


List Projects 26: Alison Nguyen

February 23–June 26, 2023, Bakalar Gallery



MIT List Visual
Arts Center

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Above and front cover:
history as hypnosis, 2023 (still)
All images courtesy the artist

The cultural implications of technology are a primary concern in Alison Nguyen's practice. Spanning the moving image, installation, performance, and text, her works reflect on how digital images are produced and consumed—whether in film, advertising, or virtual spaces online.

In past projects, for instance, Nguyen has borrowed user-generated, 3-D-modeled objects, which often appear in video games, and employed found footage to trace the evolution of consumer-produced media (from early home videos to YouTube vlogging). The artist has also exposed visual parallels between dessert commercials and the aesthetic embellishment of tragedy in news reporting, sometimes dubbed "disaster porn." And Nguyen has enlisted motion-capture technology (which maps the artist's movements onto an animation in real time) to outsource live-broadcast virtual lecture performances to her gig-working avatar, Andra8.

Recently, Nguyen has taken a closer look at the relationship between political conditions and technological developments while also considering the psychological effects of mainstream digital media on its consumers. These subjects are brought to bear in the works on view in her List Center exhibition, which premieres

a three-channel installation of Nguyen's first live-action film, *history as hypnosis* (2023), 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 and assimilation 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 ventures from the California desert to gas stations, gritty strip malls, starchitect-designed buildings, and underground enclaves. Interweaving subtle references to past geopolitical violence associated with the US war in Vietnam, the works on view offer a complex take on how memory, consciousness, and historical narratives merge into a shared cultural imaginary, which is produced, and reinforced, through cinematic images.

history as hypnosis, 2023

In the opening scenes of *history as hypnosis*, a limousine inches into the bay of a desert car wash. Riding in the back are three women; each is dressed in generic white workwear and has a troubled expression on her face. The limo's trunk and rear passenger compartment interior are filled with dirt, and, for a moment, we see what appears to be a dead body, half-buried in the mound of soil. Whether the corpse is real or a phantasmic hallucination remains unclear (the body only appears in this brief opening sequence, and the women seem to forget about it).

The film goes on to follow the trio, who, as a voice from a "programmer" heard through the car's Bluetooth speakers suggests, are embodied artificial intelligence whose memories have recently been wiped. As they make their way from the desert landscape (where they duck for cover at the sight of a helicopter flying overhead) to the city, they are advised that their feelings of discomfort are normal, temporary, and that "it'll all start to feel better and make more sense once you're more integrated." In the tradition of the "road film," a cinematic genre Nguyen consciously borrows conventions from, the three protagonists (credited as "A" [played by the artist], "B," and "C") embark on a series of encounters at gas station convenience stores, strip malls, subcultural enclaves, and postmodern

buildings that are alternately comedic and unsettling.

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. In addition to their all-white attire, the women have blackened teeth, a reference to a beauty practice common amongst Vietnamese women outside of periods of colonization when foreign beauty standards were either adopted or enforced. In an encounter at a convenience store, a cashier questions what she judges to be their foreign appearance—asking where they are from and whether their teeth are dyed black because they are "satanists." Specters suggesting violence from their past "program"—before they were "wiped"—haunt the film's protagonists, too. They cower at a distant helicopter, and a blow-dryer doubles as a gun. Throughout the work, Nguyen mines cinematic genres and conventions, connecting the technologies and architectures of science-fiction's dystopian vision of the future to the traumas of past events while offering, with wit and humor, strategies for refusal.

Cu, 2022

Nguyen reinterprets the text featured in *Cu* from a semi-autobiographical poem of the same title written by her brother, Matthew Nguyen. Rendered in bright yellow ink on orange hand-dyed paper, the low contrast between words and ground emphasizes the text's almost sculptural density on the page. *Cu* recounts a family trip to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum that the Nguyen siblings took with

their younger cousin Alex and uncle Chu, who drove the children from their homes in Maryland to the US capital in a used limousine.

Directed by their uncle to shout "cu" (the Vietnamese word for "penis") should they run into trouble in the museum, the poem emphasizes the absurd theatrics of this outing—a group of second-generation



Cu, 2022 (left), *are you aware that you are being hypnotized*, 2022 (right). Courtesy the artist. Photo: Dario Lasagni

Vietnamese-American children ferried in a battered limousine to a museum celebrating US military power. This humorous personal history is interwoven with observations about intergenerational traumas caused by the US war and violence in Vietnam and their family's immigration to the United States amid these conditions.

Within the context of works on view, *Cu* illuminates autobiographically significant aspects of a visual motif that appears in *history as hypnosis* and elsewhere in Nguyen's work. The limousine is a signifier

of a distinctly American brand of aspirational celebrity culture. (As the artist observes, its design is similar to that of the hearse and may also carry an association with death.) This symbolism is complicated by the narrative in *Cu*, which reveals the limousine's personal resonance: within the artist's family mythology, the car functions as both a bizarre gesture toward upward mobility and as a primary set piece in an improvised performance that flouts the codes of the museum and the war technologies on view there.

are you aware that you are being hypnotized, 2022

Presented on a flat-screen monitor fixed to a mount resembling a car's side-view mirror, this short video loop is comprised of alternating segments of bright orange frames and an extreme close-up of one of the three female performers in *history as hypnosis* speaking the words "are you aware that you are being hypnotized?" over the whirl of highway traffic. Throughout the trance-like loop, the spacing between the silent segments of orange frames and the

performer's repeated phrase varies. In later repetitions, the performer's flat intonations disconnect from the image of her mouth forming the words on-screen. The asynchronous image and sound replicate the jarring effect of a digital playback failure that might interrupt a mindless scroll through online video content, while the video's infinite loop references the mesmeric effects of contemporary user-generated digital media.



history as hypnosis, 2023 (still)

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

history as hypnosis, 2023

Three-channel HD video, color, stereo sound, three 84 × 39 × 0.19 in. aluminum panels
25:00 min. loop
Produced with generous support from New York Foundation for the Arts' 2021 Artist Fellowship in Film/Video, Rug and Vase, and MIT List Visual Arts Center

Cu, 2022

Print on hand-dyed rag paper, text by Matthew Nguyen, typesetting by Wes Adams
22¼ × 30 in. (56.5 × 76.2 cm)

are you aware that you are being hypnotized, 2022

HD video on monitor
1:07 min. loop, 24 × 17 × 6 in. (70 × 43.2 × 15.2 cm)

All works courtesy the artist

Credits for *history as hypnosis*:

Director, Alison Nguyen; executive producers, Mustafa Zeno and D. S. Chun of Rug and Vase; cinematographers, Sebastian Mylnarski and Mustafa Zeno; production designer, Heather Yancey; writer, Alison Nguyen; cowriter and coproducer, Zans Brady Krohn; score, Scott Kiernan; editor, Alison Nguyen; sound designer, Leslie Shatz; colorist, Marcy Robinson; additional music, Ivan Berko; vocal sound designer and recordist, A. M. DeVito; postproduction assistant, Luke McCormick Gardiner; field producers, Nabil Elbehri and Bren Haragan; hair and makeup, Caroline Mills and Jeong-Hwa Fonkalsrud; gaffers, Vince Jefferds and Jeremy Guico; sound mixers, Amelia Palmer and Adrian Aiello; wardrobe assistants, Soha Sabouri and Anna McColley. Cast: Moriah Sittner, Andrea Clinton, Alison Nguyen, Julian Polys, Kakra Nunoo-Brown, Liz Rossi, Anastasiia Bannikova, Lauren Bell, Romeo Sanchez, Jacob Gorchov, Conor Dowdle

SPECIAL THANKS

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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, 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 and Curatorial Program, New York; AC Gallery, Beijing; Half Gallery, Signs and Symbols, La Kaje, and Hartnett Gallery, all New York; and the University of Oklahoma; among others. She has been awarded grants and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, BRIC, Squeaky Wheel Film and Media Art Center, 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.

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

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS



Graduate Student Talk: Kartik Chandra

March 15, 2023, 5:30–6:00 PM
In-person and livestreamed



Spotlight Talk

March 22, 2023, 5:30–6:00 PM
In-person



Film Screening in Collaboration with e-flux Video & Film

May 11, 2023, 6:00–7:30 PM
In-person at List Visual Arts Center

May 23, 2023

In-person at e-flux Screening Room, Brooklyn, NY

All List Visual Arts Center programs are free and open to the public. Registration is required. For more information about events and programs related to this exhibition, please visit: listart.mit.edu/events-programs

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