

# LOST FROM VIEW

A SOLO EXHIBITION BY  
**HƯƠNG NGÔ**

# EXHIBITION

# MAP

**THE FACTORY**  
CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTRE

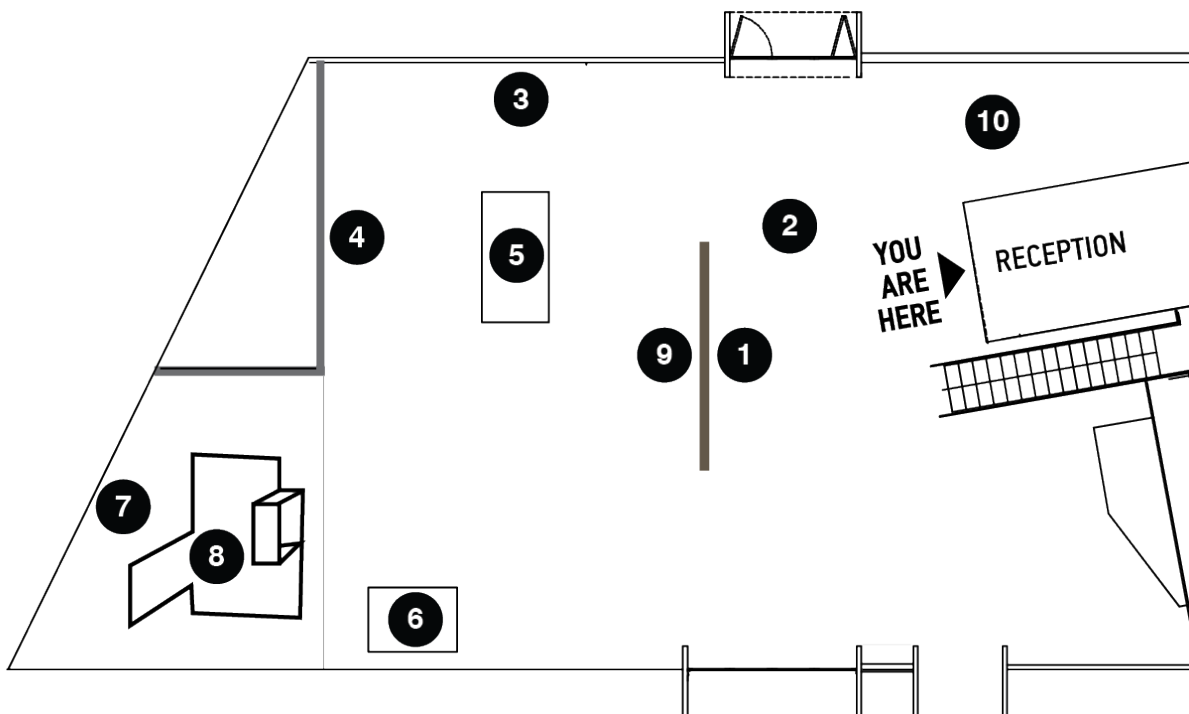
Help us save the environment! Please return after you've done with this booklet

'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 causes and their effects. 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 understandings of gender, race, and power.

Zoe Butt, Artistic Director

**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.



**1**

*Existing Surveillance Photographs, List of Aliases, and Forged Chinese Passport for Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai (Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer)*

2017

Archival pigment prints on MOAB metallic silver

4 prints: 25 x 35cm (each), ed. 3 + AP

These four prints reveal the various identities of Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai issued by the general government of Cochinchina. They reveal information on where she was born (1927, Hai Phong); daughter of Nguyễn Văn Bình; professions; various places of arrest, re-located, resided and most intriguingly - recording all her various aliases.

EXHIBITION DOCUMENT

**2**

*Who Owns the Light*

2017

Digital print on silk organza

365 x 131cm

This silk screen possesses an image-excerpt of the 600m2 fresco mural painted in the halls of the Palais de Porte Doree (which now houses the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration - a museum of the history of immigration in France). It was built in 1931 for the Paris Colonial Exposition - a museum to illustrate the success of colonial conquest, where art, peace, work and trade are represented to the right of the mural; and to the left, industry, freedom, justice and science. 'Various scenes evoke the benefits of colonization through the figures of missionary, the doctor or the engineer, but nothing is said of the violence, the exactions committed or forced labor, the idea being then to justify and promote colonial policy by giving a smooth, idealized image of France's actions overseas.'

\*See the museum's web page for more information here: <https://www.palais-portedoree.fr/node/10070>

**3**

*Up Against The*

2017

Invisible ink on sulphite pulp paper, bottle of iodine

Installation variable; bottle of iodine; 9 prints: 79 x 53cm (each)

In this work, Ngô uses invisible ink, a technique of encryption used by Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai and her allies to communicate. Invisible ink is created from boiled rice water and becomes legible after an iodine solution is applied. Here, Ngô has chosen a letter written to 'Các Anh' or 'Brothers', which has been translated into 'Comrades' in this French document. In the letter, Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai questions whether it is because she is a woman, or of the educated, 'bourgeois' class, that her letters go unheeded.

**4**

*Reap the Whirlwind*

2018

Five volume artist book with thermochromic ink in clamshell case with blind-embossed covers

Installation variable; case 22 x 23 x 13cm, ed. 8 + AP

An artist book serves as the anchor of the exhibition. It is a collection of five handmade volumes with text excerpts from 'congai'\* novels that each narrates a different version of the logistical, sexual, ethical, and political aspects of the concubine system often practiced between Indochinese women and French men during the colonial period. Though appealing to pulp fiction readership, each book offers a portrait of a character who is politicized against oppressive forces through her congaihip. Ngô has overprinted the collection with thermochromic ink, preventing the viewer from reading the text until it is touched and thus implicating them in this matrix of intimacies.

\*'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)

EXHIBITION DOCUMENT

**5**

*Livre du Poche*  
2018  
Books  
Installation variable

'Le Livre de Poche' was a collection of short, popular tales sold as a book-set, in France, in the 1950s. This mass form of cheap entertainment, produced at low cost, possessed book covers akin to film posters, its stories – written predominantly by men – indulging in romance and intrigue. Ngô flips our gaze here from the perception of women (the predominant focus of this exhibition), to give contrast to how men at that time exotified female desire, 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'. Ngô's scrupulous edit of these 'congai' novels in her adjacent work (see 'Reap the Whirlwind'), employs thermochromic ink to reveal only select script. Such sentiment all the more palpable by knowing one must physically touch these pages, our heat required to reveal the text beneath, which inscribes discrimination and psychological violence.

**6**

*Proposals for a Translation*  
2017  
Newspaper  
Installation variable; poster: 84 x 56cm (each)

The class-based struggle of the Communist movement overshadowed the Vietnamese women's rights movement of the early 20th century, leaving an incomplete framework and clumsy translation of the term 'feminism'. Ngô reached out to a group of artists and thinkers that identify as Vietnamese for possible translations for the term 'feminism' into Vietnamese. Using their replies, she created a set of stamps (carved with the participants' proposed narratives, explanations and translation of feminism), which was then used to print the accompanying publication. This solicitation for a translation acts not only as a proposal for a literal translation, but also a proposal for the very process of translation itself.

EXHIBITION DOCUMENT

**7**

*Hỡi các chị em phụ nữ / Calling All Women*  
2018  
Phototex print on paper  
Installation variable

Hương Ngô came upon these hectographic leaflets in the Vietnamese National Archives II (Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia II). Dated July 11/12, 1940, it begins with 'Women! Subjects of a feudal regime, submissive to an uncivilized colonial, the Vietnamese woman has sustained incalculable miseries: patriarchal regimes, social slaves, political tyranny. What remains free to women from the elite to the low class?'; ending powerfully with the rallying cry of 'Rise up! Lift yourselves as the wind and the waves! Participate in the only Front of the anti-imperialist Indochinese people.' While Ngô does not know the author of this manifesto-like text, 'Hỡi các chị em phụ nữ' carries the fervor of a 'womanhood' that galvanized a new era for the agency of gender in social and political life – a mode Ngô similarly seeks to unpack in the attitudes of 21st Century women (see more in her 'Proposals for a Translation')

EXHIBITION DOCUMENT

**8**

*New Women*  
2017/2020  
Staged for The Factory with Tricia Nguyễn  
Dramatic reading with stage (including metronome, bell, scripts), and costumes  
Installation variable; stage: 183 x 137 x 137cm (approx); 3 costumes: 89 x 89cm (each, approx)

'New Women' tells the story of three women working for a contemporary women's magazine and was originally written in 1944 by seminal Vietnamese playwright Vũ Đình Long. Although the play was seen as modernizing because of its French-influenced 'théâtre-parlé' style, the plot champions a patriarchal, Confucian gender structure: the main female character is preyed upon by the male publisher of the magazine and one woman is pitted against another. Ngô uses the 20th century story to reexamine how patriarchy and capitalism operate in concert, yet invisibly to exploit female-identifying bodies. In her dramatic reading, Hương Ngô adapted the play by omitting all of the male voices. This process leaves behind blank spaces and long pauses, opening the text to a contemporary reinterpretation.

The original play was inspired by the actual magazine *Phụ nữ Tân văn*, which was published out of Saigon from 1929 – 1935 and covered a wide range of topics including home-making, child rearing, relationships with the family, and politics.

**9**

*Having Been Lost in Plain View (Breathing Photo)*  
2020  
Moving still, color, looped  
Performed by: Yến Hải Nguyễn

In this exhibition, the artist deliberately limits the presence of the female body, instead creating conceptual artworks of code where the presence of text stands in for the experience of women. In this 'breathing photo', Hương Ngô gives the only bodily presence of a woman staring defiantly at the camera, her breath caught in a repetitive loop and, just like much of the way History has been written – her voice barely audible but her presence unmistakable.

**10**

*We are here because you were there*  
*Chúng tôi ở đây vì quý vị đã ở đó*  
*Nous sommes ici parce que vous étiez là-bas*  
2016-2017  
Hectograph prints and hand-cut paper with custom typeface  
Installation variable; poster: 48 x 60cm (each)

These prints were created using a form of printmaking called hectography, a predecessor of the photocopy, frequently used during the Vietnamese call for Independence during French occupation. Ngô here quotes Sri Lankan novelist Ambalavaner Sivanandan, a leading intellectual whose life's work was committed to revealing how perceptions of race and class prevailed in a world, struggling to dismantle colonial attitude towards human labor and servitude. Aware of the disparities between between the rich and the poor, between voluntary and involuntary mobility, between the dividing lines of faith, be they Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim, between the ones who can and the ones who can't – the phrase 'We are here because you were there' highlights the polemical repercussions of blame and shame of colonial rule, but also highlights the labor we overlook, because we cannot see it.



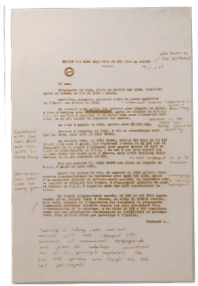
*Signals from a Hidden Kitchen*

2017

In collaboration with Nhung Nguyễn

Four channel sound installation: 10:00 minutes, looped

The soundtrack you can hear in the exhibition space was collaboratively produced between Hương Ngô and Hanoi-based sound artist Nhung Nguyễn. This sound score was created using objects from Nhung's kitchen, edited and arranged with Ngô, inspired by anti-colonial movement organizers who would use domestic objects – kitchen utensils, familiar musical instruments and even furniture – to communicate with comrades afar. The sounds of this kitchen at times blend in with the noise of everyday life, allowing the signals to go undetected except by those listening for them.



*Letter from Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai to father (Nguyễn Văn Bình)*

*Letter from Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai's father to Marshall Philippe Pétain*

*Letter from Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai to Comrades or Các Anh (Brothers) (2 pages)*

*Profile of Nguyen Thi Minh Khai (2 pages)*

*Letter from Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai to Hồng (2 pages)*

2017/2020

Laser cut on paper

Installation variable; 8 prints: 21x29 cm (each)

Accompanying several artworks are letters found by Hương Ngô in the National Archives of Overseas Territories in France (Nationales d'Outre Mer). These texts concerning Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, were of key inspiration to the artist in the creation of this exhibition in its revealing of her struggle and determination to succeed in Vietnam's fight for independence.