

## In the Night, I Hear 'em Talk: Sung Tieu Sung Tieu in conversation with Maurin Dietrich

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London, 2019. *Loveless* installation view at Piper Keys, London, 2019  
Courtesy: the artist and Piper Keys, London. Photo: Mark Blower

### MAURIN DIETRICH

I would like to start with your exhibition *Loveless*, which just closed at Piper Keys in London. How did it come together? And how does it relate to the broader context of your practice, which is situated between sculptural elements, video work, and sound elements?

### SUNG TIEU

The exhibition was built up with various components: heavy steel sculptures of objects usually fabricated for custodial environments, a video work behind a stainless-steel TV enclosure, and a seven-channel sound installation hidden within various food containers. I was interested in the prioritization of sensorial response over cerebral engagement. In previous works, I engaged with notions of displacement, initially through the concepts of colonialism and appropriation. For *Loveless* I was thinking about it more in relation to global capitalism. A crucial element within the exhibition was a fictional opinion column about a high-end Japanese coffee shop that had just opened a branch in Jakarta and a global design trend the article called *brutal minimalism* that sought to elevate the experience of consumption. I had been thinking through alienation in relation to interior design and its connections to the prison industrial complex. I was intrigued to trace how state oppression through safety regulations has led to a kind of elective affinity or dialogue between the prison industry and public spaces such as parks, administrative buildings, or airports, and how similar design choices have been utilized by the private sector to communicate values such as security and efficiency—as with that try-hard, hip Jakarta coffee shop.

### MAURIN

The catchy melody of Kanye West's "Runaway" was one of the recognizable elements of the audio work in the exhibition. We also heard generic or "placeless" sounds like metal on metal or a door closing. What drew you to these acoustic, nonvisual elements?

SUNG

The sound moved from field recordings of things like a neon light flickering or the slamming of a gate to manipulated parts, melting towards the end into a three-chord melody that was initially appropriated from Kanye. Your question reminds me of what Jean-Luc Nancy says regarding the difference between the visual and the audible. “The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence... All sonorous presence is made of a complex of returns.”<sup>1</sup> So within the installation you were always already returning to some other space and time. The expansion of these frequencies through the sculptures was a way to rethink the physical sensation of alienation under the sensorial terms of the self. What is visible and what is not was crucial in relation to the table units as well, the abuse that happens by the sheer design of them, the generic and violent nature of the cold steel, the dull edges to prevent self-harm, the nonexistent screws that mean they can’t be taken apart, the impenetrable surface. I like to think about what happens when something like that arrives in the public sphere, especially when it comes with violence and distrust, as a rule, towards the humans that are supposed to use it.

MAURIN

In earlier works of yours, you dealt with acoustic military strategies during the Vietnam War. Their starting point was the absence of anything visual to cause the terror—almost the terror of something imaginary that became real through sound. Can you give more background to how you “translated” that into visual components?

SUNG

I discovered a PSYOPS operation from the 1960s for which the U.S. Army in Saigon composed a fictional sound piece titled “Ghost Tape No. 10.” They hired voice actors to make a four-minute recording in which a Vietnamese soldier calls for his wife and child from beyond the grave. The aim was to lower the enemy’s morale, to induce fear through sound, and to reinforce behavior favorable to U.S. strategic goals by tapping into the belief that dead relatives should be buried close to their ancestors so their souls are not trapped in purgatory. Vietnamese spirituality was weaponized as part of the U.S. war machine, but the ghost tape says a lot more about the American psyche than the putative Vietnamese beliefs they wanted to exploit. The recording was usually broadcast at night from helicopters flying over the jungle. On other occasions, soldiers would carry what looked like a backpack with six speakers attached to it. *Song for Unattended Items* (2018) brings this broadcasting method into the gallery. Friends and colleagues donated handbags and backpacks for an installation in which each bag would play a single sound. I was fascinated by how quite harmless sounds can trigger memories of trauma for veterans with PTSD, so I combined seemingly benign stimuli, such as a recording of crickets in a park, with the sounds of fireworks and helicopters, which were then mixed with the noise of burning wood. When listening to these sounds together, one very quickly imagines a danger zone. Within the context of London, I was also interested in the city’s paranoia about unattended bags and the self-surveillance that happens around that

MAURIN

For several years, the art world has been giving a lot of attention to themes of inclusivity and postcolonialism, which have somehow become keywords or hashtags. You also address these issues, but in a more precise way, by transferring them to everyday life in Germany and focusing on diasporic Vietnamese communities—for example, in your project *Subnational Enterprise*, which took place in a Vietnamese-run shopping mall in 2015.

SUNG

When I think of the 10th Berlin Biennale, I remember an international discussion that had little site-specificity, with just a few exceptions such as Mario Pfeifer’s film and Natasha A. Kelly’s work. The curatorial team seemed to have neglected the context of Berlin and spoke about political issues in an abstract manner rather than a concrete and engaged one. For example, the city’s Black African community is relatively small—less than two percent of the population of the city. I am not saying that Black politics doesn’t matter in Germany; in fact, it matters a lot given Germany’s colonial occupation of South West Africa and the genocide it inflicted on the Herero and Nama peoples. But this discourse misses the opportunity to address other urgent issues such as the growing political tensions in the city and their relationship to larger, long-existing migrant communities or the refugees who have recently found a new home here. At the end of the day, such questions are extremely local, and I think to curate a biennial that responds to them, one needs to know a city really well.

MAURIN

In relation to the sociopolitical context of Berlin, could you talk more about the collaborative projects that you have been working on that started out from interventions within the city?

SUNG

The projects I made five years ago with TROI OI [2](#) and on my own came out of a related necessity. I was fresh out of art school, which was great but also informed by a Western understanding of art that left me not really knowing what kind of work to make. So when Swedish-Vietnamese fashion designer Nhu Duong and I decided that we wanted to collaborate on a project about our cultural heritage as immigrants living in Berlin, the city became our playground. We made sweaters for a number of Vietnamese florists in Berlin's subway stations, where people could go and purchase them. Clothing became a medium through which buyer and seller could communicate about how and why these Vietnamese-owned businesses emerged after German reunification. In a similar manner, my project *Subnational Enterprise* at Berlin's Dong Xuan Center in 2015 grew out of a desire to talk about displacement as an essential state-building instrument. Vietnamese immigration happened very differently in East and West Germany. The GDR actively recruited workers from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, while the story in West Germany has to do with the Vietnamese boat people. Present in this distinction is also how each state dealt with migration. For West Germany, it was clear that the Vietnamese refugees were in the country to stay, while the recruitment agreement initiated by the GDR in 1980 was premised on the idea of guest workers who would return to Vietnam after a few years. Vietnamese laborers became ghettoized within the GDR, not least because they were prohibited from "mingling" with Germans. It was all built on the politics of rejection—and after 1989 deportation—rather than integration. One can still see the social and cultural divisions created by these two vastly different policies in Germany today.

MAURIN

In 2018 you cofounded the collective East London Cable [3](#) as a way of thinking about the representation of minorities in the media and how not only white bodies and standardized forms of desire are present in them.

SUNG

When I was seventeen years old, I was an actor in a German TV series called *Türkisch für Anfänger* (Turkish for beginners), where I played a Vietnamese character called Ching. Now "Ching" is, of course, not a Vietnamese name but an invention by the scriptwriter. I think this captures the relationship I had with TV when I was growing up. I expected to be represented in an inaccurate and simplistic way. What East London Cable does is to try and show things—whether performance, moving image work, or televisual media—that we as artists and creative producers want to see on TV. We draw from the ethos of 1970s and 1980s public access and cable TV that foregrounded local concerns. The mediatization of pretty much every part of social and political life today has given the media an incredible responsibility. In many ways, TV can reach a more diverse audience and is less white and less normative than the art world, with its gatekeepers and politics of exclusivity. One of our goals is to seep the televisual into other realms of culture and vice versa.