

Text by Sophia Larsson after Nam June Paik's "Something Pacific"

### When I Saw Something Pacific

*Dear Great-Grandfather,  
give up your land  
a son  
aflame  
amass  
except Buddha  
All you'll have left is Buddha*

The Americans watched us on tv. But I don't think they all liked it. To watch is to participate. The draft is to participate. Our protest is against participating.

Somewhere else, deep in a bamboo grove, my uncle waits. Leaves shaking wildly. Eyes sewn shut. My grandmother hides him away.  
Precious stones, sown into the garden, she hopes to retrieve him later.

Rodin on a watchman. A watchman is like a walkman. But the Rodin doesn't watch or walk. He thinks.  
He thinks like me: in front of the television.

Gassy blue flames drink up a monk's robes. Its black smoke curls and waves through the wet sky.  
Flash.  
The smouldering monk swims across the ocean.  
A UCSD student participates.  
And melts into the concrete sea.

Three Buddha statues are placed in front of three out-dated televisions. One Buddha is stone. Two Buddhas are bronze. I found them around the Communications building. A graveyard of dead sets and oriented teachers. Materials.

"When your grandmother came from Vietnam, one of her jobs was working for a company that produced bronze sculptures for museums. Her father was a Buddhist monk. She could've been an artist."

One of the two bronze Buddha statues, the one Nam June Paik called "The Samurai Buddha", was placed in the dirt under the shade of a thick tree. The Samurai's skin climbs and crashes like waves in a storm. A long, thick mouth, diminutive nose, and worried set of eyebrows pinch up from the dark sea. His green and blue completion comes from thirty-five years of oxidation. The patina splatters and slides down his swollen belly. His distinct features reach in different directions. The stubs of his arms extend along a horizon. His bun, like a torch, rises upwards. This enlightened being, a cross-shaped tombstone, designates the grave of a dead television set. The television set is occupied by long, dead grasses.

At the bronze casting factory in Oklahoma, my grandmother worked with other Vietnamese immigrants to pour boiling metals into fingers and feathers. Statues made hot then hardened. One day, my grandmother's coworker poured gas on herself and her husband. She killed them both with fire.

One television set has plastic knobs with candied ruffle edges. The knobs are glued in place. If they did not glue the knobs there wouldn't be knobs anymore.

When we left with our orange dust and helicopter skies, my grandfather was in Boston studying American history. That's the major they let him study. He had won a Fulbright scholarship. After the fall of Saigon, he lost communication with my mother, uncle and grandmother. When we left he did not think he would have a wife or children to come home to. He watched America fly away on the television.

*America, love the televisions!*

*Love the buzz! The bodies! The flushing fat bombs. North wheezing napalm!*

*Love the protest! During the protest! Around the protest!*

My grandmother and her children grew wings and flew across the pacific ocean. They met my grandfather in Oklahoma. Her golden streets were paved with blizzards and broken windshields.

A degree is just a piece of paper. A degree is an opportunity. A degree is elitist. A degree is how I got here.

My grandfather's father could not read. My grandfather is a scholar. I am a student.

Material sons.

Material daughters.

Golden like straw, they lightly dance around the tip of a blue, white and red flame. Their sticky shadows run down the wall like fresh paint. Burning the skin of my teeth, I sift through the ashes and cough up bone dust. I put out the flame, but still feel its heat. I relight the flame, and carry it further into the darkness.

*Dear Great Grandfather,  
Dear Samurai Buddha,  
Dear Baptist Jesus,  
Dear Sweet Swollen Sky,*

What am I supposed to find amongst these ashes? Of people? Of war? Of this new country? Of these charred and interpolated memories?

Materials they say.

Materials coming together and falling apart.

That's all the televisions are. That's all the Buddhas are. That's all those bombs were. That's all we are and ever were. Materials that are flooding and flaming and decaying into the earth. The Earth being pulled apart by a universe in motion. Materials of flesh and bone, of bronze, and of explosive substance.

We love them all