



## SUNG TIEU IN COLD PRINT

8 Feb – 3 May 2020

The media theorist Friedrich Kittler once claimed, in an essay about Pink Floyd's song "Brain Damage" (1973), that "the history of the ear is always a history of madness."<sup>1</sup> For the past couple of years, the relationship between memory, belief and hearing has been one of Sung Tieu's main concerns. The Vietnam-born and London/Berlin-based artist researches the use of sound in the context of warfare, developing sound installations interwoven with architectural interventions, sculptural components, writing and video. In one recent project, she focused on "Ghost Tape 10", a sound-weapon deployed by the US Army's psychological operations unit (or PSYOP)<sup>2</sup> during the Vietnam War.<sup>3</sup>

Tieu's exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, her first institutional solo show in the UK, further expands on the intersection between sound weaponry, brain damage, international relations and information circulation. Titled *In Cold Print*, this new commission focuses on the so-called Havana Syndrome.<sup>4</sup>

In late 2016, a number of US embassy staff based in Cuba<sup>5</sup> started to complain about persistent headaches, tinnitus and dizziness. Unable to identify the cause, a rumour – supported by Donald Trump – of a sound weapon devised by the Cuban government quickly spread. Although no proof of such weapons could be found, and doubts began to surface, most of the US embassy staff were repatriated. Two years later, in July 2019, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania published the results of their tests on subjects who had experienced this "high-pitched cricket sound".<sup>6</sup> Neuroscientists defined the after effects as "concussions without concussions". The cause is still being debated.

At Nottingham Contemporary, the gallery is treated as a surveilled space – in between an underground carpark and a buffer zone. It also acts as an auditorium, a complex theatre of operations connected to a new sound work developed with the support of scientists from Nottingham Trent University and composer Ville Haimala (one half of the Berlin-based music duo Amnesia Scanner).<sup>7</sup> Interspersed within a structure of fences and cruciform pillars are stainless-steel seats and engraved mirrors.<sup>8</sup> These disparate components manifest the underlying violence of the purportedly neutral designs disseminated by the state apparatus (prison, asylum, military).

On another level, the information communicated through the advertising billboards<sup>9</sup> triggers shifts in the perception of the space and what can be heard within it, thus highlighting the correlation between the perception of sound and its translation into information through vision, memory and language.

A publication, devised in collaboration with Haus der Kunst, Munich (where Tieu presents *Capsule 11: Zugzwang* until 21 June 2020), and Mousse Publishing, will be available from Nottingham Contemporary in late April 2020.

1. Friedrich A. Kittler, "The God of Ears", translated by Paul Feigelfeld and Anthony Moore in *Kittler Now: Current Perspective in Kittler Studies*, edited by Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury, Polity Press, 2015 (p. 99)

2. "Psychological operations (PSYOP) are operations to convey selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning, and ultimately the behaviour of governments, organizations, groups, and individuals." (*Wikipedia*)

3. Playing on the traditional Vietnamese belief that a soul can only find peace if buried in its homeland, ghostly voices were played from loudspeakers mounted on helicopters and backpacks. Voices urged soldiers to surrender and find their relatives, or else risk forever being wandering souls. The name given to the larger propaganda campaign was "Operation Wandering Soul".

4. Adam Entous and Jon Lee Anderson, "The Mystery of the Havana Syndrome", *The New Yorker*, 9 November 2018

5. The diplomatic relationship between the two countries resumed in 2015 under the initiative of the Obama administration and Raúl Castro, putting an end to more than 50 years of diplomatic crisis which peaked during the Cold War.

6. Ragini Verma and Randel L. Swanson, "Neuroimaging Findings in US Government Personnel with Possible Exposure to Directional Phenomena in Havana, Cuba", *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 23 July 2019

7. *In Cold Print*, 2020, five-channel sound, 31:24 minutes. Emitted via a range of high-end portable speakers and subwoofers whose presence is hidden from plain sight, this sound piece comprises various elements: a reconstruction of the Caribbean cricket sound, which has been likened to the alleged sound weapon; recordings of Nottingham Contemporary's water-pump system; and apparent fragments of dystopian advertising jingles. Another key element of this sound piece are brain waves turned into sound. Subjecting herself to a battery of tests, the artist had her brain scanned while listening to the reconstruction of the sound weapon. The recorded electric activity was then translated into music from the help of neuroscientists. The bags and clothes presented, which hold the speakers, have been made based on military uniforms and accessories with patterned fabric sourced in Vietnam.

8. *Exposure to Havana Syndrome*, 2020, brain scan on stainless steel mirror. These brain scans refer to those published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* in July 2019, where a research unit based at the University of Pennsylvania led tests on the Havana Syndrome victims. Outlines of these scans (which resemble camouflage pattern and geological maps) are engraved onto a number of stainless-steel mirrors (the type commonly installed in prison cells). The scans are of the artist's brain, produced as she exposed herself to a reconstitution of the sound weapon during an MRI exam. The results were later analysed in collaboration with scientists from Nottingham Trent University, to emphasise details that would manifest the reactions to the exposure to the sonic weapon.

9. *Newspaper 1969 – ongoing*, 2020, five images on 75-inch LED screens. A continuation of the *Newspaper 1969 – ongoing* series that Tieu has been developing for some years, they present an anchor point for this project, providing both the substance of the research material and its fictional set-up. Usually printed onto newsprint, here they are displayed on the kind of LED screens typically used for advertising billboards.

### Related Events

We offer free events related to our exhibitions and research strands. Book your place by visiting [nottinghamcontemporary.org](http://nottinghamcontemporary.org) or calling 0115 948 9750.

#### Sung Tieu: Acousmatic Paranoia

Sat 25 Apr, 3–8.30pm

The second instalment of the research series *Sonic Continuum*, this symposium features Sung Tieu, alongside thinkers and musicians, and explores sonic warfare and the psychoacoustic dimensions of fear. Contributors to be announced.

#### Exhibition Walkthrough

Wed 4 Mar, 6pm

Olivia Aherne, Assistant Curator of Exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary, and auditory scientist Christian Sumner discuss their collaboration with Sung Tieu. The conversation expands on the impact sound can have on the brain, ears and to physical and psychological well-being.

Exhibition curated by Cédric Fauq with Olivia Aherne  
Public Programme curated by Sofia Lemos with Ryan Kearney  
Sound piece produced with the support of Ville Haimala  
Newspaper design produced with the support of Dan Solbach  
Brain scans design produced with the support of Gunar Laube  
With the great support of Rob Morris, Christian Sumner and Frederique Vanheusden at Nottingham Trent University

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Image credit: Preparatory design for *Exposure to Havana Syndrome*, 2020 (with the support of Gunar Laube).