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WHEN WATER EMBRACES EMPTY SPACE

30 October 2024 to 5 January 2025

**Tuấn Andrew
Nguyễn**

Project coordination: Ulirich Krienbrink
Technical realization: Carlo Bas Sancho, Mathis Oesterlen
Educational programme: Jan Blum, Lisa Bellmann
Graphic design: Katarina Šević, Anna Mándoki

EXHIBITION WALK

**Tuesday, 3 December,
5 p.m.**

With Edit Molnár, director, Edith-Russ-
Haus (in English language)

**Tuesday, 10 December,
5 p.m.**

With Marcel Schwierin, director, Edith-
Russ-Haus (in German language)

GUIDED TOURS

Every Sunday during the exhibition at
3 p.m. (attendance free, regular entrance)
Group tours on request



www.facebook.com/edithrusshaus



www.instagram.com/edith_russ_haus

A majestic hand-carved wooden boat is the protagonist of Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn's new solo exhibition, *When Water Embraces Empty Space*. The story of the boat, past and present, is spread throughout the entire building, told through video installations and collaboratively made objects.

The sixteen-meter-long outrigger sailboat is called the Luf canoe, named after the Papua New Guinean island from which it originates. The local and ancient knowledge, of both plants and the ocean, that is required to build such a boat is nothing short of remarkable. Generations that have grown up in Berlin know the magnificent object from school excursions to the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem. Since 2020, part of the museum's collection has been housed in the Humboldt Forum; here, the Luf canoe is presented as the institution's crown jewel.

According to the historian Götz Aly in his book *The Magnificent Boat*, the arrival of the Luf canoe in the Berlin collection has a dark and troubling history. The object is connected to the sustained violence that the Imperial German Navy and German traders perpetrated on the people of Papua New Guinea. The islands' forests and natural resources were destroyed and replaced with plantations, which the local population were forced to work on, and the colonizers raped local women. When the islanders resisted these atrocities, the Imperial Crown ordered their massacre through so-called *Strafexpedition* (punitive expeditions)—as happened on Luf.

In 2021, the Humboldt Forum commissioned a video interview with descendants of the few Luf inhabitants who survived this colonial aggression. They expressed their wish to see the boat, mourned their community's lost knowledge of how to produce this type of watercraft, and expressed a hope to reconnect with it.

Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn's exploration started from this juncture: his goal became to fulfill this wish and make the meeting possible. The artist believes that the Luf canoe is a bridge between the past and the future, between the dominant narrative of German colonialism and the erased stories of the people of Papua New Guinea. It is a bridge between fact and fiction, testimony and resilience.

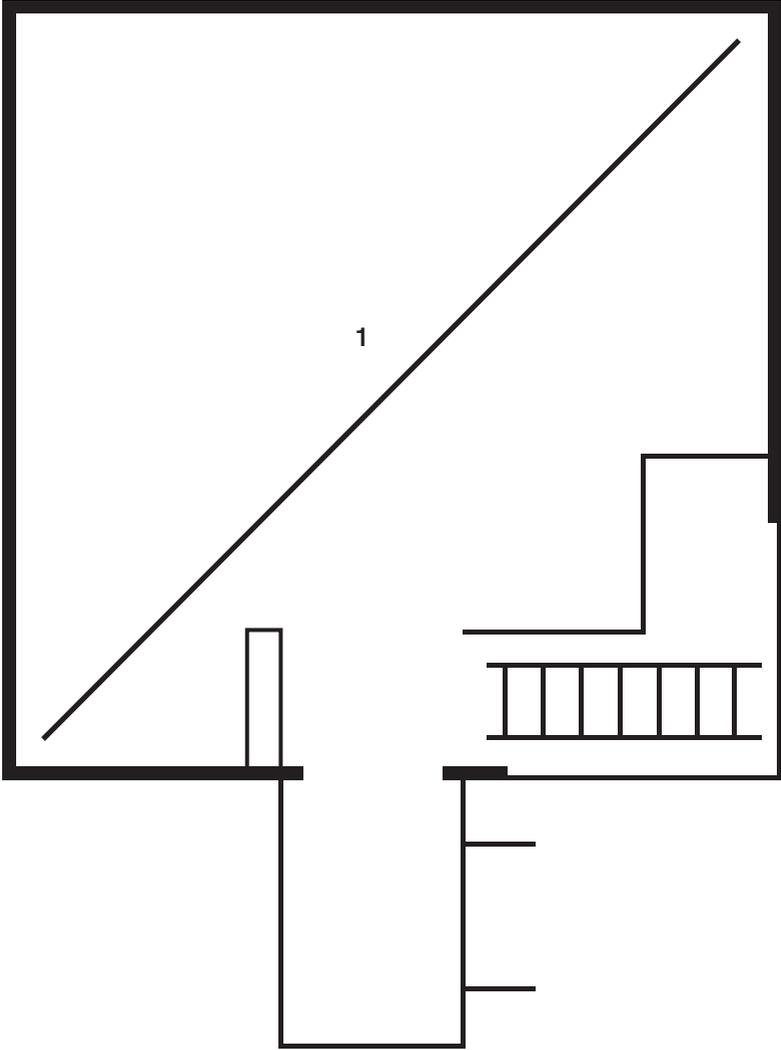
The exhibition's series of multichannel film installations together present a narrative built from conversations between the Luf canoe builders' descendants—Stanley Inum, Fordy Stanley, and Enoch Lun—and their long-awaited meeting with the boat. Other videos present footage of the Luf community's attempt to rebuild the boat. Their aim is to create an object

that would resolve the relationship between object and narrative, between maker and keeper, and between trauma and healing.

Colonialism destroys and controls memory. In the wake of all this destruction, what strategies do we have to recuperate memory? Can fiction fill in the gaps, give agency, and act as a tool of healing inside the voids that remain?

Maybe the boat needs to float out of the museum, where it is being displayed, and disappear in the oceans as it was meant to—a sea burial for the chief of Luf or for a larger, more metaphorical burial: one of the continuation of colonial ideals in our current times.

GROUND FLOOR



1

ABOVE THE SEA, AGAINST THE SKY

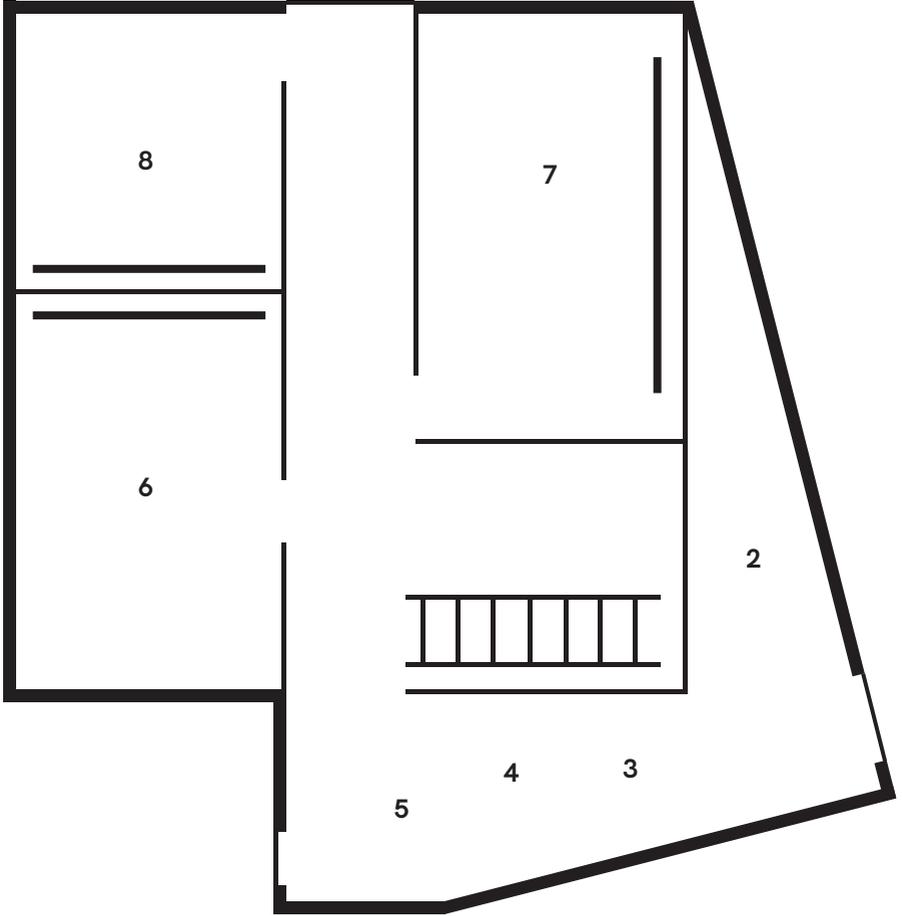
2024

3-channel video, computer-generated
imagery (CGI)

6 min

Using three channels of video, this work attempts to express the Luf canoe in its full scale of sixteen meters long. The video was built using computer generated images based on very detailed photos of the canoe. It imagines the Luf canoe in its original purpose, which was the ritual burial at sea of the last chief of the Luf community through the burning of the boat. It shows three phases of the Luf canoe: floating on the sea, being burned, and as a ghost boat.

GROUND FLOOR



2 ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH OF THE LUF CANOE, 1903

2024

Framed photo print

3 TOUCHING THE BOAT

2024

Print on Dibond

Photo of Stanley Inum's hand while touching the Luf canoe, July 2024.

4 TATTOOED ARM OF ENOCH LUN

2024

Print on Dibond

This image documents Enoch Lun's forearm as a Berlin-based tattoo artist sketches a motif in the preparation for tattooing. The design of the tattoo is based on the motifs on the Luf canoe. Enoch decided to get the tattoo after his encounter with the canoe in the Humboldt Forum for the first time, in July 2024.

The image documents Enoch Lun's forearm after the stencil was transferred to his arm, moments before the tattoo artist inscribes the motif permanently.

5 SCULPTURES

2024

The wooden sculptures are models of parts of the boat that the community of Manus islanders are working on. They are descendants of Niemin, who was one of the builders of the original Luf canoe, and their ambition is to reconstruct the Luf canoe based on the measurements and photos they took on their recent visit to the Humboldt Forum.

6 THE ENCOUNTER

2024

72 min

Stanley Inum, Fordy Stanley, and Enoch Lun—three community representatives—and their translator, Kireni Imwe Jean Sparks-Ngeenge, visit the Humboldt Forum to see the Luf canoe for the first time. Nobody from the Luf community has ever had the chance to see this significant symbol of heritage before.

After months of working on the logistics of their visas to enter Germany and after endless negotiations with management and securing staff of the Humboldt Forum, the encounter was finally made possible. The project initiators, Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn and the Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art, asked for

permission just to visit the artifact but also to document the historic encounter.

The actual meeting was orchestrated by the Humboldt Forum. They decided to locate the first encounter in their classical-style lobby and provide an official introduction to the regulations to be followed during the encounter in the exhibition space.

The film also documents a story told by Stanley Inum, in which he recounts the story of the Luf canoe based on the oral traditions of the people of Luf island. The narrative covers the story of the boat before it was brought to Berlin and exhibited in the Ethnographic Collection in Dahlem. He is saddened by the loss of technical knowledge, as no one now knows how to build such a boat—languages and traditions have also been taken with it.

The main languages spoken in the film are English and Tok Pisin, which are two of the three official languages of Papua New Guinea, the third being Hiri Motu. There are an additional 851 Indigenous languages spoken in Papua New Guinea.

The event is documented by two camera crews in parallel, one belonging to Tuấn (three cameras) and the other made up of colleagues from the Humboldt Forum. This film was edited together from the material filmed by Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn's team.

7 WHEN WATER EMBRACES EMPTY SPACE

2024

5:30 min

The Luf canoe is literally walled in at the Humboldt Forum. This work imagines the canoe, in a surreal act of liberation, floating through the walls of the Oceania Collection in the Ethnological Collection of the Humboldt Forum, Berlin. It passes various rooms filled with objects from different exhibitions until it reaches the façade. Many of the objects are statues or masks with ceremonial and spiritual purpose. They seem to whisper. Besides these whispers, performed by Stanley Inum, Fordy Stanley, and Enoch Lun, the soundscape consists of a song performed by Kireni Imwe Jean Sparks-Ngenge, who was the translator for the project. She sings a song written by her father, Ngenge Sasa, a friend of the Luf representatives and former local politician of Manus Island. Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn got to know this song as he was exploring Berlin together with the collaborators from Papua New Guinea, after the encounter in the Humboldt Forum. In this way, the song, which is a song about longing and return, became connected to the video of the canoe floating out of its exhibition hall.

8

A BOAT IS BACK

2024

11 min

Filmed by Manuai Matawai on the island of Manus, this video documents the communities' process of rebuilding the Luf canoe. The boat-building will continue to be filmed, eventually documenting the whole process.

BIOGRAPHY

Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn (born 1976) explores the power of memory and its potential to act as a form of political resistance. The Vietnamese/US artist's practice is fuelled by research and a commitment to communities that have faced traumas caused by colonialism, war, and displacement. Through his continuous attempts to engage with vanishing or vanquished historical memory, Nguyễn investigates the erasures that the colonial project has brought to bear on certain parts of the world. Through this collaborative practice, he explores memory as a form of resistance and empowerment, emphasizing the power of storytelling as a means for healing, empathy, and solidarity.

Nguyễn has received several awards in both film and visual arts, including an Art Matters grant in 2010

and a VIA Art Fund grant. He won the Joan Miró Foundation award in 2023. His work has been included in several international exhibitions, including the Asia Pacific Triennial 2006, the Whitney Biennial 2017, the Sharjah Biennial 2019, and Berlin Biennale 2022.

Nguyễn cofounded The Propeller Group in 2006, a platform for collectivity that situates itself between an art collective and an advertising company. Accolades for the group include the grand prize at the 2015 Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur for the film *The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music* and a Creative Capital award for their video project *Television Commercial for Communism*. Besides a major traveling retrospective that began at the MCA Chicago, the collective has participated in international exhibitions including *The Ungovernables* [2012 New Museum Triennial], the 2012 LA Biennial, *Prospect3* [2014 New Orleans Triennial], and the Venice Biennale 2015.

www.tuanandrewnguyen.com

The German colonial history of violence in present-day Papua New Guinea

In the mid-nineteenth century, German trading houses participated in colonial expeditions. German companies such as the Hamburg Trading House of Robertson & Herrnsheim were founded and pushed ahead with conquests in the Southern Ocean, motivated by gold, missionary work, and a thirst for adventure.¹ In 1847, a memorandum on the “elevation of Prussia to a maritime, colonial and world power of the first rank” was presented to the Prussian parliament.² A further forty years passed before clear territorial boundaries were agreed upon with England. In the meantime, the trading houses on the islands, which today belong to Papua New Guinea, were already going about their business, forcibly dispossessing the local people, turning the land into plantations, and raping Indigenous women in the process. The cultural and economic conditions and needs of the population were not included in the negotiations they demanded taxes on things that were not commodified before the colonizers. Since 19 May 1885, the islands west of the Luf Group have been known as the Bismarck Archipelago, uniting the islands of Neu-Mecklenburg, Neu-Lauenburg and Neu-Pommern.³ Included in the trade goods were so-called art treasures or ethnographica. Missionaries, traders, commanders, doctors, and men

explicitly trained as researchers were in close contact with museums in Germany.

The museums in Leipzig, Berlin, and Stuttgart in particular placed orders to complete their collections. The naval vessels SMS Carola, Möwe and Hyäne are of particular importance for the history of the Luf Islands. During the so-called *Strafexpeditionen* (punitive expeditions) of 1882/83, artifacts that can still be seen in the museums today, such as masks, drums, and necklaces, were brought to Berlin. Later, when the Luf Islands were already under German rule, the Luf canoe was brought to the German capital by the company Hensheim & Co. in 1904.⁴

Luf

The Island of Luf belongs to the state of Papua New Guinea. It is the biggest of several Islands called the Hermit Islands, or, to use a less colonial name, the Luf Islands. It takes eight hours by small boat to reach a city from the Luf Islands. Luf and the other islands of the Luf group belonged to the colony of German New Guinea from 1899 to 1914 (formally until 1919). As early as the end of December 1882, German marines and traders destroyed villages, plantations, and canoes on Luf as part of a so-called *Strafexpeditionen* (punitive expeditions), in which numerous locals were killed.

For a long time, the myth circulated about the inhabitants of the island of Luf was that they had voluntarily decided to die out because they no longer wanted to reproduce. For this reason, it was long believed that there were no descendants of the people of Luf. In fact, the Germans brought in (sexually transmitted) diseases. Women were abducted and raped, as Stanley Inum describes in the film *The Encounter*. His ancestors survived because they were able to escape the last massacre on the island and hid in the jungle.

Strafexpedition

The locals “atoned” for their defense of the islands by being subjected to excessive excessive military counter-attacks, so-called *Strafexpeditionen* (punitive expeditions). The deployment of large warships, marines, and native police troops under German command was particularly destructive. Cooperation with these police forces was important for the colonial endeavor because the locals knew the tactics and hiding places of the islanders who had been attacked. The relatively few murders of the colonizers that triggered these “punitive expeditions” were meticulously recorded. The names of the dead white people, and the places and dates of their deaths are still known today. The names of the murdered islanders, on the other hand, are not known. The number of victims and

the extent of the raids can only be inferred from the boastful correspondence with the headquarters of the trading house.⁵

Luf canoe

The Germans gave it the name Luf-Boot. The people from the island of Luf, who speak in the works shown, call it the Luf canoe. It was built on the island of Luf between 1890 and 1895. The boat is almost ten metres high and fifteen meters long and capable of transporting fifty people. The outrigger gives the narrow dugout canoe, which forms the hull of the boat, more stability. This allows it to achieve high speeds. Particularly risky maneuvers, such as crossing the winch, could be carried out in this way. The canoe was originally built from material from the island of Luf. This technique is extraordinary and impressive compared to European boatbuilding of the time. The canoe, built after the punitive expedition remained in a house and was sold by Hershheim in 1903 to Felix von Luchan, the then director of the Africa and Oceania Department of the Royal Museum of Ethnology (now the Ethnological Museum) in Berlin. However, this particular canoe was not built for trade, but for the ceremonial burial of the last chief of Luf Island, Chief Labenan. This burial could never take place due to the violent raids and diseases brought in, as there were too few people on

the island to launch the boat. In the film *The Encounter*, Stanley Inum describes how not only the canoe was lost through violent colonization, but also the technological knowledge—the cultural heritage of boatbuilding. The canoe is still part of the Oceanic Collection of the Ethnological Museum at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. The Humboldt Forum’s website documents how it was moved from its old location in Dahlem to the new building and walled in there.

The Creole Language of Tok Pisin⁶

The Creole language of Tok Pisin is the most widespread lingua franca in Papua New Guinea.

The existence of a pidgin language based on English has been known from the time before the Germans took possession of Papua New Guinea. Whaling and trading ships, mostly with crews from the Pacific islands, used or possibly brought the language to the country. An early form of Tok Pisin was already known during German colonial rule under the derogatory term *tokboi* (servant language, from the English “talk boy”).

The term “pidgin” refers to a reduced form of language that is used by speakers of different languages to communicate with each other. A pidgin language is therefore not a first language, but is learnt by its

speakers as a foreign language.

Tok Pisin is a makeshift language with a simplified grammatical structure that developed under colonial conditions. Its purpose is to communicate using simplified forms of other languages. The basis is English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and German (Kitchen German, *Unserdeutsch*), languages of the colonial powers and traders to which the locals adapted in a rudimentary way. In many cases, the improvised pidgin of the first generation became a regular language of the second generation.

Humboldt Forum⁷

The Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace is a universal museum in Berlin. In addition to the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, it is also home to the Berlin exhibition of the Berlin City Museum and the Humboldt Laboratory of the Humboldt University of Berlin. In addition, accompanying events, exhibitions, and guided tours take place at the center, which is run by the Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace.

“The Magnificent Boat” by Götz Aly

Götz Aly traces the path of the Lufcanoe in his book *“The Magnificent Boat: How Germans Stole the*

Art Treasures of the South Seas". According to Aly, euphemistic narratives about the celebrated acquisition of such artworks are still being perpetuated today, obscuring their historical context and avoiding confronting injustice. Aly's angry report also offers insight into the cultural background of the arts and crafts on the archipelago. It raises the question of the appropriate treatment of artifacts and their creators in the museums of our time all the more urgently: Colonial robbery should no longer be condoned through silence.⁸ Aly's book was the starting point for this exhibition project.

Götz Aly: *Das Prachtboot: Wie Deutsche die Kunstschatze der Südsee raubten*, published by S.FISCHER, 2021.

- 1 Graichen, Gisela, and Horst Gründer. *Deutsche Kolonien: Traum und Trauma*. Ullstein, 2005.
- 2 Red-Anderson, Paulette. "Chronologie zur Deutschen Kolonialgeschichte." *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*.
- 3 Graichen, Gisela, and Horst Gründer. *Deutsche Kolonien: Traum und Trauma*. Ullstein, 2005.
- 4 Aly, Götz. *Das Prachtboot: wie Deutsche die Kunstschatze der Südsee raubten*. 2023 ed., FISCHER Taschenbuch, 2021.
- 5 Rohwer, Thomas F. *Die Maritime Bibliothek/Heinrich Schnee – „Bilder aus der Südsee.“: Unter den kannibalischen Stämmen des Bismarck-Archipels. Von DR. HEINRICH SCHNEE, früher Kaiserlicher Richter in Deutsch-Neu-Guinea*. Neumünster, epubli, 2021.
- 6 Information taken from Wikipedia: Tok Pisin and pidgin in general.
- 7 Information taken from Wikipedia: Humboldt Forum and Ethnological Collection.
- 8 Bundezentrale für politische Bildung. "Das Prachtboot. Wie Deutsche die Kunstschatze der Südsee raubten von Götz Aly." bpb.de, 9 June 2022.

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für Medienkunst

OPENING HOURS

Tuesday till Friday 2 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Monday closed

ADMISSION

2,50 Euro / 1,50 Euro

Free admission on 23 November and 28 December 2024
Closed on 24, 25, 31 December 2024 and 01 January 2025
Open on 31 October and 26 December 2024

Admission is free for school children, visitors up to and including
the age of 17, and students at Oldenburg universities.

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