

Project Proposal

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Lens-Based Media

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INTRODUCTION

The mother of my mother was born in 1932, in Vietnam. She has lived through the First Indochina War, as well as the Vietnam-American War. In 1975, when all wars officially ended, she was 43. My mother saw the Vietnam Liberation day at 12. Growing up, she was amongst the ones who had to work hard to rebuild the country after 30-years of wars and disputes. Then, I was born as the first generation of Vietnamese to be born in peacetime. The year I was born, the internet was born in Vietnam, too.

The three generations of women in my family represent the history of Vietnam in 100 years. And of course, some gaps cannot be filled between us.

Hoà - my grandmother, was married to my grandfather in their 20s. Not long after, my grandfather went to the army, leaving Hoà at home by herself. As the war ended, my grandfather came back. That's when many women started to look for him through people finding public notices on TVs, stating his name and clear description of what he looked like. Hoà found out about the affairs he had. Later on, he divorced my grandmother, leaving her to marry another woman.

Being an Asian woman, Hoà faces immense misogyny/double standards throughout her life. When my grandfather left for other women, the one to blame was my grandmother. It was a failure of a woman whose husband went away because it's her fault not being able "to keep a man." Hoà was guilty as a woman, and she sought redemption in educating my mother - Trang, as austere as she could. Hoà from then devotes her life to household duties. Although no one has ever accused Hoà of being a failed woman, she lives with the belief that society has neglected her ever since.

Now, Hoà is in her 80s. She is suspected to have Alzheimer as her ability to remember and memories fade away. Thanks to this process of ageing, Hoà becomes joyful and curious; as if she is rejuvenated. She would now ask to go out every day, to get closer to nature and she would start a conversation with people she meets. How ironic it is that in the last days of life, Hoà lives more joyously than ever.

But as Hoà reaches an end of her journey on Earth with her suffering miraculously alleviated by the blessing and curse of ageing, she also leaves her daughter - my mother and her granddaughter - me, behind.

I. What I want to make

I want to make a feature-length documentary film about my grandmother. I want to try to catch up with all that has happened in her time (Vietnam in Wartime), in my mother's time (Vietnam in Reconstruction-era) to make sense of what is happening in my time (Contemporary Vietnam).

To form my cinematic language, I will research the genre of documentary and hybrid documentary, to find out what fits my project best. As I researched, director Pedro Costa's use of docufiction (the combination of documentary and fiction in narrative film-making) interested me tremendously. Besides, to show how personal memory is linked to national history, my cinematic language will include archives outside of my family's context, such as war archives, Vietnamese women's museum's archives.



Pedro Costa's use of chiaroscuro lighting in the claustrophobic interiors, composed static shots and a rich colour palette make the film feel like a series of living paintings.

II. How I want to make it



My grandmother and my mother on a trip to visit my great grandmother's grave.

The pandemic has allowed me to go home and conduct this project with remote consultation of tutors.

To start, I'd spend time with my grandmother to study her physical and mental condition. Her daily rituals would be observed and filmed concerning how my family and I process her reaching the end of her time passage. At the same time, I'd go through the family archive to dig for tangible materials to reconstruct her life story. To form the shooting script, I will write down fragments, memoirs about my grandmother, collecting stories about my grandmother through different perspectives. Also, the story would be told concerning Vietnam's socio-political context, giving a bird-eye view between personal narrative and history.

III. My timetable

Oct - November - Rotterdam - London

- Researching references of related movies, topics
- Draft out different possible ways of telling the story visually
- Writing down fragments, memoirs about my grandmother, collecting stories about my grandmother through different perspectives

November - February - Vietnam - Home with my grandma

- Day-to-day observations of her life
- Family archive
- Visit Vietnamese women's museum and its archive
- Filming
- Constantly reviewing materials, forming narratives alongside

March/April - Back to Rotterdam

- Reviewing footages, rough-cut, finalise the script

May - Final editings

June - Post-production

IV. Why I want to make it

I believe making this film would allow me to explore topics that I hold dearly and intimately to myself: home, exile, the female body, intergenerational feminism. As I stated earlier, this project would also help me move forward. It wasn't always easy being a granddaughter of a grandmother and mother who has to face unjust and stigmas throughout their life. I was a rebel, now as I grow into a woman of my own, I would like to reconcile, with the women in my family, and with our pasts. The questions I attempt to answer through this project:

- (1) Who is really Hoà - my grandmother? What would be an accurate and multi-dimensional portraiture of her?
- (2) How are my family and I deal with the passing process of a loved one? How does my grandmother deal with it herself? And the permeable, unreliable and personal nature of memory.

V. Who can help me

Hoà, my protagonist. Trang, the protagonist's daughter, having been with Hoà since her date of birth and through Hoà's life, her divorce, her early symptoms of memory loss. And my grandfather. I need to learn about his personality and perspectives on the marriage.

Jue, a former Lens-based student whom I am still in contact with. I find her thesis structure (interweaving different types of materials) and themes (in search of a home) resonate with how I would want to write my thesis.

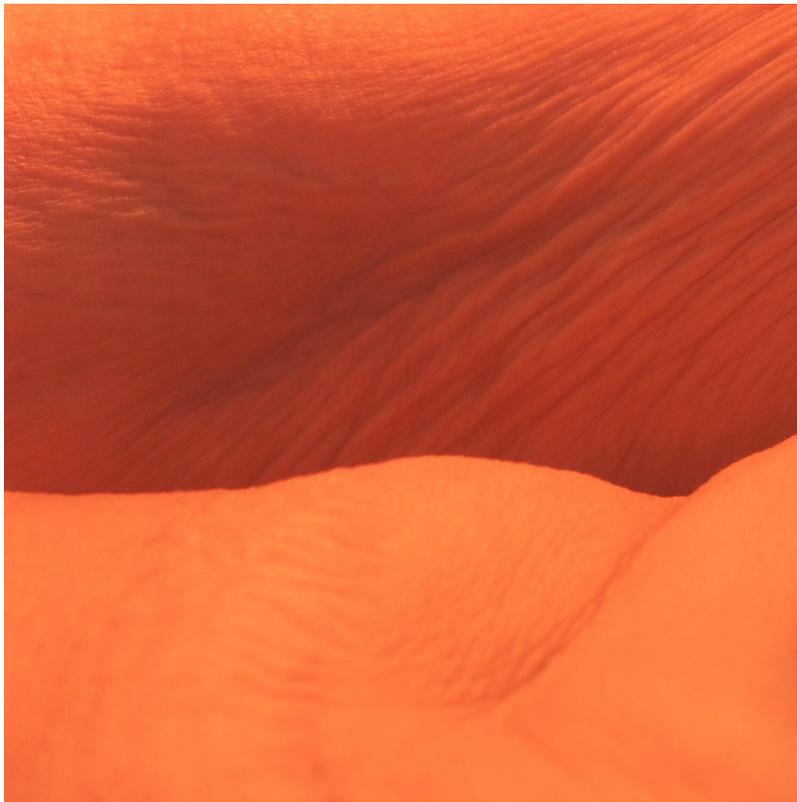
As Natasha supervised Jue's thesis, she can help me in the process of organising my collected materials and forming a coherent structure in my thesis: how to link personal memories/experiences of difficult family relationships to the larger context of misogyny through different times in Vietnam.

Rosella, a former student and now my tutor. Her thesis looked at similar themes: intergenerational relationships and the intersection of the political and the personal (as how I plan to do with examining the effects of societal misogyny on my grandma).

The consultation of PZI tutors and peers will also help me in the process of forming my cinematic language in filming this project.

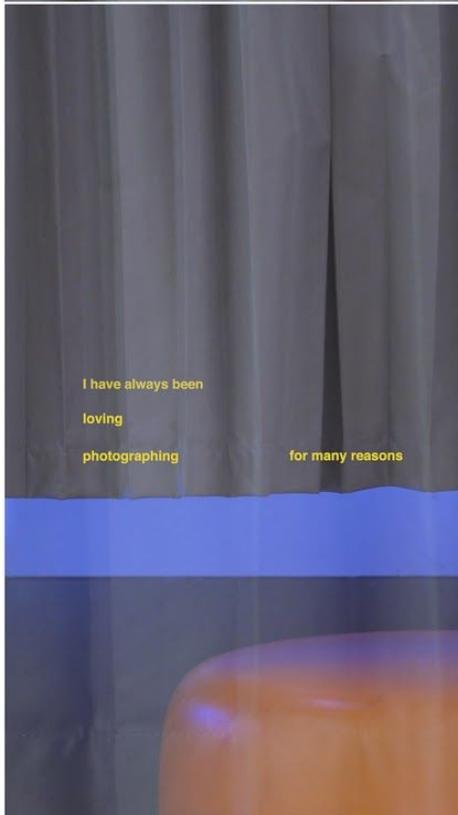
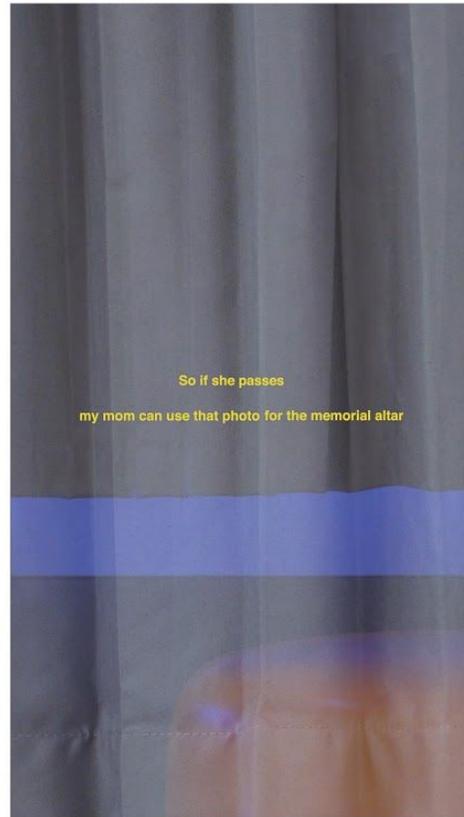
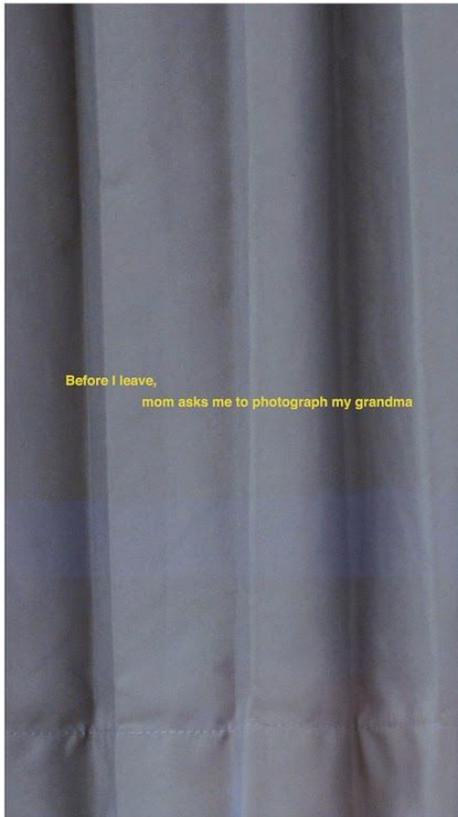
VI. Relation to previous practice

The photo series and photobook “Desert” and the short film “From Home to Home” are my projects from last year. The photo series addresses nude photography of the female body, documenting the ageing process of my grandmother by abstracting her body into lines, surfaces and forms.



The naked body of my grandmother - Desert photo series

“From Home To Home,” showed my imagined journey of going home, in which home is referred to both a person and a place. Hence, when using the metaphor of a person as my home, I used voiceover to tell anecdotes of my grandmother. The story was told inductively, by using footage of an empty city during lockdown to talk about the visibility/ invisibility of myself - an Asian woman. I used footage of a passport photo booth in a train station to tell the story of how I was asked to take a photo for my grandmother’s memorial altar⁽⁶⁾, and so on.



(1) *Still frames - From Home To Home, 2020*

The common themes in my previous works (Desert photobook and From Home To Home) are about the trapped situation of women, whether in their mind, in their corporeal bodies or in their space - a confined space and/or a geographical place. Besides, about my cinematography and film editing techniques, I also see a similar methodology of dealing with the topics: formalism. Hence, the story of my grandmother is also about societal confinements of a Vietnamese woman, and my process of finding cinematic language to tell the story.

VII. Relation to a larger context

This project has a relation to several topics, such as how to deal with the loss of a loved one, the history of the misogyny of Vietnamese women in the past and how it has changed through time, also how to deal with trauma and memory loss (Alzheimer), and difficult family relationships/family secrets.

Films and other artworks with similar themes

Home (2019) by Leticia Simoes (Brazil)

Leticia Simoes returns home for family rapprochement after 10 years away due to her mother's depression and bi-polar complicate matters. As an attempt to tighten ties, Leticia convinces her mother to give her access to old family photos and objects.



A scene in Home - Leticia and her mother visits her grandmother in a nursing home

No Home Movie (2015) by Chantal Akerman is a great piece of intimacy and profound reflection on family history and mother-daughter relations.



A scene in No Home Movie - Chantal Akerman having dinner with her mother

Stories we tell (2012) by Sarah Pollen

Sarah Polley digs into family history to portrait her mother through a patchwork of stories and materials. The documentary shows that the past we construct can be warped through the lens of both our memories and cinema.



A scene in Stories we tell - Sarah Pollen filming herself with her biological father

VIII. References/Bibliography

Reading list, sources references to use both in the research and in the making stages of the work (these are subject to change).

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- *Vitalina Valera*. 2019. [film] Directed by P. Costa. Portugal.