

Profile

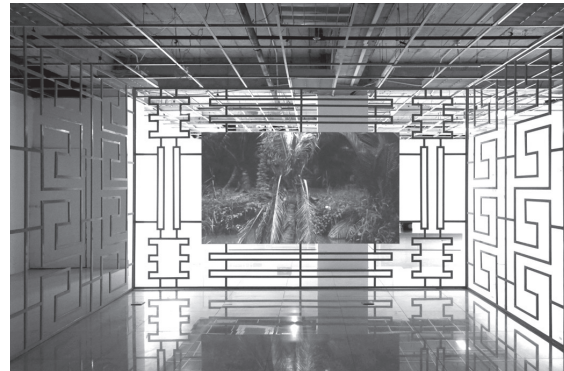
Sung Tieu

The German-Vietnamese artist, now based in London, is all-too familiar with the tensions created by geographical borders and cultural divisions that she addresses in her work.

In 1945, in the aftermath of the atomic bomb - the apocalyptic full stop at the end of the Second World War and harbinger of what he termed a nascent 'cold war' - George Orwell noted that 'it is a commonplace that the history of civilisation is largely the history of weapons'. Born in 1987 in Hải Dương, northern Vietnam, Sung Tieu emigrated aged five to Germany, eventually walking across the German-Czech border with her mother to seek asylum. Originating from a country divided along North-South lines until 1975, and emigrating to one divided between East and West until 1989, Tieu was distanced from the cataclysms of both their unifications but has been finely tuned to the end of the Cold War's hot fallout. Her practice explores the evolving forms of weaponry, still tethered to a Cold War logic, used to restrict and mould subjects in subsequent global capitalism. She asks: if these are the weapons, who is the threat?

At Nha San Collective in Hanoi, Tieu's 2017 exhibition 'Remote Viewing' included the video work *No Gods, No Masters*, 2017. Within the narrative framework of a river-based journey through impenetrable Vietnamese jungle, the cinematic familiarities of the US version of the Vietnam War in, for example, *Apocalypse Now*, 1979, are inverted in black-and-white and colour negative footage which frequently detours to domestic rituals in Tieu's family home in Hải Dương. The accompanying sound features 'Ghost Tape No.10', a recording created by the US PSYOP (Psychological Operations) programme, which was broadcast into the jungle where *No Gods, No Masters* was filmed. The tape features the heavily reverberated voice of a dead Vietcong father and husband whose ghost now wanders the earth, trapped eternally in purgatory for not being buried near his ancestors, superimposed on layers of roaring white noise interspersed with moans, crying babies, dog barks and funeral music. These sounds operate as missiles targeted at psychologically resonant frequencies in enemy subjects. The violent psychological effects of sound are continuously re-elaborated in Tieu's work: her graduation show at the Royal Academy Schools, *Song for Unattended Items*, 2018, featured a 12-channel sound installation expanding on noise from the Ghost Tape and focusing on the mechanics of sonic threat - the way individual sounds are banal in isolation, but once they become rhythmic signal danger. Here, repeated popping becomes gunfire, birds tweeting too frequently becomes panic, fireworks become uncontrolled explosions, then from the chop of a helicopter the viewer inevitably composes their own version of Vietnam.

In Tieu's work, the legacy of a Cold War threat continues to propagate - a persistent state of mitigated catastrophe dispersed in the contaminated everyday, the alleviation of which is premised on detecting signal from noise and the benign from the malignant. Western warfare waged against abstracted targets of immeasurable complexity continues to be recycled; if not communism, then drugs or, in this century, terror. In *Song for Unattended Items*, each of the 12 sound



Remote Viewing, 2017,
installation view at Nha San Collective



No Gods, No Masters, 2017, video

Sung Tieu emphasises the threat the displaced body poses, and the necessity for immigrants to assuage those fears by conforming to a certain narrative of productivity, utility and safety.



Loveless, 2019



Song for Unattended Items, 2018

channels emanates from inside an unattended bag. Dispersed across the floor, these discarded and generic readymades become objects of banality-become-catastrophe with the potential explosive cargo the public has been trained to suspect. Or, perhaps, these are the remnants of everyday life, moments after the alarm of imminent disaster is sounded. Tieu's environments often bring to mind these instants of evacuation, in which the viewer is cast as the first responder on the scene, stumbling into the eerie anxiety of a room still warm from recent presence.

With continuing threats comes the expansion of institutions and industries of protection. As Adam Curtis suggested in *The Power of Nightmares, 2004*, 'instead of delivering dreams, politicians now promise to protect us from nightmares'. Tieu's 2019 exhibition 'Loveless', at Piper Keys in London, adopted the aesthetic of a custodial facility, a space of containment where objects are protected from subjects, and subjects from objects. A monitor is encased in stainless steel, and two dining units - table and chairs fused as one - are bolted to the concrete floor; surfaces are wipe-clean, edges rounded. Noise emerging from seven scattered takeaway containers ultimately breaks into rhythm, melody and song. For *Formative Years on Dearth, 2019*, Tieu located two dining units nearly identical to those in 'Loveless' in the public space outside the Lakanal House estate in Camberwell, South London. In *Parkstück, 2019*, at Fragile in Berlin, the steel dining units arise again in an adjusted soundscape, this time with a picnic basket and cutlery set up on one table. Each of the three installations features a faux newspaper placed on one of the tables with a single article penned by Tieu under a pseudonym (these are part of a series, 'Newspaper, 1969-ongoing', and are a regular feature in Tieu's installations). The replicating table-and-chair forms, basic support structures of social and family life, are redirected by the articles towards their myriad uses: in *Loveless*, the article references the proliferation of 'brutally global interiors' that are 'aggressively functional' with reference to a supposedly hip new cafe in Jakarta; in Camberwell, it emphasises the incongruous domesticity of its setting next to Lakanal House; in *Parkstück*, a report of a fight in a Hamburg playground is used as justification for the expansion of a city-wide 'danger zone' by the city's security forces. These tables, which recall the primary forms and seriality of minimalism, are found to be rigid and resilient in isolation, but as

malleable in purpose as they are mobile across international boundaries. In 1961, Dwight D Eisenhower's farewell address warned of the corrupting influence of the military-industrial complex; here, we might note the global embrace of adjoined penal, housing and leisure spheres - a one-size-fits-all militarised minimalist design for everyday life that treats security as a selling point and subjects as risky business.

New projects in 2020 mark a focus on the way evidence is weaponised and facts negotiated. For *In Cold Print* at Nottingham Contemporary, Tieu focuses on the so-called Havana Syndrome: the possibility that even after US President Barack Obama ventured to Cuba in 2016 'to bury the last remnant of the Cold War in the Americas', an unknown mobile weapon - reportedly sounding something like a cricket - targeted US embassy employees, resulting in long-term post-concussion effects. Tieu argues for a range of explanations based on the available material in newspaper spreads on display screens, while also subjecting herself to a recording of the putative sonic weapon while undergoing DTI, MRI and EEG brain scans, which are translated into the soundscape for the exhibition. Here, evidence forming science, pseudoscience and conspiracy is played out against the vagaries of affect and perception. The title of Tieu's exhibition 'Zugzwang', at Munich's Haus der Kunst, refers to a compulsory move that will weaken your position in chess. The soundscape is her own version of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser, 1845*, accompanied by the noises of a bureaucrat's office. The walls are adorned with bureaucratic forms Tieu has derived from asylum applications, the boxes on the forms echoed by the grid of a chess board which has been hand-drawn over them, the pieces shifting from one document to the next in an ever-evolving game. Tieu emphasises the threat the displaced body poses, and the necessity for immigrants to assuage those fears by conforming to a certain narrative of productivity, utility and safety - to play a game where the state makes the rules and where people are pawns.

Sung Tieu's exhibition 'In Cold Print' is at Nottingham Contemporary, 8 February to 3 May.

Adam Hines-Green is an artist and writer based in London.