

## PRESS RELEASE



### **'LOST FROM VIEW'**

A solo exhibition by Hương Ngô

Opening: 6PM, 19 June, 2020

Location: The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre (15 Nguyen U Di, Thao Dien Ward, District 2, Saigon)

**'My only spouse, it is the Communist Revolution!'**

*Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai*

**'Never did he feel her closer to him than in those moments. She became suddenly transparent and all the slightly mysterious quality of her race disappeared'**

*Jean Hougroun, 'Reap the Whirlwind'. Dell Pub Co. 1953, pg. 127*

**'Feminism is achieved when assigned gender roles are non-existent in religious, societal, cultural and philosophical ideology'**

*Liên Trương quoted in 'Proposals for a Translation' by Hương Ngô*

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'Lost from View', by artist Hương Ngô, excavates the idea, role, and perception of women, drawn to how history remembers and values their contribution to particular cause and their effect. In this exhibition, Ngô is especially inspired by the life of Vietnam's national hero - Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai - for her strength, tenacity, resilience, and bravery in navigating the rise of the socialist era in the 1930s, specifically compelled by the many aliases she embodied in her commitment to Vietnam's anti-colonial movement and its desire for independence. For this exhibition, Ngô refers to archival documents, literature, and photography, to give window not only onto this prominent figure, but also the lives of other women living this revolutionary period, sometimes with great tragic end. Ngô does so in order to reveal how social

perspectives of sexuality, intelligence, and beauty have been (and continue to be) mired by complex cultural translations bound up in stereotypical and colonial understandings of gender, race, and power.

Throughout history, women have fought for visibility in a world predominantly socially determined by the desires of men and their interpretation of what roles women are permitted. It is the dogma of religion, the patriarchy of political economy and the perception of duty in cultural tradition that has, for centuries, marked women as the subject (and property) of men. Significant courage shifted 20<sup>th</sup> Century social acknowledgement of equal rights between men and women – such as British author Jane Austen, publishing anonymously as ‘A Lady’ in 1811 with her legendary book ‘Sense and Sensibility’; or celebrated abolitionist Sojourner Truth who in the 1820s identified the relationship between black slaves and the struggles of women in African-American society; or Iranian poet/theologian Táhirih, revered for her devout Babi faith but executed in 1852 for ‘unveiling’ herself in the presence of men. Within Vietnam, the historical legacy of the Trung sisters who defeated the Chinese army in 40 C.E was often recalled by the many young women who aided their brothers, husbands and sons in patriotic fervor for independence, evident as early as 1913 in Phan Bội Châu's play ‘Trung Nữ Vương’ (The Trung Queens). ‘Modern art has also highlighted women's crucial role in armed conflict. During the Second Indochina War, for example, women in North Vietnam took up arms and joined communist militias. Many socialist realist artworks, by Nguyễn Thụ and Tôn Đức Lương among others, show women proud of their physical strength and confidence with artillery.’<sup>1</sup> It is against this rise of nationalist fervor that artist Hương Ngô begins her quest to embody the experiences of women, highlighting 1930s-40s Vietnam particularly.

‘Lost from View’ contains conceptual artworks of code. Hương Ngô presents encounters printed on paper and silk, relying predominantly on the indication of text, whereby historical document – letters, fictional novels, telegrams, private testimony, screenplay scripts and identity papers – are ‘intervened’, meaning she has quite deliberately made their ensuing stories illegible, in fragments, invisible or requiring further translation. The lack of heroic imagery here is stark. There are no images of resilient women with weapons; nor are there scenes of women in the fields, babies strapped to their backs as they harvest; or scenes of women in classic áo dài in family portraits with their brood. While such stereotypical images are to be found in much of the modernist art of the revolutionary period in Vietnam, what Ngô rather seeks to engage is how popular culture and social expectations of women at that time were rarely articulated by women. Like a detective, Ngô scours French colonial transcripts revealing their surveillance of suspected Communist spies (of whom a few were women); of the letters between Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai to her family and Party; of the romance novels of the era exotifying the sexuality of the ‘Annamite’, to name but a few. What Ngô reveals in this abstracted process, is a reflection of commitment to the Communist call for an independent Vietnam by courageous women, despite their voice, bodies and identities being largely sexually and politically exploited, their role and identity often omitted from History. Ngô ultimately draws attention to the absence of historical acknowledgement of the contribution, experience and memory of women – a narrative that Ngô's art seeks to alleviate not through images (a trope burdened by cultural and social stereotypes of beauty), but through words and their performativity.

Ngô is particularly attune to the relationship between materiality and message, deploying various strategies in her art that hints at the presence of coercion, forgery and encryption – all techniques of warfare and its engine of surveillance that has come to be present in our daily 21<sup>st</sup> Century lives through

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Nelson, ‘Modern Art of South East Asia: Introductions from A-Z’. National Gallery of Singapore, 2020, pg. 248

our online media, television, smart devices and digital image manipulation tools. The role of such highly designed mechanisms are textually hinted at in Ngô's art, evident in her careful choice of the written word which all visually challenges the stereotypical landscape of a woman's world subsumed as hidden, sensuous, attractive, laborious and dramatic. These qualities elucidated through her employment of such materials as invisible or thermochromic ink, the considered study of popular custom typeface and its subject, hectograph techniques in the art of leafleteering, the tragedy behind the embroidered stitch; or the act of performing a script illustrating the psychological guardedness of a woman in society – Hương Ngô's 'Lost from view' begs all of us to re-assess the gendered way we understand what we see.

(Excerpt from 'Rallying in Code' by Zoe Butt)

The artist also wishes to thank the following artists for their collaborative role in this exhibition with particular artworks – Nguyễn Phương Linh, Nhung Nguyễn and Uyên Ly; in addition to the performance 'New Women', directed by Tricia Nguyễn.

'Lost from View' is organized by The Factory, and remains on view until 4 October, 2020.

\*Image caption: Hương Ngô 'Having Been Lost in Plain View (Breathing Photo)' 2020. Moving still, color, looped. Performed by: Yến Hải Nguyễn. Courtesy of the artist.

## **Please find illustrative works below**

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## **Notes to the editor:**

**Hương Ngô** (Huong Ngo, Ngô Ngọc Hương, 吳玉香) is an artist born in Hong Kong, often working between France and Vietnam, and currently based in Chicago where she is an Assistant Professor in Contemporary Practices at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Having grown up in the American South, she engages histories of colonialism and migration, particularly in relationship to language, structures of power, and ideologies. The body and, alternately, its absence and its traces are strongly present in her work, which often asks how we might make visible the process of our own subject formation. Both archeological and futuristic, her work operates in layers, continuously making and unmaking an unruly archive.

Beginning her studies as a biology major, she received her BFA at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2001) and continued in Art & Technology Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA, 2004). Her research and archive-based practice began while a studio fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2012. She was recently awarded the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Grant in Vietnam (2016) to realize a project, begun at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in France, recently exhibited at DePaul Art Museum (2017), and continued through the Camargo Core Program (2018), that examines the colonial history in Vietnam and the anti-colonial strategies of resistance vis-à-vis the activities of female organizers and liaisons. Her work, described as "deftly and defiantly decolonial" by New City and "what intersectional feminist art looks like" by the Chicago Tribune, has exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, NYC; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Nhà Sàn Collective, Hanoi; and Para Site, Hong Kong, whilst also supported by 3Arts, Chicago Artists Coalition, DCASE, Sàn Art, among others.

# THE ACTORY

**The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre** ('The Factory') is the first purpose-built space for showcasing contemporary art in Vietnam, established in 2016. As an independent private initiative, it creates and hosts interdisciplinary activities in order to introduce and expand knowledge of contemporary art and cultural trends, both past and present, in Vietnam. As a social enterprise, The Factory also offers a publicly accessible reading room of art-educational resource; workshop and community space for hire; replete with café and restaurant. All profit from the sale of art and business on-site supports the running costs of its Arts Centre. [www.factoryartscentre.com](http://www.factoryartscentre.com)

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ĐỐI TÁC TRUYỀN THÔNG: **toong**  
PROMOTIONAL PARTNER:



*Her Name Escapes Me 2017*

In collaboration with Phương Linh Nguyễn

Hand-embroidered pillow, custom armature

Installation variable; pillow: 30 x 30 x 13cm (irregular)





*Proposals for a Translation 2017*

Newspaper

Installation variable; poster: 84 x 56cm (each)