

63 YEARS (GỬI ANH TUYỀN)

Mai Nguyen Anh

13 MARCH — 14 APRIL 2019 — CHAPEL GALLERY, OBJECTIFS

Curated by Sam I-shan

OBJECTIFS
Centre for Photography and Film

EXHIBITION PROGRAMMES

Objectifs Chapel Gallery
12 March 2019, Tuesday

ARTIST AND CURATOR DIALOGUE

6:30 – 7:30 pm

EXHIBITION OPENING

7:30 – 9:30 pm

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Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film
Chapel Gallery

Curator and writer
Project manager

Sam I-shan
Chelsea Chua

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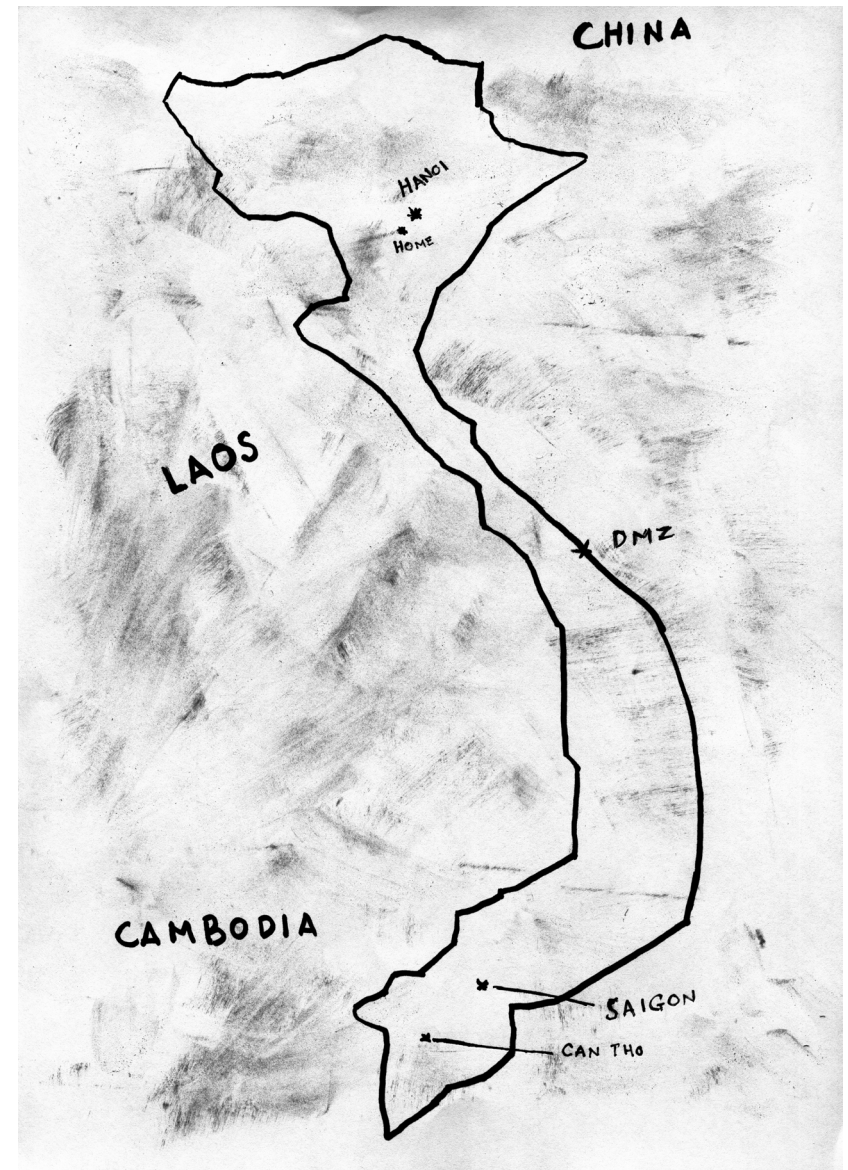
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All images: Mai Nguyen Anh, *63 Years (Gửi Anh Tuyền)*, 2015 – 19

Interviews and translations by Mai Nguyen Anh

The artist thanks all his family members, especially his grandmother.

Special thanks from Objectifs to Sim Chi Yin, Sam I-shan,
Shahidul Alam and Jessica Lim.



MAI NGUYEN ANH'S 63 YEARS (*GỬI ANH TUYỀN*)



Mai Nguyen Anh's intimate family history project spans the complex history of modern Vietnam, beginning before the second Indochina War of 1955–75 to the present day. The protagonists are Mai's grandmother, Mrs. Huong Thi Kim Phung, 77, and her older brother Mr. Tuyen Pham, 81, who were parted at a young age in the early 1950s and lost contact for years after, due to geopolitical circumstances that spanned countries and continents. Living in Hanoi, Mrs. Huong received news of Tuyen's survival when he wrote to her from the United States in 1976, where he and his family had escaped to following the Fall of Saigon the year before. In the decades following, they communicated through letters and telephone conversations. She learned about his early life in the south, where he had risen to become a high-ranking official in the South Vietnamese government, and his struggles in America as he and his family adapted to a new way of life as refugees and subsequently citizens. Fearing retaliation from the Communist party and preoccupied with the difficulties of getting by in the US, Tuyen was only able to make a brief visit to Hanoi in 2015. It was then that the two of them were able to reunite after 63 years of separation for the first, but also possibly the last time.

While in Hanoi, Tuyen was introduced to other relatives, including Mai, who had, since childhood, heard tales about his grandmother's long-lost brother. He subsequently visited Tuyen's home in California, and started to develop this project even as his interest in and understanding of the historiography of war and conflict in Vietnam grew. In addition to his photographs, Mai interviewed his relatives about their memories and impressions of Tuyen, and assembled material from family archives. He staged and photographed scenarios based on some of these collected stories, and documented important snapshots and letters. He also commissioned imagined representations of Tuyen by artists who specialise in ancestral altar portraits, but rather than giving them a likeness of Tuyen, described instead some traits or aspects of his background that resulted in drawings of idiosyncratic visual archetypes.



The result of all these documentary images, invented depictions, and fragments of collective memory is a composite portrait of a person well-known in their family lore but truly known by no one.

63 Years (Gửi Anh Tuyền) tells the story of the tenuousness and strange persistence of familial ties in the face of geographical dislocations and social crises brought about by political upheaval. Tuyen is very much in the mind and heart of Mrs. Huong as the only surviving member of her immediate family, but distance and difference have rendered him a remote and ultimately inaccessible figure. His physical presence in her life, while longed-for, is complicated by the artefacts, images and words that make up the souvenirs of loss that have so marked the reconstruction of her relationship with her brother. This inexorable sense of time lost, and still quickly passing, are further suggested by the three moving image works in the exhibition, perhaps most directly by Mrs. Huong's articulation of her memories and hopes in the *63 Years* video, but also by the loop of the sea that at once evokes immense and perilous journeys, but also the undertows of unspeakable emotion.

Amidst the large scale of history, as constituted by regime change and the emergence of modern states, systems and societies, this project powerfully focuses on the real and emotional effects these have across generations of a single extended family. It reveals the endurance of belief and the consequences of war between north and south Vietnam that exist to this day.

—SAM I-SHAN



INTERVIEW OF MRS. HUONG, TUYEN'S SISTER AND MAI NGUYEN ANH'S GRANDMOTHER



He left in 1952. I can't remember the exact date. I was small so I didn't pay much attention to what was happening.

I heard he traveled to Saigon and was adopted by Mr. Khoa, who is one of my father's friends. Years later, he was finally able to write back.

There should be more letters, but I forgot where I put them.

He told us he was able to go to school and he studied really hard.

He was a bright guy, but he also lived a harsh life. He mentioned that on one New Year's Eve, he had to sew and repair his old clothes so he could have decent ones to wear.

He didn't have any family support so he suffered a lot. He had no one to count on and had a tough time growing up.

When I read his letter, my heart was broken.

I remember he wrote in one letter that he wanted to study medicine in university. He thought that if he became a doctor, he could work for either side.

He was there. He had to work for the South. There weren't any other options.

He thought that if it was about saving people's lives, then the side doesn't matter.

But because he didn't have enough money, he could only afford to go to administration school.

Then he became a government official. I am not sure what line of work he did but I guess he was just a regular officer.

In 1965, he married Dung and built a family of his own.

I wish he could come back one more time.

Other people come back so many times but Tuyen was afraid to do so when he was younger.

Every time I wrote him a letter, I told him to come back. I told him that there is nothing to be afraid of.

The ex-vice president of the Republic of Vietnam, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, came back a long time ago. He even visited the Perfume Pagoda.

"He has more blood on his hands than you." I said. "What are you afraid of?"

You only did paperwork. You had no choice but to work for them."

"The war is over, people have let it go."

Despite all my persuasions, he still wouldn't come back.

When my oldest brother Toan was alive, he also told Tuyen to come back home.

If he had done so sooner, he would have been able to meet Toan. Now it is too late.

Tuyen seems to regret not coming back sooner than he did.

He was afraid then but now he knows it is fine. Other people come back frequently.

They return every year.

When I heard that he is coming back, I was delighted. The closer the day of his arrival, I the more excited I became.



I counted the days, then the hours until his flight. I kept thinking to myself, “Tomorrow is the day, what time will we pick him up?”

But the excitement soon went away once I met him. I had a lot of mixed emotions but kept them to myself and tried to put on a happy face. I don’t know how he felt. I no longer understand my brother.

But in the moment I saw Tuyen, I knew right away that he is my brother. We are related by blood so I just know. It can’t be wrong. Tuyen had also sent many photographs of himself over the years. I looked at them and compared him to my dad and Toan, many times. So, he is definitely my brother. And his ear’s shape is just like Toan’s.

We didn’t talk much. He is a well-educated guy so he seemed to keep a bit of distance. We had already told each other all the stories through letters so there wasn’t much left to talk about.

He also cut short his visit, so we did not have the chance to chat more. I myself didn’t know what to talk about with him. A few sentences and we ran out of things in common.

But I still feel like we are close somehow. I can tell he is a kind person. We only met briefly but I can tell.

Toan was also kind. When my dad was still alive, he was also the same. I just want Tuyen to spend a bit more time back home. That is all I want. I was really sad that he could not go back to our home in the countryside to celebrate with everyone.

Tell him to visit one more time. If he can come back this year, it would be great.



MRS. DUNG'S STORY AS TOLD TO MRS. HOA, TUYEN'S NIECE AND MAI NGUYEN ANH'S MOTHER

She told me that during the Fall of Saigon, Tuyen escaped out of the country while he was at work. He did not tell anyone in his family. When Dung found out he was gone, she was taking care of their five children. She was furious.

After that, Dung's sister was able to take the two oldest children to cross the sea safely.

Dung stayed back to take care of the three other kids. The smallest one was just a couple of years old.

Then she tried to escape with the rest of her children. But it took her a few tries before she was finally successful.

She told me that every time she tried to escape, she brought along a blanket.

The first time they were able to get on to the big boat. However, they were caught halfway out to sea.

Dung and her kids were locked up in a police station. She had the blanket, so she was able to cover them from mosquitos during the time they spent there.

Soon they were set free because the children are too little.

However, she lost all her money, a lot of money. She used all this money to pay for the smuggling, but it failed.

I don't remember exactly how much gold she lost. But I remember distinctly she said she lost a lot.

I am not sure how many times they tried to escape. But the last time they did, they succeeded.



They were on a small boat and many people did not survive the passage because it was overcrowded and there were many storms at sea. But this time, they made it out to international waters. They were lucky enough to meet a big ship: American as I remember. Dung was able to speak English, so she asked them to help.

The ship took everyone to Malaysia. Dung and her children took shelter there and contacted Tuyen in America.

It took almost another year before they were able to set foot on American soil and the whole family was reunited.

Many people died during the waiting process too.

She said it was the most extreme hardship of her life.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mai Nguyen Anh is a Vietnamese visual artist whose works are often a mixture of observational and poetic documentary, enriched by personal significance and contemporary issues. Majoring in Economics at the University of Surrey, United Kingdom, his interest in documentary photography led him to work in photojournalism, and he joined VnExpress Newspaper as a contract photographer in 2013. In 2015, Nguyen Anh left VnExpress and has been freelancing for various news outlets as well as focusing on his personal projects. In 2016, he received a scholarship for and completed the One Year Certificate at the International Center of Photography in New York. He is the co-founder of Matca, an online photography community in Vietnam. Mai is the recipient of the Open Category award for the inaugural Objectifs Documentary Award in 2018.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Sam I-shan is a curator at National Gallery Singapore, working on modern and contemporary Singapore art. She was previously curator at Singapore Art Museum and Esplanade Visual Arts, focusing on the moving image and photography from Southeast Asia and wider Asia. At Esplanade, she curated and managed new commissions and site-specific exhibitions with a range of regional artists. Her exhibitions at SAM include *Afterimage: Contemporary Photography in Southeast Asia*, and the *APB Foundation Signature Art Prize*. She also headed film and moving image initiatives at SAM including Artist Films, while co-programming the Southeast Asian Film Festival.

THE OBJECTIFS DOCUMENTARY AWARD

The Objectifs Documentary Award champions Objectifs' mission to broaden perspectives through image making, by supporting original voices in visual storytelling in Singapore and the wider region. The Award enables photographers to work on new or existing projects, encouraging them to discover and tell stories about their communities. It welcomes creative approaches to non-fiction storytelling, from established documentary photography to visual experiments, with projects presented as still images or through multimedia.

Awardees were given professional and financial support to work on their projects over a nine month-long period, and their works were exhibited at Objectifs from March to April 2019 in conjunction with the documentary programme, *Stories That Matter*.

THE AWARDEES FOR THE INAUGURAL EDITION ARE:

- Open Category: **Mai Nguyen Anh**
- Emerging Category: **Grace Baey**

THE JURY PANEL CONSISTED OF THE FOLLOWING MEMBERS:

- **Sim Chi Yin**, Photographer
- **Sam I-shan**, Curator, National Gallery Singapore
- **Shahidul Alam**, Director and Founder, Drik, Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, Chobi Mela International Festival of Photography
- **Jessica Lim**, Festival Director, Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops
- **Emmeline Yong**, Director and Co-founder, Objectifs

Objectifs is a non-profit arts space dedicated to photography and film. Our mission is to broaden perspectives and inspire through the power of images. We present a year-round programme of exhibitions, screenings, workshops, talks and residencies, aimed at fostering dialogue, and advancing the practice and appreciation of photography and film.

