The background of the image is a lush, green landscape. In the foreground, there is a dense forest of trees with vibrant green leaves. The middle ground shows rolling hills and more trees, partially obscured by a soft, white mist or fog. The sky is a pale, hazy green, suggesting a bright but overcast day. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

Nguyễn Trinh Thi
47 DAYS,
SOUND-LESS

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Nguyễn Trinh Thi
**47 DAYS,
SOUND-LESS**

A black and white photograph of a dense thicket of trees and bushes. The image is slightly out of focus, creating a sense of depth and texture. The text "He listened." is overlaid in the center in a white, italicized serif font.

He listened.

Nguyễn Trinh Thi

47 Days, Sound-less

2024

Video, three screens and mirrors

Video: three-channel projection, 16:9, 16:9 and 5:2 aspect ratios, black and white and colour, sound (stereo), 30 mins

The installation *47 Days, Sound-less* by Vietnamese artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi presents a fictional narrative about a man who wanders alone in a dense forest, with no trail to show whence he came and no memory of who or what he was or is.

Thi identifies “peripheries”—including natural landscapes used as backdrops, uncredited characters and soundtracks from American and Vietnamese movies filmed in Southeast Asia—that reveal more-than-human perspectives. To Thi, this artwork is a form of “expanded cinema,” which challenges conventional ideas of spectatorship and questions the dominance of vision in cinematic storytelling.

The artist meticulously weaves reconstructed images of trees, leaves and the sky with echoes of dripping water, chirping crickets and birds. Yet, not all of these sounds are from nature. Some were produced with local and indigenous musical instruments to resemble natural sounds. In the video, a group of Jarai—natives of the Central Highlands of Vietnam—gather. They are heard speaking about the man whose eyes are not human eyes, as they prepare for a ritual for the dead.

At the centre of the exhibition space, a system of mirrors reflects fragments of footage onto the surrounding walls, offering new ways of meditating upon the inextricable relationship between a place and its inhabitants.

A dark, blurry image of green foliage, possibly a forest or garden, with a focus on the text.

or green.



Intuitive Cues for Listening to Images

Nguyễn Trinh Thi (NTT) converses with curator Syaheedah Iskandar (SI) about re-thinking our modes of seeing (and sensing) moving images in her artwork *47 Days, Sound-less*.

SI Can you share with us the premise and experience of *47 Days, Sound-less*?

NTT Well, this work combines my interest and ways of working and making over the last ten years. At the same time, I tried to create a new form, and a method of working with and watching moving images.

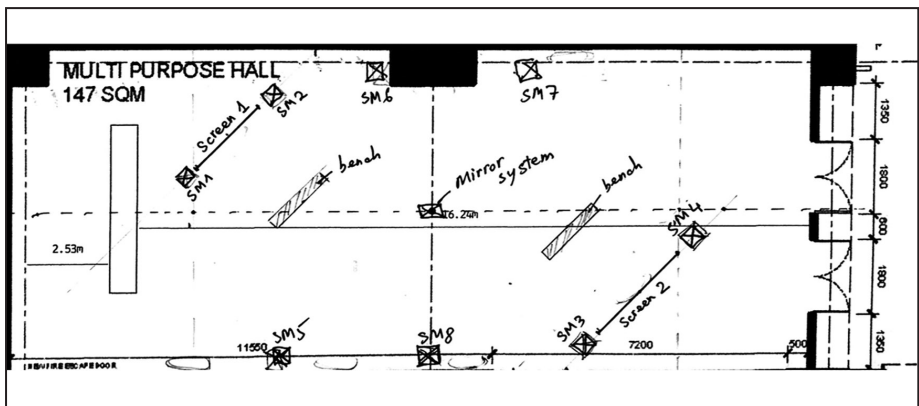
A challenge that I faced was developing other ways of presenting the work as an installation and exploring how it worked within a space. The audience's experience of being in and relating to the space is very important to me. So I wanted to create a sensorial experience, beyond looking and watching, to evoke in the audience a direct feeling with the work.

This work combines two very different modes of watching: One is the experience of a film sitting down, watching from start to end. Another, which is the opposite, is the mode of watching in a gallery or an installation. The gallery setup allows the audience to be distracted from the flow of the film, they have more freedom of movement. They can come into the artwork at any point; maybe they don't watch from the beginning to the end. To combine these two different modes, I made two films placed on opposite sides of the room. The two films' narration, dialogue and text are the same, but the audience can see them as two separate stories linked together.

The other crucial part of *47 Days* is the middle section of the installation where I have included mirrors. You enter a different environment when you step out of the film's

sight line. Moving images are projected onto the mirrors, which are then reflected onto the surrounding walls, creating a world of its own. The mirror projections become fragmented because the space shapes their placements. The projected images become the environment and the sounds become environmental echoes.

It's trying different ways of showing and having the audience experience different modes of receiving. That is why I'm inclined to use the term "expanded cinema" to describe this work – although I haven't heard people use it recently – because it is not only that the form of cinema is being expanded and expanded into the space, but it also references cinema.



This preliminary sketch of the exhibition layout of *47 Days, Sound-less*.

For the sounds, I used local, traditional and indigenous musical instruments to create the small sounds of a forest. The images I selected are from either Hollywood or Vietnamese movies in which natural landscapes, trees and plants are part of the insignificant background while humans are always in the centre. I made this observation in my previous work *Vietnam the Movie* (2015) as well. For example, for Hollywood movies shot in foreign locations, they typically go to another country or an exotic site and

use the landscape or its people as a backdrop for their narrative, for the action of the main characters. A lot of the Hollywood Vietnam War movies were shot in Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines or Thailand because of their similar landscapes to Vietnam.



Video still from *47 Days, Sound-less*.

Returning to *47 Days*, I had the idea of reversing images from these movies—I wanted to foreground the natural landscape and the local extras instead of them being in the background. I wanted to foreground the sounds, for my installation to mimic the environment. When you are recording the sounds of a location on set, you might think: “It’s nothing. It’s just the background sound.” But these sounds represent so much more for me. The sound of a location not only relates to the site’s geography but also represents the layers of history and the memories of the place, including the stories of the indigenous people. There would be other layers of sounds that human beings cannot hear that come from within the Earth, the trees or insects—frequencies that we cannot access. I wanted to reverse this hierarchy in terms of visibility or focus.

SI It's fascinating how you have used the reflective function of mirrors to call attention to the peripheral space. The mirror thus becomes an extension of the space, highlighting things beyond the central line of sight that we typically ignore. Circling back to the conception of the artwork, how did you come up with its title, *47 Days, Sound-less*?

NTT It came about when I was writing the proposal for the Han Nefkens Foundation. It was during COVID, no one could travel anywhere and I was stuck at home.

While analysing *Apocalypse Now* (1979) for my earlier work *Vietnam the Movie*, I learnt that the indigenous people of Northern Philippines—the whole village of the Ifugao people—were included as extras, as the indigenous people of Vietnam in the film. It was an uncanny coincidence that when they filmed the ritual scene of Ifugao people involving the buffalo, the indigenous people of Vietnam also had an exact similar practice.

I had worked with the same indigenous group on my previous project *How to Improve the World* (2021), and I found this connection very interesting. So, I was thinking about all these connections between the different groups of indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia, and I did a search on Google Maps to see how long it would take to travel from the south of Vietnam in the Central Highlands (where the Jarai people live) to the Ifugao in the Philippines. I wanted to research in both places, but because it was during a lockdown, there were no flights and transportation. Google Maps usually gives flight information, but at that time, it was so funny that it could only give walking instructions. So, 47 days was the time needed to travel between the sites of the two indigenous groups, and I found it interesting to think about this connection by walking.

“Sound-less” came from the work’s focus on the many layers of sound frequencies. It was also a kind of tribute to Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983)—which also means sunless—because his films greatly influenced me.

There are many different ways of titling something—sometimes, it just comes out of a moment. I like *47 Days* because it marks this specific moment because of COVID. It's also about space and time. I did think of many other titles, but I kept coming back to it.

SI **It also sounds intuitive and appropriate when we think about the conditions of our time. I want to return to the films you have mentioned. Most of the found footage that you have used in your works, such as *47 Days* and *Vietnam the Movie*, are from Hollywood films shot in Southeast Asia. Most of them depict or deal with the historical trauma of the Vietnam War. What was your process of selecting these clips?**

NTT Actually, I do not really pay attention to the details and narrative of these films. When I work with these materials, I scan to find parts with natural landscapes. It is very difficult to get them as a whole picture because there will always be people in them, and the trees, plants and water are always blurry because they are in the background. So basically, I will zoom in and cut people or landscapes out of the image and reuse the scene as a whole new image, which becomes very abstract.

SI **You have mentioned before that part of the dialogue of *47 Days* is from Ursula K. Le Guin's post-apocalyptic science fiction novel *City of Illusions* (1967).**

NTT Yes, I brought together materials from many sources, kind of like weaving things from different places, times, geographies and materials. I wanted the work to have a part that is still like a film but a film that is being shown as a part of a bigger network.

The videos in *47 Days* include my footage and what I have collected from existing movies, but I also wanted to have a fictional frame or story for the work. It was a way of having a form or structure, something that could help the audience to follow the work, and I found some of the works by Le Guin

that I came across some time ago very fitting for this; for many different reasons, one of them being that her stories have these ecological interests. She also wrote about the consciousness of forests and plants in her earlier works of the 1960s and 1970s, long before it became a trend today to talk about the consciousness of plants and non-humans.

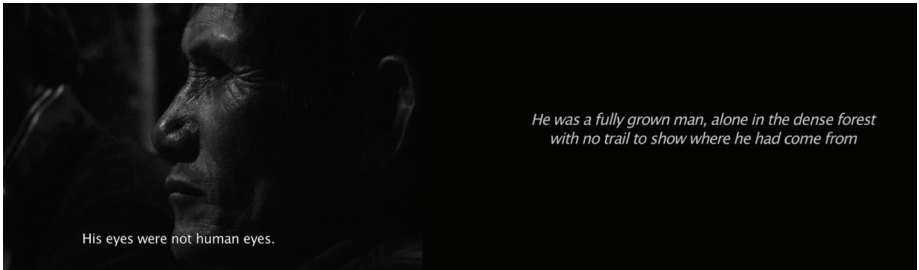
I first knew of Le Guin's work through *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), which was written in direct response to the Vietnam War. In this science fiction, a group of people from different planets came and colonised a world along with its native species living in the forests. Though their forests were cut down and destroyed, the inhabitants managed to kick out the colonising force in the end. But through this, they were introduced to violence, and eventually learnt to use violence.

So I put together some simple lines from these different stories dealing with ecology and created this consolidated story of a man who was left in the forest and had lost his memory. He could not remember who he was and where he had come from. A village of indigenous people took him in and raised him like a child while trying to restore his memories through rituals. Although this is a fictional story, it tied all these separate elements I have in *47 Days* together. I kept the narrative quite open—I didn't include many details or actions, leaving a lot of space for the audience's imagination.

SI **Yes, I can imagine that. What I find so fitting about Le Guin's books today is that she draws a clear link between colonial exploitation and the climate crisis despite writing them in the 1960s as stories responding to the Vietnam War.**

NTT Yes, very much.

SI Some of the dialogues in *47 Days* are interposed with images of the Jarai people conversing with one another. Can you share about your engagement with them?



Video still from *47 Days*, *Sound-less*.

NTT I reused the footage I shot of the Jarai people for *How to Improve the World*. That film talks about their culture and perception of the world by hearing and listening. It was inspiring to work with the Jarai because I was also very interested in different ways of perceiving the world besides our logically based and increasingly visually oriented mode of being.

I filmed the Jarai gathering as they prepared for their most important ritual called *pothi* (or “grave-abandonment”) to send their dead to the other world forever. Over the footage, I put in a dialogue that appears in both films in *47 Days*. The dialogue includes subtitles of the Jarai seemingly talking about a mythical man, but that was not what they were recorded talking about in real life. The subtitles are part of the fictional story.

In a way, I feel all these worlds are parallel. I have talked about this in my previous films, of coming into a different community as an outsider, an artist or a filmmaker, when I have a genuine intent to engage with that culture or group. On the other hand, as an artist, I always feel the ethical problem of trying to represent these peoples. I believe

everyone has the right to exist. It's okay when you cannot understand the other group as long as you respect everyone's existence, in the same way we cannot understand other species or beings—and that's okay. You respect them and treat everyone equally.

Sometimes, I have a problem with the human gaze. For example when gazing at nature or landscapes, it comes from a human-centred perspective. We have to respect and accept that as human beings, or as any privileged human being, we don't have to have access to everything. This perspective has impacted my recent works. I try to challenge this human-centred perspective or gaze to open up perspectives, to object to the idea that we deserve special treatment or access to everything.

SI Can you expand on what you mean by “parallel worlds”?

NTT It's about being aware of the many possibilities. We may not be aware that parallel worlds exist because we do not know them, but we should also be mindful of that position. This should be a standard perspective, that our human-centred world is not the only world. So, it's about getting out of this position of being in the centre, or the idea that we know everything.

I think there are parallel worlds between human and non-human beings, but even among us humans, there are many parallel worlds—the people in the centre, the people who are the majority and the minority, the indigenous people. There are so many different worlds and even if I am aware and appreciative of that fact, I still cannot access these worlds because I don't have the same experience. I don't speak the same language and can only observe from the outside. I don't want to make a work that pretends I can access and understand it.

SI In a way, it's sitting with that discomfort of not having access.

NTT And also, sometimes to leave people alone? It's respecting their boundaries. I don't understand why, the indigenous people or the minority always have to be the subject of study, to receive the gaze and attention from the centre. I think they have the right to be anonymous.

SI You mentioned re-editing the footage from previous works for use in *47 Days*. Things constantly change during an artwork's development process. Did *47 Days* change from your original proposal?

NTT Let's see, this work went through different developmental phases, which took longer than usual. I changed how I worked by experimenting with new things and forms, like the mirror system. In the beginning, I experimented without having any clear idea of how I would use the mirrors, but that process helped me troubleshoot and express this idea I had about peripheral vision.

I was interested in exploring the mirrors because they were similar to how sound works as compared to vision. With vision, you focus on the centre, so it's more of a one-way direction, but sounds happen all around you. It's about the environment and the space. Peripheral vision acts similarly. From the corner of your eyes, you have a view of what is happening around you, like a spatial background view. So the mirrors fragmentise and reflect the images into the space and around you, so it's still a moving image but not in the centre and in front of you.

The mode of projection using mirrors also has the potential to connect us to another world or something. And separate from the idea of peripheral vision, I'm also interested in animism, and wanted to explore a mode of looking, showing or making that utilises elements of animistic practice.

I once made a film about a religion in Vietnam where the spirit would possess the medium, and they would perform to entertain other spirits or the Gods. Thailand also has troupes screening films not for humans but as offerings to the spirits. So, I am interested in these animistic practices in Southeast Asia. I wanted to explore new ways of projecting moving image, but in a way that made me feel like I was just one of the performers and [not] the author of the work.

SI You're also acting as the medium!

NTT The audience can be human and non-human. I want to think that I can make works for anyone. Do you know Lav Diaz? He's a filmmaker from the Philippines, known to make very long films, as long as ten hours. He said that when making a film, he also imagines showing it to non-humans. If he shows it in a movie theatre, it is for the movie theatre to watch and not for the humans. I like that such practices still exist in Southeast Asia.

SI This also supports your notion of taking away the human as the audience, being at the centre of this narrative. Focusing now on challenging our modes of visibility, based on earlier layouts of *47 Days*, why did you change the mirrors to their current circular shape?

NTT Yes, it was square in the beginning. Well, not for any particular reason. The round shape is easier to work with and is forgiving. When I worked with the rectangular shape and experimented with the projection on the walls, the images became distorted. With the round shape, it is also distorted but still makes the shape look good.

SI Films are usually in 4 by 3 or 16 by 9 aspect ratios, but when we think of the circular shape, it's how most creatures, including humans, see. Our visual field is approximately circular, it's just that we don't "see" the circle quite distinctively.

NTT Maybe it's a bit more organic than the square. At the end of the film, there is this part where you only see blurry trees or leaves up close, imagine we are looking through a telescope or even a microscope. It's one of those things where artists have to solve problems, and the gist of our problems are usually practical issues, but when we solve them, it becomes a happy coincidence, which is also a good outcome. I think it was probably that. As artists, we make these decisions quite intuitively. There may be a reason for it all, but it may feel like we don't need to explain it.



Thi experiments with installation formats for *47 Days*, using projection as a medium, in her studio in Hanoi.

SI From this conversation, I've gleaned that you're challenging this notion of ocularcentrism in this work, making space for what exists outside that centre. You have also mentioned in past interviews the hegemonic way we place sight above all other senses, which has, in some ways, contributed to our hypervisual reality today of prioritising the central line of sight. This hypervisual reality is very much driven by screen technologies. What does it also mean for you as a moving image artist to use video as a medium to challenge that?

NTT Most of my recent works use fewer moving images or videos. I am returning to the basic elements of early technology, or pre-tech. For *documenta fifteen* (2022), I didn't use any videos at all. The visual element was what some people

called “prehistoric cinema” or “camera-less cinema,” because I didn’t use a camera or video. The work goes back to the beginning of cinema, of creating moving images without the camera. I used chilli plants and light to project shadows on the surrounding walls of a fortress, resembling shadow puppet theatre.

A big part of the documenta work was the sound of bamboo flutes which automatically played according to wind data coming from a long distance away (from Vietnam), alongside the shadows. Once during testing with the lights switched off, it was complete darkness, and the listening felt amazing—it was magical. Our attention was focused on this one sense, hearing. I believe our senses constantly compete with each other, and when you have a lot of visuals, you simply do not have any space for other senses. You could even say that this is the impact of colonisation or being colonised because all other modes of perception have altered to allow one dominant mode of sensing to take centre stage.

This interview was held virtually on 2 November 2023.
It is here edited and excerpted for clarity and brevity.

Commissioned by the Han Nefkens Foundation, Mori Art Museum, M+ Hong Kong and Singapore Art Museum.

About the artist

Nguyễn Trinh Thi is a Hanoi-based experimental filmmaker and moving image/media artist whose practice over the last decade has consistently engaged with the history and memory of Vietnam. She has found innovative ways to connect cinema and the moving image with sound practices, performance and alternative forms of storytelling.

Thi uses montage to compose her work, drawing on different media, from her own audio and visual recordings to found footage and still images from postcards, photography, newsreels, Hollywood films and ethnographic footage. Her practice currently explores the power of sound and listening, and the multiple relations between image, sound and space, with ongoing interests in memory, representation, landscape, indigeneity and ecology.

Her works have been shown at Thailand Biennale, Chiang Rai (2023), documenta fifteen, Kassel (2022), Minneapolis Institute of Art (2019), Biennale Jogja XV, Yogyakarta (2019), 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane (2018), 21st Biennale of Sydney (2018), International Film Festival Rotterdam (2016), Jeu de Paume, Paris (2015), CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux (2015), 13th Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale (2015) and Asian Art Biennial, Taichung (2015), among others. Thi is the director of Hanoi DOCLAB, an independent centre for documentary film and moving image art she founded in 2009.



For more information about *47 Days, Sound-less*, including an essay by curator Syaheedah Iskandar, please scan the QR code.



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