



## Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba/MATRIX 203

### Memorial Project Vietnam

April 6 – June 29, 2003

**University of California  
Berkeley Art Museum**

May 6 – June 29, 2003

**New Museum of Contemporary Art**

September 11 – November 28, 2004

**Austin Museum of Art**

**MATRIX**

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba/MATRIX 203

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba has used mosquito netting, business cards, dried fruit rinds, newspaper, rice, photography, and, most recently, film to address the daily experiences of ordinary people in Vietnam. His poignant, lyrical, and spellbinding works comment on the rapid changes taking place there due to active governmental reform of many traditional social structures, and to the aftereffects of the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> Nguyen-Hatsushiba was raised in Japan, educated in the United States, and now lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City. This varied background enables him to explore Vietnamese history and identity, discrimination and cultural re-evaluation from an intriguing place of in-between.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba's MATRIX exhibition includes two films (projected in the gallery as DVDs) that are linked by a common underwater setting; vivid, saturated color; choreographed movements; and hypnotic soundtracks.

*Memorial Project, Nha Trang, Vietnam, "Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious, and the Cowards"* (2001) records a staged underwater race by cyclo (Vietnamese bicycle taxi) drivers, a significant community within Vietnamese culture. A cheap and traditional mode of transportation, cyclos were utilized primarily by poorer people, many of whom fought during the Vietnam War and found it difficult to find other jobs. For the current government, cyclos represent the old way of life. In response to legislation outlawing their production, the artist created this work as a gesture of solidarity with the drivers who struggle to hold onto their livelihood.

In the pensive and somber film, cyclo drivers, working sometimes singly and other times in pairs, cycle under the crystal clear, lush blue-green waters. Struggling to keep their balance on the sandy floor, they pass coral-colored rocks and, with great effort, push forward until they run out of breath. Periodically, they rise to the surface gasping for air. Throughout the film they ceaselessly ascend and descend, all the time moving toward a symbolic underwater burial area composed of thirty mosquito net-covered forms. The nets, stretched six to eight meters deep, float as if prophetically. As art critic Christopher Phillips notes, "the divers personify a quest for a zone of safety where they can survive...their exertions seem both utterly heroic and perfectly futile."<sup>2</sup>

*Memorial Project, Nha Trang, Vietnam*, filmed on location in Vietnam, references the many Vietnamese people who tried to flee the country by boat during the 1970s and 1980s, and, by extension, all who escape their homeland when faced with war and its aftermath. The artist explains that he was attempting to provide "a spiritual space for them to rest in peace. It is also my effort to establish a sanctuary. It does not need only [to] be a memorial. It can be a hideout from the rest of the human entity."<sup>3</sup> As the subtitle of the work "*For the Courageous, the Curious, and the Cowards*" denotes, this is a work that celebrates humanity with all its quixotic desires—and mistakes.

The use of water as the setting for both films provides a specifically Vietnamese sensibility. Vietnam, with its long coastline and one of the world's largest, most fertile river basins, the Mekong delta, is defined by its relationship to water. Historically, the country's survival has been based on maritime trade. Vietnamese folklore and mythology abound in references to water, from the distinctive national tradition of water puppetry performed in lakes and waterways, to the myth of the magical sword—instrumental in driving the Chinese out of the land—that was retrieved by a tortoise and taken to the depths of Hanoi's Hoan Kiem Lake.

Two powerful images dominate *Happy New Year—Memorial Project Vietnam II*



(2003): a traditional New Year's dragon puppet, supported from beneath by seven divers; and a fantastical Fate Machine—a giant, skeletal orb filled with smaller balls, which are released at random and shot toward the surface of the water by the Master of Destiny. The Fate Machine refers to the experience of the Vietnamese "boat people" who cast their lot on the water, attempting to flee the country following the war in search of a better life. Metaphorically, each capsule in the orb is an individual soul attempting a successful journey. These capsules explode, however, before they reach the surface—they exhaust their last breath, igniting the hopes they had into a colorful display of courage, eventually dissolving into the vast sea. The desire that compels the boat people to undertake their risky journeys and the uncertainty that awaits them is manifest in the repetitive process of release and upward motion. The artist describes the work as expressing "the drama of humanity."

When the war officially ended in 1975, tens of thousands of Vietnamese sympathetic to the South left the country, many to avoid displacement and political persecution. They left by any means they could, mostly in boats, and about a third of those who fled drowned in their attempts. In 1979 alone, more than 270,000 people tried to emigrate. The exodus continued through the 1990s, motivated in later years primarily by economic hardship.

In describing this project, Nguyen-Hatsushiba notes that many Vietnamese people who left the country after the war are beginning to return. The impact on personal identity of such round-trip migration—of crossing and re-crossing boundaries—is one of the topics he explores in his work. When individuals return home after all that time, he says, they are not the same people they were when they left. The story of the boat people, in other words, continues beyond the journeys themselves.

*Happy New Year—Memorial Project Vietnam II* also explores a key event in modern Vietnamese history: the Tet Offensive of 1968, a series of surprise attacks by North Vietnamese troops during the celebration of the Lunar New Year, when both sides were thought to have laid down their arms to celebrate the country's most important holiday. The Tet Offensive is considered a turning point in the war, in that its success demonstrated the vulnerability of the American and South Vietnamese forces. The victory for the Northern regime several years later led to the beginning of the era of Vietnamese boat people.

The effort to create a memorial to the souls lost during escape attempts by the

*Happy New Year—Memorial Project Vietnam II*, 2003 [DVD still]; digital video.



boat people has been the primary focus of Nguyen-Hatsushiba's work since 1994. Initial plans for his MATRIX exhibition included a cross-continent cyclo ride from California to New York, location of the New Museum, the second venue for the exhibition. His aim was two-fold: first, to create a performance art work, and, second, to raise money to construct a permanent underwater memorial installation, ideally located in U.S. waters. Visitors to the memorial could see it either by snorkeling at the surface of the water or diving down for a close-up experience. The sheer magnitude of the project necessitates additional research that the artist continues to pursue.

When Nguyen-Hatsushiba was born in Tokyo in 1968 to a Japanese mother and a Vietnamese father, hundreds of thousands of people in the United States were protesting the war in Vietnam. This was also the year in which the heaviest casualties were sustained on both sides. On what [as of this writing] might be the eve of another widely disavowed U.S. war, Nguyen-Hatsushiba's astute, politically charged moving-image memorials have their U.S. premiere in the MATRIX Program. What, as a nation, have we learned about war and its aftermath in these thirty-five years?

The dates for Nguyen-Hatsushiba's MATRIX exhibition overlap the anniversary of the Unification of Vietnam, or Liberation of Vietnam, on April 30, 1975. The artist notes that the anniversary is a sad one for expatriate Vietnamese, as it commemorates a day that changed their destiny. In explaining his work, the artist stated, "I am attempting to discuss a space where one may freely hope his/her future. Freely hope and freely attempt, a contrast to the reality blemished by corruption of the system."<sup>4</sup> The power of hope for a better life routinely propels people to risk theirs in search of it. Nguyen-Hatsushiba's memorial projects remind us of past injustice while simultaneously communicating an eternal truth: the human spirit seeks freedom from oppression and needs peace.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson

Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

<sup>1</sup> "Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba," in *MEGA-WAVE – Towards a New Synthesis, Yokohama 2001*.

*International Triennale of Contemporary Art* (The Japan Foundation: Yokohama, Japan, 2001), 270.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Phillips, "Crosscurrents in Yokohama," *Art in America*, January 2002, 89.

<sup>3</sup> Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba interviewed at the Yokohama 2001 Triennale, unpublished, n/p.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*Happy New Year—Memorial Project Vietnam II*, 2003 [DVD still]; digital video.



*The following is an excerpt from an e-mail conversation between Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba and the author on February 25, 2003:*

**Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson: How do you choose the subjects of your work?**

**Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba:** I think living in Vietnam has made a big impact on my development in art. There are many unwritten stories from within, but it is also the part of my life spent in the U.S. and Japan that I feel the need to digest in reflection to present-day Vietnam. Recently, my subjects are engrossed within history, tradition, value differences, systems, religion, and the ambivalence of all these things...It is a kind of perseverance to existence...that become[s] my subject. The kind of life moment you resist letting go of, sort of like the survival of the fittest.

**HZJ: How does the presentation of your work in the U.S., in Berkeley—the home of the anti-Vietnam War movement—affect your thoughts on presenting your work?**

**JN-H:** I am looking forward to experiencing this. It may lead me to a new understanding and direction. Even though my work has evolved with the new film, and is dealing more explicitly with history and war tactics, I hope that my work can also be experienced beyond the context of war. I hesitate more about the group of Vietnamese overseas who are caught in the mind trap of what is just and what is evil based on their limited understanding of their own heritage. This simplistic definition may mirror the mentality of the officials who identify what is good and what is socially evil. Here, I am talking about the anti-communist group of Vietnamese, who are still attempting to make some drastic changes to Vietnam. I think it will change, but gradually.

**HZJ: Who are the performers in your pieces?**

**JN-H:** For the first film and the new film made for my MATRIX exhibition, they are a group of fishermen. They are really creative in how they develop their highly unique movements.

**HZJ: Do you do the underwater filming yourself?**

**JN-H:** I really love to be in the action and to capture the shots. In underwater shooting, one can really be in the action, above and below, from all kinds of perspectives. The speed of your movement cannot be that swift, however, especially in the vertical movement controlled by your buoyancy. Well, at least with my current basic equip-

*Happy New Year—Memorial Project Vietnam II*, 2003 [DVD still]; digital video.

COVER: *Happy New Year—Memorial Project Vietnam II*, 2003 [DVD still]; digital video; produced by the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, with assistance from the New Museum, New York.



ment (just a camera), speed is limited. So, I have to work with the subject's direction of movement versus my physical movement versus the shifting of the camera within my arm's length. For all the films that I have made to date, I have used only natural light. For the film *"Towards the Complex..."*, I only had one video camera (a Sony MiniDV) and one 35mm still camera. I would switch back and forth between the two machines to catch the shots...Many times, we would redo the action so that I could be shooting from another perspective. Later, some eighteen tapes were edited for the film. On the other hand, *Happy New Year* is shot with two video cameras. Both my assistant and I took various positions to shoot the scenes. Maybe the way we work will frustrate filmmakers and film students (I did not study filmmaking). I work more like a painter who paints the same spot over and over until the whole image begins to interact with me. That process continues into the editing stage.

**HZJ: What is your relationship to narrative?**  
**JN-H:** It is a very beautiful question to think about if it could be asked of anyone off the street, without any attached context. It doesn't have to be in the context of art, literature, film...just simply, "What is your relationship to narrative?" How do we construct our passage of communication? It may be non-verbal or simply visual without words. I have grown up understanding the relationship to causality; every outcome has at least a source, visible or not. Playing on this principle allows us to create a variety of narrative styles. Everyone's life is narrative.

**HZJ: Do you do historical research, or are the references based on your own personal memory and oral histories?**

**JN-H:** Both. I think it is important to be flexible in gathering information for references. Sometimes it even becomes necessary to "make" references. I am involved in "creating" a story more than "reporting" a story, although I try not to distort the situation. This "creating" process can come from my own judgment to a given situation, objective reflection of society, culmination of my own mixed identity, and fragmentation of the values from that identity.

**HZJ: Can you describe the soundtracks of each piece?**  
**JN-H:** The soundtrack for *"Towards the Complex..."* just worked out. The intro and the ending with the recorder are arranged by my friend, the composer Quoc Bao. The rest

*Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either nor Neither—A Love Story*, 2002 [DVD still]; digital video; photo courtesy of the Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto and Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo.



is something I recorded using a 4-track cassette recorder when I was in graduate school in Maryland. I remixed one of the compositions from that "album" and mixed in a makeshift bubble sound. The track is mostly my own voice through some effects. Another important element of this track is the whistle; it is my own whistle recorded. The thumping noise during the sequence where the cyclos are pulled over the rocks is almost the climax of the film. It has a religious tone to it, but it is exaggerated with a ridiculous amount of pounding, as if to drive off some obstinate spirit that is haunting one's karma. I try to stretch time with sound, to bend time as a way to try to acquire the voices of souls that moving images may not be able to express.

**HZJ: How did you transition from making sculpture to making film/video?**  
**JN-H:** I think it was the need of presenting the idea. I was not intentionally thinking of pursuing such a direction. After going over my concept for the work to be made for the Yokohama Triennale with the curator, the idea evolved in an unpredicted direction. My original plan was to develop a museum of cyclos consisting of multi-gallery spaces, just as in a real museum. We began to focus on the idea of the memorial room and eventually, my idea of doing the performance changed into filming the performance in the real sea in Vietnam. By that time, I really got scared thinking about what may be down there. Sharks? Sea snakes? Even unexploded leftover bombs and mines from the war? I asked friend in the coastal city of Nha Trang about the water conditions and any possible dangers. I invited him to join the production, and his worries were quite different from mine. They were related to what the authorities would say about such a project. He was also not sure if we could realize the concept of having people pedal cyclos underwater without air tanks. I stressed the point that they must not use tanks nor masks, but they may breathe. I researched underwater camera equipment via the Internet and got family and friends to hand-carry equipment from the U.S., Germany, and Japan. Such equipment does not exist for rent or for sale here in Vietnam, and I wanted to avoid possible delays at customs for the declaration of goods. I signed up for a diving course. My instructor became my camera assistant. The rest is that. We just did it.

*Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam*, 2001 [DVD still]; digital video; photo courtesy of Yokohama Triennale 2001 and Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo.



Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1968. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1992 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1994. This is the U.S. premiere of *Memorial Project, Nha Trang, Vietnam*; the world premiere of *Happy New Year*, and the artist's first one-person museum exhibition in the U.S. He lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

**Selected Solo Exhibitions and Screenings**

2003  
 "Memorial Project Vietnam," New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY; Austin Museum of Art, Austin, TX  
 "Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam, 'Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards,'" Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, Germany

2002  
 "Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either nor Neither – A Love Story," Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan  
 "Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam, 'Towards the Complex – For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards,'" The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand  
 "Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba," Galeria Animal, Santiago, Chile  
 "Towards the Complex," De Appel, Amsterdam, Netherlands

2000  
 "Xich Lo 2001—The Making of Alternative History," Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

1998  
 "In Between," Shiseido Ginza Art Space, Tokyo, Japan  
 "Individuals-Collections," Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan  
 "WWW.XEOM.COM," Blue Space Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

1997  
 "Dream," 29 Hang Bai Exhibition House, Hanoi, Vietnam

1996  
 "The Mosaic Series Exhibition," Dallas Visual Art Center, Dallas, TX

*Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam*, 2001 [DVD still]; digital video; photo courtesy of Yokohama Triennale 2001 and Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo.



**Selected Group Exhibitions**

2003  
 "The Moderns," Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin, Italy  
 "Universal Stranger," Borusan Art Gallery, Istanbul, Turkey  
 "KaaP Helder 2003," Kunst en Cultuur Noord-Holland, Den Helder, The Netherlands  
 "Venice Biennale," Venice, Italy  
 "Eighth Istanbul Biennale," Istanbul, Turkey

2002  
 "Busan Biennale," Busan, Korea  
 "URBANLENZ," Omotesando, Tokyo, Japan  
 "Video-Zone, The First International Video Art Biennale in Israel," Tel Aviv, Israel  
 "Attitude 2002," Contemporary Art Museum of Kumamoto, Kumamoto, Japan  
 "Rio de Janeiro Film Festival," Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
 "Thirteenth Biennale of Sydney," Sydney, Australia  
 "XXV São Paulo Biennale," Sao Paulo, Brazil

2001  
 "Yokohama International Triennale of Contemporary Art," Yokohama, Japan

2000  
 "Invisible Boundary: Metamorphosed Asian Art," Utsunomiya Museum of Art, Utsunomiya, Japan;  
 Niigata Prefecture Art Museum, Niigata, Japan  
 "The Third Gwangju Biennale," Gwangju, Korea

1999  
 "Gap Vietnam," The House of World Cultures, Berlin, Germany

**Selected Catalogues**

*Attitude 2002 – One Truth in Your Heart*, Contemporary Art Museum Kumamoto, Japan, 2002.  
*[The World May Be] Fantastic*, Thirteenth Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, 2002.  
*XXV Bienal Internacional de São Paulo*, Iconografias Metropolitanas, Países, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2002.  
*MEGA-WAVE—Towards a New Synthesis, Yokohama 2001*, International Triennale of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan, 2001.  
*Invisible Boundary: Metamorphosed Asian Art*, Utsunomiya Museum of Art, Utsunomiya, Japan, 2000.  
*Man & Space*, The Third Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Korea, 2000.  
*Gap Vietnam*, House of World Cultures, Berlin, Germany, 1999.  
*Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba: In Between*, Shiseido Ginza Artspace, Tokyo, Japan, 1998.

*Thinker, Dreamer and Whatever*, 1997; chickens, mosquito net, and wire; 14'9" x 14'9" (4.5 x 4.5 m); photo courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo.



**Selected Bibliography**

Gioni, Massimiliano. "Speaking in Tongues," *Flash Art International*, Nov.-Dec. 2001, 74-77.  
 Kawahara, Hideki. "Voices of Hamatori," *Bijutsu Techo*, November 2001, Vol. 53, No. 812, 129-136.  
 Kent, Rachel. "Yokohama Triennale," *ART AsiaPacific*, April/May/June 2002, Issue 34, 36-37.  
 Phillips, Christopher. "Crosscurrents in Yokohama," *Art in America*, January 2002, 84-91.  
 Purvis, Jennifer. "The Making of Alternative History," *The Japan Times*, Arts Section, September 3, 2000, 14.  
 Tani, Arata. "Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba," *Shinano-Mainichi Daily Newspaper*, July 23, 2001, 13.

**Work in MATRIX**

*Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam, "Toward the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious, and the Cowards,"* 2001  
 Digital video projection  
 13 minutes  
 Courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo

**Happy New Year - Memorial Project Vietnam II, 2003**

Digital video projection  
 16 minutes  
 Courtesy of the artist and Mizuma Gallery, Tokyo

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A work in progress, 1997; performance installation at Long Hai, Vietnam; photo courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo.