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Interview with Lana Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam (Lin + Lam) by Ayreen Anastas

Ayreen Anastas: Before our official beginning, I thought it would be good to introduce what you have been working on.

Lana Lin: Lan Thao and I have been collaborating for about five years. We have been invested in research-based projects that examine how our individual and national subjectivities are defined through history, archives, language and translation. The content and context of our work determines the form it takes. We have produced installations, photographs, actions, and time-based media. Our decision to work together with you on this email dialogue/interview was initiated on the occasion of our multi-media installation *Unidentified Vietnam* at Gallery 456. Actually we chose to ‘come out’ as the artist team ‘Lin + Lam’ with this exhibition, possibly because this project has been with us throughout our collaboration. From the beginning we conceived of it as both an installation and a 16mm film – each embodiment to address capacities specific to its form. This is a good example of how we approach a project. And the project is ongoing because we are still in the process of completing the 16mm film. We work pretty slowly, or maybe I should say methodically.

Ayreen: OK, let’s start at the beginning, where is that beginning? the beginning however you would like to understand it ... the beginning is the hardest wrote Karl Marx at the beginning of one of his books..... the beginning, not as origin more as orientation?

Lin + Lam: This is a good place to start because it is indeterminate, and we tend to begin by considering our orientation - what position will we take with regard to the subject. For *Unidentified Vietnam*, we begin with an ending (which of course is also a beginning) - the end of a war, the end of South Vietnam, the end of the US military presence in Vietnam, the end of false hopes of democracy . . . April 29, 1975 also signaled a beginning - the beginning of exile for millions of refugees, the beginning of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The movement from beginning to end, end to beginning - the transition - is central to this particular project. We are interested in the transfer of power, from one government to another, one nation or idea of a nation to another. Shortly after April 29, 1975, the South Vietnam Embassy in Washington, D.C. called the Library of Congress to ask if they could take charge of a collection of over 500 films, sound recordings, and assorted documents, so they would not fall into the hands of the new government. Once again, an arm of the US government played the protector. The Library of Congress acquired the films, and they can be found in an archive called the South Vietnam Embassy Collection.



Photograph of a film can from the South Vietnam Embassy Collection, Library of Congress.

Ayreen: In *Unidentified Vietnam* what is the meaning of Vietnam as you discovered it or as it unfolds and manifests itself in your work? It is not a question about the identity of the unidentified? It is more what new associations, surprises, layers, points of interests you discovered while working on this project?

Lana: I cannot say what Vietnam means. Of course there is real place called Vietnam, with real people and real history. I know this as the place where Lan Thao grew up and where part of her family still lives. It is where only a certain kind of fruit grows, and where you can still find the detritus of decades of war, but I certainly don't know what it means. Its meaning is not fixed – it could refer to a non-existent nation, a lost nation, a nation divided then united, a 'third world' nation, a modern nation, a postcolonial nation To me it communicates a set of meanings, complex and contradictory, such that we knew we would be busy for many years studying it. This is why the title *Unidentified Vietnam* seemed so fitting. Referencing the seventeen film cans in the Library of Congress' SVNE film collection labeled only 'Unidentified Vietnam,' we thought the title spoke to the desire to identify and construct an ideal nation, and the failure of that nation-building project.

Lan Thao: I believe it was Bill Clinton who said: "In our national memory Vietnam was a war, but Vietnam is also a country." It is a bizarre and telling statement - it took more than 25 years after the war ended for someone who is not Vietnamese to recognize that Vietnam is a country. What a country means is a difficult question, because its meaning will shift from person to person, from one socio/politico/economic position to another. But it also represents a period of US intervention failure. It is precisely the idea of Vietnam [the possibility of the spread of Communism] or rather the myth of Vietnam and its eventual demystification that we aimed to suspend at the outset of the project. I agree with you that it is not the question of identity that we are after, but perhaps what is unrecognizable, what is undefinable, what is unidentifiable within the distance in history created by time and geography. This is a history that is too much to speak – it is a long history of struggle for self-governance. From where we are as makers, it

was crucial for us to look at this particular historical past, with our feet firmly planted in the present. We were also very much interested in seeing whether misrecognition would occur. There is an absent present in all of the propaganda films we looked at that became pivotal for us. There are no credits for directors...

As we continued to interview people for the project, what surfaced as one of the most striking things to me - the process of nation-building - is the recognizable sameness in the creation of image - the same image, same national symbol can be used to mobilize people from both sides of the struggle for independence, whether supporting a socialist or capitalist system.

Ayreen: What strategies have you developed working with propaganda material in *Unidentified Vietnam*?

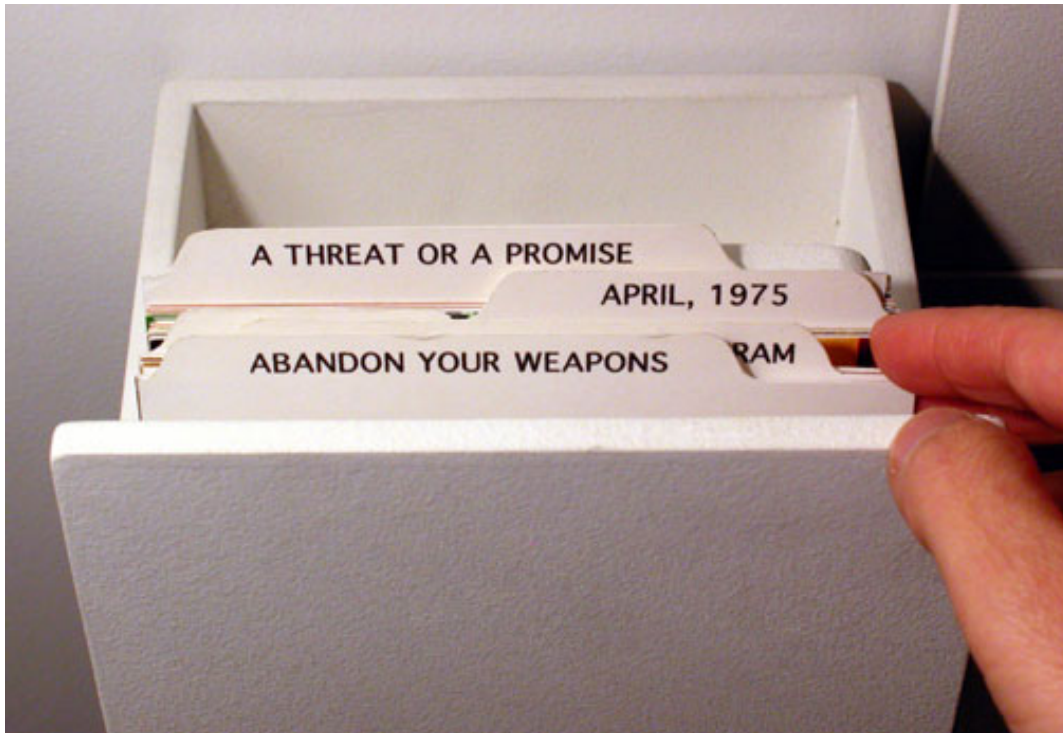
Lana : Since propaganda is by nature seductive to the viewer, you're right that we needed to develop a strategy that didn't reproduce propaganda, while still referencing and quoting from the films. Two methods we employed were de-construction and re-enactment. An effective method for seducing the viewer into the world of the propaganda film (and actually most mainstream narratives,) is for the sound to confirm the image, reinforcing the desired meaning. We took apart this alliance, so that the sound questions or contradicts the image, or is simply dissociated from it, inviting the viewer to make alternate connections or bring their own ideas to the material.

We examined and selected representative events in the propaganda films – for instance, a rally when citizens pledge their loyalty to the government, a classroom where a teacher writes a slogan on a chalkboard, and press conferences with key political figures of the time. We re-enacted these scenes as a way to closely study the films, mimic their gestures, and insert our own presence into them, re-writing them for ourselves. This pointed to the performativity of political leadership as well as the ideal citizen – the demand to conform to and perform these model roles. We also superimposed our re-enactments over the original images, drawing a parallel between the past and present. We aren't interested in luring people into a nostalgic past, but to speak from and work within our contemporary moment.



[PLEASE CLICK HERE TO WATCH](#) an excerpt of *Unidentified Vietnam*, video component of installation.

Lan Thao: I agree with what Lana has conveyed. I would add that since my past work has revolved around the residues of the war, it's important that what we do with the films from the archive not become shorthand to a complex history. Since we have been working simultaneously on a 16mm film as well as an installation, we wanted to address each medium separately, each on its own terms. Viewership in a cinematic space is very different from viewership in an art context; unlike a film where deconstruction can be experienced through our editing of sound and image, in the installation, the viewer is the editor, giving more or less time to the things on display. We have an opportunity in our installation to create an environment that echoes our working process. Our research is akin to archaeology - the viewers enter into an excavation if they so choose.



Unidentified Vietnam, detail of installation, card catalogue drawer 'A'.

Ayreen: In your installation, on one of the walls, there were a series of black and white photographs. At first sight, they appeared to be fragments of a map of the world. I was wrong. Can you explain more what they are and what their relation is to the other elements in the exhibition?

Lana: Earlier I said that transitions were very important in this project. The photographs are actually stills from a transitional moment in the propaganda films. The propaganda films employed a wipe, a swish pan of light and darkness, to move from one scene to the next, or one news clip to the next. This was the moment that was not meant to be central, but merely the exit and entry between the main events. To us, this transition spoke literally to the changeover from one government to the next, one power to the next. It was the marginalized moment that we wanted to analyze. We froze each frame of one second of filmed time. 24 frames equals one second of 16mm film, so we have 24 photographs.



Unidentified Vietnam, detail of installation, “24 frames = 1 second”.

Lan Thao: This is one example of how we work – site, scale and medium-specific, utilizing different temporal registers. We expanded this fleeting moment - spatially, physically, and temporally - in the time it takes for a viewer to travel the entire length of the gallery and view what would normally pass before them in one second.

Ayreen: In your film *Departure*, which explores three post-colonial cities in Asia, what were your ideas and your desires before you ventured on your trips to Taipei, Shanghai, Hanoi ... and how did these desires and ideas manifest themselves and transform ... I am interested to hear more about this project, maybe it is good to describe the thought process that brought you there and back. How does *Departure* inform your other works and ideas; what did it give you back?

Lana: *Departure* was our first video collaboration, so we were embarking on a way of working together, how to communicate within this particular medium.

Filmmaking and art are my means of knowing and learning more about the world, and usually this means portraying my sense of displacement. This could be my estrangement from Taiwan and my own relatives, my estrangement from language, or from US foreign policy, or even my own sense of self. So for me *Departure* is not so much about being a foreigner to Asia as it is about foreignness itself, and how that foreignness is experienced in the movement through different spaces and histories.

Duration and cinematography were our means to communicate the limitations of our own perspective. We were very conscious of the problems of ethnography in documenting cultures, people, and sites that were

unfamiliar to us. The language barrier was only the most obvious manifestation of these problems. Our lack of understanding and access shaped the project and became the conceptual framework.

We shot images with a fixed frame to give a strictly limited perspective – our own. The viewer becomes aware of this as a limitation (as opposed to receiving it as an omniscient or universal point of view,) through the relatively long duration of the shots. We wanted the viewer to experience the viewing time as real time, so each location is seen from a single point of view – an essentially uninterrupted shot. And we do not present the typical touristic viewpoint, the “scenic overlook” or “best” vantage point. The view is that of a passenger in a moving vehicle – from a train in Taiwan, a car in Shanghai, and a cyclo in Hanoi. This was one strategy we employed to situate ourselves within the surrounding landscape and emphasize our own individual positions.



Departure, video still.

Lan Thao: The initial period of the time we spent in Asia for me was more about orientation conditions than working on a new project – learning, very slowly, a new language, new living. Initially, we had some ideas, interests around architecture in different cities in Asia, but soon it became apparent that we needed to refocus, and face our own pre-conceptions, as well as figuring out our subject position. It was the first time that I was to be living in Asia after 25 years, and I was rather ill prepared psychically speaking. That foreignness Lana spoke of, I also experienced, even though I didn’t expect to.

I think we were both deeply affected by our own inability to communicate, grasping for whatever clues or visual aids available. And that everyday struggle became a way to foreground to our viewers who we are as makers, how we regularly experienced a multitude of languages there. In Taiwan, the subway announcements are in four languages: English, Mandarin, Taiwanese and Hakaanese. So the languages

that we heard on the streets became the language of the piece, running parallel with the language of filmmaking. *Departure* is narrated in five languages by five different women, speaking in their respective native tongues. Highlighting the power dynamics that endanger less dominant languages was important to us.

Lana and I co-wrote the stories of change, the histories of power shifts – mapping them through the vehicles of transportation. We thought a lot about ethnography, how to work against and with it. We then worked with a number of translators and language consultants to try to preserve the nuances in each language. And that took a lot of work, a lot of back and forth and a lot re-writing. There were times we had to re-write while we were at the recording studio because our narrator would make suggestions as to how things could or should be said.

I love the way language can do different things, like the word ‘departure’ implies leaving and coming at the same time because when you leave somewhere you are also coming to somewhere else. Writing for me is a very much about articulating my thoughts at first to myself and then the reader. Writing with another person on the same topic – is articulating myself while seeing whether my use of language, metaphors, synonyms, antonyms is working the right way. And because we were working within a very condensed period, we learned quickly how each of us speaks, in speech and in text.



Departure, research notes.

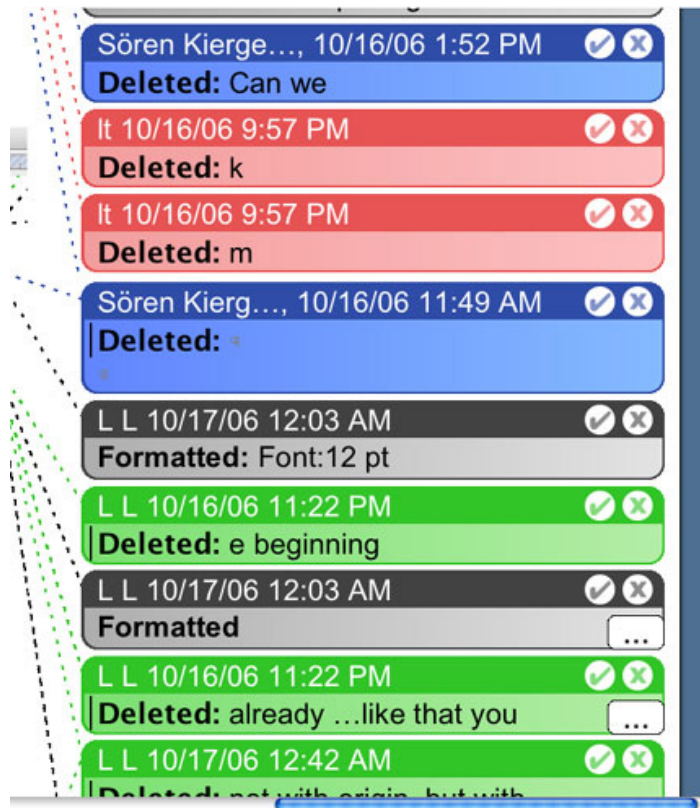
Ayreen: I would like to hear more about the lines connecting Lin and Lam collaborating and how that space is constituted. Lin film, Lam architecture, yes, but I mean more. Some assume that collaboration is inherently more political than working on one's own. What is more in this space of collaboration than the simple addition of one plus one equals two.

Lana: I don't believe that collaboration is inherently political, but it provides an opportunity in which the political is possible. The dynamic exchange between collaborators is a process of contestation, and politically speaking, this is where an agonistic democracy can develop. One could also say that productive tensions can exist between artist/artwork and the viewer, but with collaboration, the exchange is direct and built into the process. Ideally the participation between individuals contributes to something that is supplementary to each individual – it values the individual voice while generating a collective voice. We specifically point to this by taking the collaborative name 'Lin + Lam'. Whereas Lin and Lam suggests a combination, even a merger, Lin plus Lam retains our individuality.

Lan Thao: We struggled a little with the process of naming ourselves. As Lana said, 'Lin + Lam' is a reflection of how we see our collaboration. It is a recognition of our individualities, that as we combine our efforts and focus we are not sucked/subsumed into one neat package, one singular identity. The 'I' still exists for me. I don't believe that it is possible to speak as one singular voice in a collaboration. I don't feel very comfortable with that idea because as far our process goes, it is a layered discussion, with many edits, many deletions, and of course, many additions. We each have our strengths; working with Lana allowed me to explore in areas of time and media much more in depth than if I were to do it alone. Likewise, my own thinking about space and objects has shifted. But the initial idea of collaborating began as we saw the overlapping areas of our individual practice, our interests in the social, the historical, and notions of race and gender. And we were both interested in seeing if our different backgrounds and life experiences could serve as fuel for work. So in a way I do think that it is a personal and political choice we make in *how* to work together - what are the motivations for each of us, before coming to a conceptual framework of a project, aside from the necessary division of labour, who does what . . . etc.

I must say that sometimes collaborations have been represented as somewhat too utopian for me, that whole team effort thing, as if egos and personalities are not of issues. There is friction in working together, and that friction is in part what makes the work, but there is a tendency to erase friction, as friction is seen as 'contention' and of course that would be seen as 'bad'.

Lana: It can be quite difficult, but we have to take on that contention – and just tossing ideas back and forth between the two of us is insufficient. We want to open up the field of discussion around our work and seek out forces that challenge our practice.



-- Ayreen Anastas, Lana Lin and Lan Thao Lam (Lin+Lam)

Ayreen Anastas writes in fragments and makes films and videos. *Pasolini Pa* Palestine*(2005), *m* of Bethlehem* (2003), *the Library of Useful Knowledge* (2002) have been shown internationally in festivals, museums and cinemas but not yet broadcast on television. The new shorter *Oxford English Dictionary* was published in *Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 16, Number 3, July 2004. She has no affection for the proclamation of victory. Troubled by any image of herself, suffers when she is named.

www.16beavergroup.org
www.campcampaign.info

Lana Lin is a New York-based media artist. She has made a dozen films and videos that have been seen at documentary and experimental film festivals as well as museums and art galleries. Montage and appropriation have been her tools to convey multiple perspectives and disorientation. She has called herself a non-visual visual artist but images continue to haunt her. She was honored with a 'Golden Razor' award back when film and audiotape were cut by hand.

H. Lan Thao Lam is a bilingual, bi-national artist who has worked with space, money, and social left-overs before venturing into time. Her projects: *Where Does It Goes From Here* (2001), *Wouldn't Martha Be Proud* (1999) and *Tracing Echoes* (1998 – present) have been presented inside galleries and elsewhere. Her education is formed by refugee camps in Malaysia, housing projects in Canada, Ontario College of Art, CalArts, among others.

The artist team **Lin + Lam** have shown their work in New York, Vancouver, Taipei, Hong Kong and Denmark. Their text and photo project about the former Vietnamese refugee camps in Hong Kong appears in *Cabinet* magazine, Spring 2005. They will contribute to *Art Journal*, Fall 2007.

www.linpluslam.com

www.caacarts.org