



Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba in Ho Chi Minh City, 2005. *Courtesy of author.*

# Creative Particles: An Interview with Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba

Drake Stutesman

## *Special Introduction by Barbara Pollack*

Even in this era of global biennials, a presumption lingers that all artists not born (or living or working) in the United States are merely resident-aliens in the territory of art history, immigrants seeking green-card status to attain a place in the western canon. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba is representative of a new breed of international artist, using a fantastic and daringly beautiful vocabulary to transport viewers to his world rather than proving that he deserves a place in ours. Born in Tokyo in 1968, Nguyen-Hatsushiba trained in the United States (School of the Art Institute of Chicago, B.A.; Maryland Institute College of Art, M.F.A.) before returning to live in his father's homeland of Vietnam in the 1990s. From his base in Ho Chi Minh City, this artist's films have been presented as installations at every major international art exhibition of the past five years, from Venice and São Paulo to Moscow and Shanghai.

Acutely aware of the rest of the world's view of Vietnam as a war-ravaged landscape and symbol of American failure, Nguyen-Hatsushiba masterfully transcends these stereotypes by staging his narratives at the bottom of the ocean. These underwater dramas—often featuring contests, such as rickshaw races or painting competitions, impossibly difficult for contestants laden with diving equipment—are simultaneously quixotic and heroic, brimming with festival-like explosions of color and sound too marvelous to be didactic political statements. Yet history can never be extricated from these waters, just as landmines are still dangerously alive along Vietnam's coast line, a very real risk faced by the artist and his crew when making these films.

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The sea's anti-gravitational atmosphere transforms these tests of bravery and endurance into graceful balletic performances proceeding across the screen at a meditatively glacial pace. In this manner, Nguyen-Hatsushiba insinuates himself into, rather than invades, our collective unconscious, replacing visions of Rambo with far more subversive and magical images of Vietnam. And that is how and why he is considered one of the most important and influential artists working in Asia today.

### *Interview by Drake Stutesman*

In this interview, it becomes obvious that the video installations of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, though often visually dream-like and ethereal, are conceived and executed as plain, hard work. He sees the world around him as an ever-generating blend—if not blur—of what is solid and what is ephemeral, what is creative and what is obstructive, what is new and what is old. Nguyen-Hatsushiba's mixed heritage is often highlighted in art critiques. However, this heritage, which he calls “nothing new,” is not in the forefront of his art. Rather it seems to compose his thinking process itself. His ideas follow an often complicated series of adaptations. His famous underwater “cyclo” piece, *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam—Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards* (2001)—which seems so representative of his work, and screens so seamlessly—began with a desire to paint in outer space, then evolved into an aborted performance in the water tank of a Japanese museum, only to end up as an embodiment of his signature look: a group of people struggling under the blue waters of Vietnam. His work is about connection, but not in the easy way that the use of water implies. Rather, Nguyen-Hatsushiba perceives union within the most seemingly disconnected things—dust, bubbles, arbitrary motions—and he respects that they remain disconnected, as it were, because they each carry a morphic resonance. They are not apart.

Nguyen-Hatsushiba's work is a reflection of this unity. As he says, “I thought maybe making art can also be something close to real life.” So identity, often construed as separate or fragmented—especially within the kind of national experience that he memorializes (diasporas, loss of social stature, government cover-up)—is for him something that cannot be lost. The particle and its movement in miscellaneous fluidity or the person feeling a way through life, for him is in fact the impetus of the energy of the whole. His ideas spring from a chain of “protean linkages” as poet Susan Howe has called such intrapersonal, universal connections. The interview that follows, in which just such linkages abound, took place in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam on March, 12, 2005.

—D.S.

*Drake Stutesman:* Why did you come to live in Vietnam?

*Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba:* I came here almost nine years ago, in 1994. I came here on a traveling grant when I graduated from the Maryland Institute. They offered a grant to one graduating student, so I got it. It entitles you to travel to any one country of your choice so I decided to come to Vietnam to understand more about my father's background. I went to Vietnam when I was six or seven years old, 1974–1975, just as the war was—I don't what you should say—completed or finished. We had to move out of the country so we went back to Japan. I was born in Japan and was here, in Vietnam, from '74 or '75 and then returned to Japan. Then when I was nine years old, in 1979 or so, my father and I moved to the U.S. I didn't live here in Vietnam immediately. With the traveling grant, I got to take many pictures of the country. The proposal for this grant was for me to take the daily lives of the average people so I took many pictures of people doing something. I was able to show it to the American public so I could show what is happening here because I think many Americans have an image of Vietnam as a war image. During this trip I discovered there was something here and I wanted to discover more. So I made several trips back and forth between the U.S. and Vietnam and eventually I decided to consider living here. That was 1996, I think. So I spent one year in the U.S., in Dallas, where I grew up, working for UPS to save up money. I got money and I decided to come here to live. In 1996 I first showed my work in Hanoi, in the government-owned exhibition space, and then I came down to Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, to actually live.

This was before I began to work with “cyclos” [bicycle taxis common to Asia]. I was still working with something that I started back in the U.S. and then began to combine with what I found here, material-wise, such as mosquito nets, charcoal briquettes. But I saw this potential and energy in young people here. That's something I was very inspired by . . . how the young people really wanted to discover something for themselves so that they have a better future. But the way they approach is I think different than in the U.S. or Japan. Here they approach very raw, maybe because there're so many ways that they haven't experienced so they will try anything . . . and that anything or that approach of trying to get things or get to something in anyway they can . . . it becomes sort of crazy but at the same time it becomes some form or creativity . . . at least that's how I see it . . . so that's what really attracted me to living here. You see on the street . . . it's just activity after activity. In the street, they'll open up their house and you have business on the street. It's a very different environment from many parts of the U.S. and it's not like the pedestrian traffic of Japan. There's more air between.

*DS:* More air?

*JNH:* More air is circulating between people here. However there is the dust . . . the dust that brings everyone closer, I think.

*DS:* Can you describe a little more what you mean by the air and the dust?

*JNH:* I'm comparing the pedestrian traffic in Japan to the traffic here in Vietnam. And maybe that's the difference between how we live. It's very close and closed in Japan. Here too. However, there's some air between, air and space between the people here. In Japan it's almost condensed . . . and here we have the dust that maybe connects people. [laughs] So the dust becomes like a bond and that's also something that I'm interested in . . . and you just don't get that in the U.S. Here you have to wear a mask to protect yourself from all the dust, the exhaust fumes from the bikes, because we don't have specific laws forcing us to fix the bikes, so we can have any bikes with any exhaust fumes coming out. Whatever we have we can drive so all this craziness or chaos in some way becomes a package of creativity . . . at least for me.

*DS:* You called the dust a bond and in a sense from what you've just described the dust is symbolic of lawlessness. I mean no laws control it, so your perception of it makes an interesting mix where the dust, which could be seen as a negative, is seen as a positive. Can you talk more about that?

*JNH:* Sometimes I try to talk about this to my students but it's never very clear. But when I'm driving and when we stop in the traffic—many of my students, and many people, think of traffic, you know, as getting stuck and not that comfortable out in the sun. But when I begin to think about the dust . . . if you just think of the dust, each speck of dust, as an idea, you know just floating around, you have millions of ideas in front of you, around you. I try to appreciate that for my class, teach creativity in my class. I try and encourage students that you can have, or generate, ideas any moment of your existence, even in the traffic. So instead of getting upset about traffic or tired of traffic, you can discover some ideas.

*DS:* Dust, bubbles, mesh . . . these are very much your themes, the substances you like to use in your videos. So it's not a big surprise that you're talking about dust. You lived in Dallas, which at least has the desert around it, but this seems to be a dust that you find unique to your experience in Vietnam and as Vietnamese. Why did the dust here become creative to you whereas perhaps it wasn't so in the States?

*JNH:* Well in Dallas, it's pretty clean. And maybe, as I tried to explain, that the distance between people is so much distance. In general in America there's so much space, so of course you have houses with space between. Not like here, where they're next to each other. Maybe the whole culture is different. I have never seen an American place to eat where someone will come around while you're eating to sweep the area. What they're trying to do is sweep the floor, so of course that generates dust, but here, you may

encounter that in many places. So sometimes I get irritated with that, because I'm eating something and they just don't understand that dust moves around. It's not something that stays at the bottom. But when I hear that many people here want to get an education or work outside or even live outside, sometimes I try to say that there are many things here already and that maybe you don't need to go out. Some students tell me that some people have whatever they have because of what they're connected with. For example because they have education outside or live outside the country or have some member of their family living abroad. So this ties with connections. So they think of outside as a source for many different things, including some aspect of happiness and I'm sure you can realize it's not the case. You can exist here. So, coming back to sweeping the dust, maybe they don't realize all the possibility that they're generating. They just look at what they can see, so they're cleaning, however at the same time they're making this mess but they don't consciously see that.

*DS:* Well, do you relate this politically to what's happening here in Vietnam. I think Ho Chi Minh City is an unusual city. Do you think it's unusual?

*JNH:* I just think it's a different city. I don't know what you mean by unusual. I mean each city has some differences. I guess it depends on where you come from. For people here I'm sure they wouldn't say it's unusual.

*DS:* Well I was thinking in terms of this whole notion of possibility and cleaning which generates chaos, cleaning up, and then chaos which you see as creative potential . . . that's an easy political metaphor, if you want. Is that how you see what's going on here . . . this mix . . . straightening up if you want to call it, neatening up, in which there is this flow of possibilities?

*JNH:* No. I think people have been sweeping all the time and generating this mess. Even during the war.

*DS:* Your career has really taken off since you've been living here. In other interviews people often pick up on the topic of the "in between," which is a vogue topic, but obviously that's something very real for you. Can you talk about that? Why is this a comfortable focus for you—the in between?

*JNH:* I don't think it's comfortable.

*DS:* I mean you gravitate towards it.

*JNH:* Maybe it's not that I want to be there but that I always happen to be there. [laughs] I'm not sure exactly . . . people say it's because of my background—cultural background.

*DS:* With your Japanese mother and your Vietnamese father?

*JNH:* And also living in the U.S. for eighteen years, I never really thought about all those differences in culture. And at that time many people began to talk about identities and culture . . . in the '80s and '90s. But I generally didn't find myself in that kind of discussion.

*DS:* It didn't interest you?

*JNH:* I was just living. My concern wasn't there.

*DS:* You just wanted to be this kid, living in Dallas.

*JNH:* Something like that. And even when I began to study at art schools . . . those discussions were more full fledged but I didn't feel that I was attached to that kind of conversation. And even now, I don't feel I need to find a specific identity for myself. I mean if you're given a name and you know yourself as this person, whether you have your past as Japanese or Vietnamese or wherever your ancestors come from, I think all of those things are not really new. I mean in my case, a mixture of Japanese-Vietnamese background, it's not so new. Only recently people begin to say—because of that maybe he or she has certain things that we don't have.

*DS:* You mean, you have a multicultural background therefore you have something else that they don't have?

*JNH:* Something like that. I'm talking about what people think. Many of the writings on me, whether short or long, tend to start with my background. I think it's important in some way but people had that situation a long, long time ago; it's nothing new. But I think consciously maybe with the technology and all the closeness we have now between different countries . . . we can just get on the Internet, we have all that information accessible, we begin to become more conscious about that kind of individual. So we tend to have those kinds of exhibitions with that kind of public, which is not very interesting because it's not new. So there was one exhibition like that and I refused to participate [laughs] because that topic didn't interest me conceptually and it's nothing new and it wasn't so exciting.

*DS:* I noticed in reading about you that writers focus on your content and that very few focus on your form, which is so dramatic.

*JNH:* The form?

*DS:* The form of how you put things together, how you use the screen, how

you cut things, use different screens, use sound which is really dominant. But the content of the water and the identity—that dominates the conversation. I found the form very fascinating. Do you storyboard? How do you put something together? Each of your pieces is quite complex—one thing following the other, like a blank screen or striated screen. Do you do it afterward in the editing? Do you know where you want to go?

*JNH:* [Laughs] Yes that's one thing I actually talk about when I talk about my work. I don't have a storyboard. I didn't study filmmaking. So I don't have much understanding of history of cinema and I don't have much understanding of the procedure. All I know is how to put across the information, the image, so that they make some kind of story. All my young works, they were supposed to be somehow narrative without spoken words.

*DS:* That's what you want them to be . . . narratives?

*JNH:* Yes. They don't narrate as smoothly and as easily as some other filmmakers' or some other artists' work . . . I don't know. . . anyway I don't storyboard maybe because I don't have that background. I tried it in my first film. I made posters, just like a storyboard I guess, but I ended up completing only three. . . the rest were blank. So the story actually happens, begins to develop when I'm editing, almost like a painting process. I think I describe that sometimes. I look at the screen and see how the images change and by looking at that change I apply something to it. So I may switch or change to another sequence or cut. But it's very visual. And after I have a draft—rough-cut—and I begin to shorten to get the main things that I want to talk about, I have some images of actions that I want to portray. In almost all the work I try and portray some kind of human struggle. A very physical struggle. Maybe with the cyclo drivers, just going up to take breath and having to come down again, so I have this repeating action. . . so I have this action and I have a sketch of that and talk about it with my actors. But again, they're not trying to copy what I drew. It's [breathing] something that they have to do to survive. So they're not really acting they're just doing something that they need to do. So I shoot maybe ten days worth of shooting and put all the useable stuff that can make a story into my hard disk and then I make the story in the editing process. I go through several different parts and construct the segments.

*DS:* So you start with simply a visual image in your mind? That's the seed? And it becomes a narrative once you've started the filming, and you begin to see the storyline?

*JNH:* If you have storyboard, it maps out everything, so you don't waste time or money. When I did the *Cyclo Memorial*, I used fishermen to push the cyclos and I tried to plan for the different things I needed before I made my trip





*Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam—Towards the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards* (2001, single-channel video, thirteen minutes). *Courtesy of the Artist, Lehmann Maupin Gallery, and Mizuma Gallery.*

to the coast 400 kilometers away. For example, making the spherical thing that's filmed with the dragon.

*DS:* The fate machine?

*JNH:* Yes. Inside are the little capsules that have to come out when they open. I planned it carefully and had it made by a metal-smith. These are props. But when I'm there [at the site], I visualize additional actions, additional movements. For example, I really wanted the men who were going to rotate the machine to rotate it as if it were a very heavy thing. Dense with many, many human souls inside. The capsules are supposed to be interpreted in that way. The motion has to be heavy. It's not sketched out. It's in my head.

*DS:* Do you do all the camerawork or do you have two or three cameras?

*JNH:* The first film was just one camera. Later I had two, so I had two perspectives.

*DS:* Do you instruct the second camera with every detail or do you allow free range?

*JNH:* It's pretty much free although after each dive we review all the shots and then if there's something that I want I'll just make a request for the next dive. I watch and get some idea of where the camera should be located because we don't want to shoot each other. So we have to work out where to position ourselves.

*DS:* Your camera assistant is a woman?

*JNH:* Yes. She actually was my diving instructor when I first learned how to dive and then two weeks before I shot my first film she was telling me she wanted to do some drawings of different fish. So she has an artistic background. So I asked if she wanted to be my assistant. At first she just held the camera, because she'd never used one before. I shoot both with 35 mm camera and then video camera, so I have different images. I have to switch back and forth. So for the first film, she was holding the camera next to me and at the same time being my buddy as a diver to make sure I didn't bump into anything. So she became my safety supervisor and the camera assistant and then she was holding my still camera, and then I allowed her to shoot in different locations and we combined the footage.

*DS:* Is she Vietnamese?

*JNH:* No, she's Japanese but she's been in different diving spots all over the

world. She's never at one location too long. Last time she was in Asia, then the Red Sea, now she's working as an underwater videographer. In the last piece, she worked on the underwater painting. But this time she brought her boyfriend and so we had three cameras.

*DS:* It's interesting that you use non-professional people. Because the pictures are very beautiful. They're framed in a classically beautiful way. Did you learn to dive with this in mind or did you start diving and then get onto the idea of working underwater?

*JNH:* I learned diving to specifically work on the first project. Two weeks before. Then I took two weeks break. Actually I got sick. The training was too intense. Because I live here and I have to go 400 kilometers away so I only had one week to learn. The site is basically a fishing village with many boats. We'd go out maybe an hour-and-a-half away from the mainland every day to shoot. Wake up early in morning and come to the beach and get the fishing boats and we'd do two dives, for safety, because you can't do more than three dives a day. It's hard on the body. Takes too much nitrogen. So we'd do the first dive . . . maybe thirty minutes or forty minutes, depending on the depth, then we come back onto the boat and take a one hour break and then go back again for forty or thirty minutes. Sometimes we'd push it for more. It's kind of nice once you get used to the cycle. But it's very exhausting for me. The fishermen are physically fit since that's what they do for a living. Sometimes they'd have to wait for me or help me with a massage because I'd feel almost dead with exhaustion.

*DS:* Did this make you want to do more or give up?

*JNH:* No. I know I wasn't prepared physically. I was told to do cycling to get my heart strong or do swimming, but I wasn't fit. But I had the desire to keep going. I was very excited when I got in because it was a very new environment. I was also scared. Because I didn't know what was under there. That was one of my main concerns. There might even be mines in the water. I got a friend to do some research. He's a tour guide so he knows the area and he knows fishermen. He made sure that we didn't have dangerous creatures and leftover bombs. That relieved me and I decided to do it and took the diving course.

*DS:* What was it that drew you to this underwater world?

*JNH:* Well when I was doing something in San Antonio, I had this idea—what if I could go up into space and do a painting or some kind of sculpture or installation—with zero gravity, for example—use the paint from the tube and

then just get it out into this space and begin to make a painting or an installation.

*DS:* So the paint would hang in the air rather than catching on a surface.

*JNH:* Right. I don't know how it would react. I've never been there but having the paint just float I thought would be interesting to do. So more research told me no artist was accepted to go up into space. I thought I could send a proposal to NASA and see what could happen. But eventually in 2002 I thought about making a museum within this exhibition space—a cyclo museum because I have already been working with that idea. Basically at the Biennale we had different rooms, so I had a history of cyclos, a display of different cyclo models including my own designs and then stories and experiences of cyclo drivers. Everything about cyclo. But with all those artists showing together, there wasn't that much space, so the curator asked me to make one of the rooms of the cyclo museum I had in mind. And then I decided to do the room called the Memorial Room. By that time I was relating cyclo drivers' life to boat people's lives, because I found they are counterparts: one who had to leave and start new life and one who had to remain and live with an existing life.

*DS:* What is their connection and comparison?

*JNH:* Ones who remain, ones who depart. And also, the ones who made it and the ones who did not. Some who tried to leave were stopped or could not go the way so they had to come back. Cyclo drivers, who are working in the streets, if you ask some of them, some of the older ones, they had a position in society before. A more prestigious position. Some of them were doctors, professors, doing something. But then they lost their position after the war and they had to do something to survive and so they became a cyclo driver.

*DS:* I had no idea. Boat people were in similar positions . . . being professionals then having to work, perhaps, at menial jobs.

*JNH:* They were more professional because they knew that they would lose their status, so they had to leave. So they left and of course not all of them made it. So the memorial project was about offering a prayer to people who lost their lives during this transition. So I wanted the cyclo drivers going into the water to be physically offering themselves. Of course they don't end up dying, but their demonstration of struggle becomes the offering. It's not just praying and thinking about it but physically doing the thing. So that's why it's considered a memorial.

*DS:* Why did you want to do something that was enacted rather than a thought or prayer? Why did you feel that an action represented what you wanted most?

*JNH:* Driving around the city you see many memorials, statues, war objects, commemorating some war hero or event in history, but I notice that people go around these things to get to somewhere else so there's no objective to actually stand in front of them or even give a thought to these statues. So, they aren't functioning as a memorial, at least from my perspective. So I decided to think of something where you have to physically get involved to offer something. So it's not just thinking, it's more than thinking. Perhaps it transcends thinking, in some respect.

*DS:* Is there a direct evolution from the painting in space to the whole notion of the cyclo driver in the water?

*JNH:* Well, the painting in space was just about the physicality of how things might float. The closest situation would be underwater and I found images of astronauts training underwater to feel how they might feel up in space. So the closest and cheapest would be underwater. I wasn't thinking about doing something underwater nine years ago, just the fascination of how it might feel and what kind of work I could produce. This brought me back to considering going underwater. The cyclo room in the museum wasn't going to be film or video but a performance. It wasn't going to be a group of fishermen, it was going to be myself in large water tank and somewhere a cyclo would be floating, suspending and I would get onto it and peddle. The tires would move but it wouldn't go anywhere. But then I'd have to go up for breath. But a tank that size was difficult and its insurance would cost so much. It became impossible but the curator liked the idea so he suggested that I get a different approach. So I asked him if I could use a swimming pool and make a live broadcast but it was summer and all the pools were booked. So I tried the city aquarium but they said no. The curator asked if I could use a river by the city's port. I became very scared because I didn't know how to dive and maybe the water was dirty. I always thought I would be doing this in a controlled environment and now it wasn't going in this direction. Then he suggested another idea. All this was via E-mail—he was in Japan and I was Vietnam. He said to me, "Well, Vietnam has a coast full of water, why don't you do it in your own country?" Then I began to really get scared because of the mines in the water and things like that. The time was coming when I had to do something and I really liked the idea of doing something underwater so I had to make a decision. I already had a video camera, I purchased a year ago, but I'd never used it. So I thought I could use it. I thought about using other people. I thought of cowboys and horses so I visualized that with cyclos instead of horses and it made a beautiful image in my head, and that's

when I began to think of filming. Since I had a camera, I thought I should be the person to shoot.

*DS:* Was it a good feeling to suddenly be working with a group of people when you'd started out with just yourself?

*JNH:* Prior to this, I'd worked with cyclo drivers, because I'd produced new designs for cyclos. I felt comfortable enough because my diving instructor was with me so I didn't have any fear. Then my friend the tour guide, he also joined as a project coordinator.

*DS:* Do you feel the project was more successful because you used real fishermen who had very difficult jobs to enact this image of something difficult?

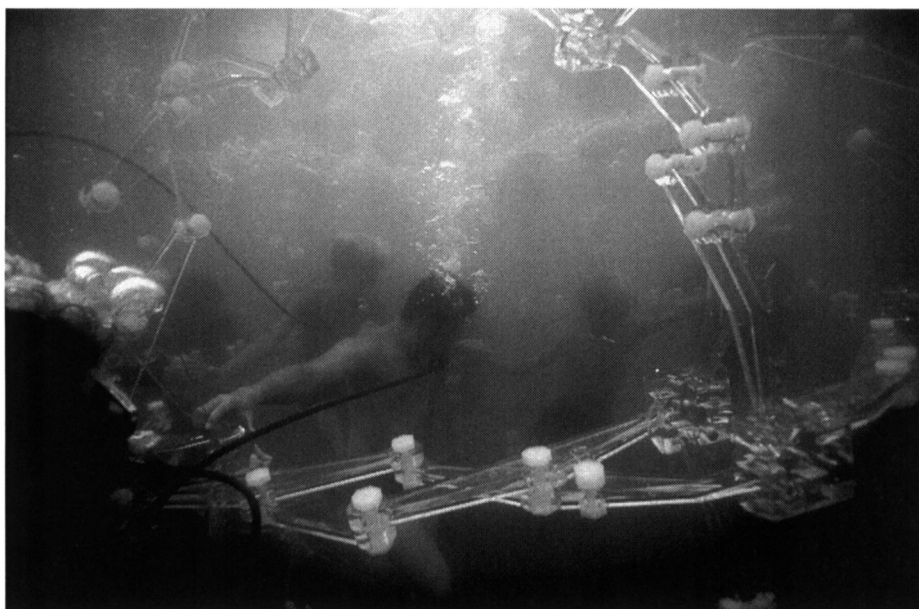
*JNH:* Yes. I wouldn't have asked real cyclo drivers to do this, because that wouldn't work. Having the fishermen's expertise with underwater environments . . . that was good. I've done two projects now underwater in Japan. There's a difference between how the groups from the different countries accept how things should be done. In Japan I worked with volunteers and they were professional divers, so they knew how to dive. But they live with many rules—diving rules, safety rules. So if I asked if they'd do something, they kind of slowed down but here, in Vietnam, the fishermen don't have rules, so it was very flexible for me to work with them. And also they really wanted to try something different. Every day they work to fish so with the Memorial they were experiencing a vacation. I think having Vietnamese work on this film made some difference.

*DS:* What kind?

*JNH:* It demonstrated more of the raw feeling. And the fishermen never complained. But in Japan the volunteers—some were college students—they complained. The coordinator of this diving group told them the story of the Minamata incident, which is why I'm creating this memorial. So the volunteers didn't really know what happened back then. These young people were listening and I think that talk made a big difference. I saw them look at me very differently after that. Some almost began to cry. Then, they began to realize they're making a memorial. It wasn't like I was directing them to do something because it became their project.

*DS:* Why did you choose that particular subject?

*JNH:* It came to me accidentally. There was a new contemporary art museum one hour away from Minamata. The curator had seen my first piece on cyclos and he asked me if I'd like to make something so I asked him if there was



*Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas: Battle of Easel Point—Memorial Project Okinawa* (2003, single-channel video, fifteen minutes). Courtesy of the Artist, Lehmann Maupin Gallery and Mizuma Gallery.

any water nearby and we thought about Minamata because there's water there. So immediately I begin to think of the disease and the location because I had seen some pictures by [photographer] Eugene Smith when I was a student and that stayed in my mind. So that's how it started. So I accepted their invitation and that I would be doing something there. So I began to develop the idea and I produced the plastic sphere here [he indicates it in his room] and shipped it to Japan.

*DS:* The independent structure is something in your work that comes up often. You usually begin with a little structural device of some kind and then the action evolves around the structures. Such as the sphere or the easels or the Plexiglas hexagon. What is this physical structure? What does it mean to you?

*JNH:* This object [points to it] from the dragon film came to me when I was shopping at one of the centers here in town. When you buy something you get a chance to spend on the lotto machine. But inside it has capsules with a message and it drops down. You open the capsule and you see what you can get, like a small gift. So I thought, "What if I put this underwater?" Because capsules can retain air, the capsule should go up. That became the source for the film I was thinking about doing with one historical part of the Vietnam War, the 1968 Tet offensive. So I wanted to talk about that because I felt that could be one of the points where the boat people—or people in the South—felt as if they were not going to win the war. It was also a turning point of the war. I connected that idea . . . the historical background . . . with the lottery machine idea. At the same time, because it happened during New Year, I began to visualize the Chinese dragon. So I began to combine these elements into one story.

*DS:* How did the lottery connect in your mind to the Tet?

*JNH:* Well I thought about the capsules inside and how it tells your future . . . that's why it's called the fate machine . . . and the master of destiny rotating this machine and he triggers the machine so he's releasing the ball. The idea of fortune telling, and the idea of fate telling, it came from the lottery. Lottery is basically a gamble.

*DS:* How did this connect to the Tet as a turning point?

*JNH:* Because the citizens are beginning to wonder what will happen to them. And how they would progress from there. Some left then or later. It was their destiny.

*DS:* Were you always interested in the idea of memorial?



*JNH:* I was always interested in doing something with the boat people from the time I was in undergraduate school. Then I was working with rice grains. I took the rice, as sticky rice, and I would attach it to different surfaces. I'd let it dry and then before it dried I'd take a photograph. So the photograph became an extension of my work. I'd usually cover objects in some no man's land—under the freeway, for example, or an abandoned warehouse. I'd go inside and I'd cover a door, a broken car. Different objects I'd find inside, abandoned. By covering them I begin to think about how the rice actually clings to the surface. Once it began to dry it cracks and falls. So that whole process of duration and of attaching to a surface and then falling became like what the boat people went through. They had to cling onto the boat, and some of them . . . they fall. So it made a similar sense. So I was working with that kind of idea. One day I was working with incense sticks and I was making a small installation with a bit of uncooked rice and incense sticks. Then I stacked them up while they were lit so of course they'd burn and so much smoke came in my face. Maybe it's just coincidence but after that I came home and I had an answer machine message from my sister in Japan and it said that my grandfather had passed away. So then I tried to figure out when that was and it was when I was doing the installation. So I felt there was something there and then a few days later I went back to the same location and I saw a dead dog lying there. So after that I never made another incense stick installation.

*DS:* Because you felt it was a memorial for your grandfather?

*JNH:* It was some kind of connection, whether I knew already that he had died or we somehow communicated and I was welcoming his passing. Something like that. Same with the dog: the dog knew where to come to die. So I stopped doing that, but from that experience, I thought maybe making art can also be something close to real life.

*DS:* Why are the boat people such a strong theme for you?

*JNH:* I personally was never a boat person. My father was not but my grandmother was and many of my friends also. But I always asked this question: why when you're born in one country, your home country, why do you have to leave your own country for some kind of happiness? It's kind of strange in some way. Maybe that's why.

*DS:* Do you feel that they shouldn't have left?

*JNH:* No. I'm not trying to give a critique of what they should have done. It's not about that. It's just that if you are born in one place, why are you forced to leave? For happiness?

*DS:* It seems that thematically you see it as both. Obviously they were facing a horrible life or a potential of a better life. But also, for what you said earlier, you see it as a “grass is greener” thing too; that you should find something in the dust where you’re at. It seems a thematic question for you: why does this have to happen?

*JNH:* Well for the students that I talked about earlier, definitely I think they have a choice. But you know the people after the war may not have had that choice. So I’m not saying that they shouldn’t have left. It’s just a bigger picture, a bigger question. Why do we have to leave from our own home to look for happiness? It’s not a specific question to the boat people.

*DS:* But it obviously is an important political reality for you. Were you close to your grandmother?

*JNH:* Yes. Not very close but close.

*DS:* Did you see her often?

*JNH:* Yes. When I was here in ‘74 and ‘75, she was still here. Then when she got to the U.S., basically she lived with us in Texas. She died only a year ago.

*DS:* Did she talk about the experience in Vietnam?

*JNH:* No, she didn’t really talk about it. But my mother talked about it while we were here in Vietnam. She was once asked by my grandmother if she wanted to go with her. My mother thought about it a little bit but she declined. So she said she would like to go but would not at this time.

*DS:* So when did your grandmother leave?

*JNH:* Right after 1975. We left after the war was over.

*DS:* So you stayed all the way through, here in Saigon?

*JNH:* Yes we were here.

*DS:* And you didn’t feel the same kind of danger she felt?

*JNH:* The danger was in both sides. You go you have danger, you don’t go you have danger. We had to think carefully about which danger was better. By that time, my father could not come with us because he was a Vietnamese citizen so he had to stay to go through the new program. So all the Vietnamese living in the South had to go through the program to basically be

re-educated with the history from the North. He had to stay here but eventually he was able to join us in Japan. Again it's a passport situation. We had to fly to Bangkok to go to Japan. My mother did not speak Vietnamese nor English and she had three children. The authority at Bangkok stopped her and asked her, "Who are these children?" And at that time my sisters and I had a card with a Vietnamese name, not a Japanese name. My mother had her Japanese name so she could not prove we were her kids. She couldn't speak the language so she had some problem communicating and luckily there was a Korean reporter at the airport who was covering the war and he could speak Japanese so he helped the authorities to understand the situation so we could get on the plane. What if this man was not there? Maybe something else would happen.

*DS:* Do you have memories of fear?

*JNH:* I don't have memories of fear. It was more an adventure.

*DS:* How long did you live in Japan?

*JNH:* About three years. I went from first grade to almost half of fourth grade. Then I thought I was going for vacation with my father but my parents were actually separating and I didn't know. So my father took me to the U.S. and my sister remained with my mother. So I told my friends, "I'm going to America for the summer," and then I realized I wasn't coming back. That was a very emotional thing for me. My sister came with us but she wanted to go back to Japan. So my mother came to the U.S. to take her back and then at that point I knew that I would stay and she would go back. So you know [long pause] that was kind of sad.

*DS:* Would you say it was traumatic for you?

*JNH:* For me it was the one main thing in my life. After coming back from the airport, I locked myself in the bathroom and I made a prayer that someday I would go back.

*DS:* Were you close to your sisters?

*JNH:* Yes, so it was a terrible loss.

*DS:* Why did your father take you to the States?

*JNH:* My father wanted to take the son. But I think what he did was very, very good. I'm glad that he made a choice. Because if I'd stayed in Japan I would have become a bad kid and grown up very negative and also the

chance of my getting to university would be less, because in Japan all your pre-university period you have to struggle. Then once you get to university, you can relax. Most likely I would not have coped with all that strictness. But America was more relaxed and it was my own decision to go to university.

*DS:* Was your father disciplined?

*JNH:* He was very strict. Maybe I wasn't that bad a kid [laughs]. But he also worried that I'd go in the wrong direction because he brought me to America—it opened up my head to new experiences. If I look back, Japan was very, very constraining.

*DS:* A lot has been said in critiques of your work about the water as a boundary, a ground zero. But water is also completely containing. You're held by water as much as you're free in water. Is that something about water that appeals to you?

*JNH:* When I'm underwater I discovered that's where we can see ourselves. We can see the breath we breathe, as it goes up. Whereas on land, though it's still there, we don't see the shape. Therefore we don't think to really investigate that experience. We're experiencing the same thing on land as we are in the water.

*DS:* What is that experience?

*JNH:* That we have to breathe. We take it for granted. The struggle of life. That's the thing I want to demonstrate underwater—the struggle of life—except show it in a simple, basic very purified version. So the first film, the cyclo film, is about that struggle. We can talk about the future of how we can see ourselves. Why just look into the future, why not do that now?

*DS:* Is this sense of time as continuous the theme with which you structure your films? A very visible physical structure, slightly fragile, very small in the huge ocean, but durable, always appears in your films. People are always acting around these structures. The Plexiglas structure in the Minamata Memorial has a lot going on—it catches the light, it's flexible, it moves with the people. It's a very interesting demonstration of your ideas.

*JNH:* The structure could be philosophy. I see the future past and present all at once because they have to interrelate. We can't have a past or a future without the present binding them to one specific frame of time.

*DS:* How does this relate to how you structure your films? For example, the



*Memorial Project Minamata: Neither Either nor Neither—A Love Story* (2002–2003, four-channel projection, seventeen minutes). *Courtesy of the Artist, Lehmann Maupin Gallery and Mizuma Gallery.*

use of four screens in *Minamata Memorial* and the fast intercuts. These are very interesting.

*JNH:* It was a struggle to make the piece. This work is the work that I most want to go back and do something more to it. There are two things that I want the audience to experience: one is the underwater setting, the other is the dance club setting. I still feel it's not quite there. It begins with the children playing at Minamata, then goes into the underwater sequence with the image, a chemical, or something falling, then these people underwater who are collapsing and expanding the Plexiglas sphere. It's made from a children's toy. I have the original here.

*DS:* What is the appeal of this opening and closing motion to you?

*JNH:* This motion gave me the idea that if I put individuals inside and they pushed and pulled it, it becomes a life sustaining motion, like a lung or a heart. That was the basic idea. That's the state people with Minamata's disease live in; they become kind of vegetables. At the time, during '50s and '60s and early '70s, the circumstances of what happened were badly investigated by the Japanese government. The people with this disease were discriminated against as if it was transmittable. Now we know it came from the mercury poisoning from this particular factory. Even today there's a discussion about how to compensate people. Back then they were refused. I just think about the struggle of how they have to live.

*DS:* So how did the dance floor and the cartoons figure in this?

*JNH:* The poisoned people became paralyzed, inanimate, and if you look at the Japanese comic books, you see inanimate characters animating life through the little boxes. They express whatever they want to say in a bubble. They look like they're moving but they're not. I began to associate that with the people with Minamata's disease. The dance club with the young people dancing—they are offering their free flexible motions to pray for these individuals. They're giving their free form motion. So it becomes an offering—the physical generation of their energy. It has a satisfying sense of connection and it's a reiteration of your sense of connection to everything. There is no disconnection. Energy happening here is connected to energy over there. The four screens were to place the audience in a surrounding.

*DS:* What about your use of strident sounds, especially in *HO! HO! HO!* Sharp sounds, screeching, and static. And the screen is striated. Can you talk about that? Why do use these disruptions?

*JNH:* I was trying to refer to live TV broadcasting in the past . . . live cover-

age of the Vietnam War for example. The first time war was covered that way, I think. All those disruptions are there to try and recreate it. So things are not smooth. Also, trying to bring it back to the history, so not using a new age clear definition screen.

*DS:* So you're using the interruptions as images for content, for narrative, rather than trying to draw attention to the screen, for instance. You like things that dissolve—nets, bubbles, dilutions—these are repeating images. And things that ray outward, like stars. These are both durable and fragile. Is this something you've done deliberately or have they just appeared in your work?

*JNH:* I notice they all have bubbles because they're underwater. But I don't think too much about that. There's not really a formula. I try and have at least two contrasting things and then a human being. For example, in the dragon film there is the dragon and the fate machine, and then people. Then with the Minamata piece, there is the sphere, the dance element, and the people. In the Cyclo piece, you have the cyclo, then the mosquito nets, and then people. The latest piece, we have easels and then the star in the center, and then people. I try not have more than two structures. Two structures is contrasting. Maybe my next challenge is to make one structure and then people. Maybe next time, the water can be one thing and the people can be the structure.

*DS:* It seems like you feel that there is an ever-present structure that you don't even have to impose, you just have to perceive. Like the dust: you just have to recognize it. It exists already and you don't have to build it.

*JNH:* Yes. Now I think I'm losing my first time approach. Now, I'm getting used to being underwater though I haven't been diving for a year. People have commented that because my work is done underwater, you know, it looks nice. I question that openly to myself. Does it become smooth and nice because it's underwater or is it something else? So for the fifth project, I need to consider that more. I don't want to create just another water film. It has to have a different sensation. This time I'm giving myself more time. Thinking more about what is water and thinking about different ways to use water. The next project is something about how we assume water and we generate water, versus being in water—that's the basic difference. It will be shot on land.

*DS:* Water still appeals to you most of all?

*JNH:* I think I need to investigate it more. Because we don't live underwater, it's exotic to us. One student said I use images exotic to western culture—the dragon, the cyclo—so does that interfere with the creation of my story? Do I

use these as exotic objects to attract? I answered—if you were living here these would not be exotic objects. They're just a part of everyday life. The same idea goes for the water—if you lived on it, in it, it wouldn't be exotic. The question is: is the water what makes my work exotic? So I need to investigate that. I always think about what I'm doing aesthetically. It's becoming too colorful so I'm trying to reduce that beautiful, clear water. In my latest catalogue I've requested not to have glossy pages, because the look is becoming ugly to me. Too sweet. The story may get lost to those people who are just getting involved with the sensation, the beauty of the water in my work. They can view that if they dive, so I want to create something hopefully they cannot achieve even if they dive.

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