

# MOMENTA BIENNALE

## Balado / Podcast

Episode 7 - Verbatim

## Tuan Andrew Nguyen

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# Tuan Andrew Nguyen x Jamie Ross

Episode 7 (31 min)

For this season's final episode, Jamie and Tuan meet virtually – one in Toronto and the other in Hồ Chí Minh City. Tuan addresses a little-known side of Vietnam's colonial history through the life of his grandfather, a Senegalese former soldier. Old traumas are laid bare in the Vietnamese-Senegalese community, torn between forgetting and love, at the heart of Tuan's work. Jamie and Tuan talk about how a song can stimulate and reveal memories and about the physical space created by its vibrations and lyrics.

“[W]hen we talk about song and vibration, it is bodily [...]. A song is a seed because it carries all this information inside of it.”

Pour le dernier épisode de la saison, Jamie et Tuan se rencontrent virtuellement, depuis Toronto et Hồ Chí Minh-Ville. Tuan aborde un côté méconnu de l'histoire coloniale du Vietnam par le vécu de son grand-père, ancien tirailleur sénégalais. Déchirée par l'oubli et l'amour, la communauté vietnamo-sénégalaise se retrouve au cœur de son œuvre, révélatrice de traumatismes. À distance, Jamie et Tuan échangent sur la manière dont une chanson peut stimuler la mémoire et révéler les souvenirs, puis sur l'espace physique créé par ses vibrations et ses paroles.

« Quand on parle de chanson et de vibration, c'est corporel [...]. Une chanson est une semence parce qu'elle porte en elle toute cette information. »

**Jamie:** You're listening to a podcast about images and the artists who make them brought to you by the 2023 edition of Momenta Biennale de L'image, curated by Ji-Yoon Han.

Entitled Masquerades Drawn to Metamorphosis, the 18th edition of MOMENTA Biennale de l'image presents 23 artists whose projects activate processes of transformation, mimicry and mutation. Its goal is to shed light on the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, defining the relationships between self and other, between humans and our environment.

I'm your host. Montreal artist and filmmaker, Jamie Ross and I'm meeting up with the artists showing work at this edition of MOMENTA for generous moments of conversation. Je suis votre animateur, artiste et vidéaste Jamie Ross. Je rencontre des artistes faisant partie de cette édition de MOMENTA pour des conversations enrichissantes. Les entretiens seront en français ainsi qu'en anglais.

I love artists. I love having the opportunity to sit with other artists about the work we make and to look at it with rigor, with curiosity and with delight. I'm interested in the messiness and the irregularity of communication, and I believe in the singular energy that is engendered by the places that inspire artwork. Not just our studios, galleries or the museums where they're shown. I'm interested in the resonance of a site and the objects that accompany each artist in their practice. For this series, I joined MOMENTA artists for an encounter at a site of their choice to hear about their process and to think about the questions their work asks. And I'm also fascinated by the paradox that is artists working with images, sharing their work in a decidedly non visual medium, that of a conversation, a podcast.

I made no secret of my deep attachment to Tuan Andrew Nguyen's practice when I met him for a conversation. How could I ever hide such a thing? His films are these haunting worlds in and of themselves, the lyrical gyres of which you can tilt and lean and even dive into. And the first time I found myself in front of one, in front of one of his films, *The Island*, I found I had lost track of time completely after watching it. He joined me from his studio in Saigon for this discussion. Enjoy.

At the sound of the bell. We begin the spell. (bing)

**Jamie:** Tuan Andrew Nguyen, thank you so much for joining us.

**Tuan:** Thank you for having me. Jamie Ross.

**Jamie:** Would you tell me where you are right now?

**Tuan:** I am calling in from Saigon, also known as Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. I'm calling from my I'm connecting from my my office. And we are in at the end of a very maze like series of alleyways called hams here. Um, yes. And it's 8:00 in the morning.

**Jamie:** And it's 9:00 at night here in Toronto. And for our listeners, I'm half in my closet, my friend's closet. Um, so I like to situate ourselves a little bit before we enter into the conversation with all the artists. Um, so it's nice. This is the only one that is around the world. So the piece that you're presenting at momenta, *Specters of Specter*, the specter of ancestors becoming, is also quite international in terms of

diaspora, in terms of place, in terms of memory and history. Would you explain a little bit about how you started working with the Vietnamese diaspora in Senegal?

**Tuan:** So I was doing a lot of research in regards to tirailleur, which are colonial soldiers of the French Empire. Um, my grand uncle was a tirailleur who fought against his will in Vietnam, and he ended up in Algeria during the revolution there. And then he ended up in Martinique and part of the colonies of France. And, you know, I was always very kind of intrigued with his stories growing up. And so I started doing a lot of research several years ago regarding Tirailleur, um, and found out that, you know, there were tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of tirailleurs that were brought to Europe from the different colonies, uh, colonies from West Africa, North Africa and Indo China, which is, you know, which is what the French called its colonies in Southeast Asia, namely Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Um, and I was very intrigued and really curious about any kind of solidarities that arose between these tirailleurs, different, different nations. Um, and then when the revolution in Vietnam started to occur, the uprising against the French, a lot of tirailleurs from West Africa and North Africa were sent to Indochina to, to manage and squash that revolution, that rebellion. And and that was a very interesting story. So when I ended up in Senegal for the for the first time, I was working very closely with Raw Material Company, which is a center for thought and cultural exchange. It's an amazing place started by Colo-Colo and was directed by Mary Ellen Pereda at that time. And we we started talking about coyote, one of Coyote's best friends and a neighbor of Raw Material company was from this community. She was half Vietnamese, half Senegalese. And, you know, I started to kind of understand more

deeply that there was this migration of Vietnamese women and children at the end of the First Indochina War, from Vietnam to West Africa, because these African, West African tirailleurs were in Vietnam for so long, they they had relationships and had children and wives. And at the end of the war, it was actually very dangerous for children of these partnerships to remain in Vietnam. Um, so there's a large, large migration of Vietnamese women and children from Indochina to West Africa. And that's where this film begins from that migration.

**Jamie:** It's so cool how the art world is able to provide these contacts and these, these routes of of connection, like from residencies and exhibition spaces, project spaces become friendships and neighbors can come out of the woodwork in such a way. It's it's really cool. I want to talk about song. I always want to talk about song. There's never a moment I don't want to talk about Song and Ji-Yoon Han's proposition for this year's biennial provides a really beautiful throughline through a lot of interesting projects. And these last two months, as I've been interviewing artists, the idea of song has come up again and again. Song as vehicle. Song as portal. Song as opening. Song as inheritance. And I think that there's a really interesting. Way in which your projects deal with song, that adds something new to that conversation. And thinking particularly of your the work that was presented at the new museum. The unburied sound of a troubled horizon. And in it is a really sophisticated concept of a very particular frequency of sound that both touches on song but also departs on it. So permit me the metaphysical meandering, but what does this particular frequency, both of the sculpture that you showed and the way it makes its way into the into the film.

**Tuan:** The frequency that you are speaking of, Jamie, is 432Hz, and it's a very interesting frequency because there's there's a lot of research being done on this, on this frequency. There's been a lot of scientific research on how this specific frequency lends itself to how it affects our bodies. Sound is sound is a very powerful thing that we often tend to kind of overlook, because in general, we're a very ocular centric society, right? We're an ocular centric world, and we've forgotten how powerful vibrations are. And that's what this frequency is. It's a it's a specific vibration. And it's there's been a lot of research on 400, 432Hz and how. And its potential to be used as a treatment for PTSD, among other things. You know, science has shown us that our different internal functions in our body, like heart pressure, heart rate, blood pressure, and so on and so forth are actually affected by by certain frequencies and this frequency being one of them. The other thing I find really interesting about 432Hz is that. It is the frequency at which the earth is vibrating. So this is I think it was in 1952, a German physicist called Schumann. So. So it's named after Schumann. The resonance which is the Earth's, they call it the Earth's heartbeat. Um, and he discovered that the Earth resonates at a average kind of hertz of, like, 7.83 to 8Hz. So when you kind of work out the math and the physics of it, 432Hz is a multiple of that. And so when we're working with this frequency, um, you know, in ancient time, a lot of people have used it as, as a healing device. And now science is catching up to that, um, catching up to those ancient ancestral kind of processes. Yeah. So I find it interesting.

**Jamie:** The image that is the most arresting for me in that piece is when the character is placed underneath the bell. The bell is rung with her almost entirely

within it. And we're not talking about a bell that was cast as a bell we're talking about. It was a tool of the US war in Vietnam, and it's she is being placed within it, within this tool of death, and it has been transformed into a thing of healing. And it's an incredible, incredible, powerful image. You activated your show in New York at the New Museum, with music, with song, with experimental music, with traditional song. Would you describe a little bit the importance of of song in your work?

**Tuan:** Yeah. At the new museum. We actually started with some chanting with by some Tibetan monks in exile from sera monastery. And, you know, chanting is one of those kind of technologies, I would say, that tries to or this is what scientists believe tries to align itself with that, that frequency of the Earth, which is 432Hz. And I thought that was going to be that was a really kind of important opening for this activation. And then we had been an a friend of mine and a composer, a very young composer from Vietnam who is actually now studying in California. He actually wrote the music for the ambient sounds of A Troubled Horizon. He activated the mobiles, which are tuned to 432Hz. And there was also the the the bomb, the B-52 bomb. It's called the M117 bomb, also in the space that he also activated at the same time. So there wasn't much song in that activation per se. But I completely understand what you're you're talking about. There's a lot of song in the films that I make. Song is very important to me. You know, besides, it's kind of vibrational aspects because song is music and it's vibrating at a certain at certain frequencies. And I think those frequencies tell a certain story.

**Tuan:** But the other element of song are the lyrics of the song, the words that are used in the song. And I find that also very fascinating. Um, song brings me to a

certain place, like really quickly, a certain place and a certain time. And, you know, I talk about this, you know, how people, when they smell something, they automatically get brought back to a certain memory. Song does that for me, and I'm sure song does that for many other people. Um, in a, in a way that's much stronger than, you know, the smell of things. Um. Songs tell stories. Through the words and through the through the vibrations. My grandmother was a poet. I. When I was younger, I used to write a lot of poetry and lyrics and stuff. So for me. Songs have that power, right? The combination of the vibration and the words kind of bring us back to places and activate certain memories, and that's that's my fascination with song. And they can be political, you know, like we protest songs have been very, very powerful kind of tools of political resistance for, for centuries. Um, yeah. And there's, there's power in that.

**Jamie:** I think there's something really interesting too, about the... the way that in. In buried sounds. There's a mix of. The traditional and the historical pop registers of song, to which I think is such an interesting, interesting connection. Like people can relate and a sentimental memory basis to the songs of their childhood, of their past. And I think that, yeah, in that scene where the character is singing to the it's a performance for the camera. It's an incredible it's an incredible moment. The character approaches your sculptures to almost wear them as these numinous extensions of his body, and then begins to perform. The song. But it's this. This thing that is. It was. It's such a. It feels like such a guttural. Embodied sort of way of thinking about this metaphor, that it doesn't feel like a metaphor at all. It feels like something that you feel rather than think when watching the piece.

**Tuan:** That's beautiful, Jamie. I mean, I think also like when we talk about song and vibration, it is bodily like vibrations affects our ... our bodies, you know, not just our minds. They affect our minds too, in the way that I'm speaking about. Like how they activate certain memories, but they also activate our bodies. And, you know, while I was hearing you speak, I was thinking, wow, it sounds like you're describing a seed. A song is a seed because it carries all this information inside of it. So when I sing the song. I activate the seed, and when I give you that song and you sing the song, you activate that seed as well. And I think that's something that's a that's a really beautiful metaphor.

**Jamie:** Mm hmm. It's interesting, like, I also make video for installation, and I think that the context of. Every presentation of every project in the best case scenario, can have a deeply site specific relationship to the to the piece forever. And there's some beautiful images. Was it Sharjah where this piece was first presented?

**Tuan:** Right. Sharjah was the first presentation of this work. It was commissioned for that biennial in 2019.

**Jamie:** Mhm. Ah, cool. The images of a sandy middle part between the four channels are so beguiling. It's like. I think the question I had was was, how do these channels fit in the logic of the edit? Like on a formal basis? Like what was it like to piece together these, these separate scenarios that went together to create the four channel video installation? If you could name for our audience what the pieces as they fit together are. Maybe generally how they might fit on the wall of a of an early edit. When thinking about splitting a film into four parts spatially in a square.

**Tuan:** That's interesting because I. Actually think about it as combining four films into one.

**Jamie:** Cool. I got the opposite, as I intuited.

**Tuan:** Yeah. So just for audiences to kind of imagine it's four channels configured in a square, um, set up in a square configuration with spaces at the corners so people can enter inside the space. So it's basically a room within a room. And you, the viewer, has the option to sit in the center and be able to see. And piece together a narrative depending on where the viewer turns their body or turns their head. So the viewer is in a space that's very immersive visually and with sound. There's eight speakers all around you, plus a subwoofer, so you're very kind of immersed into this space. And it's. It can get a little bit hallucinatory, because there's a lot going on for people who are very used to looking at a single channel, a single image happening in front of you. Right? So for me, it is very much attempting to recreate or emulate a space of memory. So you went through the space. On one screen is. Video footage of a person reading a script. It's a scene, and it's a dialogue between two people, and it's set in a recording booth.

**Tuan:** On the screen opposite is an enactment of that scene. Lip synched by people from the community. And that's all happening in slow motion. On the other scenes are interspersed different images of. People from the community. Uh, and archival footage. Taken from the archives of the French military, and even the images of people from the community that I gathered. I consider that as important as the

archival footage from these, you know, large federal archives. And so it's a. There are stories being told all around you, and they're interconnected. And what I've done in the editing process is try to. Sync things up and then push them out of sync at times. So it's it's a strange choreography to, to do for, for channels and to do it in this kind of configuration because you're not presented with them all in front of you. Sometimes you're kind of left feeling that you're missing something because you can't look. Forward and backwards at the same time. So that's the effect that I was trying to achieve in this, in this, in this installation, in this edit.

**Jamie:** For the spectator. In my experience, there was a lot of movement. I was drawn through the space, but often, just like you mentioned, to the edges where you can start to sort of imagine all four at the same time, but it becomes kind of a cognitive, quite the cognitive ask, I think, to try to perceive all four at once. And I let myself sort of not worry about all stories simultaneously at the end of the my, my session of watch, of spending time with the piece. I. Yeah, I'd come to this sort of strange, agnostic position in the story where I was, even though I was fascinated with wanting to know the whole or coming to, you know, to like a respectful amount of time with the piece. I gave up on trying to see everything at once simultaneously because it was so. The layering was. So I guess simultaneous is the right word, but there was an invocation, like a really gentle overlapping of so many of the elements that. Yeah, as a spectator, it did leave me this, this great sense of not needing to know all of the things to have a full, complete experience of the work. Which is interesting. I think with with mono band single channel linear work. The idea of not knowing the whole thing would be kind of akin to walking out. And I love the idea that it's like you can have spent the entire runtime of the installation, but still have the

sense that there's much more. Had you done the choreography a different way, which is cool, it felt agnostic to me that this not sureness, which is very it felt very interesting. I'm so curious about that edit process.

**Tuan:** Mhm. Yeah. You as a spectator I feel like. You have to relinquish your ... Your need to grasp and to understand fully the situation. And I don't know. If for me, agnostic is the word. Because maybe it's like religion, like you give up to a higher power, but you know, you're connected to that higher power at the same time. And, and that's, that's how I think memory, the power of memory is, is kind of activated here. Literally a spectator can never watch the same film twice unless you just look at one channel throughout the the full 18 minutes. Right. Because you are the final editor of the piece.

**Jamie:** That is a great place to draw things to a conclusion. I have maybe one last thing to ask you in your heart of hearts. Is there something that might feel like the greatest possible outcome of your practice?

**Tuan:** Part of me Jamie, wants to say that I'd like my practice to help us all heal. But I feel like that's a really kind of too ambitious of a mission for for one. So I would say that I would through my practice, I hope to make friends. A lot of friends.

**Jamie:** That's so beautiful. There is. An article that Michel Foucault wrote near the very end of his life, entitled friendship as a Way of Life. And in it he proposed that one could work towards that as a goal. Friendship with the.

**Tuan:** Well.

**Jamie:** I won't paraphrase too deeply, but. That's beautiful. I'll dig it up. I'll dig it up and send it your way.

**Tuan:** I would be so appreciative of that.

**Jamie:** Well, this is I who is appreciative to you. Thank you so much for your time.

**Tuan:** Thank you. Jamie. Thank you for your time and your reflections on sound and image and song. Very lovely.

**Jamie:** It has been a rare pleasure to sit with some really talented artists this summer to research, to ask questions, but most of all, to listen. And I will risk sounding a touch sentimental. This has been a deeply humbling experience for me. Accompanying artists and plunging into the deep waters of their projects is a really intimate experience. To look into someone's eyes, who has dived into the watery stuff of their inspiration and their research, and returned to the surface with something in their hands. People who have pulled something into existence, that is a really wild experience. Mes chers auditeurs, auditrices. My dear listeners, thank you for listening. I will close this series like Annie Dillard closed *An American Childhood*. As our voices in this podcast. Find you in the places where your lives have taken you. You may listen to us in your summer bed while the stars roll westward over your roof, as they always do. While the constellation Crazy Swan nosedives over your steaming roof into the tilled prairie once again. You may listen to our voices in your

winter chair, while Orion vaults over the snowy roof and over the hard consonant to  
dive behind a California wave. All two points in time. However distant meat through  
the points in between. Any two points in our atmosphere. Touch to the air. And so  
we meet. I'm writing this at a desk on Rachel Street. On Rachel. In a city around a  
mountain on an island. I'm reading this at that desk on Rachel Street. Rachel. In a  
city around a mountain on an island. My name is Jamie Ross and I'm signing off.  
Thank you for listening. At the sound of the bell. We begin the spell.