the interrelated and shifting macro-histories of global and national politics, colonialism and the Cold War are made visible and audible through the micro-ecologies and environments that these works depict.

One crucial episode that draws together these political and environmental histories is the use of the chemical herbicide Agent Orange as part of the US military's ecocidal 'Operation Ranch Hand'

- 1 Nguyễn Trinh Thi, 'Artists' moving image in Asia' roundtable discussion, IFFR, January 2019. See also Susan Jarosi, 'Recycled cinema as material ecology: Raphael Montañez Ortiz's found-footage films and Computer-Laser-Videos', *Screen*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2012), pp. 228–45; William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York, NY: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).
- 2 In some of Nguyễn's works she has used material from socialist-realist films recently distributed digitally by the Vietnam Film Archive in Hanoi.

- 3 See Leah Zani, 'Bomb ecologies', *Environmental Humanities: Living Lexicons*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2018), pp. 528–31.
- 4 Ann Laura Stoler, 'Imperial debris: reflections on ruins and ruination', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2008), p. 206. Here I am indebted to Mariam B. Lam, who draws a connection between Stoler's concept of ruin and Nguyễn's found-footage films (and other Vietnamese experimental documentaries) in relation to 'minor regionalism', in her talk 'Found footage: ecological (re)invention in experimental documentary film', Hanoi DocLab, 9 November 2017. <<https://www.seacm.org>> accessed 3 September 2021.
- 5 Thieu-Dang Nguyễn and Simone Datzberger, 'The environmental movement in Vietnam: a new frontier of civil society activism?', *Challenging Authoritarianism*, no. 4 (2018), pp. 1–15. See also Philippa Lovatt, '(Im)material histories and aesthetics of extractivism in Vietnamese artists' moving image', *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2020), pp. 221–36.
- 6 Nguyễn Trinh Thi's artist statement, <<https://nguyentrinthi.wordpress.com/2012/09/29/landscape-series-1/>> accessed 3 September 2021.
- 7 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 238.
- 8 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 238.
- 9 Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 19–25.
- 10 Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (eds), *The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

campaign during the American war with Vietnam that had a devastating impact on the environment, not only in Vietnam but also in neighbouring Cambodia and Laos.³ In *Letters from Panduranga* and *Fifth Cinema*, the physical imprint of the war is also evident in the hollowed-out bomb sites that scar the land in Quảng Trị, a province in North Central Vietnam that was heavily bombed during the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the Easter Offensive of 1972. In her essay 'Imperial debris: reflections on ruins and ruination', Ann Laura Stoler describes these remnants of war as the 'ruins of empire', noting that many thousands of unexploded US landmines remain hidden in the ground and continue to cause fatalities, injury and psychological trauma through accidental detonation.⁴ Now, in Vietnam's post Đổi Mới era, the environment is under threat from a combination of extractivist capitalism and state censorship.⁵ Against a backdrop of colonial and state erasure, the land, river and seascapes in the Landscape series are what Nguyễn calls 'quiet witnesses to history':⁶ in the context of state censorship and 'ruination', they bear witness to the country's material, ecological and indigenous histories, and their stories of dispossession and survival.

Describing archival film practice as 'an aesthetic of ruins',⁷ Catherine Russell observes how the use of found footage can produce a new form of critical audiovisual archaeology that brings with it the potential of 'shocking the past into attention'.⁸ This phrase resonates with Anna Tsing's essay 'The arts of noticing', in which she describes an ethical practice of 'noticing' and of paying close attention to the material world around us.⁹ Nguyễn's practice of foraging for material online recalls Tsing's account of foraging for mushrooms in the forest – in the context of precarity, 'in the ruins' – the 'arts of noticing' means working with what's available. In this essay I want to draw a connection between Nguyễn's ecological moving-image practice and the concept of ruin as it relates to the environment that informs both Tsing's and Stoler's writing in order to consider how these works can contribute a Southeast Asian perspective to what Tsing et al. call 'the arts of living' in the Anthropocene.¹⁰ Following this trail, I also trace Nguyễn's affinities with the approach of another forager, John Cage, whose work she references. Considering indeterminacy in the Landscape series from a Cageian perspective as 'a conceptual and compositional structuring principle, epitomized by [...] chance operations and unpredictable outcomes',¹¹ this essay asks what might a *mycological moving-image practice* look and sound like?

The Landscape series addresses how colonial histories and state censorship in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam have led to erasures that extend to historic and contemporary issues of environmental justice, examining the role of film, photography and other media as complicit in these processes of erasure. Nguyễn draws attention to the marginalization of historical accounts of indigenous peoples' experiences of dispossession in Vietnam, as well as the effects of state censorship on media reporting of ecological catastrophe. Following Tsing, I suggest that Nguyễn's

- 11 Kingston Trinder, 'Indeterminacy', in Ananda Pellerin (ed.), *John Cage: A Mycological Foray* (New York, NY: Atelier, 2020), p. 157.
- 12 Nguyễn sometimes collaborates with the photographer Jamie Maxtone-Graham, who shot some of the footage in the *Landscape Series*.
- 13 For example, *Landscape Series #1* was shown as a photography and postcard exhibition at NTU CCA Singapore's Gillman Barracks in 2019, and as a slide projection at the exhibition curated by Julian Ross, 'Blackout', at Kunsthal Rotterdam, IFFR, 2019.
- 14 See Julian Ross's essay for the 48th International Film Festival Rotterdam catalogue, 'Blackout', IFFR, 13 January 2019 <<https://iffr.com/en/blog/blackout>> accessed 3 September 2021.

ecological practice concerns not only the recycling of images and sounds, but also shows how artists' moving image can direct and focus our attention, moving from the macro to the micro and back again. Through her use of montage and remix that also extends to her own video and audio recordings that she revisits across the series,¹² Nguyễn invites an attunement to the multiple, interrelated and divergent temporalities embedded within the visual and acoustic ecologies of contemporary Vietnam.

Landscape Series #1 has been exhibited as a carousel slide projection, a looped five-minute video installation, and a photography postcard exhibition.¹³ The work shows a series of slides (photographed on 35mm from digital images on the internet) of anonymous men and women pointing to some significant, but no longer visible, past event: a road, a lake, a forest, some cleared ground, a bomb crater filled with water, an injured and recently stitched finger, a man pointing back at the camera. The final image shows a distant plume of orange dirt shooting up into the air (a caption to the photograph reads: 'Seismic-refraction measuring at the site designated for the construction of Vietnam's first two nuclear power plants. Phước Dinh commune, Ninh Thuận province, Vietnam'). Nguyễn collected the images from hundreds of regional newspaper articles found online, which often use similar shots of witnesses pointing at the landscape to indicate where a crime or other newsworthy event has taken place, but by the time that the photojournalist arrives on the scene no evidence remains. Sometimes there is a suggestion of a past dispute or some act of physical violence (as with the wounded finger), although no other clues are provided.

Duration allows the images' ambiguity to build incrementally as we wonder what we are being asked to bear witness to, while the pointing fingers demand that we pay closer attention to what is left unsaid. This is underscored by the insistent, regular pacing of the images alongside the loud, rhythmic *shunt* of the carousel on the video's soundtrack (or in the space of the gallery as with the slide projector installation). The repetitive sound of the mechanics of the carousel as it selects each slide acts as a sonic metonym of the pointing gesture that impresses upon us the urgency of environmental crisis. The black screen between each slide connects individual stories through ellipses. As if providing pieces of a puzzle or clues in a detective story, Nguyễn leaves the process of deciphering the significance of each image to the viewer.

As the curator Julian Ross suggests, the 'blackout'¹⁴ alludes to the experience of 'historical amnesia', as the elliptical structure recreates the invisible processes of erasure that occur as a result of media blackouts in Vietnam. Since production of the Kodak carousel slide projector ceased in 2004, its association with obsolete media technology evokes a pastness or belatedness. Just as the journalist is 'too late' to witness events, the enigmatic images and anachronistic sound of the technology that projects them similarly convey a sense of being 'out of time' (a concern that has obvious connotations in the context of the Anthropocene). Rather than

15 Nguyễn's artist statement.

16 Artist talk with Nguyễn Trinh Thi at Asian Film and Video Art Forum, 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZAPwZ0vj8s>> accessed 3 September 2021.

17 The planned nuclear power plants were cancelled in 2016 due to forecasts of lower demand, escalating costs and safety concerns.

18 Erin Gleeson, 'On *Letters from Panduranga*', in *Lettres de Panduranga: Nguyen Trinh Thi (Jeu de Paume/CAPAC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 2015)*, p. 53.

19 Nicolas Weber, 'The destruction and assimilation of Campā (1832-35) as seen from Cham sources', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2012), p. 158.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

21 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 169.

looking to the past, however, Nguyễn reads possibility in the images: 'Together these anonymous witnesses, portrayed in compelling uniformity [...] seem to be indicating a direction, a way forward out of the past, a fictional journey'.¹⁵

Like *Landscape Series #1, Letters from Panduranga* engages with questions of power, specifically asking who has control over an image or is able to narrate the story of a place.¹⁶ The idea for the film came when Nguyễn learned that the Vietnamese government was planning to build its first two nuclear power plants in Ninh Thuận on the last remaining area that had historically belonged to the Cham, a matrilineal indigenous group who are now an ethnic minority in Vietnam. While on a residency in Japan she witnessed protests against the Japanese government and the nuclear power company, following the nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant resulting from the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami (an environmentally catastrophic event discussed by Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn in his contribution to this dossier). Nguyễn made the video work *Jo Ha Kyu* (2012) about her experience of being in Tokyo after the earthquake. On returning to Vietnam, she learned that the same nuclear technologies and infrastructure were planned for the 2000-year-old site, but Vietnam's strict censorship laws meant that no protests or outward signs of public resistance were allowed.¹⁷ This stark contrast prompted her to travel to the area where she spent periods of time on residencies organized through a network of Cham scholars.¹⁸

Letters from Panduranga traces the colonial and Cold War histories of Vietnam, and the toxic legacy of both on the environment. In his study of historical Cham texts about the annexation of Champā, historian Nicolas Weber notes that until 1832, when it was 'absorbed' into Ninh Thuận, this area was known as Panduranga. Of relevance to this essay's focus is Weber's discussion of the disparity between Vietnamese official accounts of the history of Panduranga and local Cham accounts that were recorded in 'narrative poems' known as *ariya* – oral forms that were intended to be listened to. What remains of the *ariya* (often written down by scribes) shows that although this process of annexation 'marked the extinction of one of Southeast Asia's most prestigious kingdoms, Vietnamese official records describe it simply as the administrative reorganisation of a province'.¹⁹

The Cham communities were broken up and redistributed to live amongst the Kinh (the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam) in Ninh Thuận, and indigenous administrative powers were dismantled.²⁰ Land reform was part of the resettlement process: the Vietnamese took control of land, fields and temples without consent or compensation to the Cham, after which the land was divided into plots and became part of the Vietnamese taxation system. One *ariya* recounts: 'They left the roots, cut the buds and abandoned the trees. The roots that were kept were cut and they destroyed the crops of the people.'²¹ Weber explains that as well as the economic impact, land theft was traumatizing for the Cham (as for

many animist cultures in Southeast Asia) because of their cultural and spiritual relationship to it. They believed, he writes,

that each piece of land is inhabited by a spirit [...] that has to be propitiated adequately. If the required specific rituals and sacrifices are not performed properly, the spirit may turn against the population and punish it by sending all sorts of calamities and epidemics.²²

Through the juxtaposition of durational portrait shots of members of the Cham community with wide-angle shots of the landscape, Nguyễn's framing seems to foreground the ongoingness²³ of the Cham's relationship to this place as part of an affective ecology.

Letters from Panduranga is organized around a series of letters between a woman and a man read in voiceover (by Nguyễn and Nguyễn Xuân Sơn, intended to represent different aspects of Nguyễn), in which they discuss the interrelated histories of the French colonial era, the internal colonization of the Cham, and the legacy of the US military campaign during the war. Their observations turn to the exhibition of colonial artefacts in museums, to tourism in the region, and to the role of UNESCO. While their exchange focuses on ethical questions – as outsiders the letter-writers share their hesitation and uncertainty around their own position as narrators, a concern that can be traced across the Landscape series – there are also material consequences for attempting to tell these stories, as we learn when the male narrator describes having his camera confiscated by the police (a story based on Nguyễn's own experience of being arrested while making *Chronicle of a Tape Recorded Over* [2010]).²⁴

As Laura Rascaroli observes in her reading of *Letters from Panduranga*, the exchange of letters and photographs between the woman in Ninh Thuận and her friend – who is travelling along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Central Vietnam on his motorbike, passing through former Cham territories – forms an epistolary travelogue.²⁵ Her friend reads firstly from Da Nang, near the site of ruined Hindu temples at Mỹ Sơn that are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site; nearby there is also a Cham museum. In a subtle critique of UNESCO's neocolonial rhetoric, he reads that it has recognized Mỹ Sơn as 'evidence of an ancient Asian civilization now extinct'; referencing the Cham in Panduranga (a culture still very much alive with a population of about 180,000 in Vietnam and 800,000 worldwide) he questions sarcastically, 'are they not evidence of the same extinction?' He comments on the many large bomb craters around the temples that are both material and affective reminders of the war, while the woman writer implies a connection with imperialism when she asserts that the temples are 'being robbed of their spirits' by tourists – a critique underscored through quotations read in the voiceover from *Lettre de Sibérie/Letter from Siberia* (Chris Marker, 1957) and *Les statues meurent aussi/Statues Also Die* (Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, 1953).

22 Ibid., p. 168.

23 See Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: making kin', *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6 (2015), p. 160.

24 See Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa, 'A chronicle tape recorded over', in May Adadol Ingwanij (ed.), *The 6th Bangkok Experimental Film Festival: Raiding the Archives* (Bangkok: Read (Aan) Publishing, 2013), pp. 71–72. For further discussion of this incident, see 'Filmmakers in focus: Nguyễn Trinh Thi in conversation', Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, 18 September 2021, <<https://bfmaf.org/live-event/nguyen-trinh-thi-in-conversation/>> accessed 18 September 2021.

25 Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 154. For further commentaries on *Letters from Panduranga*, see also Pamela N. Corey, 'Sitting the artist's voice', *Art Journal*, vol. 77, no. 4 (2018), pp. 84–96; May Adadol Ingwanij, 'Aesthetics of potentiality: Nguyen Trinh Thi's essay films', in Lucy Reynolds (ed.), *Women Artists, Feminism and the Moving Image: Contexts and Practices* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 151–64; Nora A. Taylor, 'The imaginary geography of Champa', in *Letters de Panduranga: Nguyen Trinh Thi*, pp. 55–60.

The evocation of multi-layered temporalities continues through the juxtaposition of shots of the bomb sites and a scene that takes place in the Cham cemetery. In the voiceover, the woman's voice reads:

Sometimes I lie down among all these stones. The Cham Bani have the tradition of burying their dead on the chest of their deceased mother. At each spot under a pair of stones, there might be a dozen skeletons lying on each other's chest. These stones don't bear any names or traces of the dead. In the family, the women pass down the names as oral histories. You can also see this philosophy of anonymity in Champa's ancient literature. Authors did not leave their names behind. Only script copiers' names were left in print.

Against these words, the slow-paced visual framing of the sandstone rocks draws attention to the inorganic, and the relational ecology of this place as the durational temporality of the scene conveys a sense of geological time or deep time: what Ana Smalbegović calls 'a politics of time in the Anthropocene' that registers 'minute and incrementally accumulating processes of change'.²⁶ The unfolding image and sound alert us to the 'temporal rhythms' of more-than-human life, such as the tiny ants that march around the gravestones. If we pay attention to the acoustic ecology of this scene, we notice that scale is important too: it begins with what seems like a lively conversation between two birds, while other low ambient sounds can be heard in the background. Nguyễn's attention to the sandstone here suggests a form of close listening: these stones may seem silent to us, but what about the more-than-human sounds we *cannot* hear, no doubt at frequencies that are outside our range.²⁷ The camera-work invites us to try to tune into these acoustic frequencies too.

While the sandstone rocks embody geological or deep time, and the landmines denote the toxicity of the lingering material and affective presence of the war, the threat of the nuclear power plants evokes a temporality of the 'not yet' – the male letter-writer tells his friend that he is writing from 'the future' (Quảng Trị). Here the film takes on a science fiction-like quality as we see shots of men and women in hazmat suits detonating mines that contaminate the soil and leave deep indentations in the earth. This layering of temporalities through the images of the 'ruins of empire' recalls Kali Simmons's claim that

indigenous peoples are already postapocalyptic. That is, indigenous peoples have already faced catastrophic violence, the loss of relationships, and the fundamental alteration of their ways of life to survive in spaces that are physically, emotionally and spiritually toxic.²⁸

In *Fifth Cinema*, a film made partly in response to the disastrous toxic waste spill from the Formosa Plastics Ha Tinh steel plant in central Vietnam in 2016,²⁹ Nguyễn revisits scenes from *Letters from Panduranga* in order to trace what she describes as 'the unstoppable escalation of environmental and ecological destruction in Vietnam and

26 Ana Smalbegović, 'Cloud writing: describing soft architectures of change in the Anthropocene', in Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), p. 97.

27 See A. M. Kanngieser, 'Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: five propositions for sound', *GeoHumanities*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2015), pp. 80–85.

28 Kali Simmons, 'Reorientations; or, an indigenous feminist reflection on the Anthropocene', *JCMS*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2019), p. 175.

29 'Vietnam protest over mystery fish deaths', BBC News, 1 May 2016. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36181575>> accessed 3 September 2021.

30 Izabella Scott, 'Nguyễn Trinh Thi – interview: 'I want to unpick the way we look at things', *Studio International*, 18 February 2019 <<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/Nguyen-trinh-thi-interview-vietnamese-film-maker>> accessed 3 September 2021.

31 Barry Barclay, 'Celebrating Fourth Cinema', *Illusions*, no. 35 (2003), pp. 7–11.

32 Karl Schoonover, 'Sinkholes', *JCMS*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2019), p. 171.

33 Anna L. Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Tsing, 'Unruly edges: mushroom as companion species. For Donna Haraway', *Environmental Humanities*, no. 1 (2012), pp. 141–54.

beyond'; a process of destruction that is 'enacted on local and indigenous communities, who have no say whatsoever in these matters'.³⁰ Towards the end of the Cham cemetery scene in *Letters from Panduranga*, the sound of a plane overhead relocates the viewer, and the space, within the globalized world of the present. The scene then cuts with brutal force to one that results in ritualistic animal slaughter from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) – a film that signifies another form of cinematic erasure in the representation of Vietnam and its indigenous peoples through the lens of the Cold War imaginary.

Through a rhizomatic narrative that explores questions of colonialism, indigeneity and the limits of audiovisual representation, *Fifth Cinema* continues the earlier work's reflection on the role of the artist in unravelling the complex layers and entanglements of colonial, state and Cold War histories. Scenes from *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Lewis Milestone, 1962), *Pierrot le fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965) and *Ceddo* (Ousmane Sembène, 1977) are woven together through a loose structure provided by text from Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay's essay celebrating Fourth and Indigenous Cinema.³¹ The intercutting of different styles and textures of film footage and photography recalls what Karl Schoonover has described as a 'hiatus in linear time and space',³² characteristic of ecological disaster movies. The juxtapositions of sounds and images from different locations and moments in history offer a form of disruption to dominant narratives, but unlike the films Schoonover writes about, *Fifth Cinema* offers no resolution; it resists the forward trajectory of narrative causality altogether and instead offers hesitations, through repetition and fragmentation.

This process, I suggest, renders the image active, producing the 'unruly edges' and frictions described by Tsing as essential for ecological thought.³³ In one scene, for example, we see Nguyễn's hands holding a series of faded, partly torn Kodacolor photographic prints of the ocean, perhaps taken from a US military aircraft landing platform or a ship. Visually echoing the 35mm slides in *Landscape Series #1*, the prints reveal little about their origin or significance, and this indeterminacy is underscored further when the image goes out of focus entirely as the camera moves in closer. As she looks through the photographs, Nguyễn misreads them: 'Those are bombs', she states, but another voice (Jamie Maxtone-Graham) quietly corrects her, 'Helicopters'. 'Ah, helicopters – sorry, so I don't even know', she replies. She turns one of the photographs over and reads out the handwritten note on the back: 'It says "Black dots in sky are helicopters"'; the next one reads 'Ships in Distance' (the image shows a tiny dot in the far distance); another simply 'Bombs in V.N.' Nguyễn pauses for a moment, then remarks, 'Beautiful pictures of landscape! 1969 or 7?'; Maxtone-Graham answers, '67, August'.

Nguyễn juxtaposes these cinematic and Cold War images with French colonial postcards of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and propaganda photographs of North Vietnamese women fighters found on the internet

34 See Nguyễn Trinh Thi, 'Fifth Cinema and found footage', *Dreaming/Remembering: Practices around Vietnam's Film Heritage, A Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth Project* (London: British Council, 2019), pp. 29-34.

35 'Talk – Nguyễn Trinh Thi', Minneapolis Institute of Art, Thursday, 10 October 2019, <https://vimeo.com/370417069> accessed 3 September 2021.

36 Scott, 'Nguyễn Trinh Thi – interview'.

37 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p. 225. See also Pellerin (ed.), *John Cage: Mycological Foray*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

38 Like Nguyễn's work, Cage's *Diary* presents 'a mosaic of ideas, statements, words, and stories'. John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), p. 3.

39 The installation was first exhibited at Manzi Art Space, Hanoi in December 2020, and as a short film at Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival in September 2021.

(several of which had been republished in *National Geographic* in a series called 'Another Vietnam: pictures of the war from the other side'). These are shown alongside soft porn images sourced from eBay of Vietnamese women in the South, and *Life* magazine stills of Southern women wearing *ao dai* dresses.³⁴ Her critique of the instrumentalization of these images of women is linked to Barclay's essay through her repurposing of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, a film that the essay critiques for its depiction of indigenous cultures. These images are interwoven with aerial footage and wartime surveillance shots of fields and forests, and drone footage of titanium extraction by the coast in Bình Thuận province, a former Cham region in South Central Vietnam that has experienced significant environmental damage. Along the bottom of the screen runs text from Barclay's essay about a protest by tribal people in the village of Kashipur in Orissa State, East India, against the opening of a bauxite mine in the area, at which three protestors were killed by police. Traversing multiple spatial and temporal scales and registers from the global to the domestic, Nguyễn folds into these narratives images of her daughter from her own personal archive of video diaries. Rather than asserting a particular narrative onto this assemblage, however, Nguyễn builds up what she has described as a kind of 'index' inviting viewers to draw meaning from the indeterminate juxtapositions of sounds and images through association.³⁵ Nguyễn has said that through her practice she is interested in how she 'can connect histories and things that seem to be separate or isolated into a system, and [...] make visible invisible structures and networks'.³⁶ Perhaps then, through Tsing, we might take a Cageian mycological perspective and think of the unpredictable associations that might emerge from the film's rhizomatic structure and indeterminate encounters as mushroom spores that 'may germinate in unexpected places'.³⁷

With *How to Improve the World*, Nguyễn makes the connection with Cage more overt by referencing his *Diary: How to Improve the World (You will only make matters worse)* directly in the title.³⁸ *How to Improve the World* is an 'aurally-centred' video installation and short film³⁹ that focuses on an indigenous Jarai community in the province of Gia Lai in the Central Highlands, who are known for their traditional aural culture and gong music. An implicit theme across the *Landscape* series has been the erasure of indigenous stories and experiences by dominant culture through sound, as image and text replace aurality. In *How to Improve the World* this becomes the central focus, as the work explores the legacy of Catholicism, introduced in the 17th century by French missionaries, on both the acoustic ecology of this place and on the community's traditional social practices of listening and voicing through storytelling and music. The central narrator in *How to Improve the World*, a musician named Ksor Sep (whom we learn once almost became a shaman) sings and narrates a story about the aural culture of his community that has begun to disappear. Just as oral traditions of storytelling have started to fade, he tells us, so too have the sounds of birds and animals from the

fields as their land has been taken over by the dominant Kinh people as part of an ongoing process of internal colonization.

How to Improve the World is all about listening; the act of making the work is in itself an act of listening. Listening to the story being told by the narrator, alongside the other listeners around him, but the work itself tunes in to the musicality, rhythms and acoustic layers of memory and time – and a history of this place. The rhythms, tones and melodies weave in and out of the piece as a refrain – *How to Improve the World* is itself a song. The melodies come from the musical instruments and songs but also from different ambient and environmental sounds, like people in the room laughing or vocally agreeing (affirmations that they too are listening), or the sounds of women chatting as they carry their load in the construction site nearby, or the cicadas, or the bird calls, the dog barks, the river sounds, engine noise and the sounds of the construction site – all of these are beautifully interconnected through the soundscape.

In Nguyễn's own description of landscapes as 'quiet witnesses to history', her use of an aural metaphor foregrounds listening, and specifically the kind of *close listening* that quietness requires. While attending to colonial, capitalist and ecological entanglements in the Anthropocene, central to Nguyễn's practice then, as 'gleaner' – and as 'forager' – has been to listen.

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