

Siting the Artist's Voice

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In 2015, two filmmakers from Southeast Asia each made films that might be considered interludes in national historiography, opening up spaces in the historical record to unsettle the perceived closures and advances made by the progress of official time.¹ For both filmmakers, Vandy Rattana (b. 1980, Phnom Penh, Cambodia) and Nguyễn Trinh Thi (b. 1973, Hanoi, Vietnam), several textual and artistic strategies emerge as key devices to produce alternative historical documents that serve as reflective pauses rather than confrontations or ruptures. Striking commonalities between the two films include characteristics of the essay film, such as epistolarity, voice-over, the landscape as historical frame, and artistic and archival intertextuality. While attending to the constellation of these elements within the two films, the objective of this preliminary analysis is oriented toward siting the voice as it serves as a support, signifier, and opening toward meaning within the moving image work, and how it shapes the viewer's experiential relationship with the films. Siting the artist's voice thus locates its role as

¹ The two films were co-produced by Jeu de Paume, the Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques (FNAGP), and the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux as part of a screening program curated by Erin Gleeson.

medium, material presence, and conduit of personal and authorial subjectivity in the face of history.

In Vandy Rattana's *MONOLOGUE* (2015)² and Nguyễn Trinh Thi's *Letters from Panduranga* (2015), the artists perform semi-fictional dialogues. Vandy Rattana's speech, taking form as part soliloquy, part address, represents the artist's attempt to communicate with his older sister, who died during the Pol Pot regime (1975-1979), and whom Vandy never met. The agitation of his speech amplifies the silence that returns his verbal address, his words composed as though excerpted from a letter but performed as a monologue. The 'dialogue' takes place at the presumed site of her remains, under two mango trees on a patch of land where the Khmer Rouge had dug mass graves, and carried out in rhythm with the sounds of nature. Nguyễn Trinh Thi's film is narratively structured through an exchange of letters between a man and a woman reflecting on their mutual research sites. The woman speaks to her experience among the Cham communities still occupying the lands once part of Champa, the name given to a federation of Hinduized polities that once dominated central and southern Vietnam, a culture believed to have reached its apogee in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Vietnamese government's now defunct plans to construct nuclear power plants in Ninh Thuận province (formerly Panduranga, the last standing principality of Champa), had prompted Nguyễn to undertake the filmic project, which would reflect upon how living communities may

² *MONOLOGUE* was the first installment of a planned trilogy. The second film, *Landscape of Time*, was screened as part of the Hugo Boss Asia Art 2015 exhibition at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai.

unsettle the lenses through which their histories have been framed. As such, the natural and human landscape is salient in both filmic works as an ever-present provocation of time as progress, often grounding elements of intertextuality and intermediality not only in terms of references to archival materials, such as letters, photographs, and maps, but to unofficial, or even intangible, forms of history, such as burial sites, story-telling, art, and nature itself (figs. 1 and 2).

Essay, Epistolarity, and Voice

As dialogic films, both *MONOLOGUE* and *Letters from Panduranga* demonstrate characteristics of the essay film genre, a choice consciously made by Nguyễn, who cites such filmmakers as Chris Marker as inspiration.³ For Vandy, this form aligns more closely with the rhetorical possibilities engendered by the moving image. The other attributes mentioned above locate the films' hybridity in the discourse of the essay film, which notes such strategies as voice-over, the mixture of documentary and fiction, and the performativity of the author-subject.⁴ Like the literary essay form's disposition toward intellectual provocation,⁵ the

³ Seminar with filmmaker Nguyen Trinh Thi, Goldsmiths, University of London, March 10, 2016.

⁴ See, for example, David Montero, *Thinking Images: The Essay Film as a Dialogic Form in European Cinema* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2012); and Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema & Media* 49, no. 2 (2008): 24-47.

essay film is distinguished for its experimental use of the moving image as a process of thinking and as a meditation upon the making of images.

It is tempting to situate the orality and epistolarity of Vandy's and Nguyen's films as particularly salient in the context of Southeast Asia, often reiterated as dominated by oral cultures largely because of the contained literacy of the historical elites and the scarcity of extant written documents compared to those of its regional neighbors. Such perceptions may belie the findings of epigraphic and literary studies throughout the region, sourced from the written word on such materials as stone, paper, or palm leaf. Yet it is the perceived lack of truth value found in present-day official archives that led Benedict Anderson to reflect on the medium of real information in modern Southeast Asia as more ephemeral emissions, such as rumors, or the letters of communication destroyed by autocratic regimes. Anderson likened the Southeast Asian novelist-in-exile to an "archivist without archives, as well as Walter Benjamin's fabled storyteller."⁶ A contextual reading of the two films situates them as responsive to conditions of national narrative biases toward historical projects, as well as the filmmakers' retrieval or production of other memory texts, all the while signaling the performativity of these gestures. In the context of Cambodia, forms of remembrance and negotiation of trauma

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature, Vol. I*. Trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁶ Benedict Anderson, "9th Frank H. Golay Lecture: Letters, Secrecy, and the Information Age: The Trajectory of Historiography in Southeast Asia," *Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University Bulletin* (Fall 2013): 13.

from the Khmer Rouge period have rarely aligned with signs of reconciliation legible to international audiences; thus, as Ashley Thompson has argued, this has engendered attributions of silence and absence, as well as a drive for more ‘visible’ signs and processes, whether in the form of contemporary art, a criminal tribunal, or educational curriculum.⁷ In Vietnam, the Cham peoples have been aligned with the state’s mytho-historical telos of the nation,⁸ their presence in the historical record – the archival record - dominated by the ethnographic and archaeological, visual lenses whose constitution are deliberately made to enter and unsettle the frames of Nguyễn’s film. While the two films draw upon historical materials, whether oral or archival, thus not operating within a condition of total prohibition or absence, they may be seen nonetheless as illustrating the ways in which the epistolary form can be used to respond to coercive silences or injunctions against writing or connecting, thus intimating distance or absence and the desire to overcome it.⁹

⁷ Ashley Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and ‘Cambodian Art’ in the Wake of Genocide,” *diacritics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 88.

⁸ See Bruce Lockhart, “Colonial and Post-Colonial Constructions of ‘Champa’,” in *The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society, and Art*, eds. Tran Ky Phuong and Bruce Lockhart (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 11-24.

⁹ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 115, and Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 146.

Voice, in its capacity not merely as voice-over but more emblematically as vehicle for the artist's vision as well as speech, provides points of conjunction and disjunction with the visual to give form to the artists' politico-philosophical and personal reflections. Mladen Dolar suggests that voice contains a metonymic relationship to "humanity" in its invocation of exteriorization and interiorization, embodiment, and individualism. As an emanation that exceeds language, but is lost within it, voice evokes desire as well as loss.¹⁰ Voice is both medium and material for the artists, who use it to produce speech as more than oral text; the constellation of these elements activate powerful visual and aural compositions in which the artists resurrect history as a fraught and affective presence. As authors of script and voice, the artists set the tempo and the modality of the viewer's processing of image, situating the temporality – whether the presentness or the timelessness - of what is seen. Their words but also the grain of their voice, per Barthes, enable complex representations of artistic subjectivity, exploring ethnographic, archival, or familial responsibilities.¹¹ In questioning the authority of the image as metonym for historical document, the two films ask us to question which holds dominance, the voice or the image. As Naficy suggests with regards to epistolary films by diasporic and exilic filmmakers, "the voice-over narration that contains the letters dominates the visual letters to the point that they may be called 'image-over' films."¹²

¹⁰ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 10-11.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 181.

¹² Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 104.

Vandy Rattana, *MONOLOGUE*, 2015

Vandy Rattana is known for his role in pushing new forms of artistic collectivity in Cambodia, and for his documentary photographic series, such as *Bomb Ponds* (2011), which has been prominently exhibited and collected by major international institutions.¹³ His early photography pursued a documentary impulse responding to social and political exigencies, staking a reactive form of image-making in Cambodia in the first decade of the new millennium. His work often evoked the private as an interruption of the public, namely in relation to accepted and official forms of imaging the past and present.¹⁴ The primacy of landscape as principle protagonist in *MONOLOGUE* draws continuity from *Bomb Ponds*, which comprises singular portraits of individual bomb craters now integrated into the ecology of their terrains. The capacity of the landscape to still trace the devastation of the Vietnam War and the subsequent genocidal regime of Pol Pot has played a significant part in Vandy's shift from photography to the moving image. This transition is cyclical, in a sense, as it returns his

¹³ *Bomb Ponds* has been exhibited at such venues as the Asia Society (New York) and *dOCUMENTA 13*, and collected by the Guggenheim.

¹⁴ The pursuit of alternative forms of rhetoric through photography may be one consequence of Vandy's university studies in law, but it also reflects his ongoing interests in philosophy and literature. These concerns have extended beyond his artistic work to collaborative transnational endeavors of translation and publication, such as *L'association Ponleu*.

engagement with the lens to his childhood fascination with cinema, memories that compelled his turn to photography in the first instance.¹⁵ However, for Vandy, the photographic image alone became insufficient as provocation and as narrative form: “The first thing you have to learn in photography is that as soon as you look through the viewfinder you already destroy the reality.”¹⁶ For Vandy, the photograph is compromised by its pictorial truncation and objecthood. While the moving image medium provides partial modes of resolution but other forms of indeterminacy, its additional avenues of sensory interpellation intrigued the artist with its possibilities for exploration, notably in relation to the roles of voice and speech.

I have never seen you in flesh and blood!

I have never talked with you, not even a word.

And we have never smiled to each other.

I wish I knew your voice. Is it deep or low?

It is extremely hard to try and know you through the photograph.

On the picture, you’re not talking, you’re not smiling, you’re by no means angry.

¹⁵ Conversation with the author, June 24, 2011.

¹⁶ Vandy Rattana and Emma Ota, “Vandy Rattana – Speaking of Something More,” *Tokyo Art Beat*, August 28, 2015, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2015/08/vandy-rattana-speaking-of-something-more.html>, accessed January 3, 2017.

You look as if you've just stopped crying.

Who made you cry?¹⁷

Compelled to delve further into the recuperation of a traumatic historical episode that remains unspoken for most of its survivors, Vandy began work on a filmic trilogy whose first episode, *MONOLOGUE* (2015), focuses on an unreturned dialogue – confessional and cathartic at moments - with the artist's deceased older sister. Using a map hand-drawn by his father and with assistance from a local village head, Vandy located an unmarked plot of land in northwest Cambodia, under which he was told some five thousand who died under the Pol Pot regime are buried, including his sister.¹⁸ The film's overarching protagonist is a thicket of majestic mango and palm trees that comes into frame in close-up fragments as well as from a distance, their leaves in constant motion, at times almost imperceptible, often in a syncopated rhythm with the artist's voice-over (fig. 3). In poetically paced Khmer-language ruminations, Vandy speaks to his sister, posing questions varying in vocal intonation and pitch, signifying familiarity, eagerness, frustration, and chagrin. Topics include their family, the community of dead that lie beneath the ground, the flora and fauna that grow from this soil, and the spectral relationship that constitutes their relationship. Early in the film, the artist himself makes an appearance, as a minute figure dwarfed by the trees (fig. 4), gathering earthly mementos from the undergrowth

¹⁷ From English-language subtitles. Vandy Rattana, *MONOLOGUE*, 2015, single channel HD video, color, sound, 18:55 minutes.

¹⁸ E-mail correspondence with the author, January 5, 2017.

to be presented as offerings to his parents. Given the human strata that lie beneath, the few silent moments of human presence against this majestic landscape thus scale it as sublime and the nature of the encounter itself, in the artist's view, as near absurdity.¹⁹

Vandy's unreturned dialogue thus takes the form of a letter and an address to the self and the spectator as much as to his sister. But it further enacts an exchange between the voice of the artist and the voice of nature, which cannot "speak" back in his sister's stead. This evacuation of legibility thus opens up possibilities for alternative forms of communication and connection. Vandy's assuaging voice sites the landscape as medium of memory, its trees invoking the artist's musings about his childhood home in Phnom Penh, imaging smells and scents through his voiced recollections. Through this imagined dialogue, the landscape also becomes a substitute, giving spectral presence to his sister's absence. Vandy's inquiries become plaintive, even forceful, demands, incited by the promise of response enacted by a silence compromised by nature's sounds as signs. The viewer can only discern these sounds internally, conjured by the images of trees rustling in the winds, of close-up shots of vibrating leaves in the thick foliage of branches, as though hinting at something that should not be seen, visual movements that enable the viewer to discern the artist's soundscape. As such, one imagines the audibility of the landscape speaking back, frustrating but also appeasing the artist's desire to communicate. The artist's words render Nature as his sister's embodiment, but also his own breath, his voice, as emanation of Nature, and thus, his sister.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ I am grateful to Ashley Thompson for making this observation.

All things considered,

I am very glad I found you again today, against all expectations.

You probably don't know me.

You may think I am a strange man if you so desire.

I know I am still breathing.

Perhaps you are my breath.

There are scenes in which silent human presence opens a space in the address between artist and landscape, and between viewer and film. Two scenes feature symbolic gestures of gathering: the first the artist's scavenging of earthly offerings from the undergrowth, the latter - in what appears to be art historical citation - a group of women collecting imperceptible rice grains from the desiccated husks strewn the ground, their repetitive movements in pace with the artist's soft yet unrelenting meditation on humanity and Cambodia's recent history. An intermedial translation of Millet's 1857 painting *The Gleaners*, this painterly implication instantiates what the viewer sees as a produced image, a frame to which the viewer is hailed from within film's dream-like cast (fig. 5). For Vandy, these figures represent the universal degradation of rural labor as part of expanding politico-economic apparatuses, connecting art histories and situations of Realism across time and place, a window that draws continuities with

the artist's own interests in modernist visual practices in France.²¹ As an image within image that demonstrates the film's compositional flirtation with other genres, this interruption signals the "inherent intertextual nature" that David Montero notes as a key element of essay films.²²

MONOLOGUE concludes with the artist's presentation to the camera lens of his gathered offerings as portraits, each one individually framed as a still life against white cloth (fig. 6). Leaves, branches, and soil are laid out carefully on the ground, about to be wrapped and presented to the artist's parents, whose emotion-laden reactions in a future time and place Vandy retrospectively describes only by their vocal utterances, or absence thereof. Such concluding notes, in the form of communicative and temporal disjuncture, reinforce the theme of frustrated address, not only as an artistic motif but as a somber reality for a generation of Khmer Rouge survivors, who, as Vandy describes his parents, no longer share their stories with the world.²³ This description resonates with the nature of *MONOLOGUE*'s landscape, a tranquil setting that perseveres within an indefinite cycle of time, uncompromisingly absorbing, recycling, and transforming whatever wounds and disquieting deposits it may receive, allowing for its traces to construct human memory.

My father only uttered a few words

²¹ E-mail correspondence with the author, January 5, 2017; conversation with the author, June 24, 2011.

²² Montero, *Thinking Images*, 5.

²³ E-mail correspondence with the author, January 5, 2017.

but he didn't say what he was going to do with these fragments of soil.

My mother could only whisper a few words softly.

I don't know what she was complaining about.²⁴

Nguyễn Trinh Thi, *Letters from Panduranga*, 2015

Nguyễn Trinh Thi is a Hanoi-based artist-filmmaker known for her efforts to organize collective forms of dialogue, practice, and research through institutional projects such as Hanoi DOCLAB, an independent center for experimental and documentary film. Nguyễn's postgraduate studies in the United States combined her interests in filmmaking with journalism and international development, leading to her affinity with the essay film, for which she has gained increasing recognition.²⁵ Realized through various installation and screening formats, her works have been shown at film festivals as well as art biennials and major museum exhibitions. A signature trait of her practice has been a constantly evolving approach toward citation, reuse, and editing of still and moving images, reflecting her ongoing exploration of improvisational

²⁴ Vandy Rattana, *MONOLOGUE*.

²⁵ See, for example, Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, 143-163, and May Adadol Ingawanij, "Nguyen Trinh Thi's Essay Films," *Engaged Practices: Writings on Women Artists and the Moving Image*, ed. Lucy Reynolds (London: IB Tauris, forthcoming).

and exploratory modes of cinematic narrative that skirt univocality and linearity.²⁶ Among her sources of inspiration, she often emphasizes Chris Marker, whose films *Letter from Siberia* (1957) and *Statues Also Die* (1953) are referenced in *Letters from Panduranga*.

Many of Nguyễn's films have been responsive to the politicized backdrop of everyday life in Vietnam and Asia more broadly, attending to the representation of such events and actions as making and unmaking history. Straddling ethnography and character-driven vignettes, films such as *Chronicle of a Tape Recorded Over* (2010) situate the Ho Chi Minh Trail in present-day geography and mundane time. Others, such as *93 Years, 1383 Days* (2008) and *Jo Ha Kyu* (2012) reveal Nguyễn's predilection for stretching the possibilities of the moving lens in relation to the malleable relationship between image and sound. In the 2016 films *Eleven Men* and *Vietnam the Movie*, Nguyễn's material is film itself, and processes of sampling and editing expose historical cinematic productions of Vietnam, as lived place of artists and filmmakers, and as "Vietnam," the war. A recurring use of montage effects a parallel between the multiplicity of media imagery and multivocality as a strategy to decenter an authorial source, an allegory for the impossibility of grasping historical complexities as relayed through state historiography.

Nguyễn's films thus suture together alternative perspectives on Vietnamese history, drawing attention to the mediatic mechanisms that control and represent what becomes information. *Letters from Panduranga* was initially driven by the government's 2009 announcement that they would launch the country's first nuclear energy project with the

²⁶ Seminar with Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Goldsmiths, University of London, March 10, 2016.

construction of two plants, backed by Russian and Japanese engineering, in the central-southern province of Ninh Thuận. In 2016 the National Assembly voted to cancel the project, based on lower demand forecasts, rising costs and safety concerns.²⁷ Ninh Thuận is the Vietnamese name given to Panduranga, the last sovereign principality of the kingdom of Champa, when it was annexed by the Vietnamese (Đại Việt) in 1832, finalizing what had been a piecemeal process of colonization over the previous two centuries. The violent annexation of Champa crippled the self-sufficiency of its peoples, whose economic and cultural life had been largely organized around maritime trade, given their coastline settlements' strategic location between southern China and the Malay world.²⁸ With the reorganization and expansion of the Vietnamese state between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Cham peoples were forcibly disenfranchised and assimilated into imposed structures of language, dress, and cultural life. While these factors led to the dispersal of the Cham population further inland and to places like Cambodia and Malaysia, there are still remaining communities in their former

²⁷ Mai Nguyen and Ho Binh Minh, "Vietnam abandons plan for first nuclear power plants,"

Reuters, November 22, 2016,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-politics-nuclearpower-idUSKBN13H0VO>, accessed January 3, 2017.

²⁸ See Nicolas Weber, "The Vietnamese Annexation of Panduranga (Champa) and the End of a Maritime Kingdom," in *Memory and Knowledge of the Sea in Southeast Asia*, ed. Danny Wong Tze Ken (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences, University of Malaya, 2008), 65-128.

lands in present-day Vietnam, for whom such acts as the government's preliminary plans to construct nuclear plants in Ninh Thuận reveals their continued condition of erasure. It is this persistent scripting of Champa as the past, as a finite episode and historical setting written into the Vietnamese story of multiethnic nation-building, that inspired Nguyễn to grapple with the project of depicting a living community while giving visual form to the fraught nature of their historical representations.

The film is narrated in the Vietnamese language (in the northern accent denoted by its tonal enunciation and range) through an exchange of letters between a man and a woman,²⁹ each conveying to the other their experience undertaking site-based processes of research. He recounts his journey from north to south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, referencing Nguyễn's earlier film, *Chronicle of a Tape Recorded Over*, while she speaks from her location in the former lands of Panduranga, situating a gendered perspective from the outset that invites multiple readings. The north-south movement evokes the celebrated "Southern Advance" (*Nam tiến*) story of Vietnamese expansionism and state-building, as well as in more recent history, the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail as a strategic artery used by northern communist forces to support their southern counterparts. These north-south movements speak to historical conquest dominated by masculine narratives, set in relief by the female subject who situates her location, Ninh Thuận (Panduranga), as a place from which to vocalize self, place, community, and history through a series of utterances.

²⁹ Voiced by Nguyễn Xuân Sơn and Nguyễn Trinh Thi.

[Letter 19, from woman to man]

I'm writing you from the land of the woman.

Champa is a matriarchal society. Somehow though, when I go around doing my research, the men, as usual, always end up being the voice. The women here, like everywhere else, are like the background, to put it in your terms. ...

They are the landscape.

These letters provide an interplay that casts not only the Cham communities of Ninh Thuận, but also the conflicted authorship of the filmmaker and Vietnam as a multiplicity of geographical and historical perspectives as the interconnected subject of the film. For Nguyễn, the essay format provided a means to collapse reflection and representation, self and other, artist and subject, and the story of Vietnam as the story of the Chams.³⁰ As Rascaroli describes, this series of interstitial disjunctions is underscored by Nguyễn's use of epistolary dialogue,³¹ performed from a subdued voice-over script to draw the viewer into a shared space of self-reflexive examination, mediating the presumed authority of her vision and voice as a Vietnamese filmmaker uncomfortable with her role in representing Cham perspectives. The dialogue, like that in Vandy's *MONOLOGUE*, is more of self-address rather than responsive exchange, two sets of vocalized contemplations whose lyrical sympathies belie the fact they are not always smoothly aligned as communicatory returns. The narrative thus relies on the

³⁰ E-mail correspondence with the author, December 20, 2015.

³¹ Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, 147-154.

personal intimacy of the epistolary form but destabilizes it, as it does similarly with the motif of the photographic portrait (fig. 7).

[Letter 3, from woman to man]

At the moment, I'm making portraits.

I have been drifting away from the story that brought me here in the first place – the story of the two nuclear power plants to be built in the middle of this two thousand-year-old civilization.

By the way, you should refer to the Cham as “Cham”, not the elongated “Cham”.

I was ignorant to the fact that the old, familiar way has been carrying with it an air of disdain for several decades now.

I have made a number of Cham friends and been listening to Cham intellectuals as they speak with me and debate each other.

Still I can't help but feeling conscious of being an outsider.

I'm trying to avoid speaking on behalf of the other.

[Letter 4, from man to woman]

You try to access the story of another culture, another people, and I – the story of the past, of history.

Our problem is the same.

For the last few years, I think I have been pulling more away from details, actions, human emotions, people's portraits. I've been more drawn to landscape. Or you can say, my attention has been shifted from the foreground to the background. ...

...

[Letter 15, from woman to man]

I started to get the feeling of suffocation here too.

But you won't get it either from pictures of the landscape, or portraits of the people.

I want to leave.

I'm not an ethnographer – systematically studying and recording the Cham's way of life, traditions, rituals; nor am I a journalist who could write about issues directly.

I don't know what I'm doing here.

[Letter 16, from man to woman]

I'm reviewing photos of people I've been taking during this trip.

Most of them are tiny figures lost in landscapes.

I notice from the last images you sent, frontal portraits seem to be disappearing as well. The hidden or turned away faces I'm seeing seem to be telling another story – the story of a boundary erected, of contact broken.³²

³² Nguyễn Trinh Thi, *Letters from Panduranga*, 2015, single channel HD video, color, sound, 35:00 min.

For Nguyễn, the two semi-fictional letter writers represent dual aspects of her self, of her role as filmmaker, reflecting upon strategies she used in the past in contention with those to which she is drawn in the present, or reflections cast in proximity to the subjects of her film, from within the field site to back in the studio.³³ The push and pull of distance, between author and subject, between author and image, between image and subject, is expressed through spaces of visual indeterminacy, corresponding analogies of spatial and temporal liminality, and the gendered textures of dual voices that emulate one another in timbre, tonality, and modulation. Portraiture thus resonates throughout the film as a dubious form of visual capture that produces an image in vexed relation to reality. The historical framing of still images used to characterize Cham culture, whether through ethnographic photography, colonial postcards of actual ruins or the heterotopian sites of colonial expositions, are deliberate archival citations in *Letters from Panduranga* (fig. 8). They provide a dissonant mirror to Nguyễn's deliberately unstable still and moving shots of faces and moving double shots of temple landscapes, statuary, and people, who sit for these portraits but look into, beyond and away from the lens, revealing the vicissitudes of their tolerance for the portrait-taker (figs. 9-11). The photographic image comes into question as that which is often taken for granted as the natural picture, compliant subject, romance of antiquity or framing of historical truth. These images alert the viewer to the condition of their framing, and parallel the language of the letter writers, who comment upon community and the ethics of representation.

³³ E-mail correspondence with the author, December 20, 2015.

[Letter 21, from woman to man]

I'm writing you from what seems like a distant land.

Her name is Panduranga.

She lies somewhere between the Middle Ages and the 21st century, between the earth and the moon, between humiliation and happiness.

*Perhaps I've been dreaming in a poem that's coming to its end.*³⁴

The archival turn in contemporary art has situated the artist's voice as a site of scrutiny and risk in nations such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Thailand, where the state continues to assert historiographical control. Like the rumors or other ephemeral emissions that Benedict Anderson described, it has become apparent that the artist's voice – whether enacted metaphorically or materially in contemporary art – has taken on increasing weight as a medium of real information in Southeast Asia today. Voice here registers multiple metaphors including agency, conscience, and subjectivity, drawing on its enigmatic constitution as that which comes from but is not part of the body, and stands – like a fingerprint – as a unique marker of the individual. The living presence of the voice as an essential conduit for ritual or juridical proceedings endows it with an authority that augments its potency as a vehicle for storytelling within the work of art; regardless and often because of the work's "parafictional" boundaries,

³⁴ Nguyễn, *Letters from Panduranga*. The line in italics is excerpted from the Cham poet Trà

Vigia's "Blurry Nights" (Trùng ca Đêm mờ).

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the artist's voice provokes deeper reflection on the work's relationship with History and Truth.³⁵

For *MONOLOGUE* and *Letters from Panduranga*, the moving image and essay form are vital means of bringing historical imagination into being as present-day speculation. However, it is the artist's voice that, rather than authenticating a sense of place or presenting a vision of history, indexes a shared space of experience and self.

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³⁵ On artistic engagements with the "parafictional" in Southeast Asia see the contributions by Chua and Taylor in this issue.