

## The trajectory of agency in Hanh

Nguyet Ngo's *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu*

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# The Trajectory of Agency in Hanh Nguyet Ngo's *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu*

Nigel Lendon

One way to address a work of art is to ask how it takes form in its passage through space and time — how the work reveals the trajectory by which it has arrived at its coordinates in the here and now. A work of art is the outcome of a particular sequence of events, shaped by intuition, informed by reflection, and animated by the collision of coincidences. In this instance Hanh Ngo's recent work *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu*<sup>1</sup> creates for the viewer a rich and complex set of factors to consider.

The visual and narrative complexity of this work is a consequence of the intersection of its forms as they bridge multiple cultural potentialities, for the viewer effecting a doubling and redoubling of interpretation and meaning. The forms of its elements signal the intercultural character of the narratives which comprise its thematic structure, and ultimately these forms combine to challenge stable notions of authorship and agency, as well as identity, history and reflection.

In what follows I have tried to distance the experience of the work from exegesis or personality, despite the fact that the inherent theme of autobiography resonates throughout this work, and even though the interrogation of any work of art must be conceived to some extent as an echo of the events of the artist's life. In writing about this piece I want to explore the idea that to trace a work's *trajectory* is to consider the particular effects of agency when characterised by the mobility of the subject across essentially intercultural contexts.<sup>2</sup>

**I**

You enter an exhibition space to find one work comprising three sets of images in seven parts. The three sets are titled *Mekong Delta Blues, Perfume River Blues*

1 In the title given to this installation at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, July 1998, the artist acknowledges the precedent of Trinh T Minh Ha's film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989.

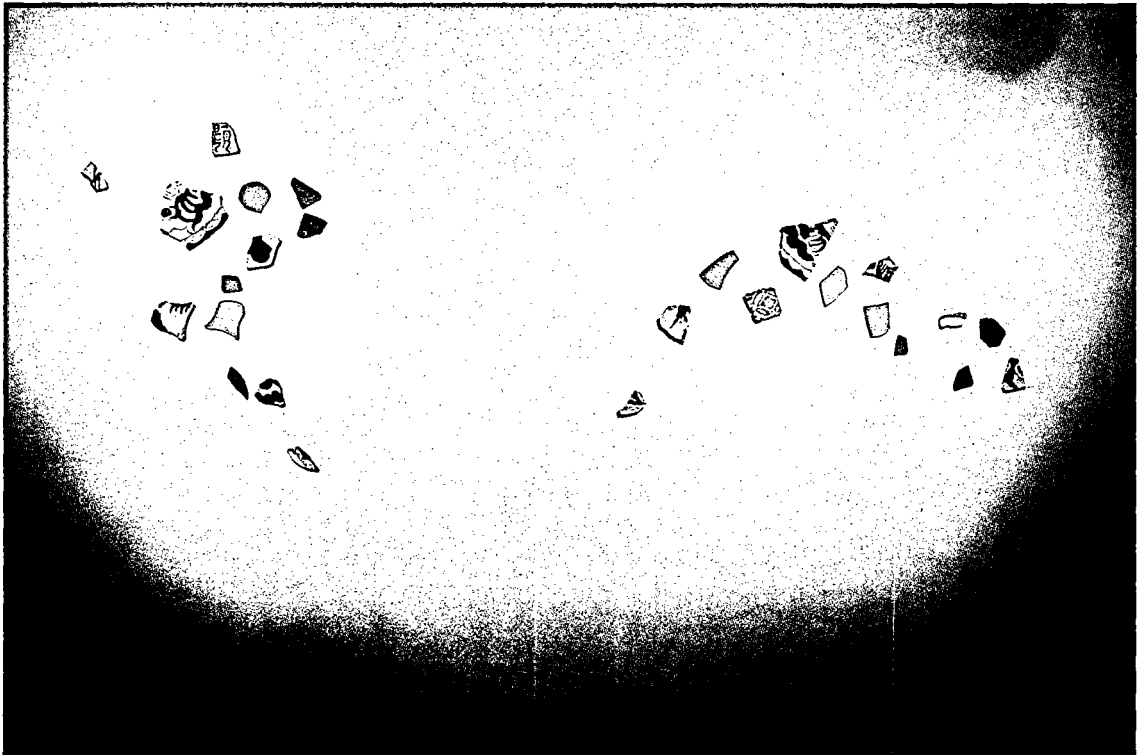
2 I derive the use of such figures from Arjun Appadurai (in 'Commodities and the Politics of Value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (ed) Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge, 1986, p 5, and *Modernity at Large*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pp 31, 59–61).

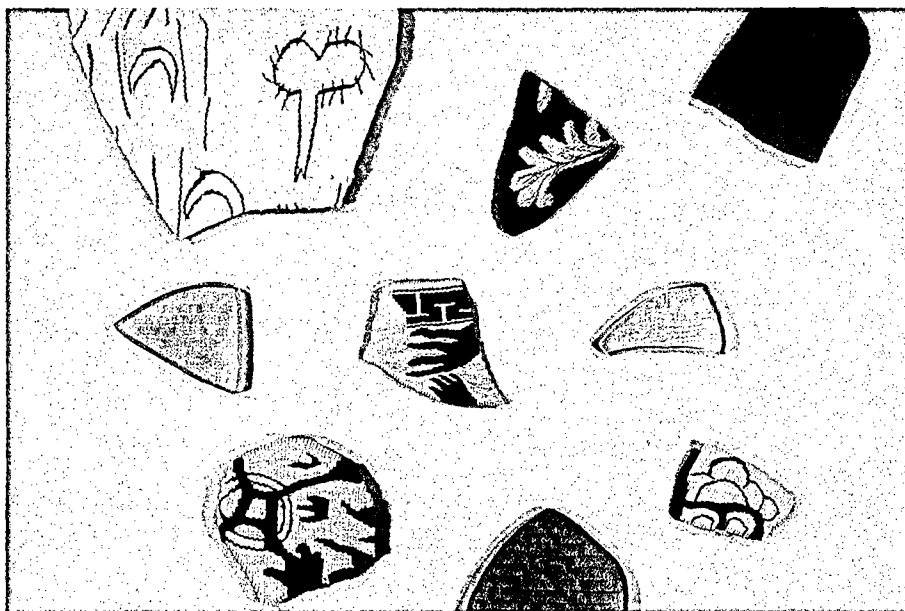
and *Chinese Export Blues*. With an introductory wall text, and a photograph of the character *Ch'ing*, a signature element which incorporates the artist's middle name, the work thus announces itself as an ensemble of image and text, and text as image. First impression is one of immersion, of being surrounded by a hundred or so elements, the scale and detail of which demand close inspection.

The images — irregularly shaped tapestries — are recognisable as representations of ceramic shards by their angular shapes, and the predominant blue and silvery grey colour of their origins. The actual shards were documented by the artist on her return to Vietnam in 1997. Some are ancient, some modern, some from the Mekong Delta region of the artist's birth, some are fragments of plate from the Lake of the Restored Sword in Hanoi and some are from the Imperial City in Hue.

For Hanh Ngo these sites are rich with history, her own history. For her, the ground has offered up signs of presence, even though pulverised by successive wars of decolonisation. No ground in Australia offers up such riches to a Vietnamese (or any other non-indigene). In an important sense for the artist these shards (and the other images) became a sign for the fact of survival. Together with the 46 shards, a child's drawing has been woven then cut into seven parts, and incorporated into the matrix, thus introducing a further autobiographical dimension, which I will explore below. That the work's imagery has been translated to the medium of tapestry is significant in that it is an art form foreign to Vietnamese cultural practices.

*Perfume River Blues*, 1997–8, 300 x 110 cm, detail of installation, tapestry: cotton, linen, vinyl film, polycarbonate





*Chinese Export Blues*, 1997–8, 120 x 160 cm, detail of installation, tapestry: cotton, linen, vinyl film, polycarbonate

- 3 Marguerite Duras, *The North China Lover*, Harper Collins, 1994.
- 4 In reality she was 18 when she left Vietnam.
- 5 Hanh Ngo, 'The Unchaste Heroine: the feminine ideal in the national epic poem of Vietnam *Truyen Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu)', unpublished thesis, 1997, Australian National University. The artist's thesis refers to the 1814 text Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu*, trans. Huynh Sanh Thong, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1983.
- 6 In the exhibition notes she writes: "The insider/outsider position of Viet Kieu means they are understood at the same time as they are completely misunderstood. Being estranged from Vietnam brings about a fear of rejection in *Viet Kieu* that can be overwhelming. In this predicament the vulnerability leads to a situation where if the 'master' beckons the 'concubine' will comply. Perhaps the position of the concubine Kieu, the protagonist of Vietnam's epic poem 'The Tale of Kieu', is indicative of the relationship between Vietnam and its expatriates." (exhibition notes, 10.7.98)

On the shattered walls of the Forbidden Purple City in Hue the artist also found the 'eight-broken' characters (in China this form is called *bapo*) in the language of the Nguyen dynasty which are reconstructed from the same shards of blue ceramic. The photograph of this figure precedes the work on the walls of the gallery. Such characters, at once painting and calligraphy — image and text — assert themselves as an ancient form of assemblage, in which each whole may be seen as a new identity, as the synthesis of its constituent elements. These provided the trigger for Hanh Ngo's mode of assembly of her own works — which take the form of the 'characters' of the boundaries of North and South Vietnam, divided at the 17th parallel.

Mirroring the 53 tapestry shards and drawings are 40 texts written on polycarbonate shapes which echo those of the shards. On these are handwritten autobiographical texts together with quotations from the novel *The North China Lover* by the French 'expatriate' author Marguerite Duras.<sup>3</sup> Duras is an expatriate in reverse sense. She was born in Vietnam, and (in the novel) left for France under some duress with her mother and brother at the age of 15.<sup>4</sup> Her autobiography is written as a cinematic script, and these quotes are represented in combination with Hanh Ngo's own texts, thus evoking the artist's own dilemma of belonging, having left Vietnam as a child of seven, and returning 19 years later.

For the artist, this text-line provides a contemporary analogue to the early 19th century national epic poem *Truyen Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu).<sup>5</sup> This poem relates the story of Kieu, the 16 year old girl who sold herself into concubinage to secure her father's freedom. This epic mythologises gendered and social norms of behaviour, perhaps even more so for expatriate Vietnamese.<sup>6</sup>

By this contrast, the artist anticipates circumstances closer to her own time and space, this time as a narrative with a crosscultural dimension not unlike

her own. The incorporation of these passages brings the work by Hanh Ngo forward into another 20th century life. As one of the work's several internal narratives, engraved on mirror surfaces, these texts are not easily read, and their significance emerges with some difficulty. Duras' texts allude to the pain of separation and dislocation, as well as the reciprocal fascination between the Oriental and the Occidental:

He comes over. He does it for her. He washes her the native way, with the flat of his hands, without soap, very slowly. He says, "you have the rain skin of Asian women. Your wrists are delicate like theirs, too, and your ankles".<sup>7</sup>

## II

To adopt aspects of the anthropologist Alfred Gell's terminology, a work like this may be interrogated as a "distributed object", a composite form which he also describes as a set, or a spatiotemporal structure.<sup>8</sup> In his final usage of this idea, Gell's description applies more properly to an artist's life-work (he chooses Duchamp as his prime example), or the complex set derived from the artistic production of a particular cultural grouping. In this case the work may be seen as partially fulfilling all three descriptions, at least suggestively. Nicholas Thomas has enlarged on Gell's conception of the distributed object to allow that it may also be understood as map-like, in the sense of being isomorphic with the makers' cognitive processes, even though certain aspects may remain relatively undecipherable.<sup>9</sup>

In this particular case, to regard the work as an extended set is to draw attention to its projection beyond its specific spatiotemporal coordinates, that is, in the ways in which its processes of production (and cognition) extend over time and space, and beyond the limits of a specific cultural setting. However, Gell's concept of agency is bounded by the specificity of its cultural/theoretical frameworks.<sup>10</sup> He appears not to have anticipated how agency manifested in a work of art may also be inherently intercultural, or rather, a "complex nesting of imaginative appropriation... involved in the construction of agency in a deterritorialised world."<sup>11</sup>

From this vantage point the objects which comprise *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu* convey a particular temporal and spatial mobility through their projection forward and back beyond their immediate context as they address the viewer. They may be seen for themselves, in the material sense described above, and insofar as they refer simultaneously to their existence in the contemporary world and to their historical precedents, they may also be seen as invoking a capacity for art to operate across cultural boundaries.

One might otherwise draw on Homi Bhabha's ideas concerning agency which allow meaning to be found in a work of art both in the particularity of the social circumstances of its production, as well as its capacity to inhabit a spatio-temporal moment of "absence" in which "agency is realised 'outside' the author".<sup>12</sup> He proposes this quality of 'outsidedness' through the figure of the "time-lag", a metaphor to account for the temporal break which splits the agent from the outcome of the narrative. Thus "intentionality and purpose — the sign of agency — emerge from [a] 'time-lag', from the stressed absence that is an arrest, a ceasure of time, a temporal break".<sup>13</sup> This he derives from Toni Morrison: "Certain absences are so stressed [that] they arrest us with their

7 Duras, *op cit*, p 74.

8 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: Towards a New Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, pp 221ff.

9 Nicholas Thomas, 'Foreword', *Art and Agency: Towards a New Anthropological Theory*, *ibid*, p x.

10 Gell, *op cit*, p 7: "...the theory is premised on the idea that the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded. It has no 'intrinsic' nature, independent of the relational context."

11 Appadurai, *op cit*, p 61.

12 Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p 189.

13 *Ibid*, pp 191-9.

intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them..."<sup>14</sup>

His emphasis on this zone of the "time-lag" as the site of agency — in this case as a way of understanding the consequence of the production of works of art — is further expressed as:

The process of reinscription and negotiation — the insertion or intervention of something that takes on new meaning — [which] happens in the temporal break-in between the sign, deprived of subjectivity, in the realm of the intersubjective.<sup>15</sup>

### III

How might Hanh Ngo's work fit such constructions of the time-frames of authorship, and of agency? *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu* seems to me to address many such issues and, in the complex concatenation of its forms, makes the representation of the experience of the time and space of both its production and reception a particularly vivid experience for the viewer. To propose that the work's agency may be found in a space outside these time-zones opens up another potential order of significance, "in the realm of the intersubjective". Thus while this work embodies the artist's reflection on travelling in time, both through its narratives of history as lived experience and through confronting history as its imaginative present, it also allows a space for another realm of interpretation.

In this essay I want to attempt to overlay Bhabha's concern with the effects of postcolonial experience with the circumstances of the mobile agent, the subject of double displacement, to ask how vision and representation may reflect more than a process of decolonisation. This occurs through the artist's capacity to represent the effects of displacement and subjugation — even though the latter is as much a consequence of curiosity and desire for reconstruction of identity as it is for reconciliation. In this sense the autobiographical dimension of Hanh Ngo's work is explicitly integrated, recording her experiences, memories, desires, as image and text, and, reflecting on the actuality of autobiography, it is the direct consequence of the particular form of her creative and intellectual enterprise.

So why suggest that this work, this creative outcome, can be better interpreted through the figure of agency rather than refer in a more orthodox way to the artist as subject, or the subject as merely autobiographical? To speak of the work's agency suggests that the artist is also the subject of forces larger than the individual (whether through dislocation, displacement, or the recovery of identity), which are relevant both at the level of intersubjectivity as well as the rules governing the political dimensions of social behaviour. It enables the work to be seen firstly through its intentionality, at the level of self-representation, and secondly by evoking in the viewer complex (deep) historical associations through the artist's transactions across the culturally specific social circumstances of her life. Agency suggests that the work has work to do, in producing a particular kind of consciousness in the viewer.<sup>16</sup> If this approach errs towards the didactic rather than the poetic, then it should be countered by the idea that one can simultaneously regard a work as the product of a complex of skills, capacities and visual sensibilities, as well as knowledge, curiosity and the recognition of resonance in life-experiences. This

14 Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable things unspoken', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol 28 no 1, Winter 1989, pp 11–12.

15 Morrison's concept of the recreation of memory, "rememoration", is also invoked by Bhabha as he elaborates this idea further: "[It] turns the present of a narrative enunciation into a haunting memorial of what has been excluded, excised, evicted, and for that very reason becomes the *unheimlich* space for the negotiation of identity and history."

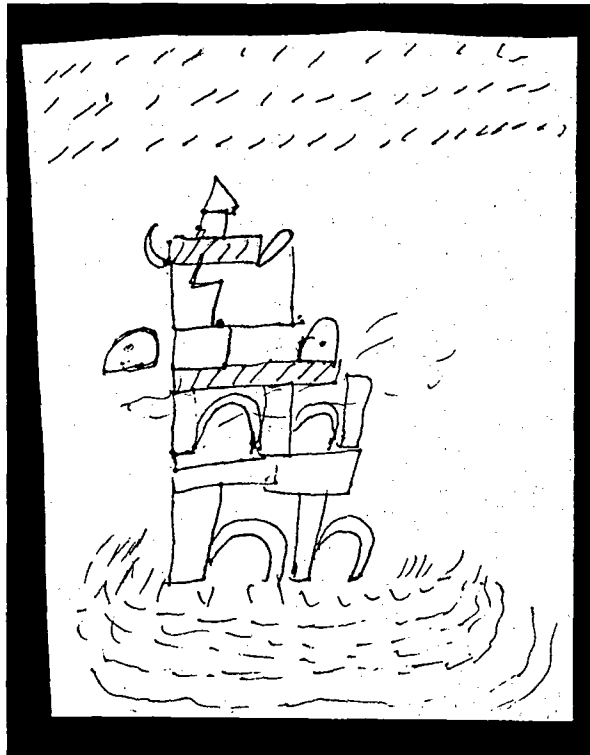
16 The idea of 'a work having work to do' I derive from Nicholas Thomas.

is particularly relevant when the subject is intercultural, and where identity and agency continually elude containment within their spatio-temporal boundaries.

Hanh Ngo's own life-experience resonates with the themes of displacement and dispossession. Her life as refugee/emigrée folds on itself as a doubling movement of inclusion and exclusion, alienation and integration, twice over, first in Australia, secondly in Vietnam. And finally, her experience of language — of 'language' as subject-in-itself, carrying complex signifiers of identity and status — becomes the mode by which the visual and the textual are linked. The languages of her art are addressed as barriers, and for the time being, they stand abstracted as characters, signs of the "time-lag" which for the artist provides the space for the enunciation of her narrative. For this purpose, the references to ceramic shards and the drawings of the child Tien are recreated as the fragments of a contemporary visual heritage accessible to the displaced and dispossessed traveller.

The presence of the child in this ensemble introduces a further displacement of autobiography. The child, a seven year old girl, who tells her story on the streets of Hanoi for money, befriended the artist, a fellow street-wanderer, in 1997. She gave the artist a book of drawings — one of which is the source for the image from which the seven woven fragments has been cut. The integration of images from such apparently disparate sources serves to evoke two moments in the artist's own life — a metaphor of the child-artist looking

Tien, *Drawing*, 1997, 11 x 8 cm Lake of the Restored Sword, Hanoi, Vietnam



forward (outward) and the artist as ethnographer/archaeologist looking inward (backward) at her own culture. One of the texts reads:

The sky is bluer and bluer, dazzling. The child is far from the Chinese, over by the fountain, stretched out in the cool water of the basin. She is telling the story of her life. The Chinese listens from far off, distractedly. He is already somewhere else, he has embarked on the pain of loving this child. He doesn't really know what she's talking about. She is putting all of herself into this story she's telling. She says to him that she often tells this story and that she doesn't care if people don't listen to it.<sup>17</sup>



Tien at the Lake of the Restored Sword, Hanoi, Vietnam, Friday afternoon, 13th June, 1997

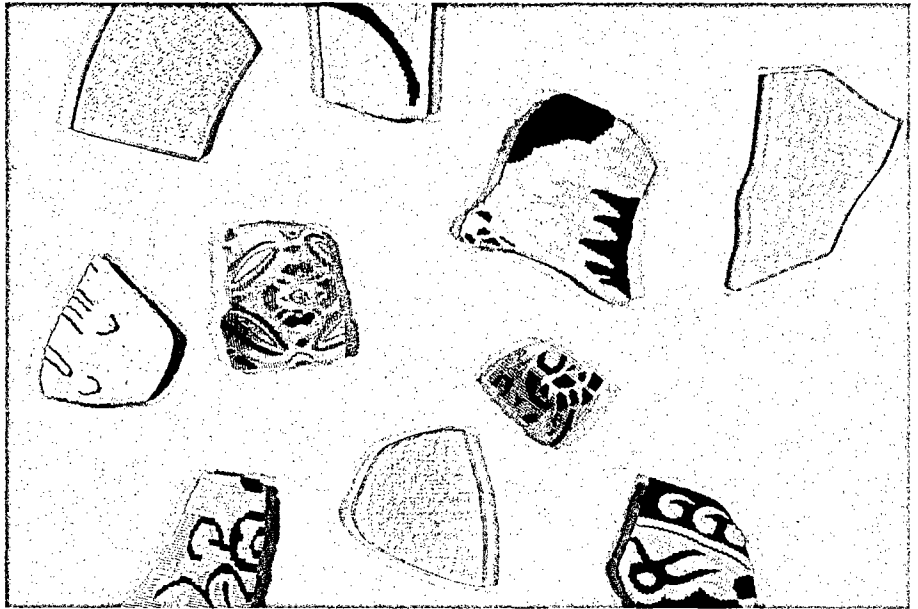
#### IV

In a previous section I addressed the question of the form of *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu* as an ensemble which unifies its disparate elements. Here I want to explore its most contradictory characteristic, in which the work is presented as a constellation of fragments, yet constituting a whole. Such fragmentation of form elicits a number of striking metaphorical associations. Most strongly, and with greatest relevance to this work, the metaphor of the fragment is restorative, for while each element alludes to the loss of its wholeness, at the same time it effects a process of constructing a new unity.

Each fragment, each original shard, is both a reference point in the artist's own journey, her own restorative project, and at the same time the material fragment refers to some previous historical moment — to some incident which has done violence to the integrity of the whole. In Hue, the remains of the Imperial City stand next door to the National War Memorial, a field of broken

<sup>17</sup> Duras, *op cit*, p 88.





*Perfume River Blues*, 1997–8, 300 x 110 cm, detail of installation, tapestry: cotten, linen, vinyl film, polycarbonate

antiquities next to a field of broken down weaponry. In the exhibition the viewer is reminded of this different order of fragmentation where the elements are arranged in the outlines of seven 'fragments' of the map of a unified Vietnam — where the topography divided at the 17th parallel, reminds the viewer of the divisions of political and cultural identity which were the circumstances providing the impetus for emigration in the first place.

The process by which each element (each shard, transformed as tapestry) 'survives' in this work is a motif through which the artist re-works these complex associations. The painstaking reconstruction of each element as a figure by which form and identity coalesce in the construction of the whole is confirmed by the artist: "I wanted desperately for it to be a whole picture." In the space of *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu* the viewer experiences the unfolding of this process as the work of the project, as the work comes together as a complete set, in Gell's sense.

## V

If lived experience can be understood as a fragment of historical time, then the experience of the *historicity* of time can be doubly challenging for the artist. It is a truism that the distinctiveness of the narrative structure of a work of visual art lies in its synchronicity — the way in which it presents the viewer with all the elements of its form simultaneously. This remains a truism because works of art also have the capacity to reveal themselves slowly, insofar as the significance of their elements unfolds before your eyes — and the slower the better — creating the distinctive time-frame of visibility.

However this work embodies time in a further distinctive, material and concrete sense. The microstructure of each element — the form of the tapestries — is an exquisite formation of threads, lapped, looped, gridded, eccentrically structured as a microcosmic pixillated formation of signs. In themselves the signs, whether image or text, allude to prior moments of craft production — and ultimately the events which led to their destruction. Their contemporary form embodies the passage of time, connecting the artist thread by thread to her past.

How then might historical time be evoked in the creative space of Homi Bhabha's "time-lag", and be manifested in a work of art? The passage quoted above continues:

Through this time-lag — the temporal break in representation — emerges the process of agency both as historical development and as the narrative agency of historical discourse.

In this case this appears as the result of the artist testing expectations arising from her consciousness of history, as well as the result of separation from its historical context, against the 'history' of lived experience. This process of testing, of matching experience against expectation, of absence and presence, is evident throughout the work. This artist carries an unusually complex 'load' of historical circumstances. Her own history challenges her to make sense of historical realities beyond her immediate context. From the site of the Forbidden Purple City, from her birthplace Rach Gia in Kien Giang province in the Mekong Delta, and from the streets of Hanoi she retrieves fragments (shards, drawings, texts) which, in their final manifestation as *Surname Viet, Given Name Kieu* serve to locate her own historical reality.

There is one further sense in which this work may be considered as a historical discourse, as Homi Bhabha has expressed it. On her return to Vietnam the artist already carried with her the literary historical reference of her study of *The Tale of Kieu*. This was not, for the artist, solely an academic topic, but rather the classic text in the vernacular language of Vietnam, *chu nom*, an epic poem to be learnt by heart, by which the gendered roles of social behaviour may be inferred. For the artist, its potential efficacy was enhanced by its mythological status, and the separation of the subject from its originary context.

18 Bhabha, op cit, pp 252–3:  
He continues, "The postcolonial passage through modernity produces that form of repetition — the past as projective. The time-lag of postcolonial modernity moves *forward* erasing that compliant past tethered to the myth of progress, ordered in the binarisms of its cultural logic: past/present, inside/outside."

## VI

In his account of postcolonial modernity Homi Bhabha also speaks of a "projective past", which,

...can be inscribed as a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, the "projective past" takes form in the trajectory of the work of art towards the future, what he calls "retroactivity, a form of cultural

- 19 Duras, op cit, p 76.
- 20 Trinh T Min-Ha concludes her filmscript of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) with the following summary: "Each government has its own interpretation of Kieu. Each has its peculiar way of using and appropriating women's images. Kieu has survived in hundreds of different contexts. First appreciated for its denunciation of oppressive and corrupt feudalism, it was later read as an allegory of the tragic fate of Vietnam under colonial rule. More recently, in a celebration of its 200th anniversary, it was highly praised by the government's male official writers for its revolutionary yearning for freedom and justice in the context of the war against American imperialism. For the Vietnamese exiled, it speaks of the exodus or silent popular movement of resistance that continues to raise problems of conscience to the international community." (*Framer Framed*, Routledge, New York, 1992, p 91.)

inscription that moves *back to the future*".

Hanh Ngo's work can also be thought of as 'projection' in this sense — that is, self-projection, the speculative exploration of identity — in the sense that it can be understood as a passage from the present to the past, a rediscovery of her autobiographical past, and an encounter with the historical past (in a deeper sense) which has initiated the process of remaking her future. And as well, Hanh Ngo carried with her her own *anticipation* of a historical past (*The Tale of Kieu*), and found instead a powerful metaphor for her 'outsider' status as *Viet Kieu*.

Such projections are only able to be interpreted — for both artist and viewer — as an outcome of reflection. Reflection enables the subject to position herself, to plot her coordinates as the imaginative traveller in time and space. In this case, consider the prismatic complexity of a process of reflection which is at once autobiographical, a constant search for signs of identity, and at the same time the immediate day-to-day reality of otherness and displacement. Reflection, in this sense, implies first the necessity of survival, but also the necessity of making sense of the persistent doubling of meanings — I and other, place and displacement, present and past, in the languages in which such things are thought.

In the mirror effect of a work of art, what you see turns from front to back, from before to after, from coming to going, a becoming and a revealing, a giving and an interrogation. As the constellation of images in this work addresses you, fleetingly *you* are its mirror-image, you are the other, the author. Or, briefly, you see a closure, a doubling and redoubling of interpretation, of reflection, as if the mirror faces another, and the viewer is caught looking back, looking back, caught in the space between two mirrors. This, for the artist, is a condition of considerable instability, hence the necessity for its stable objectification — the physical materiality of meticulously worked images and texts — as the work of art.

She looks at herself. She has come up close to her reflection. She comes even closer. Doesn't quite recognise herself. She doesn't understand what has happened. Years later she will understand.<sup>19</sup>

## VII

I wrote earlier of *The Tale of Kieu* as a governing, ordering mythology of gender and status.<sup>20</sup> As one of the histories Hanh Ngo carries with her, as a displaced mythology, it is matched by the artist against her lived reality. It provides, ultimately, the metaphor the author needed to construct her identity as an artist who is doubly emigrée. The trajectory of this particular work forces a remarkable leap of cultural imagination in its passage across multiple cultural contexts. It asks: what happens to consciousness through the doubling and redoubling effects of displacement, and consequently, how might the 'I and other' of identity be reconciled in material form? Through its processes of fragmentation, reflection and reconstruction this work proposes that the agency of art has the capacity to bridge such dissonant and illusionistic realities.