

Hue House

Hue, Vietnam, 18th century

Carved jackfruit wood

Courtesy of Phunam

The Propeller Group in collaboration with Superflex

FADE IN: EXT. STORAGE – CU CHI – DAY Close up of dusty wooden pieces being moved from inside a storage facility to an outside area. Pieces are laid out. There are MEN working with their shirts off. Suddenly we hear a PHONE RING. FEDEX (V.O.) FedEx, Ho Chi Minh City, how can I help you. TUNG (V.O.) I received an email that my shipment from Holland was damaged and confiscated. FEDEX (V.O.) What's the tracking number? TUNG (V.O.) 8 5 6 9 1 3 – FEDEX (V.O.) I'm sorry. From the beginning please. TUNG (V.O.) Sorry. Are you ready now? FEDEX (V.O.) Go ahead. TUNG (V.O.) 8 – 6 – 5 – 6 – You got that? FEDEX Yes, continue. TUNG 6 – 9 – 1 – 3 – 3 – 6 – 0 – 5 – 4 FEDEX (V.O.) 8 6 5 6 6 9 1 – TUNG (V.O.) (frustrated) No no no . . . just one 6 . . . FEDEX (V.O.) Again from the beginning. (beat) TUNG (V.O.) (frustrated) 8 – 6 – 5 – 6 – 9 – 1 – 3 – 3 – 6 – 0 – 5 – 4 FEDEX (V.O.) Please hold . . . (beat) Sir, your shipment was confiscated because customs found two guns inside the shipment which are prohibited items in Viet Nam. You will have to pay a fine. TUNG (V.O.) Yes, that's in the email. But there's been a misunderstanding. FEDEX (V.O.) The total cost to release the shipment is \$9,573.20, the guns will be seized. TUNG (V.O.) What? But they aren't even real weapons. FEDEX (V.O.) I also have a note that there's a broken vase in the shipment. TUNG (V.O.) Those wooden things you're calling weapons were actually bought in Viet Nam as props for a television show here. They're not even real! FEDEX (V.O.) They have lighter fluid in them. That's a dangerous explosive substance. TUNG (V.O.) (impatient) It's a toy lighter in the shape of an old gun. It's an old gun. Wait no, it's not a gun. It's just a piece of wood. It just looks like an old pirate's gun. FEDEX (V.O.) If they're fake why are they in a historical collection and why would you send them out of Viet Nam in the first place?

TUNG (V.O.) Well, it's a long story. We shot a television series based on actual historic events that were an important part of Danish history. And we sent the props from the series to Holland for an exhibition there, and they loved them so much that they decided to add them to their collection. FEDEX Why would a Danish TV show be made in Viet Nam? TUNG (fumbling) It's not a Danish TV show, it was made for Vietnamese television. It's a love story called Porcelain. (frantic) You wouldn't understand, it's complicated. FEDEX (V.O.) I remember seeing that series on TV a while ago. It was on VTV4 right? TUNG (V.O.) (relieved, excited) Yes, yes, that's right . . . Wow, you saw the show? FEDEX Yes, I did. (beat) But it was a little difficult to understand. There were people from the past trying to speak to people in the present . . . and then mixed within a love story . . . very moving – (beat) But got too confusing. TUNG (V.O.) It's a story where a woman in the present tries to effect the life of a woman in the past. That was the main idea behind this series. FEDEX (V.O.) Doesn't it usually happen the other way around? Someone in the past would try to change something in the future? What you're talking about only happens in science fiction movies, not dramas. TUNG (V.O.) (given up) Yes, but this is special, it's not just an ordinary love story. We try to use a love story to challenge notions of history. FEDEX (V.O.) In what sense? TUNG (V.O.) Well, the story is based on the first shipment of porcelain from Asia to Europe, some 400 years ago. It was stolen by Danish pirates and auctioned off. It was extremely valuable because nobody knew how to make it. In the end, the porcelain that was sold helped to solidify Holland's financial status and helped them gain independence from Spain and – FEDEX (V.O.) (interrupting) I would suggest you rethink it all. TUNG (V.O.) What??? FEDEX (V.O.) (matter-of-fact) Your ideas about authenticity are too simplistic. The staging of history is happening around us all the time.

We basically live in a staged version of the past – TUNG (stutters) But – FEDEX (continued) As if the past was a mall where you could pick and choose your lifestyle as easily as choosing a new wardrobe. How is your story any different from that? TUNG (V.O.) (confused) I'm not sure – I mean – I don't – (scrambling) I don't even care much about authenticity. FEDEX (V.O.) That's exactly my point! You should care. Stop being so ironic and use something real for your show. TUNG (hesitant) Well . . . what should I do with this shipment from Holland then? FEDEX (V.O.) Well, if a toy gun and fake props from Vietnam have become important relics in Danish history . . . As the final things are packed into the truck, from around the corner of the house, we see TUNG, a young man, dressed in casual office clothes, as he steps from behind a corner holding a cellphone. Moments pass. TUNG speaks. FEDEX (cont'd) Then why not just send it all back to them? TUNG You're saying that I shouldn't have anything in the exhibition then. FEDEX (V.O.) I'm saying that you should pick something authentic from Viet Nam – (pauses) From that era we have magnificent wood carvings, for instance. There are also – Tung removes the phone from his ear. The truck, now full with wood pillars, begins to roll. It reveals Tung as he stands quietly. We hear the clicking sound of the phone being hung up. FADE TO BLACK, 2010

Single-channel video (color, sound)

5 minutes, 35 seconds

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan, New York

The full title of *Fade In: Ext. Storāge – Cu Chi – Dāy . . .* is the transcript of a phone conversation that serves as the video's audio track. Tung, a Vietnamese artist working with The Propeller Group, speaks on the phone to a FedEx representative, while men move jackfruit wood carvings and architectural armatures from a storage facility to a moving truck. In this gallery, a wooden facade of a house—comprised of carved jackfruit wood architectural reliefs—that dates to the eighteenth century and comes from Hue, the capital city of one of Vietnam's central provinces, gives context to the objects handled in the video. *Fade In: Ext. Storāge – Cu Chi – Dāy . . .* is a reenactment of a 2010 event that occurred when Ho Chi Minh City customs agents confiscated a shipment of props, including fake, wooden guns. The Propeller Group had used these props to produce a made-for-television movie in conjunction with Superflex, a Dutch artist collective. Mistaking the props as real, the custom officials detained the shipment for a high fee.

The conversation about the shipment becomes a dialogue about something much bigger: the themes range from the production of cultural identity to authenticity and the impact of the present on the past. As the discussion continues, the roles of customer and customer service agent, as well as artist and layperson, begin to blur. *Fade In: Ext. Storāge – Cu Chi – Dāy . . .* stands as testament to The Propeller Group's signature method of revealing how mundane contemporary transactions or tasks, from receiving mail orders to watching television shows, often connect geopolitical histories of trade and commerce across time and space.

The Guerrillas of Cu Chi, 2012

2-channel video (color, stereo sound)

20 minutes, 4 seconds

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

When looking at *The Guerrillas of Cu Chi*, you stand between two large-scale video projections: a recent video of a shooting range and a propagandistic documentary created just after the Vietnam-American War (1955–75). Both are from the Cu Chi tunnels, one of the most popular tourist attractions in Vietnam. At Cu Chi, during the war, the Vietcong guerrilla resistance forces built complex networks of underground tunnels—containing weapons, sleeping quarters, kitchens, and even hospital wards—that were integral to the defeat of the American military. In the intervening years, the tunnels have become a memorial and an entertainment complex. In addition to crawling through a subterranean route, visitors over the age of fourteen may pay an additional fee to shoot mounted AK-47s and M16s used during the war.

Caught between the two projections, you become the moving target of the tourists who fire into the open range. Immersed in this video environment, you also become part of the spectacle of representing war and conflict. Because the tourists shoot both guns and photos, the battlefield on display is literal as well as metaphorical: cameras and guns leave different kinds of marks but both alter memory and cultural histories.

Adults may wish to preview this video before viewing with young children.

The Dream, 2012

Motorbike frame

Single-channel HD video (color, no sound)

4 minutes, 20 seconds

Edition 1 of 5 (+2 AP)

Courtesy of Burger Collection, Hong Kong;

The Propeller Group; and James Cohan, New York

In *The Dream*, The Propeller Group secures a Honda Dream, the most popular motorbike in Vietnam, to the ground of an open courtyard in Ho Chi Minh City and leaves it unattended over the course of an afternoon and evening. Stripped by thieves, the remains sit like a discarded animal carcass that has been picked clean by scavengers. By using camera surveillance, The Propeller Group taps into our voyeuristic fantasies—our desire to see without being seen, and to know what others do when they think no one else is watching.

When it is disassembled, the Honda Dream gains an alternate value, exposing a shadow economy that troubles the perceived division of the mainstream and the underground, or the distinction between day and night. The video also raises a number of provocative questions about possession and commodities: what does it mean to set out a desirable object as bait? What exactly is being stolen? What remains? If the Honda Dream is a symbol for Vietnamese daily life, then the destruction of the vehicle offers a theatrical, though menacing, spin on collaborative labor.

Television Commercial for Communism, 2011

Single-channel video (color, sound)

60 seconds

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

Flag For The New Communism, 2011–16

Two-sided heavy cotton with silk hand-embroidery

Editions 1–3 of 7

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

To make *Television Commercial for Communism*, a sixty-second television commercial, The Propeller Group commissioned a leading ad agency, TBWA\ Vietnam, to rebrand communism for contemporary global audiences. The idea of creating a brand, however, goes against the fundamental philosophy of communism, which disavows private property and commodity culture.

Vietnam was one of the last communist countries to open up to global capitalism. Its entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2007 led to an influx of foreign brands. Ads for Coca-Cola and other products began to appear alongside state-sponsored propaganda, which had long dominated the local visual landscape. The sudden appearance of advertising in Vietnam and its juxtaposition against propaganda inspired The Propeller Group to respond to the specific realities of life in Vietnam today. By incorporating popular methods of advertising, such as bright primary colors and a soothing voice-over, to repackage and sell communism, The Propeller Group activates a subversive reassessment of both dogmas—communism and capitalism—in one stylized image.

Manifesto For The New Communism, 2011–16

One-sided heavy cotton with silk hand-embroidery

Edition 1 of 7

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and
James Cohan, New York

*Untitled (Ox Head; The Living Need Light, The Dead
Need Music), 2014*

Water buffalo skull, gold leafing, and
brass rings

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

Untitled (Snake; The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music), 2014

Carved jackfruit wood with 24k gold fangs and brass support

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan, New York

The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music, 2014
Single-channel video (color, 5.1 surround sound)
20 minutes
Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music reflects on the passage from life to death, tailored around similarities between funeral traditions in Vietnam and New Orleans. The title, translated from a Vietnamese proverb, exemplifies how in Vietnam funerals are celebrations. Death is seen as a transition, not an ending. As one voice in the film intones, “the journey continues forever.” Embodying this notion, the camera is in constant motion; it floats among a cast of musicians, fire breathers, snake charmers, and other funeral performers, seamlessly blending documentary film and fiction.

The project was made on the occasion of the international exhibition Prospect.3 in New Orleans, where funerals are also famously accompanied by brass bands that typically lead a procession to the cemetery and afterwards accompany a rousing celebration. Suggesting the affinity between the two places, the soundtrack in *The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music* mutates from traditional Vietnamese music into a sentimental ballad with brass accompaniment and finally to a New Orleans-style jazz number. The artists were further inspired by the similar geographies of the Mississippi River Delta and the Mekong Delta, and in the film the landscapes of Vietnam evoke their counterparts in Louisiana.

AK-47 vs. M16, 2015

Single-channel video (color, no sound)

21 minutes, 45 seconds

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

Collateral Damage, 2015

Fragments of AK-47 and M16 bullets on paper

Two paper panels in one frame

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

Collateral Damage, 2015

Fragments of AK-47 and M16 bullets on paper

Two paper panels in one frame

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

AK-47 vs. M16, 2015

Fragments of AK-47 and M16 bullets, ballistics gel,
and custom vitrine

Editions 5, 7, 9, 13, 15, 17, and 19 of 21

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

AK-47 vs. M16 builds upon the motif of guns that runs throughout The Propeller Group's work. To create the various sculptural, video, and two-dimensional work components of the installation, the artists worked with ballistics engineers in a carefully controlled test lab. The Propeller Group arranged for the two weapons, historically used by forces on opposing sides of the Vietnam-American War, to be simultaneously fired directly at one another into ballistics gel. The entire sculptural series comprises twenty-one gel blocks and references the twenty-one-gun salute used by the US military to commemorate war heroes. It also provides the first camera-recorded, open-air images of such an experiment. The crystalline blocks recall early photographic experiments and scientific records, from Eadweard Muybridge's nineteenth-century records of locomotion, to hardened amber preserving biodegradable matter from eons ago.

Yet, the materiality of the blocks and their particular utility carry a disturbingly specific contemporary practice. The blocks are made of a substance that closely mimics human muscle tissue. By observing the depth of entry and exit, engineers and professionals studying ballistics wounds use the gel as a surrogate medium to test the physical impact of bullets upon the human body, developing even more destructive routes of penetration. In light of this history of experimentation, The Propeller Group's sculptures—which are accompanied by a documentary video and *Collateral Damage*, four panels of black matte paper preserving the fallout of colliding bullets—playfully trouble the boundaries between beauty and revulsion, creation and destruction, and violence and progress. Although the title of the installation proposes a competition, each block denies the viewer a method for identifying a conclusive winner.

Movie Poster for *AK-47 vs. M16, The Film*, 2016

Hand-painted movie poster on unstretched canvas

Designed by Erik Buckham

Painted by Hà Phước Duy

Courtesy of The Propeller Group and James Cohan,
New York

This hand-painted poster promotes *AK-47 vs. M16, The Film*, a feature-length montage film edited together from a variety of sources, including Hollywood movies, promotional videos, documentaries, news reportage, and YouTube clips. Its main characters are two guns, portrayed as storied rivals: the AK-47, described by Nicholas Cage as “Russia’s greatest export” in a voice-over, and the M16, considered “a potent symbol of American strength worldwide.” As The Propeller Group recombines varied clips, the guns historically used by opposing forces in the Vietnam-American War take center stage.

AK-47 vs. M16, The Film surveys how the two famed assault rifles are dramatized. What is at stake is not just a battle of armies but also one of ideas: many Hollywood movies about the Vietnam-American War, from *Platoon* and the Rambo films to *Forrest Gump*, have helped cement the association of these two weapons with certain cultures, reinforcing Cold War-era notions of a battle between West and East. The arena of conflict for these weapons, however, has grown more geographically dispersed and ideologically ambiguous. The M16 continues to be used primarily by the US military, but the patent-less AK-47, with a staggering 80–100 million models in circulation, has been taken up by armies, militants, and many others around the world. The film gradually weaves in clips from newer movies that in turn introduce new settings, shifting from the jungles of Vietnam to those of the Congo, to the dustier settings of Iraq and Afghanistan, and to an exaggerated gangland Los Angeles.