



In “Zugzwang” and “In Cold Print,” artist Sung Tieu’s current exhibitions at Haus der Kunst Munich and Nottingham Contemporary, sculptures and readymades such as seating and office furniture, fences and concrete columns, immigration papers, memorabilia, newspaper spreads and multi-channel sound installations are fused into environments that move between everyday banality and claustrophobic effect. In Munich, the viewer is transported into what appear to be waiting rooms and office interiors that bring to mind the generic aesthetic of bureaucracy and citizen “management.” The installation in Nottingham, meanwhile, turns the exhibition space into a kind of exterior: in a maze enclosed by public security architecture, a sound piece based on the infamous “Ghost Tape No. 10” (a US sound weapon from the Vietnam War) is played. The walls are lined by screens displaying fictional newspaper articles that only wait to be contradicted, intensifying the schism between alleged facts and mass psychosis.

Though these two projects were conceived independently by the Vietnam-born, Berlin- and London-based artist, they build on several underlying themes and questions that have long been prevalent in her work, from the aesthetics of the military-industrial complex and psychological warfare to the historiography of immigration. What connects the two exhibitions is an interest in the constitution of populace (or more precisely, publics) by institutions, whether it’s through incarceration (the artist repeatedly uses standardized prison furniture), the policing of people in public spaces or the establishment of a reader- or viewership by the mainstream media (as in the artist’s “Newspaper 1969–ongoing” series).



In response to this centralized and state-led production of (in)voluntary communities, Tieu has co-founded a series of collaborative and performative projects that leave the gallery setting. Most recently, in a 2019 performance at Tate Modern titled *East London Cable*, she and her fellow performers—Aoibheann Greenan, Dan Marre, Eve Stainton, Florence Peake, Jos Bitelli, Louis Brown and Wojciech Kosma—set out to revamp the spirit of local access TV to generate local specificity while drawing more diverse audiences, calling to mind Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz’s “Aesthetic Research in Telecommunications” projects (1975–1977). For an earlier project called “TROI OI” (2014), Tieu worked with Swedish-Vietnamese fashion designer Nhu Duong to design sweaters that were sold at Vietnamese-immigrant-owned flower shops in Berlin, inviting local art audiences to engage with the history of the Vietnamese diaspora, which was subjected to the former inner-German and inner-Vietnamese division, while at the same time asking questions about what constitutes that very community.

Despite working with her personal history of migration (“Zugzwang” includes large mirrored steel panels engraved with an abstracted image of the forest through which she crossed the Czech-German border in 1992), her work resists an autobiographical fixation. Instead, it confronts the art institution itself by highlighting the absurdities of the bureaucratic machine that surround us (and of which the museum is ultimately an extension). To grasp the all-encompassing nature of the present-day neoliberal state, Tieu employs a multitude of activities, from conducting research to producing collaborative sound works with composers like Ville Haimala and physically remaking the very architecture of exclusion and delineation that to most people remains out of sight. It all amounts to what Thomas Keenan once termed “counter-forensics”: a tactical approach to reassessing our collective political memory.



Tieu's images and installations visualize the psychological effects of warfare, revealing a military and state apparatus that, on the one hand, is extremely inventive and experimental when appropriating and misusing its enemies' deepest cultural and religious beliefs as means of combat, while at the same time proving brutally petty and pedantic in using official documents as instruments of exclusion. Ultimately, these works synthesize what Alain Badiou described in the context of democratic materialism as "the maintenance and dissolution of symbolic or juridical multiplicity in warlike violence."