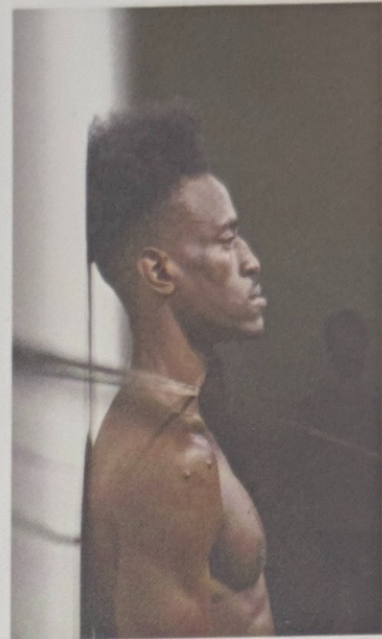


THE ARCHIVE



69



REMOTE INTIMACIES

FEATURING
LUKAZA BRANFMAN &
HH HIASSEN
DAYNA DANGER
SHAWNÉ MICHAELAIN
HOLLOWAY
JOSEPH LIATELA
CARLOS MARTIEL
KATARZYNA PERLAK
BRONTEZ PURNELL
ANH VO
XINA XURNER &
CHRISTOPHER RICHMOND
MIKKI YAMASHIRO

SWAYING INTO SLIPPERY
DIASPORIC VOIDS:
ON ANH VO'S BABYLIFT
BY BENEDICT NGUYEN

BABYLIFT ANH VO

Seeing Anh perform live, in meatspace, for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began feels momentous. Like 99% of the general public, I was not allowed to witness *Babylift*'s premiere in February 2021 at Target Margin Theater in Sunset Park. Performed to no audience, the work was meant to be admired via our absence. But tonight, June 10, 2021, they're performing another work, *non-binary pussy*, at 122 Community Center in the East Village. I get to hear them sing "I was conceived on a plane" in the flesh. I see the tension in their legs as they strut across a gravel stage in pleasers, otherwise nude. It's resplendent.

The ghosts Anh performs to were probably present. Today, our view of the sun was eclipsed by the relatively tiny moon. Across a different geometry of space-time, my own ancestors' multimodal hints and messages seem frequently obscured by the minutiae of daily life. And yet, Anh and I try to reach into the void, the limits of our fingers feeling the air, but also a metaphysical beyond.

The "our" here is slippery. Though we're both Vietnamese, I was born in Connecticut. The ways my ancestors and ghosts swirl around me are necessarily different from how Anh's are communing with them. This could sound like a self-defeating stance. But acknowledging the slip actually expands our relation to one another. It invites a mode of





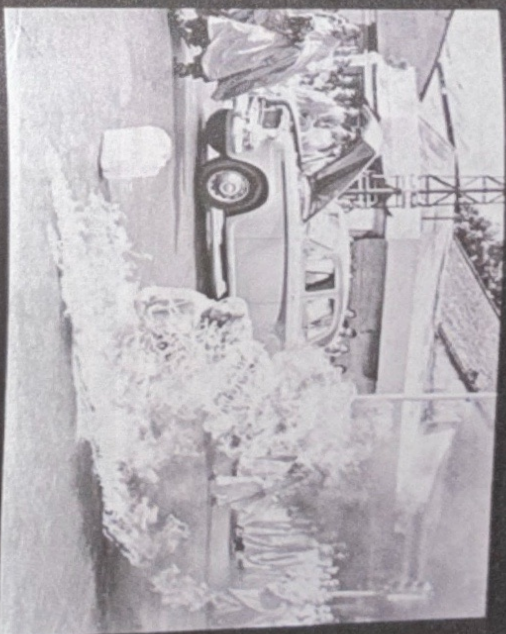
engagement that can pass through at an angle. It's an obliqueness that ruptures the linear way of thinking I'm normally incentivized to maintain, and lands me in a kind of uncertainty that's actually comforting. I'm being held by what I cannot know, but oomph—do I feel it.

Anh questions their own migration from Việt Nam to the UK and then the US, and what it means to return their attention to Vietnamese modes of daily life that, in English, get clunkily translated to "ritual." In Việt Nam, Anh would just be going to the pagoda. And yet, *BabyJift*'s scope, to me, is anything but quotidian. How does a work of performance memorialize seventy-eight children killed in a plane crash during a 1975 mass evacuation from South Việt Nam? The postcolonial implications of this event are almost too wide to fathom. And yet.

By turns serious and campy (one section features a distorted audio loop of the intro to "Avatar: The Last Airbender"), *BabyJift*'s choreography investigates mourning's potential to be erotic. In front of creased pink cellophane, Vo twerks to the camera and tosses off meditative recitations that interweave the histories of their homeland and American postmodern dance. Re-enacting these cultural "practices" (another failed translation) through monologue and durational movement sequences augments the awkwardness of the work's mis-mashed source material. Anh only heightens this sensation through repetition.

Since premiering this production in February, Anh has activated new practices of self-reflection that have produced fresh tears in what was split open. They've been in psychoanalysis, an intervention whose attention to adolescence and free association have resuscitated in Anh both memories and nightmares, which have led them to seek the wisdom of a shaman. Before Anh even spoke in their first session, the shaman recognized them as an artist.

It's odd how these spectral assurances carry so much significance. Not ironically, it's been psychoanalysis and Anh's academic study that have brought them even more clarity around these modes of engaging the world: performance and ritual. Even if analysis and academia stem from a "white anthropological gaze," the process surrounding



RIGHT
Anh Vo, *BabyJift* (excerpt), 2019.
Performance documentation from
New York Live Arts, New York.
Courtesy the artist. Photo by
Maria Baranova.



Babylift has brought Anh to recognize however "performance and ritual" are understood in Vietnam, they are and have always been there. Now an achingly large ocean away, Anh can reinvigorate these processes, even as their new perspectives allow them to see it all as "weird and campy." And being perceived by a spiritual medium actually brings the gaze a bit closer to another slippery notion for diasporic people: home.

Even before these post-show unravelings, Anh resists the potential for these new meanings to take on too much meaning. In *Babylift*, Anh lets many layers of cultural and sexual fetishization refract and distort one another, and perhaps, settle. They present a collage of references and then comb it away through their hair, singing blithely, "Gimme some of that freedom" again and again. I've never been to Việt Nam, but I let myself believe what I recognize is happening as Anh

performs. What seemed like camp comes to feel more like the banality of diasporic resignation. As in, "We are doing this here, not there." Anh's waiting for ancestral recognition is both a sacred exercise in patience and a winking celebration of its perpetual unravelling.

I was told tonight's iteration of *non-binary pussy* would feature partial excerpts of *Babylift*, though trying to parse delineations between the two works seems like a futile exercise. I can only feel, or, at least, try and trust. By geometric definition, one can't see behind an eclipse, but we love to be reminded that there are forces beyond. Where I let myself sink instead is in the vibe, the vibration of club beats and hip circles reaching for a spiritual plane. I don't have to close my eyes to dip into the void.

ANH VO is a Vietnamese choreographer, dancer, theorist, and activist based in Brooklyn. They create dances and produce texts about pornography and queer relations, about being and form, about identity and abstraction, about history and its colonial reality. They hold degrees in Performance Studies from Brown University (BA) and New York University (MA) and have received support from Brooklyn Arts Council, Foundation of Contemporary Arts, Women and Performance, New York Live Arts (Fresh Tracks) and more. As a writer, they are the Co-Editor at *Critical Correspondence*, a frequent contributor to *Anomaly*, and a blogger at *Cultplastic*.

BENEDICT NGUYỄN is a dancer, writer, and curator based on occupied Lenape and Wappinger lands (South Bronx, NY). Their criticism has appeared in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Danspace Project's Journal*, *Shondaland*, *the Establishment*, and *Culturebot*, among others. Their poetry has appeared in AAWW's *the Margins* and *PANK*. They've performed in DapperQ Fashion week and in recent works by Sally Silvers, José Rivera, Jr., Monstah Black, and more. They are a Suzanne Fiol Curatorial Fellow (2019) and publish a monthly-ish newsletter "first quarter moon slush" on substack and are sometimes online @xbennyboo.

PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION
Anh Vo, *Babylift*, 2021. Performance documentation from Target Margin Theater, New York, NY. Courtesy the artist. Photos by Yekaterina Gyadu.