

'I won't give up': why an artist is living in a gallery making 10,000 paper boats

[theguardian.com/culture/2019/jan/18/i-wont-give-up-why-an-artist-is-living-in-a-gallery-making-10000-paper-boats](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jan/18/i-wont-give-up-why-an-artist-is-living-in-a-gallery-making-10000-paper-boats)

Steve Dow

January 17, 2019



📷 Vietnamese-Australian artist Phuong Ngo in Article 14.1, durational performance art that is showing at Sydney festival 2019 at the MCA. Photograph: Alex Clayton

📷 Vietnamese-Australian artist Phuong Ngo in Article 14.1, durational performance art that is showing at Sydney festival 2019 at the MCA. Photograph: Alex Clayton

Phuong Ngo's 10-day performance at Sydney's MCA pays homage to the journey that killed 500,000 Vietnamese refugees – and could have killed his family

Phuong Ngo has just spent his first of nine nights sleeping at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in a seminar room overlooking Sydney's Circular Quay.

The Vietnamese-Australian has his rations for the durational performance, Article 14.1, stocked in one corner: 10 packets of noodles, a big bag of baked and deep fried, dehydrated rice, and a can of condensed milk.

Ngo, 35, woke at 6am to resume folding paper boats as a memorial to the dead, thousands of which, at the end of 10 days, he will burn in an ancient Confucian tradition in a fire pit outside in the gallery's forecourt, to pay the way of those drowned at sea into the afterlife.

[Sign up to receive the top stories from Guardian Australia every morning](#)

The boats are made from "Hell Bank" printed currency on joss paper, says Ngo. "We burn money for the dead ... Everybody has to make that passage before they get reincarnated."

Ngo has a slight headache from coffee withdrawal and is hungry. His bed is the concrete floor with a rug and a doona; luxuries, he says, compared to people sleeping on top of one another in each boat on their perilous journeys after the fall of Saigon, when two million people fled Vietnam.

The title of the work is a reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 14.1 of which states: “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.”



| They got really close to eating the dead.

In 1981, Ngo’s south Vietnamese father, Hoang, put his wife, Tien, and their first child, Phuong’s older brother, Phong – then five months old – on a boat. Phong would be malnourished because his seasick mother could not breastfeed, so he was fed condensed milk with water.

After three days at sea, the family’s boat – which Hoang captained – arrived on the shore of the Malaysian island refugee camp Pulau Bidong, where Ngo would be conceived.

Hoang got everyone off the boat, then flooded it to stop authorities pushing the vessel back to sea. Another boat carrying Hoang’s brother would take more than three weeks to make land: “They got really close to eating the dead,” says Ngo.



📷 At the end of the performance, Ngo will burn the paper boats he has made in an ancient Confucian tradition. Photograph: Eugyene Teh

The family was accepted by Australia as refugees several months later. Ngo and the family's youngest child, daughter Tran, were both born in Adelaide.

Had he stayed in Vietnam, Ngo's father might have faced treason charges under the Communist government's laws: a former ship's mechanic, he had become a people smuggler, a move both "opportunistic but also fortuitous", explains his artist son.

How does his father reconcile people smuggling with the loss of life? "None of his boats failed, he likes to remind me," says Ngo. Hoang organised four boats to be sent across the sea and had been intending to launch one more "to make a bit of cash" but decided not to push his luck. Instead, he captained the boat he placed his family upon.

[Sydney festival 2019: two of the hottest tickets make the audience part of the show](#)



[Read more](#)

On the window ledge overlooking the quay is a framed photograph of Ngo's partner's aunt and her little boy, taken in Vietnam. Mother and son drowned at sea, but her husband and eldest son survived because they were on another boat. Spreading the risk between boats was common: the lower estimate is that 500,000 Vietnamese died at sea after the war.

Ngo has done this 10-day participatory performance twice previously, once in his home town of Melbourne, and once in Belgium. It taught him not to be cynical about the human capacity for empathy: "The next leader of the free world could be sitting at a table folding paper boats."



📷 Visitors are invited to talk with Ngo and help him make, he hopes, 1,000 boats a day. Photograph: Eugyeene Teh

Ngo made only half of his projected daily quota of 1,000 boats on his first day because he had so many visitors to chat with. A tourist on her first visit to Australia approaches him now. She was born in northern Vietnam in 1987, and they talk about how even today Ngo's father refuses to visit the north because of the country's Communist rulers.

The woman, who introduces herself as Rosalie ("it's my English name"), explains that her grandparents had a "hard time" in Hanoi in the 1970s, forced from their homes by the government into much smaller apartments.

She says while there are "many things that should be improved", Vietnamese people are reluctant to speak about politics. She shows photographs of her family on her phone, before returning to folding a paper boat.

'It's terrifying': can a scrappy production of In The Heights scale to be bigger than Broadway?



[Read more](#)

Ngo says despite the mandatory detention and boat turnback policies of both major Australian political parties, the political climate is always changing. "I feel at the moment there is a certain [positive] shift in the way people are responding to the situation around asylum seekers and refugees," he says.

Ngo travels each year to Vietnam to brush up on his language and cultural connections, but says he feels Australian in Vietnam, and Vietnamese in Australia, never quite fitting into either country.

“I’m on the outside looking in,” he says. “I won’t give up because I’ve got it easy. My parents have succeeded to allow my generation the right to political thought and political freedom.”

When he finishes, he will celebrate with chrysanthemum tea, the first drink his parents were offered when their boat landed. It will make a nice change from the condensed milk and water he intends to drink in the meantime, as a homage to his brother. “Not the most delightful beverage ever,” he concedes.

Article 14.1 is at the Museum of Contemporary Art until January 23, as part of Sydney festival
