

Latent Images: *Vanghoua Anthony Vue's Mediated 'Photography'*

In his early teens, Sydney-born Hmong-Australian artist Vanghoua Anthony Vue became aware of a sensation of floating between two places. The experiences that his family underwent in Laos and Thailand before arriving in Australia in 1988 left in him a latent memory of another place. Now Brisbane-based, Vue expresses this “sense of home” in Australia rubbing against a sense of home elsewhere.¹ Reflecting on the theme of belonging in his doctoral thesis, Vue describes the personal relevance of Australian academic Jill Bennett’s questioning of any permanent notion of ‘home’, where the trauma and affect expert asks, “[is] home the place where I was born, the place my ancestors came from, the place where I am now?”² In this transient context to ‘belong’ to a place is a process of constant negotiation in the present and a remembrance of past lives and places.

This text focuses particularly on the themes of history and memory within Vue’s art, and does this through an engagement firstly with the context of the repeated displacement of the Hmong people, before considering how his series *Fading Marks* (2015-16) and its mediated photographic influence elaborates on the complexity of trauma and remembrance. This series of fifty-two paintings strongly connects to a psychological experience of migration and the residual longing for a site or era that is no longer readily accessible, due to conflict, time elapsed, or simply geographical distance. In Vue’s case, his parents’ experience as refugees fleeing the secret war in Laos had an indelible impact on their livelihoods and those of their children—the central inspiration behind these paintings. As Vue presents his most ambitious installation work to date at the 2019 *Singapore Biennale*, a site-specific work that draws from the lessons of *Fading Marks*, this text concludes with an analysis of this new artwork in the context of the artist’s broader practice.

HMONG TEXTILE TRADITIONS REINVENTED

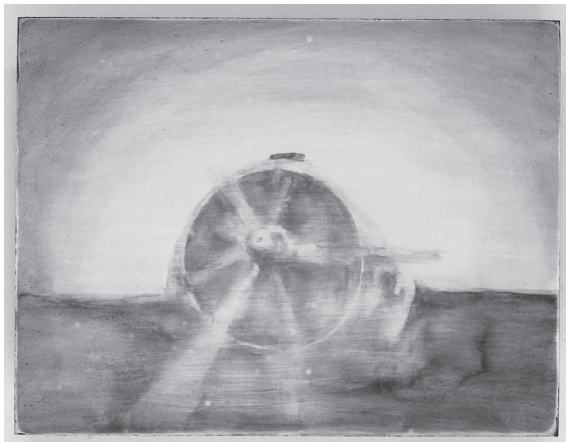
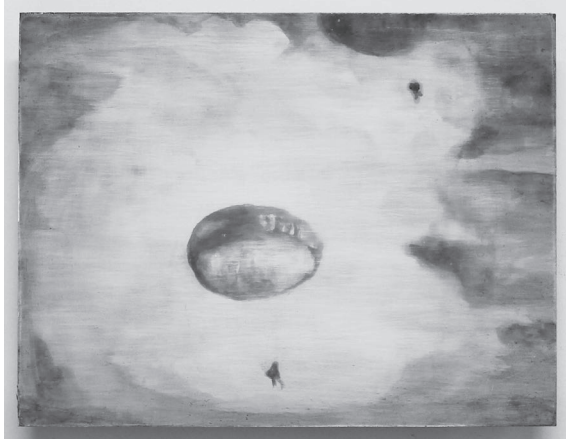
That Vue’s work frequently reflects on an experience and perception of place is unsurprising in the context of his Hmong heritage. An ethnic group described as residing predominantly in China and Southeast Asia, Hmong history is marked by migration, persecution, and diasporic life across various countries. Where the Hmong originate from is still contested. Possible locations include the Huang He or Yellow River basin of Central China, southern China,³ the steppes of Siberia,⁴ Mongolia, and even Mesopotamia.⁵ Recalling the transient meaning of ‘home’ by Bennett, a notion of an ‘original’ home seems in flux across scholarship. As American academic Keith Quincy importantly

notes, reflecting on their migratory life, though the Hmong have “wandered for centuries over the face of China and southeast Asia,” it was oppression that kept them on the move, rather than wanderlust.⁶ Thai academic Prasit Leepreecha recognises transience and diaspora as part of Hmong identity, describing them as a “transnational” people.⁷ Displacement has persisted as a threat for the Hmong for centuries—since migration from China began in the late eighteenth century due to attempts at “cultural subjugation” by the Chinese,⁸ they began to settle in northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and the east of Burma.⁹ Amongst Hmong communities in these countries, a tourist trade of making and selling their vibrant and distinctive textiles to Western visitors has flourished since the mid-1950s, and become a widely known characteristic of their culture.¹⁰

Vue’s art is a multidisciplinary fever dream of hi-vis tape, photography, painting, sculpture and site-specific installation. Moving across mediums frequently allows Vue to avoid stereotype and challenge expectations that he sees as frequently projected on artists from minority backgrounds. Vue’s research-based practice is guided by his experience as a first-generation person of Hmong and Australian heritage. Hmong visual culture, especially *paj ntaub* (flower cloth), their distinctive textile traditions of geometric and often overtly colourful clothing designs, is regularly melded into his art. These predominantly matrilineal traditions function in a layered way: as a “signifier of ethnic identity... [and] different subgroups,” the wealth of the wearer and their family, as well as for its “spiritual and protective functions, as the designs and patterns are thought to provide a safeguard for the person wearing the textile from physical and spiritual harm.”¹¹ Beginning with hemp cloth, batik and/or embroidery is incorporated to create finely detailed designs. Particular colours are associated with certain sub-groups of the Hmong, with the Black Hmongs utilising dark indigos and the Flower Hmong favouring more exuberant colours. Strong beliefs persist in Hmong culture around the use of a hidden visual language within their clothing, based on an ancient Hmong writing system that had to be secretly incorporated into designs to escape its destruction during Chinese oppression.¹² Vue sustains and reinvents *paj ntaub* in his practice by combining these traditions with materials drawn from the ‘Australian’ visual lexicon to generate transcultural objects or compositions. In his recent series *Hmong-visibility* (2019), Vue repurposes hi-visibility workwear commonly seen on Australian building construction sites. Working collaboratively with his relative Mai Yia Her, Vue introduced pre-made Hmong-style textile pieces, beads, and other accessories drawn from his daily life into the surface of clothing, such as legionnaires caps and singlets, complicating and personalising these long-held traditions in a contemporary context.

The bright palette of contemporary Hmong textiles also inspires Vue’s public interventions as part of his ongoing “tape-affiti” works (2015–). Utilising high-vis industrial tape on buildings and windows, Vue translates formal aspects of Hmong language, referring back to their hidden presence within clothing and incorporating designs inspired by these histories to create striking urban installations. Referencing the spiritual and protective functions of *paj ntaub*, these abstract and layered compositions both assert Hmong identity, but also offer an ameliorative purpose within the spaces they temporarily inhabit. As a self-identified contemporary transcultural artist, Vue’s art contributes to “definitions of identities that are not based on difference and essentialism but rather on processes of negotiation and experimentation... exploiting the mistranslations with which cultural hegemonies often apply to those in marginal and peripheral positions.”¹³ By drawing the eye of the viewer through fluorescent hues and geometric patterns, Vue affirms Hmong identity in an Australian context, as well as their agency more broadly in a world that easily forgets past acts of oppression.

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PHOTOGRAPHY, TRAUMA, AND MEMORY

The Hmong's displacement continued in the twentieth century amongst the widespread conflict in Southeast Asia as part of the Second Indochina War (1955-75). The United States military and CIA led covert operations in Laos that began in 1957, training a guerrilla resistance force of predominantly Hmong people, along with the Royal Lao Government forces, to hold back the Communist Pathet Lao backed by North Vietnam and several divisions of invading North Vietnamese (NVA) during a ground war conducted between 1962 to 1973.¹⁴ The Vietnamese communists sought the control of Laos for its strategic value, specifically the Ho Chi Minh Trail and its significant supply and transport capacity, just as American forces saw the country as a key firewall against communism's spread through Southeast Asia.¹⁵ The 'secret' war's clandestine nature was due to Laos' status alongside Cambodia and Vietnam as neutral territories determined in the 1954 Geneva Agreements, established after the end of French colonial rule.¹⁶ All foreign powers except France were prohibited

from establishing or maintaining bases in the country, or introducing new troops, military personnel, armaments, and munitions.¹⁷ This ruling frustrated the USA, specifically President Eisenhower who saw Laos as the first “domino” in the broader region.¹⁸ In addition to the ground war, the US Air Force conducted the heaviest bombardment of a country per capita in history across Laos between 1964 and 1973—580,000 bombing missions took place and two million tons were dropped, equivalent to one every eight minutes for nearly nine years.¹⁹ By 1973 communist forces controlled the majority of strategic regions in Laos. With the US in a process of disengagement from Vietnam, it slowed and then ceased its funding and support to the resistance and the Hmong. By May 1975 the Pathet Lao occupied the country's major cities and asserted control over Laos. Thirty-five thousand Hmong died fighting in the conflict, a significant number considering the relative size of the Laotian Hmong population. Many were interned in concentration camps, with the rest either siding with the Pathet Lao, resisting through further armed conflict, or fleeing the country. By 1988, the year of Vue's birth in Sydney, 130,000 Hmong had migrated to Thailand. Vue's parents, who had fled as part of this exodus, eventually left Thailand, emigrating to Australia.

Despite its overt brutality, Laos' secret war is a conflict endangered by public amnesia. Due to official US denials and partly general indifference in the shadow of the broader and more prominent conflicts that make up the Second Indochina War, full public acknowledgement and thus official remembrance remains fraught and contested. Since 2015, Vue has begun to engage with these histories through the medium of photography because of its use as a factual record, but his engagements with images are consistently mediated by different practices or material approaches, rarely presented as direct examples of their base medium. In Vue's series *Fading Marks*, fifty-two small format paintings in oil and acrylic on wood each engage with a single photographic still, drawn from a portfolio of images of the conflict compiled by the artist. In *Untitled #31* (2015), a background bloom of central white light isolates a small, blurred paratrooper floating downwards—our recognition of his minute form assisted by the billowing, jellyfish-like parachute unfurled above. Another soldier drops into the top right frame, though his chute only briefly registers as it is engulfed amongst the cold, grey glaucoma that vignettes the scene. *Untitled #8* (2015) also depicts a bloom of central white light, yet in this work it is bisected by a horizon line made by an airplane wing. At the heart of the work and the wing, an aircraft engine looms with its propellers spinning, the force of the blades seeming to almost push eddies of paint out from it. Small particles of light or dust appear to blow around it. The clarity of both works, like the other fifty in the series, is compromised by a sort of fog or atmosphere that rests across the picture plane—as if we look upon these moments through a semi-opaque lens.

These works speak to the difficulty of remembrance in a climate of denial—across time, distance, and even different generations. Each depicts a scene from the broader conflict of the war in Laos. Though Vue did not directly witness the trauma and violence his parents experienced, he notes his position as part of what Polish-American academic Eva Hoffman calls the “hinge generation”—descendants of primary witnesses who inherit a transferred knowledge of events.²⁰ This transference occurred for Vue predominantly during his childhood as his parents recounted their past—through personal reflection, as well as via media such as the 1997 documentary film *Hmong & General Vang Pao: The Secret War in Laos, 1960-1975*, itself an amalgamation of other video resources.²¹ As children, Vue and his siblings were sat down by their parents to watch the film in their home, accompanied by their father's corrective or supportive narration. Where many sought to overlook these events, Vue's upbringing was characterised by an active engagement, led by his family, to remember this

trauma and its impacts—though Vue notes the reluctance (or perhaps inability) of his mother to fully recall the depths of these experiences.²² The sense of visual delay that these works embody echoes an experience of trauma that Sigmund Freud refers to as “a feature one might term latency.”²³ As American literary theorist and academic Cathy Caruth describes in her analysis of Freud’s term, what is curious about his engagement with the inherent lag of traumatic experience is that the,

*historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.*²⁴

Vue’s paintings appear caught beneath this weight, this belated experience of events so disruptive that to have lived through it is only felt afterwards. For Vue personally, as a member of the following “hinge generation”, the afterlife of his parents’ past recalls what Marianne Hirsch labels “postmemory”. Hirsch argues that this term reflects a secondary memory that is constructed by the descendants of primary witnesses, the inheritance of a past that is still being worked through.²⁵ As a sort of painterly postmemory, these works describe a process of complex, diverted recollection.

This sense of temporal drag is generated through Vue’s studio process. As he began research for these works, Vue downloaded the same documentary from YouTube, taking film stills from this digital copy, printing them and then working from these in his studio. He utilised multiple layers of thinned paint to construct the scenes, effaced their legibility by sanding back particular areas between applications, as well as blurring other sections with a softer brush. Dust and debris caught amid each layer were allowed to settle, generating imperfections that added to the works’ veiled ambiance. Through these approaches, Vue visualises a conflicted reflection, challenging typical notions of photography’s role of bearing witness. Vue’s mediated engagement with photographic sources recalls similar approaches in the work of artists such as Gerhard Richter, or Christian Boltanski’s expanded and degraded images. British art historian Joan Gibbons, in her analysis of the work of Boltanski—whose practice engages with the Holocaust, memory, and photography—considers his art’s invocation of “the having-been-thereness of the photographic index,” its imbued sense of the present moment which Boltanski’s work actively tries to erode.²⁶ Vue’s work seems to recall these practices, generating in its own right a powerful tension between bearing witness and attempts to overlook traumatic events.

Though Vue seems to reflect critically in these works on history’s capacity for full representation of the past, they remain importantly ambivalent. For one, these images still hold a deep relevance to his familial circle and to the Hmong people—of the past’s events, which they continue to recall for themselves and their children. They also speak to the recognition of an inherent temporal rip at the heart of our lives, pulling our experiences and memories toward inevitable oblivion. Hmong culture, based as it is in a strong tradition of oral language and history, places significant value in the role of memory. As Australian historian Paula Hamilton and American academic Linda Shopes note, oral history as a process is inherently reliant on it.²⁷ As people who have experienced significant trauma due to exile and attempts at diminishing their role in history, memory—personal, familial, social—is crucial to Hmong experience. Far from dismissive of remembrance, Vue infuses these works instead with a reverent energy that runs counter to the visual ‘forgetting’ that the picture plane seems to describe. When viewing these works in person, a halo of

colour reflects from the wall behind them—generated by Vue's practice of painting the back of each work with bright pink and orange or yellow and green fluorescents. Their glow seems to push the works off the wall and toward the viewer, subtly asserting themselves in a way that runs counter to the overcast sky palette of the picture. Rather than fully dissipating, like a drop of ink in an ocean—as these paintings seem to threaten—each work's aura grounds their presence in the now. Though these events from Laos' secret war appear to struggle against attempted repression before our eyes, these works subtly celebrate the inevitable return of these experiences—their life extended through their active recollection by the living.

SINGAPORE, SITE, ARCHIVES, PATTERNS

With the increasing relevance of non-traditional means of recording the past, such as Vue's work, Hirsch (in speculating on the capacity for memory to offer something that history cannot, relevant to attempts to diminish the history of Hmong) notes a growing "need for aesthetic and institutional structures that broaden and enlarge the traditional historical archive with a 'repertoire' of embodied knowledge," an area of previous neglect by many historians that is broadly labelled as "memory studies."²⁸ Yet, as cultural memory academic Andreas Huyssen provocatively speculates, "[what] good is the memory archive? How can it deliver what history alone no longer seems to be able to offer?"²⁹ Building on the investigation into the secret war in Laos and its aftermath that he began in *Fading Marks*, Vue's proposal for the 2019 Singapore Biennale, *Present-past-patterns* (2019), considers the possibilities for presenting a memory archive that conflates official documentation with the personal. *Every Step in the Right Direction*, the title of this year's Biennale, represents faith, according to Artistic Director Patrick Flores, in "the potential of art (and its understanding) to rework the world,"³⁰ a sentiment that is strong within Vue's practice, and perhaps reflecting art's capacity to function as Hirsch's "'repertoire' of embodied knowledge."

Present-past-patterns is a site-specific response to the public spaces of Singapore's Gillman Barracks arts centre. It continues Vue's engagement with images, yet here they are drawn from a cross-section of archives: the official of state-sanctioned repositories, the semi-official of the internet, and the personal family album. By melding photographs drawn from each of these sources into a 'fabric' of public consumption, Vue challenges dominant modes of remembrance, conflating and comparing the traditional and non-traditional. In his proposal, Vue describes the Hmong's consistent relegation to "the perimeters of celebrations of nation-hood—absorbed, forgotten and relegated to the margins as 'colourful ethnic others'... their history often 'covered over' or 'weaved out' from official historical accounts and from public knowledge."³¹ Taking stills from the 1997 documentary that informed *Fading Marks*, Vue also incorporates images found through the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries' important Laotian and Hmong image archives of life within the country during the war, as well as found images from the internet of key locations from the conflict, such as the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand. Vue situates his familial history within this context through the inclusion of photographs also drawn from his family's albums, showing his parents' life within this camp after fleeing Laos and prior to relocating to Australia. Vue selects, crops, edits and then collages images from these sources to create black and white photo-patterns that he applies to the walls and wraps around the columns of a number of the Barracks' outdoor spaces. These patterns retain this same sense of ambivalence that Vue's earlier paintings presented. The original source image becomes the basis for a broader, melded digital effect that threatens to become 'wallpaper', as if challenging the viewer to overlook the reality of the subject matter. The threat of the decorative

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seems further implied by the pattern's subtle similarity to that of Hermann Rorschach's inkblot tests, originally utilised as part of psychological testing, but now ubiquitous on Pinterest.

Vue's interest in engaging with audiences in public spaces, as evidenced by his ongoing commitment to public art commissions across his career to date, is one that connects broadly with Korean-American art historian Miwon Kwon's redefinition of site specificity, away from its association with permanence and immobility during its birth in the land art of the 1960s and 1970s, towards its "impermanence and transience"³² of today, in an era of mass migration and global biennials. This temporal and transient publicness is present in the materiality of Vue's installation — constructed from self-adhesive and removable vinyl, *Present-past-patterns* will itself migrate from this site at the conclusion of the exhibition. Though temporary, Vue ensures its overt visibility through his framing of the black and white photo-patterns with bands of bright fluorescents that evoke the same palette and glow of the *Fading Marks* series. Recalling too the 'tape-affiti' of earlier public works, Vue alternates high-vis fluoro pink and green duct tape to create vivid strips of powerful exclamation. Covering the 'borders' of the site, such as the 'cuffs' and 'socks' of the structural columns, the edges of the roofs, or the 'kickboards' of steps, Vue's lurid additions challenge attempts at erasure of Hmong presence, as these colours refer to, despite still being relegated to peripheral architectural areas. Though these also may threaten to be read purely as decorative elements, Vue incorporates into some areas codified writings influenced by personal experiences, including the loss and retention of language, the experience of bilingualism, the legacy of Hmong writing systems and textile designs, and his own interest in typography and graffiti. This same tension of legibility and erasure visible in *Fading Marks* is expanded in *Present-past-patterns* on a new, more impactful scale. Vue's recent engagement with photography and archival resources, and the *Singapore Biennale* commission *Present-past-patterns*, represents an important shift in his practice toward themes of history, memory, trauma, and the difficulties inherent to representing the past. As 'memory archives', Vue's works establish a powerful dichotomy between dominant cultural hegemonies and personal recollection. By visually describing the latency of traumatic experience and the qualities of postmemory, Vue's art challenges official attempts at forgetting — instead, asserting Hmong identity and belonging through personal, familial and cultural memory.

Notes

¹ Vanghoua Anthony Vue, 'Frictions of Difference—Transcultural Reimaginings, Reinterpretations, and Reconsiderations in Contemporary Visual Arts', PhD Dissertation, pp. 10-11

² Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 137

³ Keith Quincy, *Hmong: History of a People*, Cheney, Cheney WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 1995, p. 29

⁴ Kou Yang, 'Commentary: Challenges and Complexity in the Re-Construction of Hmong History', *Hmong Studies Journal* 10, 2009, p. 2

⁵ Gary Yia Lee, 'Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity', *Hmong Studies Journal* 8, 2008, p. 22

⁶ Quincy, op cit., p. 30

⁷ Prasit Leepreecha, 'Hmong Across Borders or Borders Across Hmong? Social and Political Influences Upon Hmong People', Hmong Across Borders Conference, University of Minnesota, October 4, 2014. *Hmong Studies Journal* 15, 2014, p. 1

⁸ Geraldine Craig, 'Patterns of Change: Transitions in Hmong Textile Language', *Hmong Studies Journal* 11, 2010, p. 5

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- ⁹ Nicholas Tapp, 'Hmong', Encyclopaedia Britannica; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hmong>; accessed 2 October, 2019
- ¹⁰ Craig, op cit., p. 7
- ¹¹ Vanghoua Anthony Vue, 'Hmong Textile Traditions', *Project Paj Hoob* (exhib. cat.), Hobart: Gallery Ten, 2014, p. 10
- ¹² *ibid.*, p. 13
- ¹³ Vue, 'Frictions of Difference', op cit., p. 1
- ¹⁴ Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos*, Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000, p. 3-5
- ¹⁵ Quincy, *ibid.*, pp. 1-2
- ¹⁶ Davorn Sisavath, 'The US Secret War in Laos: Constructing an Archive from Military Waste', *Radical History Review* 133, 2019, pp. 104-05
- ¹⁷ Sisavath, *ibid.*, fn. 7
- ¹⁸ Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 22
- ¹⁹ Sisavath, op cit., 103; 'Secret War in Laos', *Legacies of War*, accessed 30 October, 2019; <http://legaciesofwar.org/about-laos/secret-war-laos/>
- ²⁰ Vue, 'Frictions of Difference', op cit., p. 66; Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, p. xv. Hoffman utilises this term in relation to The Holocaust, though its relevance is still apparent here
- ²¹ Vue, *ibid.*, p. 89
- ²² *ibid.*, p. 88
- ²³ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Katherine Jones trans., New York: Vintage, 1939, p. 84
- ²⁴ Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth (ed.), Baltimore MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 8
- ²⁵ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 243; Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, p. 73
- ²⁶ Gibbons, *ibid.*, p. 77
- ²⁷ Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, 'Introduction: Building Partnerships Between Oral History and Memory Studies', *Oral History and Public Memories*, Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes eds, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008: p. vii-xvii
- ²⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 2-3
- ²⁹ Andreas Huyssen, *Present pasts: urban palimpsests and the politics of memory*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 6
- ³⁰ Patrick Flores, 'Artistic Director's Statement', *Singapore Biennale 2019*; <https://www.singaporebiennale.org/#/director-statement>; accessed 21 October, 2019
- ³¹ Vanghoua Anthony Vue, proposal for the *Singapore Biennale 2019*
- ³² Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 4