

Art | In Conversation

Sung Tieu with Amelia Saul



Portrait of Sung Tieu. Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

In 2023, Berlin-based artist Sung Tieu opened two shows along the Eastern Seaboard. *Infra-Specter*, currently on view at the Amant, Brooklyn, and *Civic Floor*, at the MIT List Center. Deftly interweaving sculpture, installation, sound, and video, Tieu's work exists equally in the interpretation of facts, testing of realities, discovery of obfuscations, and awareness of social control. A consummate researcher, her work lends an urgency and intensity to defining what an artist is, and what she can do or be in the world. Tieu's work has explored themes of bureaucracy, nationality, and asylum; her most recent body of work zeros in on fracking through outlining what is known, unknown, felt, heard, and forgotten. Her steel-plate engraving, *Proximity Relation, Body vs. Infrastructure, 0001* (2023), installed in the entrance to her show at the Amant, geo-locates the viewer in shocking proximity to the North Brooklyn Pipeline, brought to us by National Grid, which transports natural gas obtained by fracking through our neighborhoods. At once searing and poignant, Tieu's work also contains strange, atmospheric moments of humor and (somewhat morbid) levity.

ON VIEW

Amant

Sung Tieu: Infra-Specter
March 30–September 10,
2023
New York

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Sung Tieu: Civic Floor
April 4–July 16, 2023
Cambridge, MA



Installation view: *Sung Tieu: Infra-Specter*, Amant, Brooklyn, 2023. Featuring Sung Tieu, *Mural for America*, 2023. 1,900 stainless steel plaques, engraved, screws. Courtesy Amant. Photo: New Document.

Amelia Saul (Rail): Your work is described as sculpture, drawing, sound, video, and installation. I sense that the form a work takes is secondary to your research. For example, at the Amant, you created *Mural for America* (2023) with 1,920 metal plaques installed on the wall. But the salient material wasn't in the room—we hope, right? Because the plaques list chemicals or compounds used in fracking. So I'd love to hear you talk more about your approach to material and physicality in your work.

Sung Tieu: That's a good start. Being an artist yourself, I'm sure you have experienced that the path to selecting materials can sometimes be irrational, evolving through exploration. For me, the term "material" encompasses two aspects. First, it reflects the depth of research I delve into. Second, it signifies the materialization of the artwork within the exhibition space. I strive to derive inspiration from my extensive research, often gravitating towards materials I possess intimate familiarity with due to previous encounters. It's interesting to note that steel has frequently emerged as a pivotal material in my works, perhaps influenced by the fact that my father worked in a steel factory in the GDR (former East Germany)—an intriguing revelation I recently uncovered. During my early years in Freital, although I was unaware of his profession on a conscious level, I may have subconsciously developed an affinity towards steel.

However, my selection of materials for each artwork primarily hinges on the associated research. Take, for instance, *In Cold Print* (2020) at Amant. Upon entering the space, viewers are confronted with news screens reminiscent of those found at bus stops or subway stations—an intentional emulation of reality. Additionally, I incorporated fencing inspired by the barriers commonly seen around embassy premises. Each artwork carries its own chosen materials, yet my approach wants to transcend mere personal expression. I strive to synergize the essence of the content I aim to convey, allowing it to guide the artistic process in a method that works in reverse.

Rail: The walls that lead you into the second room at Amant.

Tieu: Exactly. The fencing, while not necessarily specific to embassies, is often used to divide private and public spaces. I've seen them with a certain mesh design, known as anti-climb mesh, which lacks footholds.

Rail: When you say that you end up choosing anti-climb material, I immediately think of climbing over embassy walls.

Tieu: Yes, literally!

Rail: These materials convey a sense of shared historical trauma throughout all of the work—but they are not only nostalgic or referential. Can you talk more about what you want the materials to do?

Tieu: Within the Amant show, functionality plays a significant role. The pillars, the anti-climbing fence, and the protective covers of the radiators, for instance, imply a certain function, but I have taken them out of their original context. I encountered the pillars in a car park in Sao Paulo, and they had these attachments that resembled crosses, although they were not intended as religious symbols. They were simply present in the car park. Inspired by them, I recreated these pillars for my installations, where they possess a stronger ideological presence as references. However, I deliberately maintain ambiguity around their status as works by choosing not to mention them as such.

Rail: Your work is showing all these things that I've already seen, that everybody has already seen. But we haven't been looking at them because they're designed to be invisible, or to wield subconscious control, or just influence behavior. You're pointing out who is being Temple Grandin for human beings. Temple Grandin did it for cows, and the US embassy does it for human beings. You're decoding all these invisible-visible things.



Installation view: Sung Tieu: *Infra-Specter*, Amant, 2023. Courtesy Amant. Photo: New Document.

Tieu: Yes, with the Amant show, for the first time, I integrated all the courtyards, facades, corridors and walkways, blurring the boundaries between the exhibition space and transient areas. For example, we have “Protective Cover” in the lobby area when you enter Amant from Grand Street. It is a prime example of how the work seamlessly blends into the space. I particularly enjoy those moments where things become blurry, where the work and the space are not clearly defined, and where the dependencies of one to the other can be felt. I have also experimented with sound in a similar manner. Sound emanates from these protective covers, but it is barely audible, creating a sense of uncertainty. You’re not quite sure where sound is coming from. All of these elements fascinate me.

In fact, I really would like to work more with transient spaces in museums. I thought, “Oh, you can probably always propose a show in the bathrooms of museums, and those will be available!”

Within my work, the process of arriving at the form is an ongoing question. Every time I feel I start from zero, not necessarily literally zero, but you know, I really try to let myself be guided by exploration.

Rail: You often work with seriality and metal discs, all of which reference Minimalist artworks. I’m interested in how this new work relates to and critiques the history of Minimalism. For example, in *Numeric Analysis*, (2022) you transform US asylum application forms into Minimalist compositions, and then measure the exact space they offer the applicant. Historically, bureaucracy was compared to the Byzantine, the surreal, and the absurd. And I want to know more about that, but first I want to ask if you think bureaucracy has changed?

Tieu: Has bureaucracy changed? [*Laughter*] I believe bureaucracy has only intensified. It has become an inescapable part of society. Systems of control tend to grow, and once a barrier is established, it becomes challenging to remove. I find it fascinating to purposely measure these documents, as it seems absurd to try and quantify the square millimeters of space provided. Removing the text and exploring its relationship to abstraction and Minimalist form in art becomes a way for me to critique it.

My approach to Minimalism involves identifying specific instances where it surfaces, but I often take my content from social or political contexts. In this instance, I selected particular documents, then removed their written content, then I measured them with the intention to reveal a different layer of information while retaining a connection to its original source. This is how I approached Minimalism in *Numeric Analysis*. It is literally about the square millimeter areas and about quantifying the boxes and lines in each document. Similarly, in *Mural for America*, it carries a Minimalist appearance, but upon closer examination, you find out it’s actually full of information. It lists each ingredient involved in the fracking process. Sometimes, I am successful in critiquing Minimalism, while other times I may inadvertently incorporate its visual language. But yeah, I try to remain critical. [*Laughs*]

Rail: It’s also a kind of subterfuge—you’re always using the same thing you critique within the work. So I’m talking to you from Boston, where I just saw your work *Civic Floor* at the MIT List center. When I visited, I was told to take off my shoes in order to enter. The floor was felty white, not exactly soft. And the sensation on my feet blended with very loud, very overwhelming sound art. There were four imposing metal sculptures spaced evenly down the room, and the walls were lined with minimalist, white-on-white images. Many of the ideas and problems that are knotted so intensely into the works were already functioning before I could even see them in detail. The work had a big aura. It poured, even limited by frames, it poured wider. The approach and the experience your body undergoes by proximity was an issue that obviously concerned you. In light of this I wonder what you’re asking of the visitor.



Installation view: *Sung Tieu: Civic Floor*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, 2023. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Tieu: The white carpet was intentionally chosen to blend the floor and the wall seamlessly. I wanted them to become one unified entity. By surrounding yourself with whiteness, it becomes challenging to perceive the boundaries of the space, making it difficult to measure its dimensions. To quote a sentence by Jace Clayton from a recent review of the exhibition: “Racial whiteness operates as political neutrality, and this is what forms the uneven ground upon which civic rights are built.” I think this quote beautifully summarizes how the concept of racial whiteness functions as a form of political neutrality, which in turn, creates an unequal foundation on which civic rights are established. This notion of neutrality perpetuates and reinforces systemic inequalities and biases, affecting how civic rights are understood, distributed, and experienced.

Requesting visitors to remove their shoes before entering the room, as I have done in a previous exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof, serves to slow down their experience of the show. Regarding the sound installation, it consists of eight channels, with visitors experiencing two channels at a time, accompanied by the respective sculptures. Each sound piece lasts for five minutes and corresponds to a specific sculpture. My intention was to transport the audience into the very essence of the space and encourage them to fully engage with the artworks. It is, of course, ultimately up to each individual to decide their level of involvement. However, in order to fully experience the exhibition at MIT, there are certain guidelines to follow, such as the requirement to remove one’s shoes or utilize shoe covers. Without it, the show would have had an entirely different impact. Moreover, my curator, Natalie Bell, and I carefully considered the aspect of accessibility during our

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Rail: And were there similar discussions that you had when installing the Amant show?

Tieu: Yes, there were discussions during the installation of the Amant show as well, although to a lesser extent. One reason is that Amant has step-free access, allowing visitors to move more easily through the space. However, one aspect we considered was the seating arrangement for my film *Moving Target Shadow Detection* (2022). The seats provided a level of comfort, but they weren't particularly comfortable to sit on. I like those situations. Where you offer something but at the same time, it still is in accordance with the work. I find these situations intriguing, where there's an offering but also a certain resistance, a discomfort within the nature of the work.



Installation view: *Sung Tieu: Infra-Specter*, Amant, Brooklyn, 2023. Featuring Sung Tieu, *Moving Target Shadow Detection*, 2022. 3D video simulation, color and sound, 18:55 minutes. Courtesy Amant. Photo: New Document.

Rail: There's something about the physicality of the body that's always implied. It was really amazing to me that how few of your works show bodies, how much bodies were present in both shows.

Tieu: Indeed, what I find most fascinating is contemplating how visitors experience the exhibition space. I enjoy theorizing about their movements, what they encounter first and subsequently, and how that shapes their perception of the overall experience. The body and its movement through space plays a significant role in how the installation is perceived. In previous exhibitions, such as the one at Haus der Kunst, the installation was conceived almost like a still opera—without people.

Rail: That was with the Wagner piece?

Tieu: Yeah. The audience had to actively move around while encountering different works that dissected various aspects of the exhibition. I find the body fascinating, and I believe it stems from my general interest in sculpture. Sculpture inherently prompts a physical engagement and relation to the artwork. However, you're right in pointing out that my works don't directly depict the body, although the body is always present and implicated in the overall experience.

Rail: What happens for me when there's nobody is that I become the stand in. I become the bureaucrat and the stateless person. I become a fracker, in that I benefit from fracking directly. And I become a stateless person even when it's obvious that I'm among the most privileged group of people.

Tieu: A significant aspect of my work is about providing information, particularly in the case of the new commission *Liability Infrastructure* (2023) at Amant. Essentially, everything I've done is reveal publicly available information that would otherwise require considerable time and effort to uncover. With Amant, I took on a different role, aiming to provide information that should be readily accessible by the government.

When you mention becoming a fracker, I believe it's because you're now more aware. But at the same time, the individual chemicals involved in fracking are poorly understood. Even after extensive research and consulting with chemists to explain each chemical to me, we encounter that problem. Each chemist I spoke to has specialized knowledge, but we lack comprehensive expertise of the entire list. We can broadly identify certain chemicals as solvents, for instance, but delving into the specifics requires further research and expertise.

Rail: — Certain categories of chemicals, et cetera ...

Tieu: Exactly. While we can provide basic categorizations like “solvent, alcohols, benzines” delving into the intricacies of each chemical necessitates extensive research and a deeper understanding. The exhibition at Amant aims to make certain aspects of that information more accessible. By simplifying the content and presenting it in a more digestible manner, I hoped to convey the complexity inherent in the subject matter. This approach is also evident in works like *Broken Words, False Measures* (2023), which examines a three-page document from the EPA to a local resident. While the letter acknowledges the health risks associated with using the groundwater, it fails to provide any concrete solutions or further measures. It attempts to satisfy on the surface, but ultimately leaves residents with no actionable information to address the issue at hand.

Rail: In the past you've worked on East German post-war bureaucracy, including in the show at Hamburger Bahnhof you mentioned. But then a while ago, I think it was with the Havana Syndrome, you started to focus on US issues. Do you feel that you have an advantage coming from a different cultural position when looking at information and information systems in the US?

Tieu: I was always interested in the relationship between Vietnam and the US. This has always been influenced by my biographical background and personal experiences. The way information was spread during the war in Vietnam was a crucial aspect that shaped my work, particularly in projects like *No Gods, No Masters*, (2017) which delves into the research around Ghost Tape Number 10 and psyops and the manipulation of information for military objectives.

Rail: Ghost Tape Number 10 is a manufactured recording of a dead soldier telling people to give up, psychological warfare against Vietnamese people.

Tieu: Exactly. The war in Vietnam has a complex history where there was no singular neutral perspective, neither from the Americans nor the Vietnamese, nor even from the general media. This lack of neutrality fascinated me. Havana Syndrome presented similar qualities. I became intrigued by the sonic attack itself and its connection to concepts of specter, as seen in Ghost Tape Number 10. Additionally, I was interested in the ambivalence surrounding the nature of the Havana Syndrome, what Havana Syndrome actually is/was and how information about it has been used and manipulated to serve specific political agendas. That ambivalence of information resurfaces within my research about hydraulic fracturing. Initially, I had discussions with the curator at Amant about showcasing certain aspects of my research on the GDR (German Democratic Republic) and Vietnam.

Rail: Oh, really?

Tieu: Yes, I decided against showing those works because I questioned how it would relate to the site. When you present something specifically focused on the GDR and Vietnam, American viewers can easily detach themselves or fail to consider their own bodies in relation to that history, viewing it as something unrelated to them. It's a natural tendency for humans to relate differently to information that seems disconnected from their own experiences. So, I wanted to avoid that and present something that would have an immediate impact on the United States. It was an artistic decision. So I chose to concentrate on what was happening in Bushwick.

Rail: The pipeline, and the proximity to the pipeline was amazing. You stand there. You read a plaque. And you realize, "Oh, the pipeline is really close to me." I have to tell you, I kept laughing when I was seeing your show. I thought it was really funny that you had a recording of tinnitus. It was the most morbid, funny joke. And then also the fact that you're like, "Oh, the pipeline's right over here, want to go see?"

Tieu: I don't mind being blunt. Because it's so obvious, in a way, to pick the topic of fracking. Perhaps my German background provides an advantage in approaching the subject because everything is new to me, as I had no previous knowledge of fracking. I was like, "I have no idea what this is. I need to learn about it."

Rail: For *Mural for America*, you traveled to Pennsylvania and West Virginia to visit fracking sites and surrounding areas. What was that experience like?

Tieu: The experience was very different from what I had anticipated. It allowed me to gain a better understanding of America by shedding the rose-tinted glasses one often wears when walking through Manhattan. New York is a prosperous city, but when you venture outside to the rust belt area near Pittsburgh, you encounter many run-down houses that are left abandoned. There isn't much apart from a few gas stations, malls, shops, diners, and chain-food restaurants. It revealed a completely different side of America. I

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Rail: And they didn't?

Tieu: No, they didn't. In some cases, fracking actually takes place in state parks, and there were no fences at all. You could walk right up to the site because it was within the park boundaries. The fracking site would blend in smoothly. You could simply walk onto the site.

Rail: That's insane.

Tieu: Yes, even in areas where there were fences, I didn't face much resistance because the acceptance of fracking is quite high. It is accepted because it brings jobs, improves infrastructure, and provides a sense of prosperity to the area. The gas companies make intentional efforts to reinvest in the community and present a positive image of fracking. They talk about its safety, describe it as "natural gas" extracted from the shale beneath our feet, and promote it as "green." They even claim it's "free," although that's not accurate—it is an expensive industry with significant environmental consequences. But this is the advertising they present to the community. Fracking is widespread and widely accepted in the United States, to the point where it becomes challenging to argue against it because it has become deeply ingrained in the fabric of the country and its workforce.

Rail: Heartbreaking.

Tieu: Yeah.



Installation view: *Sung Tieu: Infra-Specter*, Amant, 2023. Featuring Sung Tieu, *Reverberations* (Marshall County, WV); *Reverberations* (Greene County, PA); *Reverberations* (Ryerson Station State Park, PA), all 2023. Steel pipe, speakers, amplifier. Courtesy Amant. Photo: New Document.

Rail: At Amant, you have three massive pipes that ache—it’s the only way I can describe it—with recordings of the Earth’s vibration near fracking sites. How did you make the recordings?

Tieu: I used a device called LOM, it’s a geophone with fine sensors capable of detecting minute changes in vibration in various materials. I used it to record the Earth by simply sticking it into the ground.

Rail: Around the fracking sites? Were there any surprises in that process? Did you know what you would get?

Tieu: I had no idea what to expect. It was more of a conceptual idea to record the Earth and shift the perspective away from the human. I wanted to explore what the Earth “hears” when a pipe goes through it or when a well is constantly pumping and extracting gas. The recordings captured that. That’s what came out.

Rail: There’s also sound at MIT. And if there were closed captions, it would read something like “ominous music.” It was cinematic, dramatic, in stark contrast with the minimalist objects in the room. You made that in collaboration with Alexis Chan, and I was wondering if you could talk about that process.

Tieu: Alexis Chan is a collaborator I've been working with since 2015, and he's a good friend of mine. He also created the music for *Moving Target Shadow Detection*. I enjoy long-term collaborations. For the sound at MIT, it was intentionally designed to contrast with the artworks in the space, like you describe it. The idea was to create an additional layer of experience, giving a sense of what it might feel like to be in those spaces and navigate them.

Rail: I just noticed a rhyme: remember how there's earth inside of the sculptures at MIT, and the sound you make around it is quite ominous? And then you literally hear how the Earth feels and sounds in *Amant*?!

Tieu: Yes, yes!

Rail: There's a loop! Could you explain the process of composing the sound?

Tieu: The composition process is step-by-step. For example, in the case of MIT, you can actually hear sounds of my brainwaves and heartbeats. We compose or recompose most of the elements, working back and forth until we arrive somewhere interesting. I also provide field recordings that Alexis incorporates. The process is more intuitive and emotionally driven compared to my approach to visual materials. I'm not entirely sure why, but I find it more challenging to fully let go visually.

Rail: That sounds so Germanic. I mean, you came up in the German realm, where sound is Beethoven, and images are often Minimalism, especially in the gallery realm.

Tieu: Yes, that's my education. I can't really escape that.

Rail: You're escaping it. You're fine. Don't worry about that. [*Laughter*]

Tieu: I'm trying! But yes, I find it difficult.

Rail: I think you did though. I think in *Amant* you did because of those jars, those tragic jars of water next to the rocking chairs. That was so sad.

Tieu: Yeah. I think that's a new development in my work. As an artist I always have areas that I work on. For me it is about getting to a deeper sense of self. Art has a lot to do with one's perception of oneself or where you want to go psychologically or spiritually within your own work. And that's kind of my attempt at trying to get closer to being more free within my visual material. But I have to say I find that quite difficult to undo myself and where I come from, art historically.

Contributor

Amelia Saul

Amelia Saul is an artist who lives in New York.