

Fuck with Love: Some Thoughts on the Work of Uudam Nguyen

“Honey, tonight I will fuck you as a librarian,” was one of the 200 “fuck buttons” I purchased from Uudam Nguyen in the Fall of 2005, shortly after the artist expanded his MFA thesis.

I remember, as I gave them away to friends, that some were receptive to its humor. Others were either perplexed or eager to understand the artist’s motivation. In fact, one of them offered an etymology of the word “fuck.” The acronym, he thought, might have derived from some Irish legal source: When a spouse gets caught committing the act of adultery, they would be punished “For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge.” Although we generally are aware that, in spite of the many postulations on the origin of the word, the word itself was never recorded before the 1960s. Thus speculations are regarded as urban-legend etymologies.

Nguyen’s “fuck buttons” would of course invoke that particular reference, among other associations. Then again, they evoke the use of language as a means of expression that comes directly from different sectors of the mass media, and is consumed by society in our present globalized culture. The word “fuck” may be the most popular of all slang usage in the English spoken language.

In the form of buttons, however, they also evoke Daniel Joseph Martinez's controversial admission pin "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting To Be White" at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Martinez's reappearance at the 2008 Biennial with "Divine Violence" continues to unapologetically provoke uncomfortable issues of personal and collective identity. But this time, instead of the previous public interactive and interventive work, he offered a glowing installation of 125 panels, painted with automotive gold flake, each including the name of an organization around the world that utilizes violent means to obtain political gain. While Martinez's radical politics drive the content and energy behind his work, Nguyen's political impulse is colored by a playful spirit. Even so, both Martinez and Nguyen share a similar commitment to working inside and outside, with and against the conventional vocabulary of art making.

For Nguyen, inside-outside dynamic has its root in a sense of dislocation. He was born in KonTum, Vietnam in 1971, migrated to the U.S. in 1994, then attended the University of Fine Arts in Saigon (1990 -1994). It was here that he acquired an assimilated Beaux-arts methodology in figurative sculpture. (His father, I should point out, is the painter, poet, and writer Rung, otherwise known as Khinh Duong Vuong). Later, at the University of California, Los Angeles (1999-2001), conceptual artists and faculty members such as Charles Ray, Paul McCarthy, and Allen Ruppersberg proposed a complete opposite model from that of his experience in art school in Vietnam. Finally, at the School of Visual Arts' MFA Program, which must have been a significant opportunity for Nguyen to be in New York, he not only absorbed the intense layers of the international art scene that welcome its chances to be mixed into the cultural fabric of the city, but he also allowed

himself to digest the bi-product of the East/West sensibilities that Nguyen has had to come to terms with. In other words, as much as the vernacular anthropological elements of Ruppersberg, as well as Charles Ray's gestalt alteration of familiar objects of everyday life and the whole Southern California conceptual ethos, is undoubtedly present in Nguyen's collective thinking (especially with "World Condom Project"), one can also detect the ephemerality and intricate cutout sculptures of the "SEXoRGY & BeYond" series, which refers to Sarah Sze's monumental yet minutely obsessive site-specific works that allows sculpture, painting, and architecture to co-exist simultaneously.

With "Fuck Buttons," Nguyen has achieved a far more pictorial clarity, infusing his wider interests into one unified body of work. It's a spatial synthesis of hundreds of different colored buttons installed at eye-level in four rows in a diagonal grid, which, in addition to a pair of vendors placed on a lower pedestal by the entrance, corresponds to ten various sizes of three-dimensional thought bubbles suspending from the ceilings. Each contains a sound recording of female voices reading different texts that each viewer can listen to with the headphones, which hang below. Essentially, based on the repetitive use of the first seven identical words, "Honey, tonight I will fuck you as," both in printed and spoken words, it generates a hypnotic effect in terms of simultaneous visual and bodily responses. The experience is at once interactive and phenomenological.

Unlike most public interactive or interventive works, which put forward personal or political agendas (some subtle, some not so subtle) to aggressively engage the viewer, Nguyen's work is about sustaining the enduring lightness of human life. Even while in

exile, the question of maintaining his experience of being away and the longing to return home has never been a doubtful prospect. The desire for intimacy and its close proximity seem close at hand. Here I anticipate “Honey, tonight I will love [instead of fuck] you as....” to be an ongoing continuation of his larger vision. It is one that nurtures good will, which, in turn, will bring genuine pleasure and openness into the public realm.

Otherwise, either Saigon or Ho Chi Minh City should embrace the return of her and his prodigal son.

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