

# Sung Tieu Interviewed by Rebecca Rose Cuomo

*Making information a physical experience.*



Sung Tieu, *Reverberations (Marshall County, WV)*, 2023; *Reverberations (Greene County, PA)*, 2023; *Reverberations (Ryverson Station State Park, PA)*, 2023, steel pipe, speakers, amplifier.  
Photo by New Document. Courtesy of the artist and Amant.

Through a complex multidisciplinary practice that incorporates sculpture, sound, video, architecture, and installation, Sung Tieu explores the industries and mechanisms of globalized capitalism, the control of information, and protracted geopolitical tensions rooted in colonialism and Cold War ideologies. Her work critically examines bureaucratic agencies and psychological strategies deployed to manipulate public opinion and exert social control, exposing our limits in discerning known from unknown. We met at Amant in Brooklyn to discuss her solo exhibitions *Infra-Specter* at Amant and *Civic Floor* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, her first in the United States.

—Rebecca Rose Cuomo

### **Rebecca Rose Cuomo**

Let's start with your new project, *Liability Infrastructures* (2023), commissioned by Amant.

### **Sung Tieu**

I noticed construction sites around the museum and discovered that the North Brooklyn Pipeline—officially the Metropolitan Natural Gas Reliability Project—was supposed to be built here. National Grid, a gas utility company, is trying to connect an existing gas pipeline and their facility in Greenpoint with new infrastructure. I became intrigued, and that led me to fracking. My project focuses on three elements. The first is a mural listing the chemicals involved in the fracking process. This shows around 1,900 ingredients lasered into metal plaques mounted on the wall. The second element is sound sculptures produced after I traveled to different fracking sites in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. I used a geophone to record the earth's vibrations there, trying to sense what the earth "hears" during this process. The third element is a series of stainless-steel signs indicating how far away you are from a specific gas pipeline. The signs are installed in the museum courtyards and on its facades—in a sense, bringing the outside in and vice versa.

## RRC

Are fracking companies transparent in revealing the chemicals they use?

## ST

Fracking companies have to provide information about the ingredients they use. This information is available on FracFocus.org, a national hydraulic fracturing chemical registry managed by the Ground Water Protection Council. But companies are also allowed to protect trade secrets and proprietary ingredients. If they indicate an ingredient as proprietary, they don't have to mention the exact chemical they're pumping into the wells. That stunned me. Beginning in July 2023, Colorado will force fracking companies to disclose all ingredients; this new policy requires chemical manufacturers to list every chemical they use, but it remains to be seen whether the gas industry will comply. I've been working with scientists, data analysts, researchers, and journalists to track down the exact chemicals involved. Per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS)—also called “forever chemicals”—are especially dangerous. Currently, scientists can guess which trade secret ingredients are PFAS, but they don't exactly know. The mural is about this pursuit. It lists the chemical components we know as well as the trade secrets. The funny issue is that we can't even pin down how many trade-secret ingredients are used in fracking, as the companies' listings are vague.



Sung Tieu, *There Is Green Gas in Ohio State*, 2023, newspaper print, rocking chairs. Photo by New Document. Courtesy of the artist and Amant.

## **RRC**

How's your experience to collaborate across disciplines?

## **ST**

I really enjoy working with people who have their own expertise. A lot of my work is quite research heavy. When I make new work, I often ask myself what the role of the artist is. Within this exhibition, I see myself filling a gap. This information is available if you were to look, but it would involve going through five million entries on FracFocus. By recording the earth's vibrations at fracking sites or measuring distances between viewers and gas pipeline infrastructure, I'm almost trying to bring you closer to a site that's below ground or to provoke you to imagine the substance of the earth itself and how it might feel to have this happening to you. It's a different perspective: it's nonhuman; it's sensorial. It's about allowing different viewpoints on subjects we're somewhat familiar with or think we know about. At the same time, I'm not taking sides. It's more about trying to reveal what's involved and allowing viewers to arrive at their own understanding. A lot of my work tries to navigate these different perceptions.

## **RRC**

Another project you're showing at Amant is a new iteration of *In Cold Print*, first presented at Nottingham Contemporary in 2020. It's a series of newspaper clippings you wrote on Havana Syndrome, which was first reported in 2016 by US diplomats in Cuba who suffered brain injuries, among other ailments, believed to have been caused by a sonic weapon. It was originally thought to be a politically targeted attack, which the Cuban government denied. For the first half of your show, the articles were sympathetic to the American perspective; then halfway through you changed the articles to be critical of those claims.

## **ST**

I'm showing *In Cold Print* in two rooms of Amant, and we'll also be switching the information. This time, I start with the more critical set of articles, then move to the more affirmative perspective. I spoke with Jon Lee Anderson to get different sides of the argument. It was about how audiences experiencing the exhibition at different times would leave with totally different understandings of Havana Syndrome, which was an experiment to see how people react to different sets of information within the context of an art installation. I'm really curious to show *In Cold Print* alongside *Liability Infrastructure* because I think they both share this idea of secrecy and veiling through language.

## RRC

Different informational ecosystems . . .

## ST

When I use information, I try to stick to factual research. Just placing facts next to each other, you almost imply a certain conclusion. If you say, "Havana Syndrome occurred; here are the symptoms," the reader will conclude Havana Syndrome is real. The same way you can use scientific evidence to say, "There is not a single sound we know of that is inaudible yet capable of penetrating the ear and causing brain concussions." That obviously leads you to conclude Havana Syndrome doesn't exist. The way facts are used in order to conclude something is what really interests me. You don't need to make false claims. What's even more complex in our world today is how data and information are factually being used to argue for or against something. It's like that with fracking. Someone says, "We discovered methane in groundwater." The EPA says, "Methane has always been in the earth. It likely wasn't caused by drilling or fracking, because it was there before." There are many ways to interpret cause and effect so that you can easily shift blame. I'm really interested in how language allows this to unfold.



Detail of Sung Tieu, *Mural for America*, 2023, 1,900 stainless steel plaques, engraved, screws. Photo by New Document. Courtesy of the artist and Amant.

**RRC**

In contrast to *In Cold Print*, you've decided not to focus on different sides with *Liability Infrastructure*.

**ST**

There are clearly multiple sides to this conversation as well. But in this case, I tried to make sense of something I thought was neutral—a chemical list. I quickly understood it's not. How these chemicals have different names, slight shifts in nuance, and the fact that certain ones are concealed tells you a lot. Fracking companies have an interest in hiding this information from the general public, while scientists are working hard to access it; they almost have to wait for laws to change in order to move their research forward. As an artist, I somehow assist the conversation and show the audience this mysterious list I got obsessed with.

**RRC**

Do you ever get frustrated?

**ST**

Of course! I get very frustrated going through these entries. It's a self-imposed bureaucratic burden! There's also a lot of nonsense in the FracFocus chemical list. Some gas companies thought it would be funny to add DNA or carbohydrates as chemical components, for instance! But I'm interested in the challenge. I find it quite satisfying to torture myself with these things, to try to get to the core of something I hadn't understood this way before. The mural is very simple: 1,900 metal plaques with different ingredients. It's hard getting the information, but I enjoy condensing it into an artwork you can physically experience. The scope of those chemicals on the wall presents a very different way of looking at them than on a spreadsheet.

**RRC**

It takes on an architectural scale.

**ST**

I enjoy these translations into works of art and trying to make you physically sense something when you're in the room. I see myself as an exhibition-maker. I love caring for the light, the walls, the floors, the room itself. It's a particular journey, but in the end what I'm most interested in is having my audience in the space. I perceive audiences to be so intelligent. When an artwork is successful, it can be transformative. This may sound embarrassingly romantic, but artworks I love somehow do that. It really takes that work to *get* it, to feel something.



Sung Tieu, *Exposure to Havana Syndrome, Brain Anatomy, Axial Plane, (Sample 4), (Sample 8), (Sample 12), (Sample 16), (Sample 20), (Sample 24)*, 2023, engraving on stainless steel mirror, screws. Photo by New Document. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.

## **RRC**

What was something that's done that for you?

## **ST**

I'm reading about Hanne Darboven's work *Kulturgeschichte 1880–1983* (1980–83), and there's something within her work—the exploration, cataloging, counting time, the continuous repetition of writing in order to produce something new—that intrigues me. It allows you to grasp the world in its multiplicity. A successful artistic practice gives access to something that's hopefully deeper than what we experience in our day to day where a lot of our senses are alerted yet distracted. I think a good exhibition can condense your sensory experiences into something concrete. And it can only happen in that space.

[Sung Tieu: Civic Floor](#) is on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, until July 16; [Sung Tieu: Infra-Specter](#) is on view at Amant in New York City until September 10.

*Rebecca Rose Cuomo is a writer, independent curator, and art consultant based in Brooklyn, New York.*