



Memorial project Nha Trang, Vietnam - Towards the complex - For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba

05 October - 8 December 2002

Towards the Complex

Mosquito Nets, instant noodles, newspaper, business cards, rice, posters, cyclos. These are some of the diverse materials that Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba has used in his work. Apart from the cyclos, they read like a list evoking South East Asian cities in all of their unique and complex modernities: tradition side by side with the tools of trade and consumption. Such words set off a chain of images that make it possible to think about the present in different ways. Moreover, they also act as triggers for the memory, evoking historical resonance or distant reflections. The interconnectedness of words, senses, images and memories are made manifest in the works of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba. He is an artist who at once brings disparate elements together in specific formations and produces echoes from them. Everyday things take on a capacity to become memorials and witness to recent and present histories.

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba was born in Tokyo, Japan. He shares Vietnamese, Japanese and American heritage. He is thus an artist who works from a place of differences and contradictions. Born in 1968 when the Vietnam War was still being waged, Nguyen-Hatsushiba is from a generation that does not directly know of the conflict. His memories are rather closer to the post-war situation in Vietnam – the plight of the 'Boat People' and Vietnam's slow emergence from years of conflict. Educated at art school in the United States, Nguyen-Hatsushiba has experienced living between Vietnam, America and Japan for at least seven years in each location. His experiences straddle three countries that were direct theatres of operation in the Vietnam War. Although commonly imagined that it was a war concentrated in Vietnam and America, its impact within Asia and beyond on multiple levels was enormous, including of course the direct combat involvement of Australia and New Zealand.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba's work does not deal directly with this history in the sense of representing it through recognisable images and words. His practice has rather been one of finding resonance. Much of his work draws on the testimony of those who experienced the war and its aftermath, or re-visitations of traditional Vietnamese life. His work is therefore based strongly on memory and recollection, but also possible futures. Through such processes Nguyen-Hatsushiba moulds his own unique forms of memorial which, when translated into art works, have a capacity to give voice to the concerns and memories of many Vietnamese. And in this respect Nguyen-Hatsushiba's work continues to respect ritual as a potent possibility for art. This is not to place emphasis on any intrinsic auratic qualities in the work itself, in the way that Walter Benjamin noted. Nguyen-Hatsushiba's work tends not to emphasise singularity by focusing on unique works – he has rather tended to adopt a flexible media approach including installation, the use and re-working of 'ready-mades' and printing. The ritual in Nguyen-Hatsushiba's works isn't overt, but remains potent. He has performed riding a cyclo across a shallow water fountain, or directed figures in his videos who act-out struggles and releases. If Nguyen-Hatsushiba aims for an element of ritual in his works, this is deliberately kept at a distance. It is precisely this distance that gives viewers the chance to engage the works at different levels, never collapsing the cultural signs or memories into too specific a language. Nguyen-Hatsushiba has spoken of the importance of the avoidance of specificity, describing it as an act of 'allowing contemplation in me'.



The cyclo has been a constant through many of Nguyen-Hatsushiba's works. This is the traditional Vietnamese pedal powered taxi transport, roughly equivalent to the Japanese rickshaw that can still be seen in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Cyclos define the Vietnamese city in many ways, limited by a certain speed and kind of rhythmical back and forth movement. During the Vietnam War they were occasionally used as carriers of secret messages by both sides, notes curled and stuffed into their steel piped structure. Nguyen-Hatsushiba recently observed that, with the nationwide reforms in Vietnam and the consequent increase in cars, the cyclo has begun to be pushed aside, regarded as a nuisance by the government. At a time when the government stresses economic reform, the cyclo is seen as a relic of the past, an embarrassment that slows down the city streets. Nguyen-Hatsushiba's work with cyclos is thus appropriate, for in many ways it has become a contemporary point of focus, of Vietnam's past and history. Herein, the cyclo is a carrier of deep cultural and historical meanings that are becoming increasingly dis-jointed.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba has worked on a project that involved producing entirely new cyclos together with traditional cyclo makers in small factories. Working under the title *The Making of Alternative History*, Nguyen-Hatsushiba has produced four new model cyclos that function as cyclos. Each has a slightly different design, using reflective polished steel. One incorporates hints from the French colonial period. This re-invention of the cyclo is, for Nguyen-Hatsushiba, one way to try to acknowledge what is happening to this mode of transportation now. Using limited means, he teams up with welders and builders to re-imagine the traditional vehicle and give it a new face, perhaps more in tune with today's young urban Vietnamese, attracted by the new and the glossy. On accompanying posters, which show the shiny new cyclos, Nguyen-Hatsushiba inserts the catch copy 'Reflect'. As well as producing new cyclos, Nguyen-Hatsushiba has also engaged in a parallel project of interviewing cyclo drivers, many who were forced into this poorly paid job after the Vietnam War. His interviews reveal cyclo-riding as a cross-generational labour, and produce a work that is at once archive and testimony, telling the stories of the drivers in a direct way. Nguyen-Hatsushiba produced a series of highly designed posters to accompany the 'new' cyclos, each one showing a portrait of a driver together with his recollections.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba's most recent work using cyclos was shown last year at The Yokohama Triennale 2001 and shown at the Biennale of Sydney 2002. Titled *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam – Towards the Complex – For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards*, it is a large single screen projection work. The video was shot entirely underwater on location in Vietnam, with the help of several of Nguyen-Hatsushiba's friends and an entire group of local fishermen, who played the main 'characters'. They are seen through clear blue waters pushing old cyclos on the sandy ocean bed. Working without air tanks, every few seconds they are forced to rise to the surface, repeating this action of diving and rising throughout the film. Towards the end of the film several mosquito nets appear tied to the ocean floor, swaying slightly in the currents. Nguyen-Hatsushiba describes it as the cyclo drivers making a pilgrimage towards the nets, their memorial site. The nets are empty, like shrouds, or small houses for the ghosts of those lost at sea while trying to escape after the war. The film's binding element is the open ocean, an endless sublime stage on which the cyclo drivers push – they move between a certain kind of heroism and futility, a resolute dignity and humiliation. And yet Nguyen-Hatsushiba's sublime is not only one of awe or frightening beauty – it remains something deeply embedded in the present, echoing history and shedding new light – a very different light to that we experience above water – on its readings.

Roger McDonald



The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is pleased to present *Memorial Project Nba Trang, Vietnam — Towards the complex* by Japanese born Vietnamese artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba. The screening of this work supports the Gallery's strategic focus on artists from the Pacific Rim. Like other work in the Gallery, the video examines the impact of digital media and shifting international relations on the production and interpretation of art in the region. Commissioned for the 2001 Yokohama Triennale, Hatsushiba's work was shown to acclaim at both the 2002 Sao Paulo Biennale and the 13th Biennale of Sydney in the same year. Furthermore, it has caught the attention of many of the world's leading international art journals. The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery is delighted to have the opportunity to exhibit work of such international significance.

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba
1968 born Tokyo, Japan
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City

Selected solo exhibitions

- 2002 *Towards the complex* De Appel, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
2000 *Xich lo 2001 - the making of an alternative history* Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
1998 *In between* Shiseido Ginza Art Space, Tokyo, Japan (catalogue)
www.xoom.com Blue Space Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
1997 *Dream 29* Hang Bai Exhibition House, Hanoi, Vietnam
1996 *The mosaic series* Dallas Visual Arts Centre, Dallas, USA

Selected group exhibitions

- 2002 *(The world may be) Fantastic* 13th Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia (catalogue)
25th Sao Paulo Biennale Sao Paulo, Brazil (catalogue)
2001 Yokohama 2001, Triennale of Contemporary Art Yokohama, Japan (catalogue)
2000 *Invisible boundary: metamorphosed Asian art* Utsonimiya Museum of Art, Utsonimiya, Japan
3rd Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea

Selected bibliography

- Daniel Birnbaum, 'Best of 2001', *Artforum*, December, 2001
Massimiliano Gioni, 'Speaking in tongues', *Flash Art*, November-December, 2001
Hideki Kawahara, 'Voices of Hamatori', *Bijutsu Techo*, vol.53 no. 812, November-December, 2001
Christopher Phillips, 'Crosscurrents in Yokohama', *Art in America*, January, 2002
Jennifer Purvis, 'The making of alternative history', *The Japan Times*, 3 September, 2000
Arata Tani, 'Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba', *Shinano-Mainichi Newspaper*, 23 July, 2001

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