

In Deep Water

In his ambitious films and installations, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba addresses the complexities of modern Vietnam, and of being an international artist who negotiates between East and West.

BY JOE FYFE



Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba is the first Vietnam-based artist to have achieved international recognition, which came with his initial film, *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam: Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious, and the Cowards* (2001). Originally exhibited at the Yokohama Triennial in 2001, *Memorial Project Nha Trang* was in a traveling survey of his work organized by the Museum of Art in Lucerne, which included all of his films to date. The 15-minute film is shot almost entirely under water, its richly poetic imagery tied to the particular conditions of present-day Vietnam.

Fiercely independent, forward-looking, deeply troubled, larger and more European than its neighbors, this Southeast Asian country is one of the bigger question marks on the world stage. Though over the course of the 20th century Vietnam repelled by force three of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (France, the U.S. and China), it remains one of the world's poorer countries. Its populace is well-educated, with a higher than 95 percent literacy rate—ahead of China, Thailand and even Singapore—and it has recently become an economic powerhouse with a burgeoning middle class, a thriving tourism industry and a growing art scene. But there are also significant constraints on freedom of expression, to which Nguyen-Hatsushiba makes frequent if elliptical reference.

One of the meanings of the word Vietnam is water, and it is characteristic of Nguyen-Hatsushiba to invoke this connection in such a way that strenuous activity underwater, where physical movement is restricted, is linked with political repression. In *Memorial Project Nha Trang*, half a dozen young Vietnamese men clad in swimming shorts and working in pairs attempt to push three cyclos across the ocean floor, ascending for air and then re-descending to continue their efforts. Cyclos, the French-derived Vietnamese name for the bicycle rickshaws that were once used as taxis throughout Southeast Asia, are considered antimodern remnants of the servile colonial era and are being phased out in Vietnam. Nguyen-Hatsushiba used them in a number of works that preceded this film, adopting the cyclo as a symbol for those marginalized by Vietnam's modernization. He built his own versions as sculptures, and made photo-portraits of cyclo drivers, who tended to be people unable to get other work because of their political status—for instance, those who served in the army of South Vietnam.

Also important to this first film's meaning is its location. Nha Trang, where the shooting took place, is one of the beaches from which boatfuls of refugees

left the country after the Communist takeover in 1975. A third of them died before reaching their destination. The mosquito net shelters toward which the divers swim near the end of the film (and which appear in much other work as well) are, according to the artist, “a spiritual space for [the refugees] to rest in peace.”

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba was born in Tokyo in 1968 to a Vietnamese father and a Japanese mother, and lived in Vietnam in 1974-75, near the end of the American war, returning afterward to Japan. In 1978, he moved to the U.S., spending his remaining childhood and adolescence in Texas and attending Brookhaven College in Dallas before completing a BFA at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1992. He received an MFA in 1994 from the Maryland Institute College of Art. Nguyen-Hatsushiba developed into a sophisticated painter in graduate school, but, he recalls, visiting faculty member Archie Rand dissuaded him from pursuing a career in painting, saying that he was “an artistic coward, aesthetically lazy.” Nguyen-Hatsushiba was “devastated” by the critique, but the provocation was useful. Rand “was testing me,” the artist says, “to see if I would break my own barrier.”

In 1993, Nguyen-Hatsushiba returned to Japan for the first time in 15 years, seeing his mother and meeting his sisters. His first sculptural installations, of cooked sticky rice and raw rice grains, were made in the mid-’90s, when he came back to the U.S. Like Robert Smithson’s “non-sites,” in which rocks or sand were moved from their original locations to exhibition

settings, Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s early installations involve displacement: discarded food is used as sculptural material in a landscape, becoming a kind of scale-shifting geographical representation. But it additionally allegorizes a psychic state, with the grains of rice symbolizing the status of the unwanted immigrant who, in a sense, is undigested by the host country.

Preserved in photographs, the mostly outdoor rice works seem to surreptitiously colonize fragments of neglected urban landscapes. *Rice around Yellow Mud* (1994) surrounds a puddle like an embankment around a lake. The rice series also includes a plant whose seed pods are caked with cooked rice, in a lot by a highway overpass in San Antonio (*Rice Tree*, 1995), and a door in one of Baltimore’s abandoned buildings carefully resurfaced in rice (*Rice Door*, 1994). The earliest works acknowledged by the artist, the rice installations introduce an exploration of his shifting status as an Asian and an immigrant. All of his subsequent works comprise temporary monuments to those who are disenfranchised by geopolitical forces.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba re-established himself in Vietnam in 1996, at first in Hanoi. Since 1997 he has lived in Ho Chi Minh City, 15 minutes by motorbike from the old, downtown section of the city, which is still called Saigon. The air of Ho Chi Minh City is thick with moisture, exhaust fumes and the noise of millions of two-cylinder engines—and, with the city’s building boom, the sound of drilling into concrete. Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s studio is a 19th-century cottage built for a Frenchman who housed one of his mis-



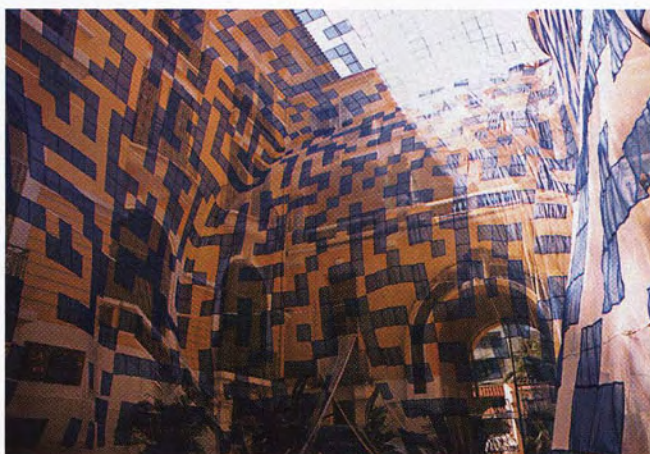
Rice around Yellow Mud, 1994, outdoor installation in Baltimore.



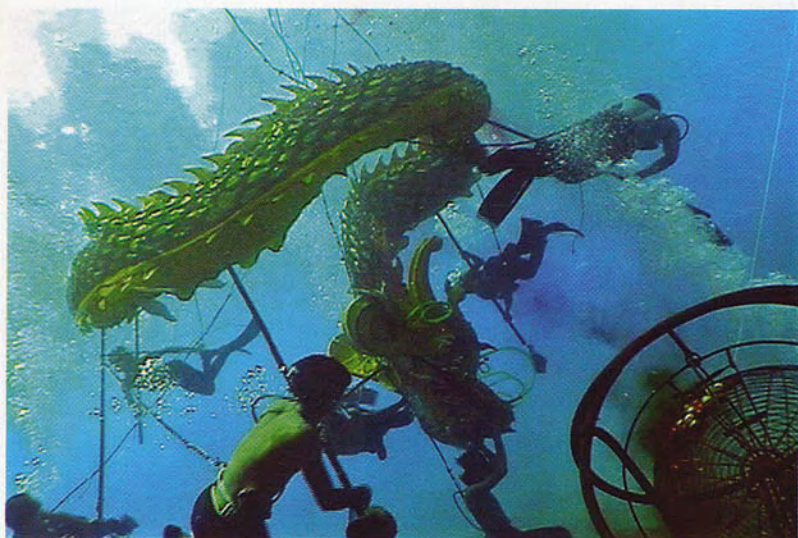
Beach Maze, Long Hai Beach, Vietnam, 1997, drawing in sand.



Shore-arriving-departing, 1996, charcoal briquettes, rice, dimensions variable; at Brookhaven College, Dallas.



Water in the Sky, 1998, mosquito net, approx. 16 by 26 by 30 feet; at Blue Space Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City.



Above, two stills from Happy New Year: Memorial Project Vietnam II, 2003, single-channel DVD projection, 15 minutes.

Right, still from and installation view of Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either nor Neither—A Love Story, 2002-03, four-channel DVD installation, approx. 17 minutes.

tresses in it. The building's vintage exterior has remained intact, though it now glows with slick white paint and green trim. A high corrugated metal wall surrounds its small lot. The interior is exceptionally clean and bright, with a large front room full of partially assembled objects used in installations and a smaller, lower-ceilinged rear room that appears to function like a command center, with a worktable holding two flat-screen computer monitors, and various charts and schedules on the walls.

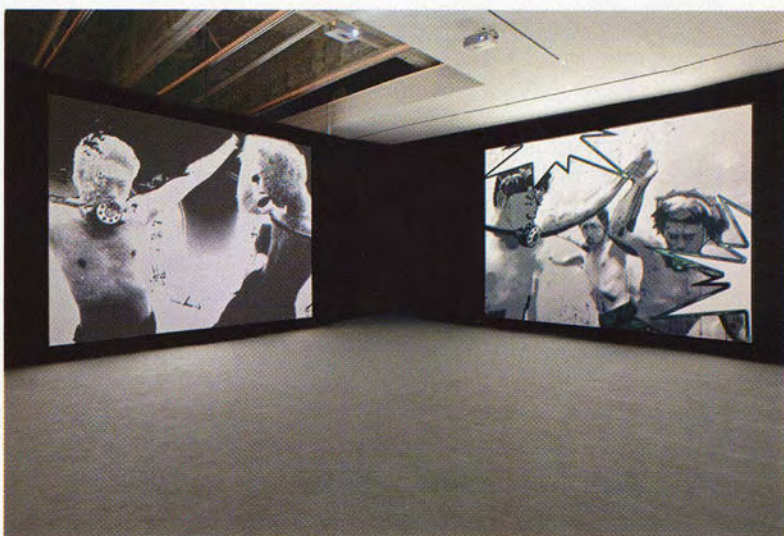
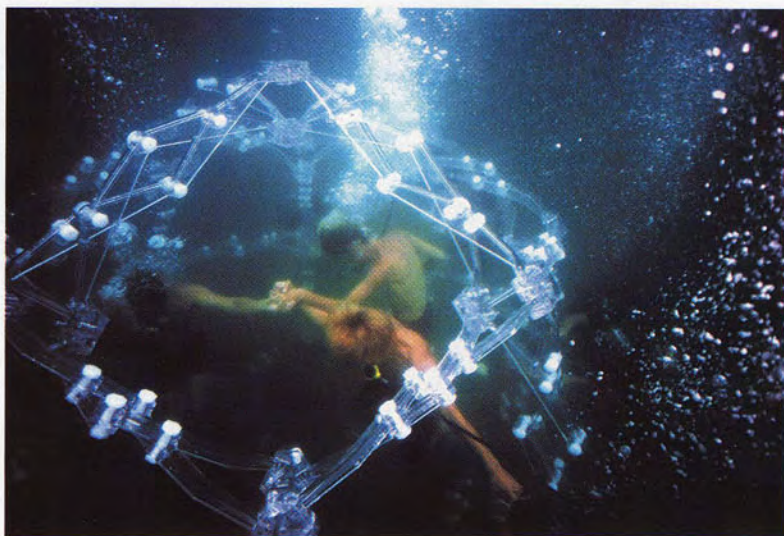
One gets the impression of an artist both deeply engaged in his cultural and physical environment and detached from it—or perhaps accustomed to being in a state of displacement. He is one of a number of contemporary artists, including Shirin Neshat and fellow *Viet Kieu* (returning Vietnamese) Dinh Q. Lê, who examine their migratory status in relation to the political histories and cultures of both their birthplaces and chosen homeland, even if their imagery is firmly rooted in the former. In an interview in *Tema Celeste*, Nguyen-Hatsushiba told curator Hou Hanru, "Many of my ideas are in the dust of the Saigon air, in the traffic, in the streets."

Among the earliest works he executed after returning to Vietnam were a number of sculptural installations patterned in mazelike con-

Characteristically, Nguyen-Hatsushiba links strenuous activity underwater, where physical movement is restricted, with political repression.

figurations that referred to the complex paths taken by individuals buffeted by political forces. On Long Hai Beach, roughly 75 miles south of Ho Chi Minh City, he drew large mazes in the sand with a stick, which were documented in photographs. In *Water in the Sky* (1998), exhibited in the courtyard of the crumbling Beaux Arts-style Museum of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City under the sponsorship of Blue Space gallery (which is on the ground floor of the museum), he installed a large box-shaped mosquito net with a maze pattern stitched into it. At the 2000 Gwangju Biennial in Korea, he replicated the maze pattern with newspapers on the floor and on structures made of mosquito netting, amid which were a number of cyclos.

For the 2001 Yokohama Triennial, Nguyen-Hatsushiba initially planned to create a cyclo museum that would document, among other things, the history of cyclo drivers, but he was not given enough space. He then considered pedaling a cyclo in a water tank, but the technical problems proved





Breathing is Free: 12,756.3—Karlsruhe 32.3 km, 2007, digital C-print, 48 1/4 by 36 1/2 inches.

unsolvable. The decision to film them underwater followed. He has said that what made the project seem feasible to him—and irresistibly appealing—was, paradoxically, its even more daunting difficulty. Like his subsequent films, this one was made using nonprofessionals, and he has been learning the craft of filmmaking as his work proceeds. Nguyen-Hatsushiba has called Vietnam “a flexible place” to work, where a productive mix of improvisation and determination prevails. “They will find a way to do things,” he says of local assistants; “I am here so I don’t lose a kind of rawness.”

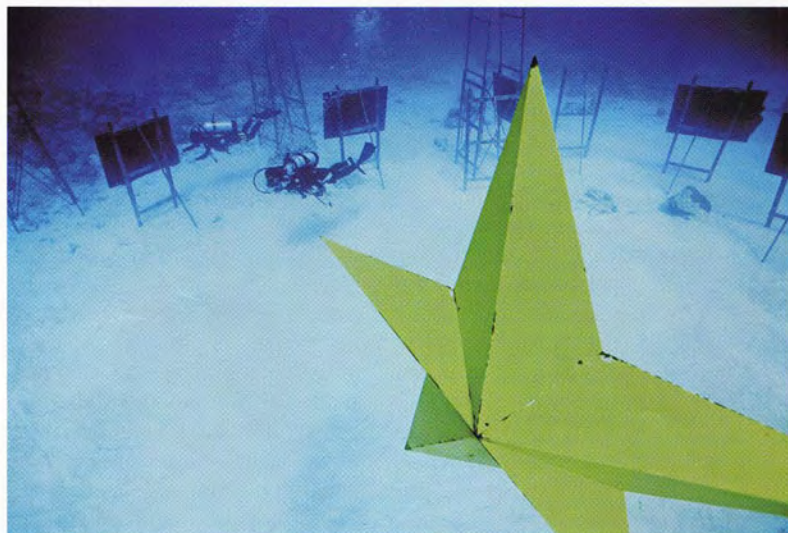
His next film, *Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either nor Neither—A Love Story* (2002-03), compares what might be called collateral chemical damage caused by industry with that caused by war. Minamata is a town in Japan that was subject to over 40 years of mercury pollution from a nearby factory, resulting in a range of serious ailments, some neurological, that became known as Minamata disease. (One of its victims is the subject of a famous photograph by W. Eugene Smith, who made an extended photo-essay on the tragedy.) While doing research, Nguyen-Hatsushiba observed the similarities between the Minamata symptoms and those caused by Agent Orange, which was sprayed over hundreds of thousands of acres by the Americans in Vietnam during the war and continues to claim victims through congenital defects in children born to parents who were exposed.

Memorial Project Minamata, which is shown as a four-screen projection, opens with shots of children playing in a field near the Japanese town, then moves to underwater scenes of three men holding hands, oxygen hoses in their mouths. The screens fill with sinister veils of red/orange pigment unfolding underwater, and then we see a woman in a room with an overhead fan. Images of the fan fill the screens (recalling an early scene in *Apocalypse Now*, in which the image transforms into the spinning blades of a helicopter), followed by people dancing to disco music in a nightclub (the “*Apocalypse Now*,” in Saigon); this footage alternates with comic-book-style drawings of the earlier underwater scenes. The quality of the film becomes poorer and is broken up with static, evoking

fetal sonograms and underlining the vaguely fetal appearance of the nearly naked underwater men. As crosscuts continue between the dancers and the men, one is led to consider that Minamata disease affects the nervous system before birth; another association—nervous dancing/nervous symptoms—links the Saigon disco dancers and Agent Orange victims.

Historical references return in *Happy New Year: Memorial Project Vietnam II* (2003). Its title refers to the Tet Offensive of 1968 (the year of the artist’s birth), which began during a lunar New Year truce. In the surprise assault, the North Vietnamese Army attacked five important cities in South Vietnam as well as dozens of provincial targets. The battle for Hue, a well-preserved former royal seat in the North, was protracted, and left the city in ruins. While the North Vietnamese lost 45,000 men in the Tet offensive—over half of those who fought—the operation was a signal political victory over the U.S.

As the film opens, a view of a field of flowers is followed by imagery of present-day Hue, including its Citadel and bicyclists crossing a bridge over the city’s moat. This is intercut with underwater scenes: divers, silver fish, small plastic balls releasing clouds of color (from food coloring) that billow forth like the smoke from fireworks or sig-



Two stills from Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas: Battle of Easel Point—Memorial Project Okinawa, 2003, single-channel DVD projection, approx. 15 minutes.



The Ground, the Root and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree, 2007, single-channel DVD projection, approx. 15 minutes.

nal flares. A large dragon appears—it is the kind used in New Year's celebrations, though the common description of Vietnam as "dragon shaped" is also relevant—manipulated by divers from below. What the credits refer to as a "fate machine" is seen next—a large globelike cage holding what seem to be several dozen lottery balls. As the cage spins, hesitant scraping sounds build portentously toward insistent drumming. Additional colored smoke and the reappearing dragon contribute to a sense of chaos not far from the apocalyptic.

If the ultimately mournful *Happy New Year* portrays Vietnam as both a mystical force (the dragon) and a beautiful victim (of fate), Nguyen-Hatsushiba's next film, *Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas: Battle of Easel Point—Memorial Project Okinawa* (2003), takes a more angrily satirical view of the country and the war's legacy. It was filmed underwater off the coast of Okinawa, near the site of an American military base from which ammunition was dispatched to Vietnam during the war. In its title, which refers to the Christmastime resumption of the American bombing of North Vietnam in 1972, a holiday greeting becomes a menacing exhortation to Ho Chi Minh. The assault, ordered by Henry Kissinger after the breakdown of the Paris Peace Talks, resulted in a particularly high number of civilian casualties, especially in Hanoi, where it is still commemorated annually.

The opening sounds in *Ho! Ho! Ho!* are of fast hip-hop, played military-marching-band-style, with multiple snare drums. Once again, the setting is underwater. Divers arrive, carrying large folding metal easels that they arrange in a circle, propped on submerged reefs surrounding a three-dimensional version of the single yellow-gold star on the Vietnamese flag. This image is followed by a field of white stars on a blue ground—as in the American flag—which soon shoot like bomber jets toward the viewer. More divers appear, all carrying ammo belts that contain yellow paint cartridges, and they begin to paint. Though they look at the yellow star as if at a life-drawing model, the images taking shape on their canvases are of American movie stars, like Sylvester Stallone, who have appeared in Hollywood films about Vietnam. Frustration builds among the underwater

artists, and some hit their paintings in anger. Then the music becomes quieter, the divers disperse, the easels collapse and the paintings are abandoned. The underlying message is that the Vietnamese artists' efforts to depict their own history have been fatally compromised by the interference of American popular culture's war fantasies.

In the Lucerne exhibition, the films were augmented by several works in other mediums, including a room of photographs documenting *Memorial Project Waterfield: The Story of the Stars* (2006). A performance/installation presented at the 2006 Gwangju Biennial in Korea, it, too, used water as a central metaphor, this time in relation to global economic hegemony and scarcity. The 15 performers, wearing white jumpsuits, goggles and surgical masks, and with water bottles strapped to their backs, made their way through a densely packed field of 28,000 half-filled plastic water bottles, sold in Vietnam by Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Over the course of several days, the performers drank from the bottles, refilling them with urine. Gradually the filled bottles formed a pattern of 50 yellow stars, linking the gold star of Vietnam with the 50 stars of the U.S. flag. Nguyen-Hatsushiba understands the plastic water bottle as a symbol of the 21st century and sees the cycle of drinking and elimination as a kind of purification ritual, though he gives it an ironic twist. In *Waterfield*, a ground war between capitalism and communism that had its final stand in Vietnam is replaced by a familiar American corporate war between two beverage companies. Just as the orderly array of tight-packed bottles came to resemble a mined rice field over the course of the performance, the artist, photographing the process, began to evoke a combat journalist.

The Globe Project: The Garden of Globes (2007), made for the Lucerne exhibition, was installed in a long room painted a vibrant blue. Each of its 25 chrome globes, mounted on stands, has a peephole directed at a specific place on the far side of the world where there was a history of forced displacement: Phnom Penh, Havana, Monrovia. On the floor were statis-

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tics, such as “Fled to Sudan 1984, over 500,000.” Hundreds of objects were suspended from the ceiling—sandals, bicycles, furniture, clocks, electric fans, hats, etc.—made of paper and bamboo and colored the same blue as the walls. In many Southeast Asian countries, these objects traditionally serve as offerings to ancestors.

The problems of political refugees are addressed again in *The Running Project*, also titled *Breathing is Free*, which premiered in Lucerne as well. For this project, Nguyen-Hatsushiba has committed himself to running 12,756.3 kilometers (7,926½ miles)—the diameter of the earth—as a monument to those who, in his words, must “run or perish.” A film was shown in Lucerne of the artist running in Geneva—site of many peace talks—to initiate the project. For subsequent runs, the artist mapped routes that inscribe meaningful images on the given cities. In Manchester, where the Lucerne exhibition traveled, his route criss-crossed canals; when sketched in on an aerial map, it revealed shapes that resembled ferns, which were among the first vascular plants: they distribute water, as canals do. Another run, in Taichung, Taiwan, was configured as twin flowers to commemorate that country’s Independence Day.

Last September, Nguyen-Hatsushiba exhibited a new film at Lehmann Maupin in New York titled *The Ground, the Root and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree*, which concerns traditional Southeast Asian culture and faith confronting historical change. Once more dominated by water, this film is shot from above, on the Mekong River, a dominant geographic signifier of the region. Filming took place in Luang Prabang, Laos, the ancient seat of that country’s monarchy and a landmark of its Buddhist heritage. The city is perched on a peninsula and is historically isolated, as the Mekong

is only navigable for parts of the year. It provides an apt setting for a narrative of conflict between tradition and progress.

In the film, art students from a local craft school are shown exercising in running clothes in an open-air stadium and later are seen in a flotilla of small watercraft heading down the wide river. They stand in front of easels placed in the prows of the boats, painting the surrounding mountainous landscape. The camera, on one of the boats, glimpses the painted images, the landscape and the floating art class. As the boat passes a Bodhi tree, the symbol of the Buddha and enlightenment, many of the young artists dive toward the tree from their boats. Perhaps the brief moment in the film when the art students are underwater is meant to be understood in relation to earlier films, making *The Ground, the Root and the Air* a kind of backstory. In this version of the artist’s prevailing metaphor—contemporary life as a submerged struggle before ultimate enlightenment—the divers are finally shown coming up for air and swimming toward the Bodhi tree.

Hugely ambitious and sometimes frustratingly obscure, Nguyen-Hatsushiba creates, with his alluring submarine imagery, allegories of the fluidity—and suffocating pressures—that characterize the complex conditions of present-day Vietnam. □

The exhibition “Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba” opened at the Museum of Art, Lucerne [June 2-Aug. 26, 2007] and traveled to the Manchester Art Gallery in England [Feb. 2-June 1]. His show at Lehmann Maupin gallery [Sept. 6-Oct. 20, 2007] was followed by a solo exhibition at the Asia Society, New York [“Vietnam: A Memorial Work by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba,” May 23-Aug. 3, 2008]. Another solo show was at Brookhaven College, Dallas [August-September, 2008].

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