

3-22-2017

Hương Ngô Interview

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Recommended Citation

Perez, Jessica, "Hương Ngô Interview" (2017). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. 101.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/101

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Interviewer: Jessica Perez

Artist: Hương Ngô

Location: In Person, Chicago Artists Coalition

Date: February 16, 2017



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist.

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media, & Design.

Bio: Hương Ngô is a multidisciplinary artist whose work incorporates performance, sound, text, and installation. She was recently awarded the prestigious Fulbright US Scholar Grant in Vietnam to continue a project (begun at the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer in France) that traces the colonial history of surveillance in Vietnam and the anti-colonial strategies of resistance vis-à-vis the activities of female organizers and liaisons. The project, *To Name It Is To See It*, fleshes out identity and visibility as territories that both colonizer and colonized manipulate to

achieve personal agency or state sovereignty. She was born in Hong Kong and is currently based in Chicago. She is a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she studied Art & Technology, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she received her BFA in Studio Art, and recently a studio fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program.

She has presented her solo and collaborative work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, PS1 MoMA, the New Museum, Queens Museum, Tate Modern, the National Gallery in Prague through the 2005 International Prague Art Biennial, The Kitchen, Eyebeam Art & Technology Center, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, EFA Project Space, Vox Populi, Momenta Art, and SPACES Cleveland, amongst many other artist-run and non-profit spaces. She is the recipient of the 2011 Rhizome Commission (with Fantastic Futures), has been in residence through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, SOMA Mexico, the Camargo Foundation, Oxbow, Millay Colony, Provisions Library, Sàn Art, and LATITUDE. She has taught at the Museum of Modern Art, Pratt Institute, and Parsons the New School for Design. She organizes an artist lecture series in partnership with the Union of Vietnamese Youth in France.

Ngô is currently a BOLT resident through the Chicago Artist Coalition and recently exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in the exhibition *The Making of a Fugitive* (curated by Faye Gleisser), collaborative work with Hồng-Ân Trương at Newspace Center for Photography, Portland in the exhibit Hidden Assembly (curated by Yaelle Amir, recently at SPACES, Cleveland), through an exhibition at VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art, Carlow with Orla Ryan, Alanna O'Kelly, Brian Hand (Stormy Petrel/Guairdeall), and a group exhibition at the Chicago Artist Coalition for the BOLT residency.

Upcoming projects include *All Rise* (with Hồng-Ân Trương, Jina Valentine, and Heather Hart), to be presented at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Museum of Contemporary Art. She will exhibit new work in solo shows at the DePaul Art Museum (curated by Julie Rodrigues-Widholm), Chicago Artists Coalition, The Franklin (curated by Edra Soto), The Ski Club, Aspect/Ratio, and 4th Ward Project Space in 2017-2018. Speaking engagements programming for *To Name It Is To See It* at LATITUDE Chicago and DePaul Art Museum. She is in residence at the Ragdale Foundation in the Summer of 2017. She volunteers as an educator at the South-East Asia Center, which supports refugee and immigrant populations across generations in Uptown, Chicago.

Interview Transcript:

Jessica Perez: Do you want to start by telling me about yourself and how you came to this point to where you are now?

Huong Ngo: My family and I are refugees from Vietnam and we moved to the United States in 1979. I was born in Hong Kong en route. My mom is Vietnamese and my dad is Chinese, but he grew up in Vietnam. I grew up with a working-class, refugee background, so we made do with what we were able to get. Art was not in my every day, besides painting activities and drawing here and there. My sister was always the artist – illustrating beautifully and very realistically. That was the concept of art growing up for me. Whereas I always made a variety of things, they

were kind of strange or functional – more what you would think of as crafts. I worked with textiles and learned embroidery and sewing from my mom and my sister. My dad used to always tinker having to fix things around the house, so I learned that from him – how make what you need even if you don't have the perfect materials. He was always doing electronics at home like fixing our appliances, so I learned soldering from him. My brother and I would always play around with motors, so I'm a product of these two sides, my mom taught me embroidery and knitting and my dad taught me how to tinker and just finding a way to make things work. I carried that with me and kept making, but never thought of myself of an artist at all.

My whole life, I wanted to be a scientist, and then I went to college and I just hit a point where the classes that I was taking were becoming more and more granular, to the point where I was losing that magic that I really loved. My art classes were getting more and more interesting, more tackling social issues, these things I could see around me but I wasn't really able to process so I used art as a way of understanding and respond to those forces around me. So it was kind of a long process that I didn't even realize was happening yeah. I switched to art when I was in undergrad and I kept studying it. I did well, which helped me with my parents because otherwise they wouldn't have supported me doing it. As refugee parents, they really needed to see those material results coming out of my studies like the awards and scholarships – those kinds of things. For me it was a way to legitimize what I was doing to my parents. I went to grad school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and after that, I went to New York through the Whitney [Independent Study] Program and taught at different schools –at Pratt [Institute] and Parsons [The New School for Design] and at the MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York] and have just continued to practice and teach and learn. It's similar for many artists – life is just a cobbling together of many different activities and that's you!

JP: So I saw that you are going to go teach at Northwestern [University] in the fall, did you expect to start teaching art, and become like a teacher teaching what you go taught?

HN: Yeah that's a good question, so I started teaching actually really early, almost directly after I finished my undergrad. I learned how to do design and how to make websites, programming, all of those kinds of things. I learned that on my own and it was at a time when nobody was really doing that so the field was open. So, I immediately started freelancing and then I started teaching. That's because there was really nobody to teach it, so I learned how to teach really early, but it wasn't until I went to MoMA that I really learned that “Oh! teaching is this practice that you can develop,” and then you can have these principles behind. It can be this growing practice that is related to politics, and I had amazing mentors while I was at the MoMA helping me with that process. So after that, teaching became a part of my own creative practice, and also became a really important part of the way I see what I wanted to do in the world. That pedagogy is so closely connected to the art that I wanted to make, so when I knew that I was coming to Chicago, I started a conversation with the Department of Art and Practice program at Northwestern, and they invited me to teach a class. So, it's just been a matter of scheduling just because the year unfortunately has been really full of a lot of other activities, a lot of traveling and other things.

JP: That's pretty cool!

HN: Yeah!

JP: What kind of places do you like travel to show off your artwork or just for fun?

HN: It's a combination of all those things. Since I grew up as a refugee, I'm very practical about certain things, so a lot of times when I travel I really like to have that goal, or that professional thing that I'm doing. But sometimes it is just for fun, so I love traveling everywhere. Last year, I was in Vietnam for the first half of the year to work on a project [and] to do research. But then also to reconnect with my family and friends there, and to have that experience of living in Vietnam – to really understand what that means on a very grandeur level. While I was there, I traveled around to different parts of Asia – really an amazing experience because then I could see these very many different ways of being Asian. I've also traveled around Europe, a bit to South America, a tiny bit to Africa. I went to the Arctic recently, that was totally just for holiday which is [laughs] usually pretty rare.

JP: Did you enjoy yourself?

HN: I did yeah, I mean I, being in the city all the time, I really miss nature.

JP: Yeah, I relate to that.

HN: So when I travel, when I get out of the city, there's this feeling of being able to see the horizon, and it's just so clarifying for me. All of a sudden, I'm able to think in a way I really can't in the city.

JP: That's cool. As an artist how would you categorize yourself? I guess kind of what people, there's photographers and painters and stuff.

HN: Yeah, I'm a really difficult person to categorize I think, because I do many different things. I work with different mediums, which has always been a way that I operated. I fought it for a little bit and then eventually I just embraced it because I decided that's just the way I need to work. So I do a combination of different things that typically have some core elements that carry on, whether its thematic, whether its medium or process-wise. So for instance, much of my work involves research. It's often coming from that research, but then the final product might not look like that at all, it might be pulling from it but then look like a performance for instance, or a photograph, but it's kind of starting with that research. You can also say that a lot of my work is conceptual. So it's starting from some kind of idea, and then its working through that idea through different materials, and I mean a lot of the projects that I do tend to be interdisciplinary, combining a lot of different things, so in the same project you might have performance, video, sculpture, textile work, photography all of those kinds of things. I'm doing a show at DePaul that will open in April and that is very interdisciplinary, bringing together a ton of different materials. But I mean the reason why I do that is, well, it's just in my nature – what I need – but also it's so that people can enter into the work from different ways, from different directions.

JP: Cool, I actually saw that you're going to have an exhibition!

HN: Yeah! I'm really excited about it, I might have to rope some of you into! [laughs]

JP: I think Laura [Kina] will help us out with that!

HN: [Laughs] that would be great!

JP: So you don't have preferred medium?

HN: If I were to say a preferred medium, one that feels natural to me, I always talk about textiles and sewing as the way that I draw. So, I've always kept up a sewing practice that sometimes doesn't appear in the work at all. I have boxes and boxes of things that I've made that are different fibers and textiles, some that are just like samples of things I just can't let go of. But I think that is the material that I feel closest to, so I say that is my home. I think of it as my home but sometimes it doesn't appear in the work, but it is that thing that I sustain over a long period of time. Performance is another thing that just keeps coming back, it's kind of the tool that I'm always reaching for, and also is so conceptually tied to the ideas that I'm interested in, in terms of migration, identity, speech, language. They're so closely tied to performance, so when I'm working on an idea, my ideas about performance are also kind of going along the same track.

JP: Cool. Do you address Asian/Asian American themes and history into your artwork?

HN: Yeah definitely, very directly in some projects. I have an ongoing project with a collaborator Hồng-Ân Trương called *And,And,And Stammering : An Interview*, which is about immigration, the process of defining what it means to be a citizen – the way we construct that concept as a society. So the first time that we did the performance, we were pulling interview questions from contemporary citizenship questions, but then also looking at the history of Chinese exclusion in the United States and the types of interrogations that many Chinese people would have to endure in order to prove that they deserved to come into the United States. So that's a really direct project that looks at those years of immigration and Asian American history and how that sets a precedent for what we see today. When we're talking about the Muslim ban and immigration or what we should do about refugees, so much of that language and history comes from the period that we've been researching. Other projects have been about my family which has felt the effects of global politics for my entire life and it still does. So I mean the project that I'm working on for DePaul is looking at that but looking further. I think a lot of Vietnamese American artists are looking at the Vietnam war because it is such a pivot for their lives and it is that kind of [a] connecting thread between Vietnam and the United States. Beyond that, the history of colonization in Vietnam by France is this other history that is not really explored by Americans, but there was a direct thread that links them together, so I'm looking at all of those histories at once.

JP: Cool. Have you done any exclusively Asian/Asian American exhibits that's only featured Asian American Artists?

HN: Yeah that's a good question, let's see, for instance something that's themed Asian American?

JP: Or just featured Asian Americans or just –

HN: I've had shows with my collaborator [who] is also Vietnamese American. I was in a show a long time ago curated by Cat Chow of all art by Asian American Women, through Women Made Gallery, but besides that no, not so much. When I was in grad school, my work was not about an Asian American identity, but more about the rhetoric of fear that was dominating the political climate at the time – looking at how that was being tied to xenophobia and immigration policies that kind of thing. It's more recent that I've focused on this field of research, so I haven't been kind of put into this particular category [of Asian American] for better or worse. I think that there are a lot of really important reasons to put together a show like that, but then also there are some problems that could occur with that.

JP: Do you have a project you're most proud of?

HN: The project that I just finished this last summer that I'm really happy with is called "The Voice is an Archive." It's a video that I made with my niece and my sister, based on a recording of my mom singing a song. We're listening to the song on headphones and trying to sing along as best as we can. [See *Figure 1*.]

JP: I think I saw the still on your website!

HN: Yeah! So we're trying to sing this song and we're all getting it terribly wrong, but in really amazing beautiful ways [laughs]. My niece speaks no Vietnamese at all but she completely nails the song in some ways. Me and my sister speak Vietnamese we're kind of like fumbling [laughs]. So many interesting things that come out of it. So I'm real proud of that one because it is looking at all of these ideas that I'm really interested in about language and identity and a matrilineal connection. It was made very quickly – I had the idea one night, the next day we did it, the next day I edited it, and then it was pretty much done. It was just a bit of refining after that and there was something very satisfying about that. Being able to bring my family into the process in some way is a dream because my family is amazing and they put up with all of this stuff and sometimes they enjoy it and the more I bring them in, the more important they see it. I was really proud of it.

JP: I should have asked you this before, but what made you come to Chicago?

HN: I originally came for grad school in 2002 at the Art Institute [School of the Art Institute of Chicago].

JP: Cool, what drew you back here or drew you here in the first place?

HN: Oh, I just heard it was a great school. I had a teacher, two teachers actually that came from Chicago they studied here and taught at the Art Institute. So it just had that reputation even in North Carolina. When I was growing up, the internet was just kind of like this little baby growing up with me so I still learned about things from word of mouth.

JP: Do you enjoy it here?

HN: I am, the winter has been quite kind this year.

JP: It really has.

HN: And I mean Chicago has always been wonderful to me. I think one thing about being an artist that they might not teach you in school is that the relationships you make when you're in school or right out of school, they're ones that you can build upon for the future. If you work with another artist or curator, you can just keep up the conversation for years and that can be its own reward, without planning anything in the future. So I think that I have a lot of really great relationships in Chicago and Chicago has opened its arms. It was really amazing to come here to the Chicago Artists Coalition and have this built in community to jump into, to be able to do this show at DePaul Art Museum and other places in town, so yeah, it's been great so far!

JP: Okay, one more question, do you mind being labeled as an Asian American Artist?

HN: That's a good question, I mean it's not that I mind it or not, but it's something that happens.

JP: The branded part, or if someone was like "You're exclusively Asian American artist" and you're like, "No I'm an artist"?

HN: I don't know, it's a good question. I have these many different identities. One phrase that I heard that was really nice was "I live on the hyphens," when you have hyphenations in your identity. I'm Vietnamese, I'm Chinese, and I'm American, I use those identities depending where I am. I code switch all of the time. So sometimes I might say I'm Vietnamese, or that I'm Chinese, or Chinese American, or whatever, so I mean, it really depends on the situation and what makes most sense in that situation. For someone to label me as an Asian American artist I don't know, I think it depends on the context and their intention. For instance if they're saying, "Yeah here's that great group of Asian American artists they're all doing this work and it's on different themes it's all very different artists, but they all have some kind of common ground," I think that's completely fine, that's true. I think what's important in that is to say that I am an Asian American artist but I also make work that's not about being Asian American. I have an ongoing project called the *Dream Machine* that has *nothing* to do with me being Asian American. It's an archive and exchange of dreams, but I love it. It's one of my favorite projects, but I can still say I'm an Asian American artist with this dream machine project, as long as it doesn't give people a preconceived notion about the type of work I'm making, my interests, my politics, or anything like that, that's a problem. I mean Asian American is a construction that came because Asians really needed to have some solidarity to be able to have some political impact through collective effort, so I really respect that history. I think if you're using it with that with those kinds of intentions of speaking upcoming political struggle then that's wonderful, but if you're using it as a way to overdetermine an artist, then that's a problem.

JP: Thank you so much it was really nice talking to you!

HN: Yeah sure I know that I said a lot!

JP: Do you have anything left to say about you or your artwork?

HN: I don't think so. I'm really excited to see this [as] a class and a project that's focused on Asian American artists. I think particularly because at this moment in time, race is becoming very polarized, it's either about being black or white or its about being Christians or Muslim which isn't even a race at all. All these things are being flattened and Asian Americans tend to be lost in that mix. The political history of Asian Americans and their activism has been kind of lost. So I think it's amazing and wonderful to have a project like this!

END

Figure 1.



Huong Ngô
“The Voice is an Archive”
Three-Channel Digital Video
Black & White, Sound
6:00
2016

With Phương Mai Nguyễn, Hồng Ngô, Phoenix Chen, and Hương Ngô

Documentation of a performance in which Ngô, her niece, and her sister are attempting to replicate a recording of her mother's singing. The title proposes a reimagining of something as bodily and temporal as the voice to carry the weight of history, culture, and information as an historical archive. It is also a reclaiming of the imperfect, non-fluent, and incomplete as a body of knowledge of importance and interest.