

curatorial essay for 'Lost From View', a solo exhibition by Hương Ngô

A
RALLYING
IN
CODE

by Zoe Butt, Artistic Director, The Factory

'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 Hougron, '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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In 'Lost from View', 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 20th 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. While the emancipation of women in Europe and America (beginning in the 19th Century), called for recognition of equal labor rights between the sexes, regaling against the frame of a women's contribution to society as limited to the zone of the 'home' (to name but one outcry); within much of the Southern part of the globe, the call for greater equality rode the rise of independence amidst the collapse of the Colonial Empire, with many revolutionary movements here acknowledging the critical role that women played in the engine of war. 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.'¹ 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,

¹ Roger Nelson, 'Modern Art of South East Asia: Introductions from A-Z'. National Gallery of Singapore, 2020, pg. 248

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 by Western male writers, 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 and bodies 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 mines the historical archive for the voice of Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, searching through the Nationales d'Outre Mer in France and Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia II (The National Archive Centre II) in Vietnam (with thanks to a Fulbright grant) – evident in several letters you will find on display addressed to her Communist 'brothers' and in the photographic evidence of her identity papers (illustrating her many alias during her time). So who exactly was this enigmatic Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai? Born in 1910 in Vinh, in Central Vietnam's province of Nghe An, Khai at the age of 18 flees south to Cochinchina (present day Saigon), in angst of her parent's insistence of an arranged marriage. In 1927 she co-founds the 'New Revolutionary Party of Vietnam', which soon merges with Vietnam's Communist Party established in 1930 (upon which Khai moves to Hong Kong with Hồ Chí Minh). Arrested in Hong Kong by the British (1931-34), soon after her release Khai marries the second in command of Vietnam's Communist Party – Lê Hồng Phong. At this time, Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai is arguably the most powerful woman in Vietnam's fight against colonialism and a senior cadre of Vietnam's Communist Party. Tragically, in 1941 she was executed by firing squad for her attempt to sabotage French colonial infrastructure. As a Vietnamese revolutionary, she suffered continuous surveillance by the French, to which the historical record attests, and Ngô, in this exhibition, refers.

Drawn to Khai's bravery and her struggle to be heard, Ngô's research in turn revealed the lives of Khai's revolutionary comrades who were committed to her people's yearning for freedom, yet tragically subjected to sexual assault, arguably a consequence of the perception of women at the time, where French colonial bureaucracy greatly indulged in the practice of 'congai-ship' (known in the West as a 'concubine')². It is the weaving of popular fictive accounts of 'congai'³ practice during this era, (see 'Reap the Whirlwind' and 'Livres de Poche'), that Ngô particularly reveals the impact of class and race in the dilemma of mitigating a 'womanhood' in Vietnam.

It is intriguing to note that the concept of 'feminism' has waxed and waned in usage in Vietnam, since the 1920s. Translated as 'phụ nữ quyền' or 'chủ nghĩa nữ quyền' (translating as 'female rights'), the study of this international movement is often devoid of the social context in which its terms arose. 'As scholars and artists alike have noted, the different translations of the word 'feminism' in the Vietnamese language underscore the intensely political conditions of colonialism through which social consciousness in Vietnam developed....'⁴. It was Ngô's finding of the

² 'Although mixed marriages between European men and indigenous women did occur, the marriages a la mode du pays (which were similar to concubinage) ... were the prevalent form of domestic arrangement among European men throughout Indochina ... Potential French colonists were given advice about this local practice before they arrived. They were informed that in the house, 'the native woman will have to keep herself entirely in her role and be officially unknown'... In the French colonial perception, a congai was regarded as belonging to the same category as a 'prostitute'. In Indochina congais were expected to have sex with their masters in addition to providing household services.' Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson 'The Eurasian Question: The Colonial Position and Postcolonial Options of Colonial Mixed Ancestry Groups from British India, Dutch East Indies and French Indochina Compared'. Uitgeverij Verloren, 2018, pg. 52

³ 'Congai' novels refer to the fictive works of French writers (written between the 1920s to the mid 1950s) exploring the sexual relationships of Western white men and Asian women in French Indochina. Within the Vietnamese vernacular, 'con gai' means 'young woman'; however once the French began to colonize Indochina, the word took on darker, problematic connotations, changing from "women" to 'wife' to 'mistress' to 'whore'" (Frank Proschan, 'Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty: Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese (And French) Social Diseases' in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Oct., 2002, pp. 614)

⁴ Faye R Glaiser 'The Archives of the Archive: Hương Ngô and the Making and Unmaking of Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai' (exhibition catalog essay), from 'To Name it is to See it', DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, USA, 2017.

text 'Hỡi Các Chị Em Phụ Nữ' and its rallying cry⁵ for women to unite (distributed as hectograph leaflets in the 1940s) that further cemented Ngô's intrigue for the historical development and relevance of 'feminism', now convinced that the Western definition of 'feminism' remained insufficient for this historical context – and thus her collation of Vietnamese women's strength and resilience for her work 'Proposals for a Translation'. Ngô states, '[For 'Proposals for a Translation'] I asked a range of artists and thinkers from Vietnam, or the Vietnamese diaspora to translate the word 'feminism' into a word or phrase that they could use in their everyday lives. [This work] implied not only a proposal for the translation of this single word, but also a proposal for moving towards a translation (or multiple translations) through a collective process. It is a speculation or contemplation on the gaps in translation – how there is always something lost....'⁶ or perhaps gained.

The varying registers of translation, and the gaps in between, can also be used for ideological advantage. '... Party leaders realized that the issue of women's rights cut across class lines and could be exploited to strengthen the national united front'. Aware that galvanizing women mobilized a pragmatic social force with which to feed the Revolution, 'When the [Communist] Party launched the 'New Life Movement' in 1946 ... it adopted the slogans of bourgeois writers popular in the thirties, in addition to encouraging adoption of simpler dress, elimination of lavish wedding ceremonies, improvement of feminine hygiene and abandonment of 'out-moded customs'⁷. It is intriguing to note how Ngô flips our gaze from the perception of women, to give contrast to the perception of men at that time and their exotification of female desire and attribute (see 'Reap the Whirlwind'), particularly examining how French and American romance literature of the 1950s further exacerbated colonial ideas of servitude and beauty in the image and function of the 'native'. It is through a careful employment of thermochromic ink, to reveal only select script, that Ngô's scrupulous edit of these 'congai' novels reveals not only the struggle of its female characters coming to terms with their country envisaging their role with political agency, but also the moral and ethical landscape of colonial-cum-capitalistic influence at that time (attitudes perhaps arguably still present today) – the inherent racism, coupled with sexual desire, implicated and made all the more palpable by knowing one must physically touch these pages to reveal the text that inscribes discrimination and psychological violence.

Ngô is particularly attune to the relationship between materiality and message, deploying various strategies in

⁵ 'Women! Subjects of a feudal regime, submissive to an uncivilized colonial, the Vietnamese women have sustained incalculable miseries: patriarchal regime, social slaves, political tyranny. What remains free to women from the elite to the low class?'. See the artwork 'Hỡi Các Chị Em Phụ Nữ' for full 'manifesto'

⁶ See artwork 'Proposals for a Translation'

⁷ William Turley further states, 'Of more importance is that Party leaders realized that the issue of women's rights cut across class lines and could be exploited to strengthen the national united front. Upper class as well as lower class women were persecuted, and in fact it could be argued that the higher the class the more deeply influenced by Confucianism and the discriminatory practices which that doctrine legitimized. 'Women in the Communist Revolution in Vietnam' by William S. Turley (Asian Survey, Vol. 12, No. 9, September 1972, pp. 796.). As further background on this observation – In 1946, the Communist Party established the Central Committee for the propagation of the 'New Life Movement', with the desire to improve peoples' lives, eliminating old-fashioned practices and lifestyle by encouraging the four principles of 'Industry, Thrift, Honesty and Righteousness'. As part of the 'New Life Movement', people were advised to work hard; be prepared to make material sacrifices to help the nation; reduce wasteful feasting and expenditures; study to increase their technical expertise; participate in communal endeavours; and propagandize on elements essential to life such as hygiene and science. A year later, Hồ Chí Minh published the text 'New Life', a section of which was dedicated to the construction of a new family culture, whereby family members are advised to live in harmony, respect and trust each other; and women must be liberated and treated equally as men. Throughout his life, Hồ Chí Minh delivered more than forty speeches, articles and letters specifically addressed to women, emphasizing not only the important role of Vietnamese women throughout history, but also to reinforce the ultimate fact that 'women are part of the people. If the nation is liberated, so will they. On the contrary, if the nation is still in slavery, so will they and their children.' For Hồ Chí Minh, to liberate women is to liberate all classes and people – politically, culturally and socially. And only when liberated will women be able to obtain equality, elect, run for office and hold positions in the government. See here for further reading:

- <http://lyluanchinhtri.vn/home/index.php/bai-noi-bat/item/2240-tac-pham-“doi-song-moi”-cua-ho-chi-minh-voi-thuc-tien-xay-dung-nong-thon-moi-do-thi-van-minh.html>
- <http://www.xaydungdang.org.vn/Home/HoChiMinh/2017/10267/Tac-pham-Doi-song-moi-cua-Ho-Chi-Minh-voi-van-de.aspx>
- <http://tuyengiao.vn/dien-dan/van-de-quan-tam/phu-nu-ngay-cang-duoc-giai-phong-theo-chi-dan-cua-ho-chi-minh-86044>

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 21st Century lives through 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.