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## Patricia Nguyen Interview

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**Interviewer: Joyce Shoults**  
**Artist: Patricia Nguyen**  
**Location: In person – Chicago, IL Argyle**  
**Date: February 10, 2017**



Photo courtesy of Patricia Nguyen.

*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 Art, Media & Design.*

**BIO:** Patricia Nguyen is an artist, educator, and scholar born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. She is a Ph.D. candidate in Performance Studies at Northwestern University and a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow for New Americans. Her research and performance work examines critical refugee studies, political economy, forced migration, oral histories, inherited trauma, torture, and nation building in the United States and Vietnam. She has published work in *Women Studies Quarterly*, Harvard Kennedy School's *Asian American Policy Review*, and *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Modern Asian Plays* edited by Siyuan Liu and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. Patricia is currently the Anne Frank Visiting Scholar at the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine. As a performance artist, she has performed at the Nha San Collective in Vietnam, Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, Jane Addams Hull House, Oberlin College, Northwestern University, University of Massachusetts Boston, Links Hall, Prague Quadrennial, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile. Patricia has over 15 years experience working in arts education, community development, and human rights in the United States and Vietnam. She has facilitated trainings and workshops with The Fulbright Program, American Center at the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, Jane Addams Hull House, Christina Noble Foundation, Social Workers Association in Vietnam, Vietnamese American Young Leadership Association in New Orleans (VAYLA-NO), Asian Human Services, and 96 Acres on issues ranging from forced migration, mental health, youth empowerment, and language access. She is co-founder and executive director of Axis Lab, a community centered art, food, and design studio based in Uptown, Chicago that focuses on equitable development for the Southeast Asian community. <http://www.patricianguyen.info/>

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Joyce Shoults:** Could you tell me about yourself? Where you were born? Where you were raised?

**Patricia Nguyen:** I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. I describe myself as a child of refugees. My parents came to this country in the early [19]80s as refugees after the Vietnam War. They were boat people who were forced to migrate after the Fall of Saigon. After escaping by boat they arrived at refugee camps in Malaysia and Indonesia, separately, before they arrived in the United States.

I always begin my story with their arrival to the United States. The war marked a rupture in time for our people's history, where some stories ended and others began. My father first arrived in 1981 to Santa Ana, California, and my mother to Chicago, Illinois. They met at Northeastern University because there was a free program for refugees to earn their bachelors degree, which was really phenomenal. Free education for refugees!

I grew up, predominately, in a working class, really diverse neighborhood in the north side of Chicago, in the Rogers Park/Edgewater/Andersonville neighborhoods, kind of right at the cusp of all three. I've seen it gentrify tremendously over the past 20-25 years. The area I lived in used to have a lot of gang activity and drug trafficking. There also weren't as many resources available to the public schools in the area. But I grew up, as a kid whose dad worked in a community organization, the Vietnamese Association of Illinois. I grew up in their youth center,

which were really formative years for me to be able to learn how to read and write in Vietnamese, learn about my culture, but also learn about the structures of how a non-profit organization functions or doesn't function.

**JS:** How would you define your artwork?

**PN:** That's a really good question. It's a question that I've thought a lot about and it's more about who the work is for and who the work is with. I think about my art being grounded in the political, economic, and social conditions that people are going through and histories of trauma and memory. My art is about conjuring spirit. I would define it as ritual-based, based in memory, based in oral history, based in experimenting with different mediums and forms as a way to translate that material of difficult histories to the public, to create spaces where people can collectively heal and address these issues and also to spark dialogue, to critically engage in things they may or may not know they're grappling with.

I would define my art as grounded in the community and if it's not relevant to the social conditions that it is responding to, or shaped by then it's not relevant. But that also does not mean that I don't believe in experimentation and exploring different mediums as a way to imagine the impossible, to create a world that can be more possible. It's all part of the same process.

**JS:** How does your perspective and upbringing influence your work?

**PN:** There are three main reasons I can think of in terms of what shapes why I think about art in the way that I do and why I connect it to social justice issues and why I see art as a place of possibility, of resistance, of community building and of this place that can reenergize us and also challenge the way that we see the world, we experience the world, we move about in the world. I'll start chronologically.

Right before I went to college, the summer of 2006, there was an Asian American and spoken word creative writing and poetry group called YAWP! (Young Asians with Power).<sup>1</sup> It was led by Anida Yoeu Ali [who formerly went by "Anida Esguerra"] and Marlon Esguerra, who were part of a spoken word group in the [19]90s called, "I Was Born with Two Tongues."<sup>2</sup> Really great, amazing poetry was produced from the work that they did together. They started this summer program for youth in Chicago to learn about Asian American history through performance and poetry.

It was a transformative experience where I had an opportunity to see how art could be used to teach history and to help us reflect on the current political conditions that we're dealing with. But also have tools to process what we're learning to make sense of our own family histories, the

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<sup>1</sup> YAWP (Young Asians with Power) was a program of the Asian American Artists Collective-Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.anidaali.com/>; <https://soundcloud.com/apiaword/sets/i-was-born-with-two-tongues>

history of anti-immigration laws in the United States against Asian Americans and different racialized communities of color and how that impacts us today.

We were able to touch upon these issues and think critically about some of the violences that happen in our community, like with gang infighting or the lack of access or the ability to afford to go to college because of where we grew up. YAWP! gave us a place to make sense of our every day lives, the war trauma that our families carry, and the silences that are around those histories.

To so many of us, the program was really empowering. We were grappling with important issues, but we were also turning it into poetry and were performing it for and with each other. And as we performed, we were also witnessing each other's stories. So not only is it a form of empowerment because we hear our own voices as we try to make sense of these histories, but we were also in communion with one another and didn't feel alone in what we were facing. Not only was there power in performing, but there was power in witnessing. There was a power in bearing witness, in a collective, and sharing these stories. That's where I learned about the importance of stories, performance, history, and critical consciousness together.

I went to Pomona College and Ethnic Studies there was really vibrant: Asian American Studies, African American Studies, Chicana/Latina Studies. We were learning about social justice issues, constantly. One of my mentors was a Black Panther, Dr. Phyllis Jackson, who is a professor in Art History at Pomona College and who was a part of the black power movement back in the 1960s and 1970s. Dr. Jackson gave me another perspective on the Vietnam War, one that was quite divergent from the Vietnamese community I grew up in. Her perspective critiqued U.S. imperialism and militarization in Vietnam with a strong affinity for communist revolution. She troubled the way that I understood the role of the United States in the war in Vietnam.

In her classes, we would learn about and from these really amazing, phenomenal black artists, black women artists, through the lens theoretical and methodological frameworks of black feminisms. We learned from black artists through the world of visual arts to understand how their work challenged and redefined notions of representation of black women, black bodies, and violence against black people and the history of slavery, and history of incarceration through an analysis of systemic violence as a result of white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism.

It was really powerful to learn from black artists, like Kara Walker, Lorna Simpson, and Julie Dash and black feminist scholars, Audre Lorde, Akasha Gloria Hull, and bell hooks to name a few, to explore the possibilities of what art could offer, to really delve deeper into the politics of representation and histories of violence to challenge the viewer and what it means to be a witness, spectator, and/or voyeur.

And I'll just talk about one more amazing writer and artist I had the honor of working with. Sharon Bridgforth, who works in the theatrical jazz aesthetic creating phenomenal performances.<sup>3</sup> I had a chance to do a stage reading of her play, *Delta Dandi*, when she was an

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sharonbridgforth.com/>

artist-in-residence at Scripps College. She facilitated this life changing performance workshop where she asked us to think about a myth that our mothers told us, the kind of myth that runs our lives, whatever that is, whatever it is that we're supposed to believe, and then the myth that her mother, our grandmother must have told her.

Working with her, I felt deep internal shifts. Especially as a woman of color working alongside and performing with other women of color talking about issues of race, sexuality, gender, and class as we addressed struggles with healing, spirit, home, love, and migration through storytelling and performance. I thought, "this is the power of performance, this is the transformative, healing potential of what it means to carry these histories, whether spoken or unspoken, these traumas, these legacies of war, of colonization, of violence in our bodies and use performance as a way to open up those channels and release it or make sense of it, that there is so much knowledge that is embodied, so much memory that is embodied, and performance is an avenue to unlock them." That was my entry point into the healing potential of performance and what informs my art practice, in terms of how it's socially, politically, spiritually engaged.

**JS:** What is Axis Lab?<sup>4</sup> How did you get involved in it?

**PN:** Axis Lab started after a series of conversations with a few of my friends about the issues facing communities of color in Chicago and the kind of work we wanted to do as cultural producers to create a space for collective gatherings, arts education, innovative food entrepreneurship opportunities for refugees, and community-based design initiatives that maintained the integrity and history of the Southeast Asian community in Uptown.

Backtracking a little bit: growing up in a non-profit organization as a kid, I saw the challenges of trying to be a self-sustainable entity working to support immigrants and refugees on government funding and donor funding. If the funders decided that they didn't want to fund a program anymore, that program was done. That wasn't a really sustainable way to work. Because there are so many different organizations, they end up competing for very similar resources which ends up pitting them against each other. Axis Lab is building new models for self-sustainability as a community-centered platform and social enterprise working at the intersection of arts, food, and design.

Right now I am working with five other amazing people. Collectively we have over 20 years of experience working with communities of color within Uptown, across Chicago, and in Vietnam. We're a team of visual artists, theater artists, an architect, an urban planner, an environmentalist, and a business person. Our mission is to work in interdisciplinary ways to offer more equitable approaches to urban development, to ethically address issues of gentrification, and to build spaces where families and communities can thrive.

**JS:** On your website, you have images from one of your performances. The images included a bathtub and there was something on fire. Could you elaborate on what the piece was about?

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.axislab.org/>

**PN:** That was the first solo piece I ever worked on. I've collaborated with many different performance artists, musicians, and choreographers, but that was my first solo performance. I had support from amazing colleagues and professors like my advisor, Dr. D. Soyini Madison and Dr. Marcela Fuentes to help shape and inform my methods of creating the performance to meditate on the politics of return and exile and what it means to tell stories in the diaspora.

That piece was called "Trở Về," which means "return home" in Vietnamese. It was a piece that I created in 2012 and toured in 2013 at various universities and colleges in the U.S. To contextualize the piece a little, this performance was developed after living in Vietnam for two years, working with survivors of sex trafficking and teaching theater and performance with street kids, all the while navigating what it means to "return home" to a place my parents escaped from after war.

The piece is the story about what it means to go home, as a way of paying homage to my parents' struggle, and trying to understand the other side of the war, and feeling this intense tension between wanting to go on this journey to honor them and being told by my family that what I was doing was an act of betrayal. I was grappling with the stories that are being told on one side about Vietnam and the stories on the other side about the U.S.

For example, my father was imprisoned in reeducation camps and eventually escaped. But he lives in political exile. He's never returned to Vietnam and might not be able to return, because he could be detained at any point. The fear of being detained without warning from war is still very present.

Going to Vietnam, I cultivated friendships with people whose fathers were involved with the other side of the war. There was one friend in particular whose family invited me over for dinner and her father looked at me and said, "Your father can come back. We're brothers of the same country that ended up having to fight against each other. It's safe for him now." I could feel his genuine compassion for what it must mean to be torn from your own homeland and feel a deep longing to return home. I felt a deep tension in terms of which story to believe about the realities my father being able to return home, while holding these divergent truths together.

The piece is about the politics of return, postwar trauma, and memory. It is about continuing this journey that my parents in some ways cannot continue because they can't go back while trying to decipher the political context of what's going on, holding stories from multiple sides of the war and questioning my own position as a Vietnamese American and what it means to return to a country I was not born in, but have memories of.

The bucket symbolized the boat. My work engages with critical refugee studies. The piece meditated on the conditions of precarity at sea for boat refugees and the violence of being forced to migrate from home in tightly enclosed spaces where bodies are literally overflowing in these boats, people pushed up against each other with little to no food and drinking water. Life and death was overdetermined by the conditions of the sea.

The performance piece focused on nước, or water, as the main aesthetic material I was working with. Nước means both water and nation, homeland, and country in Vietnam. Working with

water allowed me to meditate on the meaning of nước as material and metaphor in an embodied approach to asking what it means to lose your country? How do you lose water? I wanted to play with the very material of water as a slippery, wet, and uncontained material in performance to explore its relationship to the body and subjectivity.

So I played and struggled with the way the water would overflow from the bucket onto the stage. When the stage was covered with water, it was dangerous to slip on because of the wooden floors. I also worked with a long piece of fabric that symbolized the stories that I was grappling with to pull from the water. I was also playing with how when fabric gets wet, it clings to your body, so I was working with the fabric as a material that holds memory. It was an object I could pull out of the water, as the fabric absorbed some of the water, much it dripped off the fabric. I performed with the fabric and the way it wrapped around my body, I wrapped the fabric around my body, tugged, and pulled at it in different directions. As I pulled and the tugged on the fabric wrapped around my body, it strangled me representing how these stories entangled me as the fabric clung against my body and soaked my skin. Performing with the soaked fabric on my body captured the very visceral experience of working with histories of violence, civil war, and conflicting truths across the diaspora, carrying its weight as the fabric weighed on my body and feeling the tension of being pulled in multiple directions as I danced and became entwined with the fabric. I wanted the piece to capture the beautiful, gentle, and violent struggle of what it means to make sense of all these histories and the messiness of its unfolding.

**JS:** Does your work address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or history?

**PN:** I would say that all of it does, in different ways. There is a piece that I did with the same bucket, but it was a different piece on issues of forced migration and statelessness at sea. It's called "salt | water" and it's a piece that I performed at Flats Studio for the Asian American Studies Conference when it was here in 2015 and it was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. It was curated by Jacqueline Chao and Aram Han Sifuentes who are from the School of the Art Institute. It exhibition featured all Asian American artists.<sup>5</sup>

My performances are based on the oral histories of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans that I have collected. I focused on salt and water as the main performance materials because the majority of people who were boat refugees emphasized how thirsty they were. They would talk about how they were surrounded by a large body of water, but they couldn't drink any of it.

But our bodies are also made of salt and water, so this piece also dealt with the delicate balance between salt and water and life and death. Salt and water could be a healing property. It's in our tears; it's in our sweat; it's in our blood. But when the ratio is oversaturated, it can become really toxic to the body. So there is a fine line between toxicity and healing and life and death, which was encapsulated in the properties of salt and water in the performance piece, which also represents the contents of the sea.

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<sup>5</sup> Work Werq: Art Exhibition and Performances featuring Chicago-based Asian American Artists at FLATSstudio, April 23-May 8, 2015. Curated by Jacqueline Chao and Aram Han Sifuentes. Chicago, IL.

Working with salt and water allowed me to conjure the stories of Vietnamese Americans who had to endure this perilous journey to find a better life. The purpose of this performance was to draw on the stories of Vietnamese American refugees to make a call for justice, especially for boat refugees who are escaping from war-torn countries and are stranded at sea. According to Al Jazeera in April 2015, reports of refugees from Syria, Palestine, and Eritrea were escaping from the northern coast of Libya, across the Mediterranean to the southern coast of Italy and 300+ people were on these large rafts, basically just standing room only. There was a report that some of the rafts capsized.

**JS:** Has your work ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American? And do others label you as an Asian or Asian American artist?

**PN:** That exhibition was the first performance art piece I performed that was framed as being a part of a collective of Asian American artists. However, if I were to go back farther, my spoken word performances with YAWP! and at the Asian Pacific Islander Spoken Word and Poetry Summits were also contextualized as Asian American. I suppose I can be considered an Asian American artist.

It's a difficult question for me because I see myself as coming from the school of thought of women of color and I see myself as being deeply informed by black feminists and black radical artists that have shaped the way that I understand how race, class, gender and sexuality operate in the United States. But also that that's not divorced from my body and subjectivity as a Vietnamese American woman being seen, understood, and marked as Asian American as well, and that's inseparable.

Sometimes I think that there are possibilities and limitations within these identity labels. These identitarian constructs can reflect how we are part of a group, part of collective, part of a larger struggle, part of a political community of people that have been racialized in the history of the United States. To identify in these ways is also another way of saying, "I'm a part of this struggle, I'm a part of this movement, and at the same time, that can be really limiting because there are certain ways in which the category of Asian American can compete with other identity categories of other communities of color, like Black communities or Latino communities. Of course there are also very concrete distinctions and specific histories to each group and each ethnicity within each group that shape our experiences.

So how do we account for being affiliated with a group, but also make sure we do not neglect an intersectional analysis of our distinct and shared struggles and the political, economic, and social significance of why we choose either to identify with categories and/or are labeled as an artist from a particular group.

**JS:** Would you say that your identity as Asian or Asian American is important to you?

**PN:** It's so interesting because I've worked for so many different Asian American agencies and organizations. My life before I started delving more into performance art and creating multi-media installations was in the non-profit world. I worked with Asian American legal organizations and social services organizations, from D.C. to L.A. to Chicago to New Orleans.

So even though I struggle with identity categories and battling what the categories of Asian American erases and what it affords, I was always working with organizations and communities that self-identified as Asian Americans.

But if I were to think about how I've always identified, I've always identified as Southeast Asian. And I identify as Southeast Asian we share a particular racialized history in the United States that is directly tied to U.S. imperial war and militarization. Identity categories are political categories. In thinking about being Southeast Asian, I closely relate to Cambodians, Laotian, and Thai, and how our communities have been impacted by the U.S. war in Vietnam.

What does it mean to have been part of a mass population of people during the Cold War forced to migrate, to be refugees, to be relocated? The notion of choice in arrival for refugees is a question of political conflict and war and not actually a real question about choice.

To me, I identify more closely with being Southeast Asian to relate to a specific history of war and forced migration, but still a shared struggle. This history it is very specific but also related to histories of U.S. foreign and domestic policies of exclusion and criminalization of Asian Americans in the U.S., such as the Anti-Chinese Exclusion Act and Executive Order 9066 that led to Japanese internment.

**JS:** What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

**PN:** There's the formal gallery setting, museum spaces, and community spaces, and so I try to think expansively about where my work can exist and who my audience is and how the audience is engaging within these different spaces. As I've been delving more into what it means to be an artist, as both a performance artist and a visual artist, there have been more possibilities of what and where and how I can present my work.

I am deeply honored by opportunities at the Museum of Contemporary Art to do a performance and also a talk about my work and collaboration with Ly Hoang Ly, entitled "memory vs. memory." I've also had amazing opportunities to work with extremely thoughtful curators and organizers. This past year I had a chance to perform at Links Hall/Constellation a few times as part of an Asian American theater festival, 3-on-3 series, and also a part of "I Shout to Keep My Devils at Bay: The Sacred in/and/of the Profane," a festival around ritual and the ways in which we conjure the sacred and the profane in our work, which was curated by Kantara Souffrant. There, I had an opportunity to both perform and exhibit the installation that I created for the "I Shout" performance at Corner gallery.

It's interesting because I think about how performance and installation work can live together, so it's a different way of having to imagine how things and space and people and bodies and motion can be activated. So there has been more ways of thinking about where that can be done, which is exciting. For example, we walked on over to the Axis Lab space. That's an exhibition space and a community collaborative space. It's not a traditional gallery or a museum, as it is a very raw industrial space located right underneath the Argyle "L" station.

I am going to have work shown next month at Navy Pier, which is then going to be activated by a collective of musicians and performers. For me, when thinking about where work is exhibited I'm also thinking about ways in which we can think about where work can be shown and activated. As Chicago is undergoing more drastic changes in regards to the public education system, policing, surveillance, immigration issues, there are more and more possibilities of where things can be exhibited at large, like on a street corner, in a restaurant, in public libraries.

**JS:** What are you currently working on?

**PN:** I'm currently working on two main projects. I'm a Ph.D. student in Performance Studies [at Northwestern University] as well, so I am also working on my dissertation. One of the projects in one of the chapters in my dissertation is a cookbook. This cookbook is both a cookbook and an archive of the Vietnamese community in Chicago, where we'll tell the stories of the business owners and the home chefs and how Argyle became a Southeast Asian business district, alongside recipes and descriptions about the various herbs and spices that is used in Vietnamese cuisine.

We'll actually be having an event at the MCA in April, where we'll be extracting scents out of herbs and spices to make fragrances that the audience can smell and play with in. These fragrances will be paired with stories from the community about the medicinal value and folklore of what these various herbs signify and how they have been used. That's a project that I'm working on with a team of really amazing designers, chefs, and visual artists.

And another project that I'm working on is the one that will be part of the THAWALLS performance festival, which is a collaboration between Three Walls and Links Hall, and will be shown at Navy Pier for ten weeks.

The title of the piece is called "Abundance" and it's thinking about what does it mean to call on abundance through personal and ancestral rituals in this moment, with the state of the nation is operating from a place of fear, scarcity, and a place of lack. Through performance this piece poses the question of what does it mean for communities of color who are constantly surveilled, harassed, and face death just because of the color of their skin, gender, or sexuality call upon and move from a place abundance amidst death and dispossession? How do we call upon our internal strength and power and our collective momentum as a way to rejuvenate ourselves, heal and push back? Especially as we deal with the current administration, the current political climate, both in the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois, with funding being cut left and right for different social services, mental health clinics, and public schools, which have dire effects on our communities. I am thinking through these questions through performance and visual art and how these mediums can be a vehicle to nurture us when all these forces are trying to exhaust us, run us down, or to defeat us. In the process of developing this piece I also ask how performance and visual art offer us an experience to affirm that we are enough, but we can always demand more in terms of justice and what it means to have a right to exist and to thrive, regardless of issues regarding ability or disability, language skills, educational barriers, and national belonging.

Anyway, that's a long-winded way of saying that that's the next project and it is a response to the current political conditions that we're dealing with, to develop a piece that calls upon stories of possibilities.

**END**