

Research Proposal | Hiền Hoàng

# *HOW TO TOUCH THE ELEPHANT*

SHIFTING MODES OF WITNESSING IN  
ATTENDING TO THE ECOLOGICAL TRAUMA  
OF POST-AGENT ORANGE LANDSCAPES  
IN VIETNAM

**Keywords:** Agent Orange, Multigenerational, Ecological Trauma,  
Slow Violence, Vietnam War

## Abstract

This thesis proposes *shifting modes of witnessing* as a framework to attend to the *ecological trauma* of post-Agent Orange landscapes in Vietnam. It begins with a Vietnamese folklore I grew up with: five blind *thầy bói* (Vietnamese for fortune-tellers), each touching only a part of an elephant, mistake it for the whole animal, and each insists their claim is the truth. The fortune-tellers, each confined to a single point of contact, become the figure for domain-based systems of inquiry. The thesis argues that no single mode can hold the slow, diffuse, and multigenerational character of ecological violence.

Agent Orange was one of the herbicides deployed by the U.S. military during Operation Ranch Hand in Vietnam from 1961 to 1971. It saturated the land and the bodies living on it with Dioxin, one of the most toxic substances known. Decades later, the landscapes and the bodies still carry it. Yet juridical and forensic frameworks have repeatedly failed to establish legal accountability for this contamination. This research turns to practice-based artistic inquiry as an alternative form of witnessing. It asks what it means to touch the post-Agent Orange landscapes, and to be touched back.

This research carries personal stakes. My Vietnamese heritage is inseparable from the war's aftermath. The bomb fragments inside my father's body have never been removed. They are evidence of the war, traces of trauma, but also testimony to the capacity of matter and bodies to resist and refuse violence. Attending to the trauma of the landscapes is, in part, attending to that inheritance.

The practice is grounded in fieldwork in Vietnam, material interventions with metal corrosion and mycelium, and embodied drawing on-site. Building on Susan Schuppli's *Material Witness* and Bruno Latour's *Modes of Existence*, the thesis proposes three modes of witnessing: *See*, *Touch*, and *Ngẫm* – Vietnamese for deep-thinking, but also for being submerged – and the necessity of shifting between them. The knowledge did not precede the practice. It emerged from it.



Hiền Hoàng. *Residue Transfer Study*. Corrosion residue from aluminium reacting to copper sulfate on photograph printed on copy paper. 6 × 10 cm. 2025.

Original image: *Aerial photograph showing the effects of Agent Orange defoliation*, Vietnam, circa 1961–1971. Agent Orange Subject Files, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

Current works in progress / research:



Hiền Hoàng. *Untitled*. Corrosion on UV-printed aluminium; motif from site visit, Biên Hòa (Dioxin Hotspot), Vietnam. 25 × 50 × 1.2 cm. 2026.



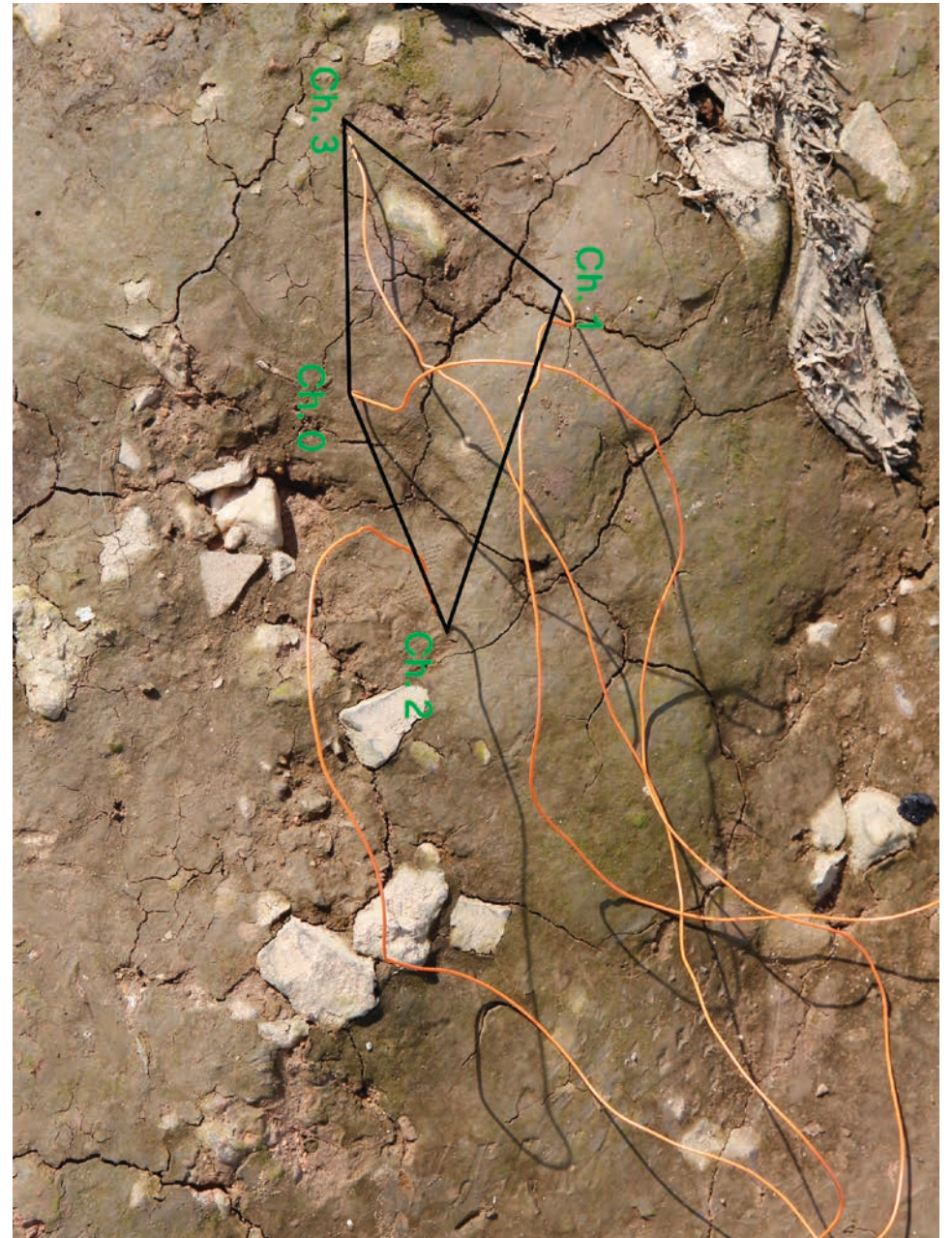
Detail from the mycelium box with corroded steel - the mycelium was growing around the metal piece.



Sculpture study with corroded aluminum stripes, wrapped around a discarded tree log, a plant keeps growing through. 2025 - 2026



Field study with soil mapping / drawing and electrical signal measurement from the soil. Biên Hoà, Vietnam, 2026.



Note for the position of the register nodes during the electrical signal measurement , Biên Hoà, Vietnam, 2026.

Corrosion on sculpture made from left-over metals, installation with soil. For the elective Capital Shadow, 2026.

