



# Architectures of Control

## SUNG TIEU

Portrait of **SUNG TIEU**.  
Photo by Nadine Fraczkowski.  
Courtesy Neue Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin.

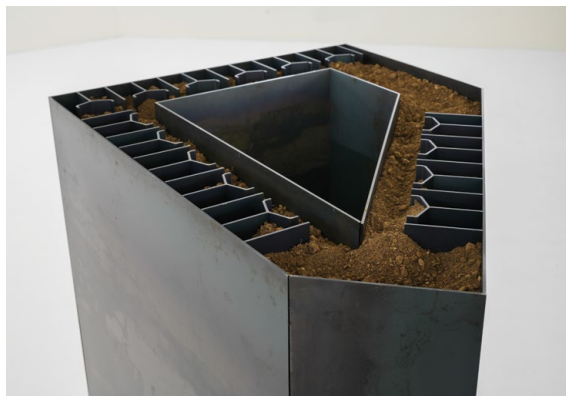
BY FRANCES ARNOLD

“I’m interested in how certain strands of my biography fit into a wider global history of Germany, the GDR [East Germany], and contract workers coming to Germany,” said Sung Tieu of her intertwining of archival research, fiction, and a notably distanced approach to her own personal experience. Virtually indistinguishable from each other, the effect is one of unease, magnified by her subjects, which span hidden threats, psychological warfare, and surveillance both historical and contemporary.

Tieu and I spoke over Zoom about her recent exhibition at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (NBK) in the artist’s home city of Berlin, which until the end of 1989 was divided between east and west, controlled by governments on opposing sides of the Cold War. Titled “No Jobs, No Country,” the presentation marks a continuation of Tieu’s investigations into architectures of control—be they prisons, immigration offices, or in this case, a former dormitory once used to house contract workers in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

The exhibition’s centerpiece is a steel sculpture, *Block G (Gehrenseestrasse, Berlin)* (2023), a minimalist, pared-down floorplan of the eponymous housing project constructed in the East German capital’s Lichtenberg district. The sculpture is filled with earth collected around the site, referencing the uncompromising delineation of territory between East and West Germany, and by extension, the strictly confined lives of those who lived here. Dating from the early 1980s, the complex provided accommodation for some of the 60,000 Vietnamese *Vertragsarbeiter*—or contract workers—who came to East Germany as part of bilateral recruitment agreements between the GDR and other Socialist states. Among them was Tieu’s father. In the early 1990s, Tieu and her mother followed, and they lived together in the Gehrenseestrasse dormitory from 1994 until 1997.

Installation view of **SUNG TIEU**’s *New Generation*, 2022, steel and soil, 150 × 75 × 100 cm, at “Civic Floor,” MUDAM, Luxembourg, 2022–23. Photo by Mareike Tocha. Courtesy the artist and MUDAM.



Detail of **SUNG TIEU**, *Form (for Residence Permit)*, 2023, four plaster casts in total, 22 × 33 × 1 cm, at “No Jobs, No Country,” NBK, Berlin, 2023. Photo by Jens Ziehe/NBK. Courtesy NBK.



“The exhibition at NBK is the closest it ever got to being personal,” Tieu said of the artworks connecting to her history with the soon-to-be-demolished complex, and her decision to include five childhood photographs from her time there. The snapshots reveal glimpses of the apartment Tieu shared with her mother: around five-square meters in size, the living quarters were closely supervised, with residents subject to myriad regulations. In Tieu’s practice, personal ephemera establish the artist as a connected outsider, rather than a protagonist. “I don’t find my biography particularly unique,” she explained. “I’m one of many. There are many stories similar to mine.”

From a divided Europe to protracted proxy wars, the narratives of displacement and migration that run through much of Tieu’s work originate in the divisions and confrontations that hallmarked the Cold War period. Take the video *No Gods, No Masters* (2017), which evokes the Vietnam War through spiritual traditions, the psychology of persuasion, and two ghosts separated by almost 50 years.

The first spirit was an invention of the 6th Psychological Operations Battalion of the United States Army in 1970. Deployed via speakers hidden in soldier’s backpacks in Mô Cày, a rural area along the southern Mekong Delta, a recording of a distorted male voice purported to be the wandering soul of a Viet Cong fighter killed in battle and improperly buried as he implores his living comrades to flee. Uniting past and present through supernatural beliefs, the video features a second ghost that used Tieu’s aunt as a medium to communicate the family’s wishes for each other during a ritual in the artist’s birthplace in the northern city of Hải Dương.

Other works explore the displacement and division of northern and southern Vietnamese people in East and West Berlin, respectively, during the Cold War era. Her early site-specific work *Subnational MP3s* (2015) unfolded at Berlin’s Dong Xuan Center, a wholesale market selling Asian imports in Lichtenberg. In the work, counterfeit MP3 players broadcast field recordings from a well-to-do West Berlin department store, evoking the very different socio-economic conditions and support experienced by southern Vietnamese fleeing the aftermath of the Vietnam War, who arrived in West Germany as refugees.



Installation view of **SUNG TIEU's** *Moving Target Shadow Detection*, 2022, single-channel video installation: 18 min 56 sec, at "Hotel Nacional de Cuba," Kunstverein Gartenhaus, Vienna, 2022. Copyright the artist. Photo by Kunst Dokumentation. Courtesy the artist and Kunstverein Gartenhaus.

Tieu's interest in architectural apparatuses of control spans the vast and conspicuous, to devices so insidious to have become commonplace. At one end of the spectrum are the seven earth-filled steel sculptures that make up the installation *Civic Floor* (2022), first shown in Luxembourg at MUDAM in 2022 and recently opened at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Massachusetts, one of two exhibitions by Tieu to launch in the US this year. Each sculpture references a historic prison design, from 19th-century radial designs to a new generation in the 1990s. Their respective floorplans visible from above, the sculptures are swathed in a haunting soundtrack evoking the slow ticking of clocks and the drip, drip, drip of water, suggestive of incarceration.

Similarly concerned with blocks and cells are Tieu's various iterations of bureaucratic application forms, a visual device she returns to repeatedly in her practice. In the paper-based work *Alekhine's Defence* (2020), it includes German forms for registration, citizenship, and asylum, which she edited and superscribed with diagrams of an unfolding chess game. Having become a German citizen in 2007, Tieu is familiar with state authorities' requirements to squeeze a whole story of migration, intention, identity, and individual worth into a series of boxes. At NBK, she transformed the paper forms into blank plaster casts set into the wall itself: a void to be filled, within unyielding constraints. "I went from fictionalizing these documents to removing the text entirely. I'm interested in the form itself: it's not about the different things I could do with the document, it's about showing something that you might have not seen before: the division of space through its lines."

Quieter assertions of control, and a mainstay of Tieu's visual language, include the incorporation of familiar-looking brushed metal seating units within her exhibitions. "They're found in all kinds of spaces: airports, hospitals, prisons, playgrounds," she said. Fixed to the wall and devoid of sharp corners and screws, they

speak to the duality of authority. "You don't want someone to hurt themselves or use it to hurt someone else. There's a strange idea of safety and protection that's also security and violence. This interests me."

Sound is also central to Tieu's practice. Its source is usually hidden within an exhibition, mimicking the moveable broadcast of "Ghost Tape Number 10," and as in the audio work *Song for Unattended Items* (2018), it strikes a psychologically threatening tone. Each of the 12 sound channels in the installation emanate from unremarkable-looking bags strewn across the floor. Uncomfortably ambiguous, the sounds include fireworks—or are those gunshots? There's fire, too, either crackling and cozy, or deadly; and what might be buzzing insects, or drones. The work debuted at Tieu's 2018 Royal Academy graduation show in London, where constant tannoy announcements on public transport warn commuters to remain vigilant of the potential terror threats posed by unattended baggage.

"Sound is something I work with more emotionally. I don't rationalize it as much as with my visual material. I'm interested in its psychology, the way it can move perception." Case in point: the video work

*Moving Target Shadow Detection* (2022), commissioned for the 2021 Frieze Artist Award, is an aural reconstruction of Havana Syndrome, an alleged sonic weapon whose effects (including headaches, dizziness, hearing loss) US government officials first reported experiencing after staying at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba in 2016. In Tieu's film, a microdrone navigates a 3D rendering of the hotel's corridors, pipes, and elevators, backdropped by an ominous buzzing, low whirring, and mechanical clicks. "When I first showed the work, it was quite contentious," Tieu said of the changing assumptions about the syndrome's legitimacy since the work's inception. "It's important to weave it into a wider history of psychological warfare, like the very real 'Ghost Tape Number 10' in Vietnam, to show that this is not a single incident. That's what I do: I contextualize."

Similarly concerned with making inaudible and hidden threats audible is her new installation comprising sculptures, research, and sound, *Liability Infrastructure* (2023), which recently debuted at New York's Amant Foundation. Titled "Infra-Specter," the exhibition focuses on the fracking industry and how the public health risks from the process's chemical components are concealed as legally protected trade secrets. An integral sound component in "Infra-Specter" is based on the earth's vibrations at fracking sites in Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

"The only thing I tried to do is amplify it in different ways, so that you can sense it more," Tieu told me—although the means could apply to Tieu's broader approach to art. By isolating architectures of control, its floorplans, forms, and fixtures, and by contextualizing histories of migration and displacement, Tieu spotlights alternative realities of those bureaucratic devices that spread insidiously into every corner of our lives.

Installation view of **SUNG TIEU's** *Mural for America*, 2023, 1,900 engraved stainless-steel plaques, and screws, 160 x 896 cm, at "Infra-Specter," Amant, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Amant.

