

List Projects 26: Alison Nguyen
February 23–June 26, 2023, Bakalar Gallery



Alison Nguyen, *History as Hypnosis*, 2023 (still). HD video, color, sound, 25 min.
Courtesy the artist

The MIT List Visual Arts Center is pleased to announce *List Projects 26: Alison Nguyen*, the New York-based artist's first institutional solo presentation.

The cultural implications of technology are a primary concern for Alison Nguyen (b. 1986), whose practice spans the moving image, installation, performance, and text. In past works, the artist has employed gaming software, machine learning, and motion capture technology to generate virtual worlds and live performances. Examining the psychological effects of digital media on its consumers, Nguyen's works also reflect on how technological developments are shaped by contemporaneous political conditions.

The List Center exhibition premieres Nguyen's first live-action film, *history as hypnosis* (2023), as a three-channel installation alongside a related print and video sculpture. Drawing on the cinematic tropes of science-fiction, Western, and road films, *history as hypnosis* surfaces themes of alienation, assimilation, and refusal and centers characters and narratives that, as the artist observes, are often "omitted from history and the screen."

The film follows three women programmed by artificial intelligence whose memories from their previous existence have been erased. In search of a man named "X," the trio venture from the

California desert to gas stations, gritty strip malls, starchitect-designed buildings, and underground enclaves. Their journey is marked by these encounters with architecture as well as by alternately comedic and unsettling interactions the women have with others as they attempt to “reintegrate” into their new, metropolitan surroundings. The artist-designed seating and projection screens within the installation employ aluminum to reference the construction and the auto industries, while the three-channel projection invokes the field of vision from inside a car’s passenger seat—at times yielding a mimetic experience of the spaces and travel on screen, while at other times destabilizing them.

Nguyen’s use of AI protagonists—as well as how the work’s allusions to mind control merge with references to tech giants like Google and Apple (the three characters sport oversized AirPods)—forms a sci-fi veneer that reflects contemporary anxieties around technology and automation. The subtext of the trio’s journey, however, is one of cultural assimilation and their gestures in defiance of that process. The women’s blackened teeth, for example, reference a beauty practice common among Vietnamese women but repressed during periods of colonization when foreign beauty standards were adopted and enforced. Many sequences draw on the artist’s family history, personal travelogues, and hypnosis sessions, as well as oral histories Nguyen conducted with Vietnamese women who immigrated to California in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Throughout *history as hypnosis*, Nguyen connects the technologies and architectures of science-fiction’s dystopian visions of the future to the traumas of past events while offering, with wit and humor, strategies for refusal. Interweaving subtle references to past geopolitical violence associated with the US war in Vietnam, the film and other works on view offer a complex take on how memory, historical narratives, and even consciousness, merge into a shared cultural imaginary that is produced, and reinforced, through cinematic images.

List Projects 26: Alison Nguyen is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alison Nguyen (b. 1986) lives and works in New York. Her films have screened at e-flux, Ann Arbor Film Festival, International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Edinburgh International Film Festival, Channels Festival International Biennial of Video Art, Open City Documentary Festival, the Jewish Museum, and Microscope Gallery, among others. Her work has been exhibited at institutions and galleries, including Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, New Zealand; International Studio & Curatorial Program, New York; AC Gallery, Beijing; Half Gallery, signs and symbols, Kaje, and Hartnett Gallery, all New York; and the University of Oklahoma; among others. Nguyen has received residencies and fellowships from the International Studio & Curatorial Program, the Institute for Electronic Arts, BRIC, Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center, Signal Culture, and Vermont Studio Center. She has been awarded grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts Artist Fellowship in Film/Video 2021, New York State Council on the Arts, the Foundation for Contemporary Art, and the New York Community Trust. In 2018, Nguyen was featured in *Filmmaker* magazine’s “25 New Faces of Independent Film.” She received her BA from Brown University and is a Visual Arts MFA candidate at Columbia University.

SUPPORT FOR LIST CENTER EXHIBITIONS

Exhibitions at the List Center are made possible with the support of Fotene & Tom Coté, Audrey & James Foster, Idee German Schoenheimer, Joyce Linde, Cynthia & John Reed, and Sara-Ann & Robert Sanders. Additional funding for *List Projects 26: Alison Nguyen* is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.

General operating support is provided by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the Council for the Arts at MIT; Philip S. Khoury, Associate Provost at MIT; the MIT School of Architecture + Planning; the Mass Cultural Council; and many generous individual donors. In-kind media sponsorship provided by 90.9 WBUR. The Advisory Committee Members of the List Visual Arts Center are gratefully acknowledged.