

ArtSeen

Sung Tieu: *Infra-Specter*

By **Helena Haimes**



Installation view: *Sung Tieu: Infra-Specter*, Amant, 2023.
Courtesy Amant. Photo: New Document.

If you read through enough gallery press releases, you begin to recognize certain lexical clichés that pop up again and again. There are so many examples—“liminal,” “dialectical,” “deconstructive”—words that are far from problematic in themselves but have been rendered hackneyed by misuse and repetition; I’m as guilty as anyone. One word that’s especially gear-grinding in its wooliness, though, that’s used to describe anything from neo-surrealist paintings to any vaguely affective moving image work, is “haunting.”

For once, though, “haunting” fits perfectly: in the case of *Infra-Specter*, Sung Tieu’s current exhibition at Amant. The Vietnamese-German artist’s incredible depth of research into unexplained phenomena and tangled official responses to them, her cool hijacking of minimalism’s stark visual language to lend her work power and legibility, and her quiet resistance to didacticism throughout all contribute to this exhibition’s ability to occupy space in your brain long after your visit. I felt so “haunted” by it on my way home that I missed my stop on the G train.

ON VIEW

Amant

Infra-Specter

March 30–September 10,
2023

Brooklyn



Installation view: *Sung Tieu: Infra-Specter*, Amant, 2023. Courtesy Amant. Photo: New Document.

The exhibition is split into two distinct bodies of work shown in each of Amant’s main spaces. Occupying one is “In Cold Print,” which brings together previous and new work related to Tieu’s research into Havana Syndrome, the unexplained set of symptoms—including nausea, memory loss and severe fatigue—reported by hundreds of US and Canadian diplomats and embassy staff around the world, the existence of which has been recently denied by a US intelligence agency report. Closer to home, the works that comprise “Liability Infrastructure”—the body of work installed in Amant’s second main space—were inspired by the controversy surrounding the planned North Brooklyn Pipeline (slated to be installed close to the museum), as well as her research into the officially acknowledged and unknown impact of fracking projects in other sites in the US.

Moving Target Shadow Detection (2022) provides the fulcrum for the works that comprise “In Cold Print.” In a long, deliberate, single shot and set to an ominously thrumming soundtrack, a drone camera’s eye slowly makes its way through a reconstructed version of the Hotel Nacional de Cuba in Havana, the site of one of the first reported occurrences of what would later be labeled Havana Syndrome. As we make our way up in an elevator and through corridors to a suite, we catch sight of classified documents, see television news reports about the condition, and occasionally see the drone that’s witnessing all this reflected in surveillance camera lenses as an ever-increasing amount of smoke fills the space and obscures our view. Tieu was apparently prevented from filming in the real Hotel Nacional because of COVID restrictions, but the use of 3D modeling and animation lends an even deeper feeling of uncanny disquiet: nothing feels quite as it should be.



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Displayed on an adjacent wall, “Exposure to Havana Syndrome” (2020–ongoing) is a series of mirrored engravings of MRI images of Tieu’s own brain after she exposed herself to the same reconstructed recording of the original “sonic events” that supposedly triggered Havana Syndrome, as commissioned by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2018. As with the rest of Tieu’s work, these sit in a deliberately ambivalent place; the patterns of activity could be read as proof or disproof of the syndrome’s existence—they apparently do show neurological effects, though Tieu came through the experiments unscathed.

A set of text pieces exhibited on large commercial display screens, slated to change midway through the exhibition’s run in June 2023, are presented in the style of news stories. In the iteration I saw, one discussed Havana Syndrome directly, while the other two talked about the history of Japanese internment camps (whose fencing now makes up sections of the Mexican border wall) and the strange history of PSYOPS, the US Army division in charge of misinformation and propaganda, thus linking the syndrome to US Imperialism and previous attempts at sonic weaponry, respectively. The second iteration will apparently change tack, contextualizing Havana Syndrome within a wider history of sonic warfare, while replacing the discussion of Japanese internment with an account of helicopter landing mats produced for the war in Vietnam, which were then also recycled to build sections of the Mexican border wall. Again, Tieu refuses to grasp at the “truth.” Instead, she seems to bask in keeping us on our toes—the “reality” behind these stories remains obfuscated and impossible to pin down.

The second space, “Liability Infrastructure,” was inspired by pipeline infrastructure and proposed “liquefied fracked gas vaporizers” that National Grid applied to install in North Brooklyn. *Reverberations* (2023), a sound installation consisting of three huge steel pipes that dominate the room, plays recordings of soil vibrations taken at fracking sites in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. These feel like a dystopian version of putting your ear to a conch shell as a kid, but instead of ocean sounds you hear the sinister, unflinching hum of human subterranean interference.

Mural for America (2023) is a collection of 1,900 stainless steel plaques engraved with known trade secret and proprietary ingredients used in the fracking process, compiled with the help of a data scientist and a physician. Tieu describes this as a “living mural” that is subject to change as trade secret ingredients are made public due to changes in federal and state laws. It is brutal, aesthetically and conceptually, bluntly depicting our limited knowledge of fracking’s longer term impact. Building on this theme, Tieu has also installed a series of four engraved metal signs—“Proximity Relation, Body vs Infrastructure” (2023)—that tells us exactly how far we are from the North Brooklyn Pipeline when standing in various spots in the gallery. If Havana Syndrome felt geographically (if not psychologically) distant, the realization that we’re standing so close to real infrastructure with potential health impacts that are either undeclared or at best unknown, is disconcerting, to say the least.

Tieu’s work has echoes of both Susan Hiller-style para-conceptualism and Laura Poitras’s journalistic/activist/art film installations exposing the ubiquity of Israeli cyberweapons. In its weight of research and fascination with hidden networks and abuses of power, it also echoes the late Mark Lombardi’s analytical diagram drawings from the late ’90s. While many artists revel in ambiguity and nebulousness, it is difficult to do so with such unsettling force and pertinence that you are forced to meditate on discomfiting questions of governmental power and control. This is a terrifyingly penetrating exhibition; haunting even.

Contributor

Helena Haimés

Helena Haimés is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.