

New Pictures: The Propeller Group, Reincarnations

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The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music, the 2014 film by Ho Chi Minh City–based collective the Propeller Group, seems to nicely fit the post-Enlightenment museum's *modus operandi* of cross-cultural comparison. Originally created for New Orleans's Prospect biennial, the film suggests commonalities between its subject—elaborate, multi-day Vietnamese funerary practices—and the similarly carnivalesque character of its host city's better known, so-called jazz funerals. Viewed within a museum, however, the film reveals a challenge to its new site's historical function to transform certain kinds of objects into works of art, and others into uneasy art/artifact hybrids. *New Pictures: The Propeller Group, Reincarnations* pairs the film, recently acquired by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, with an installation of objects selected from departments across the museum's encyclopedic collection. The installation extends the film's theme of passing to give new meaning to Theodor Adorno's old saw about the museum being a mausoleum, which a generation ago served as a theoretical shorthand for 1990s institutional critique.

Bringing together historically disparate objects associated with spiritual state-shifting—for instance an Egyptian model ship circa the twentieth century BCE; stone Buddhas from South, Southeast, and East Asia spanning a millennium; and a Kwakwaka'wakw transformation mask by Richard Hunt—the Propeller Group surprises by departing from conventional museum display, instead assembling the objects into a makeshift funerary procession. The "march," led by an earthenware Northern Wei dynasty processional group, directly faces the film as if following the tracking POV shots that dominate it, and seems poised to enter its stylized tropical landscape. The projection screen becomes a permeable membrane, proposing for the museum's objects, and their constituent cultures, the possibility of new hybridities beyond art/artifact.

The installation is most striking for the cavalierly playful and un-museological mode of spectatorship it initiates. At points, the objects sourced from the museum's collection almost, but do not quite, touch each other; the viewer initially misrecognizes the installation as an unimaginably casual treatment of these priceless and irreplaceable objects, then becomes incredulous about their veracity, particularly as the Group has also included several objects of its own in the assembly. Flanking the central group, a pair of masks—from the Ivory Coast in the early twentieth century and Mali in its second half—rest atop stanchions that respectively stand in front of a sandstone Cambodian Prajnaparamita dating roughly six hundred years earlier and a Tang dynasty limestone monk, suggesting that the Buddhist goddess and monk are wearing the masks and partaking in the spiritual practices associated with them. Elsewhere, also supported by stanchions, a pair of marble hands performing the Karana mudra (or perhaps

its descendant, the heavy metal "Satan" salute), holds another pair of hands, made of sandstone and performing a Vitarka mudra (which resembles the "A-OK" hand gesture). This pair of pairs, both of the Group's own provenance, "replaces" the missing hands of a dismembered third-century Pakistani stone Buddha. These literal hybrids defamiliarize their constituent objects, preparing the audience's imagination for the exhibition's ultimate conceit: that these objects facing the projection screen are on the cusp of entering a portal, to transition into a nebulous third state distinct from their current lives as reified art/artifacts and their former ones as worldly objects and implements of spirituality.

Thematically, the Vietnamese funeral ceremony acts as a prism through which to engage with the film, foregrounding its concern not with life or death, but with the transitioning of the soul between those two states. Its protagonist is a transgender professional mourner named Sam, whom we alternately observe performing as a fire dancer in the funeral ceremony and as the person it mourns. The fluidity of Sam's gender parallels her depiction as simultaneously living and dead, foregrounding a more earthly function of funerals in contemporary Vietnamese society: to provide unique social spaces that openly accommodate transgender individuals, as performers in the country's funeral economy. Funerals are also loud and highly visible beacons for a different kind of transition, namely that between the former communist regime, which had banned some funerary traditions and curtailed others, and the increasingly capitalist state initiated by the economic reforms of 1986.

Experientially, the film grounds all of these stakes acoustically, engaging spectators in its velocity, parallel to the procession of objects in the installation, while also taking them on a musical journey that allegorizes the cultural hybridity of the funerary practices it depicts. The first section of the film features what its credits refer to as "traditional music." In a feat of exquisite sound design, the Group isolates the individual instruments that comprise the band with stunning precision and distributes them across a four-channel surround sound setup to suggest a 360-degree soundscape, thereby

Still from *The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music* (2014) by the Propeller Group; © 2014 the Propeller Group; courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York



EXHIBITION REVIEW



Still from *The Living Need Light, The Dead Need Music* (2014) by the Propeller Group; © 2014 the Propeller Group; courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York

placing the spectator within a circle of musicians. The second section begins with Sam and the film's other leading figure, the bandleader who doubles as master of ceremonies, lip-synching to a well-known recording of the contemporary Vietnamese pop song "Một cõi đi về" ("A Place for Leaving and Returning"), as performed by Khánh Ly, the Diva of Saigon. Khánh Ly's version of the song transitions into a brass band rendition that begins mournfully but becomes raucous and celebratory. Somewhat subtly, as the brass band begins, the distribution of the soundtrack across the four channels shifts to the foreground of the soundscape, now only 180 degrees, placing the spectator within the procession and following the syncopated rhythms of the marching band through a veritable underworld of funerary performers, ceremonies, and rites.

The film directly addresses New Orleans in its third and final section, as the band leading the funeral procession begins to play the jazz standard "It Ain't My Fault" while Sam's snake-adorned casket lowers into the Mekong Delta. Only when the end credits roll does the soundtrack reappear in the pair of speakers behind the audience, reminding the spectators that the film has taken them on a journey from the enclosed, circular acoustic space of the altar ceremony, traditionally hosted in the deceased's home, to the linear space of the brass band-led funeral procession, and finally to the release of the body to the Mekong and of the soul to its next incarnation. Analogous to this journey, the film musically narrates a cultural shift from "traditional" music to modern and

hybrid, to be followed by the Group's own insertion of the New Orleans jazz standard into the Vietnamese funerary repertoire.

The film's closing emphasizes the common legacy of French military funerals, and therefore also of French colonialism, in the two former outposts. The center-margin hybridizations invoked by the Group, in which French traditions and their constituent belief systems have transformed and have been transformed by indigenous customs, are inverted by the Group's own hybrids, suggesting a hypothetical future alliance between Vietnam and New Orleans as members of the global South. The installation extends this alliance to the cultural descendants of the objects "collected" by the encyclopedic museum—which is, of course, also an artifact of colonialism—and conscripts the Minneapolis Institute of Art to participate in the postcolonial project that Dipesh Chakrabarty has called "provincializing Europe."¹ What forms these new hybrids might take seem beside the point; the exhibition's concern is with transitions between the epistemologies of its host (the museum) and those to come, which it leaves unnamed. In these transitions, the museum might be the only thing that remains an artifact.

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NOTE 1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).