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Hương Ngô: To Name It is to See It

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HUONG NGO: TO NAME IT IS TO SEE IT

by Faye R. Gissler

Foreword

Hương Ngô

The Archives Within the Archive

At the end of 1991, the fall of the Berlin Wall signified the opening of the East German state archives to the public. At the same time, the process of de-colonialization was beginning to take root in postcolonial societies by way of entangled histories of the Cold War, decolonization, and anti-colonial struggles. In this context, the act of remembering and memorializing became central to the privileging of certain narratives over others. This is especially evident in the case of the French archives, which held thousands of documents related to the Algerian War, the 1968 student uprising, and the war in Indochina (1945–1975), among other events. As a result, there was a shift from representing the colonial archive as a static collection to understanding it as a dynamic and malleable space for the production of new narratives.

In 1994, the French government established the “Archives de l’État” to facilitate access to these archives. This move was met with mixed reactions from the public and the media, with some heralding it as a step towards transparency and accountability while others saw it as a way for the government to sanitize its past. Despite these criticisms, the archives have continued to play a central role in shaping contemporary discourse on history.

The Archives Within the Archive presents a collection of works by artists who have engaged with the archives in various ways. The exhibition seeks to explore how artists have used the archives as a tool for research and creativity, and how their work has contributed to our understanding of the archives as a site of memory and identity.

The exhibition includes a range of media, from multimedia installations to performance pieces. One of the works on display is “The Missing Hero” by Nguyên Thị Minh Khai, which uses archival materials to investigate the life and legacy of a famous Vietnamese revolutionary. Another piece, “Events,” by post-structural theorist Paul Veyne, examines the role of events in shaping historical narratives.

The Archives Within the Archive is a unique opportunity to see how artists have used the archives as a point of departure for their work. It highlights the complex relationship between the archives and the public, and the ways in which they have been used to challenge and redefine historical narratives.

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The site-specific installation “Chair of Light II” is an interactive installation that explores the concept of light through a series of interactive elements. Visitors are invited to sit in a chair that is equipped with a series of sensors and lights, which respond to their movements. The installation is designed to encourage visitors to engage with the archives as a dynamic space for the production of new narratives.

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The archives of the US military in the Vietnam War are a well-known example of how archives can be used to shape historical narratives. In 1978, the government opened the archives to the public, and they have since become a popular destination for researchers and visitors alike. The archives contain thousands of documents, from classified military reports to personal letters and diaries.

The Archives Within the Archive presents a selection of works that explore the role of the archives in shaping historical narratives. The works on display range from multimedia installations to performance pieces, and they all share a common thread: the use of the archives as a point of departure for creativity.

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