

**Ngọc Nâu**

b. 1989, Thai Nguyen

Ngọc Nâu is a multimedia artist who graduated from the Vietnam Fine Art University, majoring in Art History and Criticism. Her work spans from the moving images, video projection, hologram projection, to augmented reality and collage photography. Ngọc Nâu has participated in various exhibitions and art projects in Japan, Hong Kong, Northern Iceland, Korea, England, Canada, Singapore and Vietnam. Select exhibitions include: 'South Wind Rises Asia-Pacific Contemporary Art Exhibition', Taiwan Art Education Center, Taiwan (2018); 'Asian Diva: The Muse and The Monster', Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul (2017); 'In Search of Miss Ruthless', Para Site, Hong Kong (2017); 'Technophobe', The Factory Contemporary Arts Center, HCMC (2016); 'Art Together With The Town', Koganecho Bazaar, Japan (2015) etc.

**Phan Anh**

b. 1990, HCMC

Phan Anh is a multidisciplinary artist based in Saigon. He graduated from the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University and received his MFA from Utrecht School of the Arts (The Netherlands). His works use personal and collective memories to explore both mental and physical possibilities of human beings in correlation with beliefs in abstract concepts. For him, art making has always been an honest effort to make sense of himself as an individual who plays an unpredictable part in (both objective and subjective) social, psychological and spiritual phenomena. Phan Anh was curatorial assistant at Zero Station Art Space (HCMC) and taught at the Saigon University, Faculty of Fine Arts. He is now working as a full time artist and co-curator of the Đường Chạy experimental project. Some of his highlight exhibitions include: 'Museum of the mind' (solo), HCMC (2018); 'Prospects: Before You Ask Me To Stay' (group), Research Pavilion, the 56th Venice Biennale, Venice (2015); 'Boiler room: A Creature Called Soft Machine' (group), IMPAKT festival, Academie Galerie, Utrecht, The Netherlands (2014) etc. Phan Anh was the winner of the 2017 Dogma Prize, and participated in the ACC Arts Space Network Residency, ACC Gwangju, Korea (2018).

**Trần Minh Đức**

b. 1982, HCMC

Trần Minh Đức is a visual artist born and lives in Saigon. Đức is interested in the interactions between the collective and the individual, the local and the foreign. His practice interrogates what it means to be Vietnamese in the complex fabric of contemporaneity. He graduated from the painting department of the College of Culture and Arts of Ho Chi Minh City. His work spans performance, photography, collage, printmaking and installation, exploring notions of collective memory and cultural archives through investigating historical narratives, the effects of colonialism and imperialism, and the lasting impacts of war and migration. He received fellowship of Asian Cultural Council NYC in 2015 and was in residence at Art in General from March-July 2017. He has also participated in AIR programs in Tokyo TWS 2011, Nagasaki Japan 2015, Phnom Penh Cambodia SaSaArt Project 2015, Paris France Béton Salon 2016, Art in General NYC USA 2017, and Seoul Korea Haenghwatang 2018, Jeju Culture Space Yang 2019. Select notable exhibitions include: 'Two Headed Raincoat', Haenghwatang, Seoul, Korea; 'indexmakers', Le 19 Crac, Montbéliard, France (2018); Art In FLUX and La Maison d'Art, NYC, USA (2017); 'Anywhere but Here', Bétonsalon - Centre for Art and Research, Paris, France (2016); 'happiness lies beyond the clouds', San Art, HCMC, Vietnam (2016) etc.

# SINGING TO THE CHOIR?

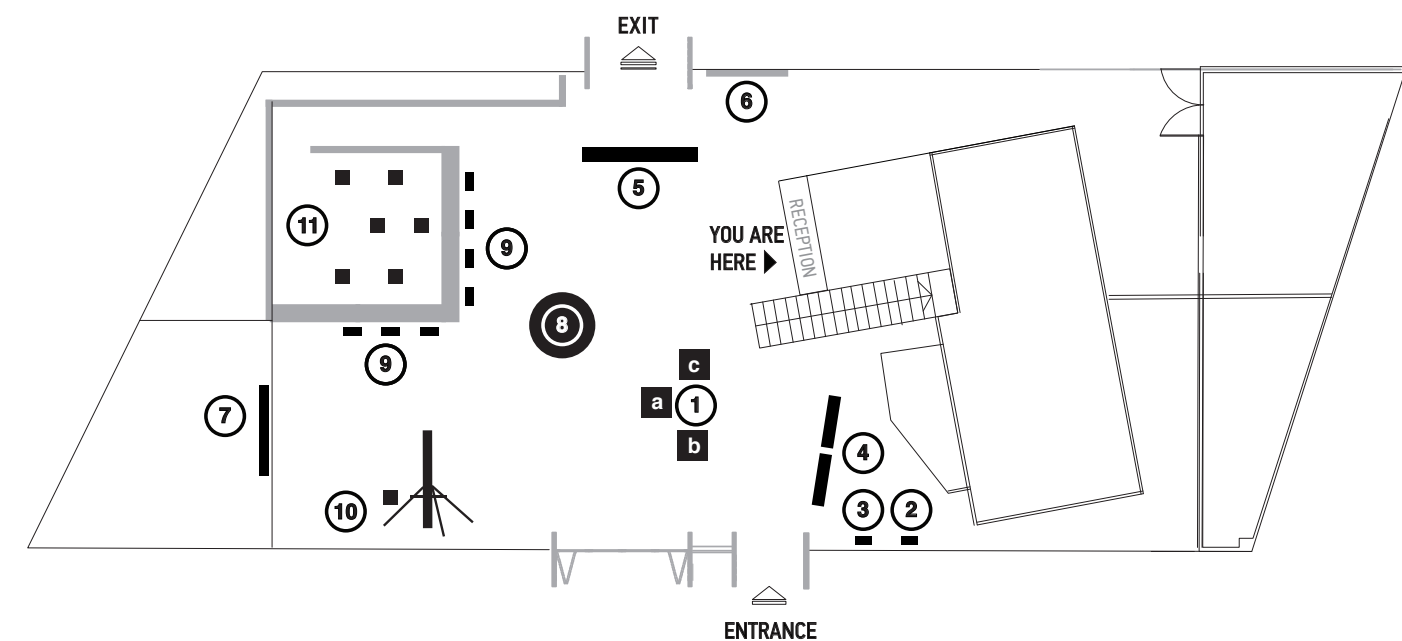
NGỌC NÂU • PHAN ANH • TRẦN MINH ĐỨC

'**Singing to the choir?**' is an adaptation of a colloquial phrase that, for this exhibition, imagines a scene where an impassioned individual seeks to convince his audience, through song, of their need to believe in his ideas. Yet they already *appear* to do so - evidenced in their reciting of his lyrics, of their body gestures in unison with his ceremonial aplomb. But is this just a mere appearance? Do they *really* believe? Does habitual behavior, in the practice of a belief, reflect genuine understanding of purpose? Is it, (or perhaps *why* is it), necessary for beliefs to be collectively performed?

This exhibition, titled 'Singing to the choir?' metaphorically ponders on this aforementioned scene, though from three distinctly different artistic perspectives of Phan Anh, Trần Minh Đức and Ngọc Nâu, whereby the phrase has been turned into a question - and thus the artists ask our viewers - do you believe / agree / understand with what they are trying to share?

Karl Marx once said, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people'<sup>1</sup>. Marx refers here to organized religions, believing the illusions they inculcate prevent society from examining the reality before them. In many ways, artists Phan Anh, Trần Minh Đức and Ngọc Nâu, also examine similar sentiment, removing the opiate (social assumptions) from their study of nature, culture and spirituality, believing the religiosity surrounding their value (the stories and rituals we recite and practice) are in need of re-interpretation in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world. In this exhibition particular objects/symbols of knowledge are of focus - an undecipherable handbook; an arm fragment from a sculptural monument; a digitized oracle - each investigating the potential blindness of faith where the instrument of knowledge (that knowing of fact is true) possesses the weight of doubt; is accessible as dismembered memory only; or increasingly reliant on virtual transmission.

1 Marx, Karl. 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'. Cambridge University Press, 1970 (first published in 'Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher' in 1843)





Please scan the QR code or follow this link: [http://bit.ly/interviews\\_vn](http://bit.ly/interviews_vn) to listen to the interview with the artists (interviews are in Vietnamese only).

1 a

Trần Minh Đức  
**Here it is My own Arm**  
2019  
Brass  
Dimensions variable  
5 ed. + 2 AP

1 b

Trần Minh Đức  
**Defenders of the law**  
2019  
Antique wooden sculpture  
Dimensions variable  
Unique

1 c

Trần Minh Đức  
**The delivery of the key**  
2019  
Poly composite  
Dimensions variable  
Unique

2

Trần Minh Đức  
**Vietnam's Fighting History**  
2019  
Pastel, calligraphy ink on paper  
27 x 22 cm (framed)  
Unique

3

Trần Minh Đức  
**Youth Union**  
2019  
Bronze, glass  
14 x 14 cm  
Unique

4

Trần Minh Đức  
**We are happy to learn to be Stars**  
2019  
Educational publications, tables, chairs  
Installed dimensions variable  
Unique

## Weight

The inability to believe often comes from a place of doubt. This doubt can feel like an invisible weight, a burden, like we know it is easier if we believed (*it is easier to follow the crowd*), but for some reason, perhaps we cannot. So we seek answers - to a medical condition that no doctor seems able to diagnose; to a much longed for (by everyone else) job opportunity that seems to continually evade you; to a fortune teller for insight into a recent spate of bad luck - the question of 'why' returns as we read and forage, as this unanswerable weight remains, eating at our conscience and consciousness. Looking for answers to the enigma of humanity and its purpose is what ultimately drives the desire to believe in a 'higher power', to look for the spirits in the ether, to consult the shrine of our ancestors, to seek confession, to meditate. Others have sought more social/biological alternatives to salvation, thus the rise of 'Reason' and the systemization of ideas; the 'utopic' organization of society towards a greater equal good (such as Marxism); or the destructive power of Nazism and Maoist thought.

Phan Anh ponders this weight in his body of works 'Placebo'. He studies his own doubt of the systems of learning around him by creating his own cipher. Reciting his created textbook, a written and spoken language only he can speak and understand, Phan Anh presents five perspectives (commandments?) of contemplation (through moving images of himself mumbling and stumbling). As guests we circumambulate around his manuscript, much as a worshipper might do around a sacred object - but is it sacred? Nearby, a massive tree trunk, its head lopped off, its arms equally missing, towers above us. At its base is a portal, a moving image, where we see Phan Anh in a series of personal ritual as he slaps, stretches and preens his body in a kind of humble reverence to this decapitated tree, almost begging his own body to pay penance for man's robbing Nature of this life. Phan Anh's intractable cynicism possesses its own integrity however, aware that his existential questioning is as equally driven to better understand the relationship between Nature and humankind's determination to name, classify and control its relevance.

## Dismemberment

Dismemberment refers to the act of cutting, tearing, pulling, or removing the limbs of a thing, dead or alive. Once practiced as a form of sacrificial ritual and capital punishment<sup>2</sup>, the dismemberment of a body part is at times considered utmost necessary, when said part poses dangers, even death, to the whole (think of the removing of a cancerous tumor from the human body). Our modern history has also witnessed the marginalization and elimination of certain peoples, as well as their beliefs and cultural practices, from official power structures (think of the Nazi's brutal massacre of the Jews; or the disappearance of various ethnic minorities' languages and rituals throughout Vietnam). This act of social *dismemberment* is deeply implicated in the politics of power, as the decision to define what's legitimate reveals something particular about those with the power to make decisions (are they really caring for the people as leaders of society?)

<sup>2</sup> Dismemberment was carried out in the Medieval and Early Modern era by both Western and Eastern empires (such as the Romans, Carthaginians, ancient Macedonians, French, Spanish, Turkish, Chinese, Korean etc.), by tying a person's limbs to chains or other restraints, attaching the restraints to separate movable entities (e.g. horses, ships etc.) and moving them in opposite directions. As early as AD 200, particularly in South-East Asia (such as India, Burma, Malaysia, Siam and Cochinchina), execution by trained elephants was a form of capital punishment practiced for several centuries. Anthropologists and historians also point to innumerable ancient mythic traditions in which the severing of body parts is associated with order, creation, and society. Sedna, the Arctic sea goddess, the Egyptian god Osiris, and the Norse frost giant Ymir are examples of primordial beings who were said to have been butchered in order to create social life. The underlying principle at work is: from death and dismemberment comes life and order. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dismemberment#Folklore>. Read more: <https://jonkanekojames.com/2014/09/medieval-history-why-dismember-the-dead>

5

Trần Minh Đức  
**Singing in Pink**  
2019  
Digital C-print on paper, bubble wrap  
Installed dimensions variable, 136  
photographs  
Unique

6

Trần Minh Đức  
**Counting Stars**  
2019  
Performance with children's choir  
3', approximately 12 performers  
Unlimited edition  
\*Performed live on opening night  
On every hour during exhibition

7

Ngọc Nâu  
**Ritual Objects 1**  
2019  
Sculptural single-channel video installation:  
5', HD, color, sound; found handkerchiefs,  
mirror; digital print on decal  
Installed dimensions variable  
Unique  
\*On loop, with one minute interval

8

Ngọc Nâu  
**Spell to kill evils & rid misfortunes**  
2019  
Found notebook, LED light, cable,  
electronic circuit  
Installed dimensions variable  
5 ed. + 1 AP

9

Ngọc Nâu  
**Notes on Landscape (series)**  
2019  
Digital print on decal, found photograph  
33 x 47,5 cm (framed)  
Unique

10

Phan Anh  
**Placebo**  
2019  
Sculptural single-channel video installation:  
19'36, black and white, sound; wood, ink  
Installed dimensions variable  
Unique

11

Phan Anh  
**Placebo**  
2019  
Sculptural five-channel video installation:  
25'04, black and white, sound; ink on  
paper, leather, nylon, gold emboss  
Installed dimensions variable  
Unique

In Trần Minh Đức's works 'The delivery of the key', 'Defenders of the law' and 'Here it is My own Arm', dismemberment follows such threads of meaning. Three arms - sculpted in composite, wood and brass, of somewhat a similar size and shape - appear *together* in front of us, representing three separate religions and ideologies. Removed from their original context, these fragments recall another time and place - are they arms of force or arms that embrace love? Are they hands that feed or that kill? All three arms seem to be holding something our eyes cannot see. What is missing from the palms of their hands? For what reason were these objects removed - to be freed, to be preserved, to be kept safe? As questions continue to conjure, new meanings start to materialize, precisely in the absence of the missing objects, the dismemberment of the arms, and the anonymity of the original religious 'bodies' (which the arms once served). In other words, in the dissolving of 'the one' (religious 'body') to make space for the coming together of 'the many' (religious 'bodies'), dismemberment in turn becomes the source of reintegration, separation - the beginning of transfiguration, and death - the seed of (re)birth.

## Transmission

Throughout the centuries, cultural transmission of memory has been passed on from one generation to another, embodied not only in artifacts (like monuments, historical archives and textbooks), but also through oral and performative traditions (like folklore, rituals and religious chants). Not all survives however, for only those who are stronger are more capable of preserving, or *choosing* what to preserve, for longer (at times detrimentally so).

Centering around the Mother Goddess religion<sup>3</sup> and the artist's home town of Thai Nguyen, Ngọc Nâu's work strives to shine light on how human greed and our blinded fascination with modernization has affected the way we believe, practice, and pay respect to our cultural memory, especially within the context of the digital influences on our everyday life today. In 'Ritual Objects 1' and 'Spell to kill evils & rid misfortunes', quotidian objects (once used in particular forgiveness rituals) are merged with modern technology (video projection and light coding) - such objects turned into a kind of futuristic shrine. From these shrines, light radiates, and texts and images start to appear, dancing their captivating tango, collapsing the boundaries between the virtual and corporeal. We see scenes that are both familiar and obscure: picture postcard-perfect landscapes of places faraway; factory workers gathering on an empty field; saturated portraits of pop stars and actresses; family members mourning the dead; a female astronaut wandering the land of some long-forgotten civilization. We continue to consume what's fed to us from this combined realm of the digital, the material and the spiritual, increasingly unaware of its power to refract, deflect, fragment, multiply and distort our moral and ethical gaze. All is not lost however, for in this simultaneously addictive and oppressive experience of a media-controlled society, songs of memory are still sung between the lines, in the shadows where the light can't reach. Ultimately, it is our conscience that prompts the individual need to preserve, to choose what to look for, listen to, and keep; and to think about how we may want our objects (of memories) and acts (of transmission) to be collectively acknowledged, practiced and carried on. These memories and acts acting as triggers to initiate (other) histories of the past; as tools to make sense of our present; and as points of reference with which we view (and build) a future.

<sup>3</sup> One of Vietnam's longest-standing belief systems, the Mother Goddess religion was established around the 16th century as an alternative to Confucianism, devoted to female deities associated with agriculture. Its practice was once deemed superstitious and banned by the government, then legalized in 1987 and in recent years has gained resurgence and prominence.