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Ethics of the Transpacific: Dinh Q. Lê, Sàn Art, and Memories of War

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In this article I address the question of transculture in the context of what is known as the transpacific. My example is Dinh Q. Lê, one of the best-known Vietnamese American artists of the early twentieth-first century. After a series of successes both inside and outside the United States, Lê returned to his native country in the late 1990s to Ho Chi Minh City or, as it is known by most Vietnamese people from the south living overseas, “Saigon,” the capital of the former Republic of Vietnam. In 2007 he created an international art space in Saigon called Sàn Art for local Vietnamese artists to learn about contemporary art and to present their works to the public, even though he himself had never been allowed to exhibit his works in his homeland under the strict censorship of the socialist government. Lê’s return to Vietnam, which I view as an example of the transpacific movement of transculture, was quite unusual for overseas Vietnamese, who are known as Viet Kieu, because the socialist policies of integrated Vietnam have been viewed skeptically by Western nations, including the United States, despite their current friendly relations. Lê has been trying, under these difficult circumstances, to reestablish international ties, including his own, with Vietnam. In the following, I analyze Lê’s commitment to the international and Vietnamese contemporary art scenes and seek to clarify the ways in which he introduces new perspectives from which to view the relationship between the United States and Vietnam. In this way, the American presence in both international culture and politics can be understood within a broader

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context of the transpacific.

I. DINH Q. LÊ AND HIS RETURN TO VIETNAM

The year 2015, forty years after the fall of Saigon, turned out to be a memorable one for multimedia artist Dinh Q. Lê, for he successfully opened *Memory for Tomorrow*, his first full-scale solo exhibition in Asia, at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo.¹ Since the early 1990s when he started his career as a professional artist, Lê has held a number of exhibitions, both solo and collective, in Australia, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom, as well as in major US cities. *Memory for Tomorrow* is exceptional in that viewers are able to trace Lê's artistic career from the *Vietnam War Posters* (1989), apprentice works that he produced when he was still an undergraduate at the University of California at Santa Barbara, to *Everything Is a Re-Enactment* (2015), a video installation that he created for this exhibition. In addition, among the works exhibited in Tokyo is *Damaged Genes* (1998), which consists of small figures of deformed children and adults, sometimes with two heads and/or four hands. These figures and their clothing are symbolic representations of the devastating aftereffects of Agent Orange. Lê produced them in Vietnam as "commercial products" rather than works of art in order to circumvent governmental censorship while publicizing his message in his homeland.² Overall, viewers at this exhibition are meant to appreciate the reason why an artist such as Dinh Q. Lê could only have emerged in the United States in the late twentieth century. At the same time, they are asked to reflect on the blurred position in which Lê is located, that is, a space in between the United States and Vietnam, democracy and socialism, the art world and the market economy, and more than anything, in between war and peace.

Lê is typical of diasporic artists. Born in 1968 in a town called Hà Tiên near the Cambodian border in what was then the Republic of Vietnam, Lê left the country in 1978 after the Khmer Rouge's invasion of his hometown during the Cambodian–Vietnamese War. His family were boat people hoping to get to the United States. Lê earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in photography in California and then a master of fine arts degree at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He has become successful in digital media art. Lê is most famous for a technique of his own invention called "photo-weaving," which was inspired by a traditional Vietnamese art of making grass mats. This can be seen in, for example, *Persistence of Memory* (2000–2001) and *From Vietnam to Hollywood* (2003–2005). His works also include

videos such as *From Father to Son: A Rite of Passage* (2007) and *South China Sea Pishkun* (2009) as well as life-size installations of a Vietnamese helicopter in *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (2006) and a stranded ship in *Erasure* (2011), in addition to simple photographs with ironic messages such as *Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium* (2005). These works are widely recognized as examples of transculture, that is, as being a hybrid of American and Vietnamese cultures, and Lê is regarded as a diasporic cosmopolitan agent in the sense that his actions and contributions to the international community highlight “the interplay of transnational migrations and movements of people and cultural practices that cannot be covered by the concepts of (usually one-way) emigration—immigration—acculturation processes” (Lenz 396).

Curiously, in the early 1990s, just when his works were receiving more and more attention in the West, Lê decided to return to Vietnam. After a transitional period from 1993 to 1997 during which he went back and forth between the United States and Vietnam, he finally settled in the latter.³ This resettlement was not only unusual, it may well have been suicidal for the artistic career of a Viet Kieu artist such as Dinh Q. Lê, because back then (and even today) freedom of expression in Vietnam was severely restricted, particularly in the field of contemporary art. Naturally, his moving back to Vietnam was a real surprise to many of his colleagues and supporters. Lê himself, however, felt that “there was something deep down that drew [him to Vietnam]” (Lê’s e-mail to Roth in 2012, qtd. in Roth 139). As Zoe Butt, curator and program development director for Sàn Art, reports, the artist thought that “it was the best decision he ever made” (“Locating” 127), because, as a refugee child having grown up in California, Lê barely remembered Vietnam. He had had a very difficult time sorting out what he was able to remember about his homeland from the ideas of Vietnam that he himself had composed out of images gleaned from mainstream American media, including war films and photographs. In a 2010 interview with Zoe Butt, Lê clarified that one of his reasons for returning was “to determine for [him]-self [his] own memories and contexts of who [he] was as a Vietnamese” (“The Pilgrimage” par. 2).

Without a doubt, this need to identify “as a Vietnamese” is shared by most of the “one-and-a-half,”⁴ as well as second-generation overseas Vietnamese. In fact, a number of Vietnamese Americans of these generations have traveled to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since the 1995 normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam, and their back-and-forth travels have resulted in the creation of important works in culture and

literature, such as Andrew Pham's essay *Catfish and Mandala* (1999), G. B. Tran's graphic novel *Vietnamerica* (2011), and Lan Cao's epic novel *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014). Except for Dinh Q. Lê, however, there have been few major Vietnamese American artists who have decided to settle in Vietnam.⁵ Their reasons not to move back vary. Many of them are highly suspicious of the socialist regime, while a few are still afraid of facing the hard reality that they have left behind and have yet to accept.⁶

Obviously, Lê is radically different from typical Viet Kieu travelers with nostalgic sentiments. He is not, however, another desolate, delicate pessimist who anticipates the worst in returning to his homeland. Rather, he has defiantly helped to establish a community of contemporary artists in Vietnam. Thus he conceived the idea of starting the nonprofit Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City. The word "Sàn" means "platform" in Vietnamese; he chose it to indicate that he expected the organization to support local artists, facilities, and contemporary art in Vietnam. The project began in 2007, a decade after Lê's resettlement in his homeland. After his return, Lê found that Vietnamese art was not merely old-fashioned but that artists were isolated from the international community of contemporary art due to governmental censorship of anything political or considered antigovernment. Even though market economics had been introduced in Vietnam and the deregulation of business and industry had already begun in order to attract foreign investors, art was still a closed-off area in which the government strictly limited individuals' freedom of expression. At the time, and still today, the socialist regime considered art as a way for citizens to articulate latent criticism of the government.⁷ In this situation, Lê came to know young Vietnamese artists who were well-trained as traditional painters and sculptors and who were able to "make a decent living by creating works catering to the emerging tourist art market." While they were both supported and controlled by the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association—the only, and government-run, fine arts organization in the former capital of South Vietnam—some members also became dedicated to "installation and conceptual art" even though they were "completely disconnected from the rest of the world."⁸ Having witnessed the suffocating environment in which local artists were placed, Lê found himself standing in "a position to offer some assistance to [his] local community" with his "connections to an international network beyond Vietnam; knowledge of the art scene in America; and English language capability" ("The Pilgrimage" pars. 5–7). Thus, he decided to organize the nongovernmental artist-run community in the city.

As it turned out, it was not easy for Lê to establish a nonprofit organization in the socialist state. First, he needed financial support to open a library where local artists could access information from outside Vietnam on contemporary art. He decided to apply to the Rockefeller Foundation and the Fulbright Program. The Rockefeller Foundation was willing to donate \$35,000 for the construction of a library with the condition that Lê set up a nonprofit recipient organization in Vietnam (as the Rockefeller never donates money to individuals), but the socialist government did not approve the project for fear that promoting new art would contaminate Vietnamese culture.⁹ Lê then approached the Fulbright Program office in Vietnam so that the US organization could serve as the organizational recipient, but the socialist government still did not approve. These failed attempts brought Lê back to the Los Angeles area, where he could turn to his personal connections for funding. Among them were Shoshana and Wayne Blank of Shoshana and Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica, Lê's US art dealers, who assisted him in setting up the Vietnamese Foundation for the Arts (VNFA) as an American nonprofit that would fund his project in Vietnam. The VNFA was expected to support educational programs for local artists in Vietnam and also to construct a gallery space for showcasing their works. This led to the creation of Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City in 2007. The main purpose of the organization was to help local artists develop a community of contemporary art, a field that was highly censored by the socialist government of Vietnam.

The opening of Sàn Art, however, did not mean that Lê finally and successfully circumvented governmental censorship and supervision in his effort to establish an art community in Vietnam. As Lê said in a 2010 interview with Zoe Butt, "the government still thinks that [he and his colleagues] will poison the Vietnamese youth with [their] Western contaminated mind" ("The Pilgrimage" par. 12). The case of Nguyen Thai Tuan's solo exhibition *Fullness of Absence* in 2011 demonstrates the extent to which Sàn Art is under the government's control and how freedom of expression is restricted in Vietnam, where a state license is required for artists to exhibit their work in public.

In "Red Tape and Digital Talismans," a careful analysis of the contemporary art scene in Vietnam under the socialist government, Sàn Art's chief curator Zoe Butt argues that Nguyen attempted in *Fullness of Absence* to display the difference between the Vietnams that existed before and after the socialist integration of 1975. Although Nguyen adopted a surrealist style reminiscent of the work of Belgian artist René Magritte, with each of his

paintings fantastic and imaginary, the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism noticed subtle political nuances that were produced when the paintings portraying pre- and post-1975 Vietnam were displayed side by side. As a result, the ministry granted his license on the condition that the pre- and post-1975 paintings would not be displayed at the same time in the gallery. Thus, the government censored half of the work that Nguyen had prepared for the exhibition. Under these circumstances, Sàn Art made a radical decision to exhibit the licensed works in the main gallery and the unauthorized ones in the back gallery, which they called “the stockroom,” assuming that visitors would know that they were not supposed to go there and yet expecting that some might wander into the nonpublic space. The ministry, however, were not fooled by this maneuver. Sàn Art was fined and ordered to adhere to the conditions of the license only a week after the opening of the exhibition. The gallery was also requested to remove all of the information regarding *Fullness of Absence* from its bilingual English and Vietnamese website.¹⁰ According to Butt, this case illustrates how contemporary art remains “a close third on the official scrutiny list, behind film and literature, as the most powerful devices perceived to potentially destabilize social harmony” (“Red Tape” 94).¹¹

Still, Lê and Sàn Art were not discouraged and, in the following year, they initiated Sàn Art Laboratory, a residency program for selected local artists, who were provided with studio and living space as well as stipends for the production of new works through individual sessions and workshops with international artists, critics, curators, historians, and writers. In this way, Lê, with the help of professionals from the international community, tried to challenge the local heritage of traditional art and to support promising young artists in Vietnam. Indeed, the program thus far has been successful and expands the limits of the freedom of expression under the socialist government. Though Lê is still not allowed to exhibit his own work, even at Sàn Art, due to its politically sensitive content, the government has come to recognize the presence of Đinh Q. Lê in the international art community and has sometimes asked for his opinion on new art. Lê’s commitment to the contemporary art world outside Vietnam has the potential to bring in new perspectives and possibly even change the way things are done in the socialist state.

II. WEAVING ANOTHER MEMORY OF “VIETNAM”

In this section I wish to draw attention to some of Lê’s works in which

memories of war—the Vietnam War and the Cambodian-Vietnamese War—are interwoven. To put it simply, what is most distinct about Lê’s work is that he recycles and reuses films and photos that others, including artists and journalists, have created. For example, in *Persistence of Memory* and *From Vietnam to Hollywood* he applies his photo-weaving technique, in which interconnected images produce other possible images of people and war in Vietnam. These works feature stills from Hollywood movies such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Platoon* (1986), as well as well-known news photographs such as Eddie Adams’s *General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon* (1968) and pre-1975 photographs of nameless individuals and unknown families that the artist purchased secondhand in Vietnam (fig. 1): all these images are juxtaposed outside of their original contexts. Lê developed this method when he was still an undergraduate at UC Santa Barbara, having been inspired by the

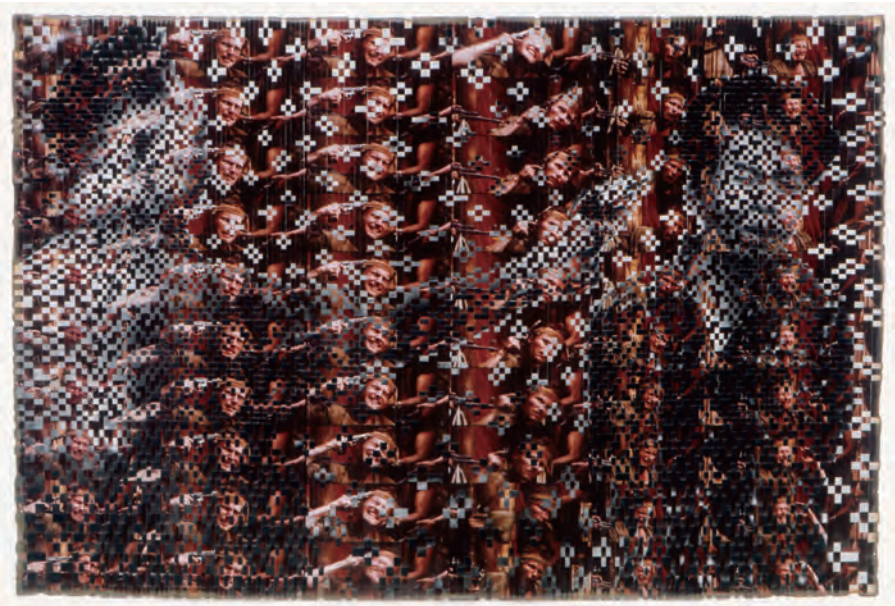


Figure 1. Dinh Q. Lê, “Russian Roulette” from *Persistence of Memory* (2002), a tapestry work made out of combined images of Michael Chimino’s Russian roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Eddie Adams’s *General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon* (1968). Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

traditional Vietnamese grass mat weaving technique that he learned from his aunt in Vietnam when he was young.

In a 2015 interview with Natsumi Araki, chief curator of his exhibition in Tokyo, Lê recalled how he developed the photo-weaving idea as a possible solution to the identity issues that he was facing as a college student:

I started questioning why I should know about somebody else's history so much more than my own personal history. I started asking where I was in relation to all of this as a Vietnamese living in America. It seemed like everything that made me who I am was a combination of these two worlds. I thought that I could make works that talk about this interweaving of identity and culture, and how the two are kind of woven together—and this would, in a way, create a place for me in society. The word “weaving” kept coming back, and this led me to realize that I could literally start trying to weave these two worlds together. (35)

Indeed, woven together in Lê's work beyond their original contexts are two entirely different images of Vietnam, one produced in the United States for moviegoers and readers of news media and the other meant for Vietnamese families before and during the war, with these composite images reflecting the complex constitution of the identity of Vietnamese refugees in the United States. In the same interview, Lê clarified the point that he is trying to make when using images from Hollywood films:

The Vietnamese in [Hollywood war] movies are kind of like props: we are the shadows in the jungle; the prostitutes or the farmers who don't say anything. We have never been real characters. This is what led me to take images from Hollywood films and kind of break them up, and then insert—through my weaving technique—images that I thought had been left out. (35)

As a result, in Lê's works, we are expected to recover the lost images and unknown stories of Vietnamese people during the war. At the same time, we are ceaselessly reminded that true images and real facts about people in Vietnam during wartime no longer exist and thus are out of reach. As Viet Thanh Nguyen rightly points out in “Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam,” Lê is seeking to “redress the absences [of all those dead and missing people in Vietnam] in both American and Asian American memories and

stories” and, at the same time, hinting at “the existence of the Vietnamese in these memories and stories as they hover phantasmatically between being faceless names or nameless faces” (23).

Lê is not, therefore, excavating some historical truth hidden beneath cultural and political mistreatment, either on the American or the Vietnamese side. He is simulating and reenacting memories of war, part of which are already familiar to the American public through popular or news media. In the course of his doing this, Lê reproduces and reprocesses images and memories so that they are reaccumulated in viewers’ minds as another image and another memory of “Vietnam.”

Lê discloses the way in which he emphasizes a “Vietnamese” perspective in his work in an interview with Stefano Catalani, curator of *A Tapestry of Memories*, a 2007 exhibition at Bellevue Arts Museum in the state of Washington:

I’m really a collagist. I think a lot of people may not realize that. But that’s who I am. I just weave the photographs instead of composing them in a collage. It’s more craft-oriented. And yet it’s all about taking diverse information, or even focused information in a certain area, and combining it to speak about things that *I* want to say. I’m taking the information and putting it in a different way to present *my* point of view because I feel the information out there doesn’t speak to and of *my* experience. At first it was just this idea that the Vietnamese experience was not presented in the American history books, and I felt this need to put the Vietnamese experience out there, by taking all the same information but presenting it in a different way, from a Vietnamese point of view. (53)

The point here is that Lê—not a historian but a “collagist”—does not bring in any single piece of new information on the history of the war in Vietnam. Instead, he restructures the information that people already know so that the same history or story can be reinterpreted and thus reevaluated from another point of view, one that is “Vietnamese,” to use Lê’s word, or as I would say, “Vietnamese American.” Thus, with images and stories of the war juxtaposed differently than before, Lê draws attention to the difference created when the same content is applied in another context, or, in other words, the difference between the image that we can find in the original and another that has been simulated and reenacted in his work. This difference leads to another possible history of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese

people, and in this process, another image and another memory of “Vietnam” are created in viewers’ minds.

Are the new images of Vietnam that Lê has created, then, more authentic and justifiable than popular and stereotyped images already imprinted in our minds? Do new memories, which the artist asks us to recollect, reflect experiences of Vietnamese Americans more accurately? What we see in Lê’s work is difference, that is, the difference in perception between images in the original contexts and those in his works. This is why the artist denies the presence of any particular, let alone political, messages in his work, while his strategy of bipolarizing the two different images of Vietnam appears to be radically political.¹² At stake is a new perspective, which Lê emphasizes to us. How, then, can Lê possibly justify the authenticity of this new perspective in his work? Is it not just another point of view reflecting the artist’s idiosyncratic ideas? In the following sections, I explore the conception of Vietnam that Lê repeatedly produces in his works and discuss whether the artist can justify this view and, if so, how.

III. “EVERYTHING IS A RE-ENACTMENT”

In the previous section, I focused on Lê’s photo-weaving works—*Persistence of Memory* and *From Vietnam to Hollywood*—in which he draws attention to the invisible presence of Vietnamese refugees in American culture as offering another perspective from which to reflect on not only the situation of Vietnamese people now living in the United States but also on the Vietnam War. Although this approach might appear to reflect the essentialist position of the artist and also support the idea that the experiences of Vietnamese Americans, whether in the war or otherwise, can be articulated by Vietnamese Americans only, Lê also expands the idea of Vietnam to include Japanese reactions to the Vietnam War in *Everything Is a Re-Enactment*, a new work that he video shot for the 2015 exhibition at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. In the video, he depicts the life of Nakaura Yoichi, a forty-year-old Japanese bartender who wears military gear from North Vietnam, wartime Japan, and the United States for reenactment events.

Lê initially encountered Nakaura at Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo on August 15, 2014, the memorial day representing the end of the Pacific War in Japan, when between 150,000 and 200,000 individuals gathered to honor and pray for the war dead who are buried there. Visitors include not only politicians, war veterans, and families of the war victims, but also nationalists,

militarists, and left-wing protesters. Curiously, as if taking part in a “cosplay” event, some visitors wear military costumes from imperial Japan.¹³ Because he was interested in political controversies over whether politicians, particularly cabinet members, should visit Yasukuni, where the A class war criminals of World War II are buried, Lê went to Yasukuni and discovered Nakaura, who “sort of stood out” among the visitors wearing military costumes (Interview by Araki 37). During a brief conversation with Lê, Nakaura revealed that he was involved with a group of people who simulated and reenacted battles from the Vietnam War at the foot of Mount Fuji using fake guns and wearing military uniforms of the United States, the Vietnamese Rangers, and the Viet Cong.¹⁴ This drew Lê’s attention to such an extent that he was inspired to make a film about the reenactments. Even though Lê never satisfied his desire to shoot reenactment scenes because of the group members’ reluctance to participate in the film, he successfully captured Nakaura’s fetishistic desire for military uniforms as well as his everyday life as a bartender in his video *Everything Is a Re-Enactment*.

The video consists of three parts shot in three locations. In the opening part, we see Nakaura wearing North Vietnamese military gear simulating a combat exercise in a grassy field. In the next part, he changes into US Army and Japanese Imperial Army military uniforms in his apartment (fig. 2). This is followed by a third scene in which Nakaura is at work as a bartender. This scene also includes Nakaura in his Vietnamese military uniform singing karaoke at the bar. In addition to the video, real US, Vietnamese, and Japanese military uniforms are on display in the museum (fig 3).¹⁵ Even though Japan’s Self-Defense Forces never fought in the Vietnam War because the postwar constitution forbids the use of armed forces other than to protect the nation from foreign invasion, groups of Japanese people are interested in reenacting battles from the Vietnam War. Nakaura is among them; for him and other members of such groups, “reenactments are [their] attempt to understand the past” (*Dinh Q. Lê: Memory for Tomorrow* 118). As the artist has stated, “in a way . . . what Nakaura-san is doing mirrors my own practice, where I go through the art to learn about all aspects of the Vietnam War, and different perspectives to give me a fuller picture of it” (qtd. in Wee par. 11).

The Japanese bartender brings forth, through his military reenactments, an opportunity for the Vietnamese American artist to once again reflect on the meaning of the Vietnam War. This, however, is not to say that Lê either identifies or sympathizes with Nakaura, and in fact he does neither. While Lê is quite vigilant of what he is doing in his work, which is why we are



Figure 2. Dinh Q. Lê, *Everything Is a Re-Enactment* (2015). Japanese bartender Nakaura Yoichi poses in Imperial Japanese military gear for the camera in his apartment. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Dinh Q. Lê, *Everything Is a Re-Enactment* (2015). Nakaura sings karaoke in his Vietnamese military uniform at the bar. Courtesy of the artist.

always asked to be aware of “the lens of our time” through which Lê simulates the events he depicts in his work, Nakaura and other members of his reenactment group “really believe they’re doing something genuinely” (Personal interview). For example, they go through “the trouble of doing serious research on the food they’re supposed to eat that would reflect the times, the books, music, everything” during the Vietnam War (qtd. in Wee par. 12) so that they would “get to the real thing” (Personal interview). In *Everything Is a Re-Enactment*, Lê emphasizes “the structure [Nakaura] is going through,” noting that “he is running, he is talking and he is trying to understand,” but in the end “he comes back to the bar” and sings a Vietnamese song—translated into Japanese—in karaoke, which is part of the reenactment. Although these events are a reenactment and thus *not* real, Nakaura and his friends are “fascinated” with the process of copying and reenacting (Personal interview). It is this system of simple belief, a sort of Freudian “repetition compulsion,” that Lê draws attention to in his work.

It is important to note at this point that people, not just Nakaura, but also others including Lê, do not perform reenactments simply to transport themselves to the time and place where things originally occurred. Rather, they reenact in order to experience a traumatic event all over again and thus relive what they are supposed to have repressed and yet are still trying to remember. As Freud argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we are “obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of . . . *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” (18). Thus, in Nakaura’s case, he simulates battles from the Vietnam War, not only because he wants to identify with a Vietnamese Ranger or a Viet Cong soldier but in order to retrieve something that he and other Japanese people have repressed and left behind in the history of postwar Japan. To be more specific, Nakaura tries to recover an alternative history of World War II for Japan as he reenacts Vietnamese resistance to the American troops. At one point in the video, Nakaura says, “I believe Vietnam won because Japan lost. Japan’s defeat was a lesson” (*Dinh Q. Lê: Memory for Tomorrow* 119). Historians might find this interpretation problematic, but Lê regards a person like Nakaura as “a symptom of [contemporary] Japan” that is the result of “the lack of open discussion about the country’s actions during World War II” (Maerkele par. 20). As Lê rightly points out, “here is somebody who is very curious about Japan’s World War II history but has found it difficult to find places where people are willing to talk about it openly and in a balanced way” (qtd. in Qin par. 11).

Most Japanese people today assume that their fellow citizens are

antimilitary and peace loving, and thus, they are reluctant to face the imperialist and military actions that Japan undertook in the past, such as the annexation of Korea or the Manchurian Incident, let alone the attempt to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, which included the occupation of Vietnam. Still, a small number of people are curious to know more about Japan's military past. Isolated from the antimilitary, peace-loving general public, they seek to understand Japanese military actions during World War II and to search for the reason why imperial Japan ultimately surrendered unconditionally to the Allies.

The lack of public space wherein open discussion about Japan's military past is possible leads Nakaura, and people like him, to adopt a "twisted and surreal" point of view in which Japan's real past is obscured and most likely distorted, while facts about the Vietnam War, for example, are mischaracterized and misunderstood through their reenactments. In this sense, Nakaura's "obsession with war and his seriousness in learning about it" are by-products of Japan's repression of the topic of its wartime past (Maerkele par. 20), and his reenactment practices reflect negatively on the nation's "political unconscious," a hidden and/or latent desire to rewrite the past in a way that would allow Japanese to look back on a beautiful history. The point is that the general public does not necessarily wish to forget the past, but they sometimes forget part of the past willingly and other times unwillingly—intentional amnesia or what Bernard Weiner calls "motivated forgetting"—in order to reconstruct a better past (Weiner esp. 218–19). History, as such, has to be acceptable by both the citizens and the state. It is not just important for government officials and right-wing politicians but also for the public at large, including left-wing protestors of war shrine visits, that history be beautiful and without flaw so that stories of good national citizens can be safely passed on to the next generation, even when the facts do not support such narratives.¹⁶

A person such as Nakaura, therefore, is not an eccentric exception in Japanese society but, rather, an ordinary person, even though his fetishistic desire for military uniforms and his obsessive practices of military reenactment may appear erratic and idiosyncratic to many. Indeed, he may be a little outlandish given that he "sort of stood out" to the Vietnamese American artist at Yasukuni. Yet he is doing what many people do: reenacting in one way or another so as to render the past—or stories of the past—more comfortable. For Nakaura, reenacting Vietnam War battles is the way to achieve this goal. He is just not entirely aware that the reenactments may be part of an intentional amnesia that rewrites Japanese history. It is this

structure of partial forgetting and recreating that Lê captures and reenacts in *Everything Is a Re-Enactment*.

IV. MAPPING OUT THE IDEA OF VIETNAM IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

As Amy Qin reports in the *New York Times*, Lê is now expanding his world beyond Vietnam to include Japan and also small islands in the southern Pacific. His latest video, *The Colony*, released in 2016 at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England, is set in the Chincha Islands off the southwest coast of Peru, where imperial powers, including the United States, fought in the mid-nineteenth century over guano, the excrement of seabirds that is a powerful fertilizer (fig. 4).¹⁷ This, however, does not mean that he is turning away from the topic of Vietnam. In fact, given that *Everything Is a Re-Enactment* raises the question of how the socialist state is being misperceived and stereotyped by a particular group of Japanese people, *The Colony* emphasizes another image of Vietnam. While his latest work appears to represent the remnants of nineteenth-century Euro-American hegemony over some small islands in the Pacific Ocean, viewers actually face the contemporary problem of power struggles between China and Vietnam with US support over territories and natural resources in the South China Sea. Lê is situating the question of Vietnam in the broader framework of the Pacific as well as in a broader context of world politics.

The Colony has three screens and projectors, one large and two small. On the larger screen are projected shots taken by a drone over the islands where workers are collecting and packing droppings of seabirds. On the smaller screens, laid flat on the floor, are footage of Chinese vessels crashing into Vietnamese fishing boats in the South China Sea and footage of a US military airplane patrolling over Chinese activities, military and otherwise, in the same sea lane, both of which the artist “found online” (“The Toll of Human Desire” 26). In the early twentieth-first century, as a new balance of political and military power is being established in the Asia-Pacific region, Vietnam’s weak position in international politics is renewed in the middle of the conflict between the two superpowers, China and the United States. Socialist Vietnam is relying on the United States to protect its territories and natural resources forty years after the fall of Saigon. Though a British reviewer of the work contends that Lê’s “mixing of [two different] stories is not entirely successful” and that “it needs more focus” (Searle pars. 10, 13), I find that the artist brings to the fore another possible point of view from



Figure 4. Dinh Q. Lê, *The Colony* (2015). Workers collect and pack guano (excrement of seabirds) on a small island in the Pacific Ocean. Courtesy of the artist.

which to see the question of, to use Lê's own words, "a big power grab" ("The Toll of Human Desire" 25). As the artist asserts in the interview about this work, the background noise of the surveillance video, which disrupts "the main narrative of the Guano War," reminds viewers that the past and the present are interwoven. Lê states, "I want to talk about empire building and its collapse, I want to talk about this process as a human toll" (29). As another instance of "everything is a re-enactment," *The Colony* expands our perspective to see the location of Vietnam in the early twenty-first century in the context of global politics, as well as in the world of installation art.

Everything Is a Re-Enactment and *The Colony* thus both illuminate a space where we can update the idea of Vietnam in the broader context of the transpacific. Nakaura's reenactment activities not only distort and misrepresent the reality of the Vietnam War, but they also broaden our perspective of it to show the aftereffects of one of the most tragic events in the second half of the twentieth century. Even though we should question the reality of the Vietnam War that Nakaura misrepresents, his reenactment,

itself being nothing but real, should be taken seriously as a cultural and political by-product of that war, which negatively reflects on contemporary Japanese people's reactions, or nonreactions, to the atrocities committed by their military during World War II. Similarly, *The Colony* is a work in which viewers are asked to face the renewed question of US hegemony in broader areas of the Pacific region from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, as well as the problem of China's territorial expansion in the South China Sea today. In these works, we no longer witness the bipolarization that Lê depicts in his earlier works in which America's imperialist view of the Vietnam War and its aftermath is polemically reviewed from the Vietnamese American perspective. The artist goes one step further in *Everything Is a Re-Enactment* and *The Colony* to demonstrate the relativist position in which history can be seen from a number of different perspectives if situated in a broad context. After having proposed in early works a counternarrative to the mainstream American view of the Vietnam War, and thereby contributing to the rectification of American prejudices against Vietnam and Vietnamese people, Lê is now trying to incorporate multilateral perspectives from which to see and update the idea of Vietnam wherein he himself is included.

What Lê challenges in these latest videos is, then, our assumption that the formation of culture is closely related to the constitution of a given nation-state and also to the uniqueness of its national culture. For the last few decades, artists and scholars in the field of Asian American studies have worked hard to distinguish their respective racial-ethnic positions. In doing so, they have unwittingly intensified the dominance of US mainstream culture, as they draw a contrast between the dominant culture and minority ones and then apply to their analysis of the formation of local ethnic cultures "theories" that can be traced back to Euro-American sources. Lê, I argue, should be counted among such artists, at least at the early stage of his career when he simulated and reenacted images from major American films and photojournalism within a framework of Euro-American digital art, even when applying the unique technique of photo-weaving. His latest videos, however, released in Tokyo and Birmingham, point to a new direction in which the bipolar relationship between mainstream and minority cultures is critically reviewed. The idea of Vietnam is relocated in the broader framework of the transpacific and thus represented from multiple points of view. This, I suppose, has resulted mainly from his "re-turn" to Vietnam. In Ho Chi Minh City where Lê initiated educational programs for local artists at Sàn Art, he has been re-educated to broaden his ideas and see US-

Vietnamese relations within a broader transpacific perspective.

This is why Lê replaces the bipolar confrontation of American narratives, always quite visible, and Vietnamese ones, sometimes hardly visible, of his early works with multilateral languages of the transpacific about the presence of Vietnam in his new videos. To put it differently, if Lê was trying to recover the lost Vietnamese presence in his early artistic career, he is now producing works from which people can access fragments of a larger reality, part of which is Vietnam. These fragments are scattered around, never revealing a whole, and thus, Lê may appear to need “more focus.” In fact, this is the way in which Lê demonstrates the complexity and multiplicity of our reality wherein a number of different perspectives collide.

These perspectives not only challenge our stereotyped images of Vietnam but also expand our view of the world beyond the binary oppositions of the United States and Vietnam, democracy and socialism, and war and peace.

NOTES

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¹ *Dinh Q. Lê: Memory for Tomorrow* was held at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, July 25–October 12, 2015. Afterward, most of the exhibit was relocated to Hiroshima where another exhibition with the same title was held March 19–May 15, 2016, at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art.

² One may wonder why the Vietnamese government censored something showing the effects of Agent Orange. According to Lê, the socialist government “was not sure how to handle the issue of Agent Orange/birth defects and soil contamination,” when he worked on *Damaged Genes* in 1998. Because Vietnam was an agricultural country and largely dependent on agricultural exports, the government was afraid that “the news of soil contamination with dioxin,” caused by Agent Orange, would negatively “affect its agricultural exports.” Also, just a few years after the US-Vietnamese normalization of diplomatic relations, Vietnam was still under US trade sanctions. So, the Vietnamese government did not want to criticize America openly. For these reasons, art exhibitions, press releases, and even scientific research on Agent Orange to publicize its aftereffects on human bodies and in the soil, were prohibited in Vietnam (Lê, Message to the author, 6 Dec. 2016).

³ Lê returned to Vietnam for the first time to do research for “Vietnam War photographs by Vietnamese journalists working for the North Vietnamese government,” as he writes to Moira Roth in 2015 (qtd. in Roth 138).

⁴ As someone who has compiled autobiographical writings of Vietnamese refugee students in her classroom, Sucheng Chang defines one-and-a-half generation Vietnamese Americans

as “immigrants who come at a young age who retain their ability to speak, if not always to read and write, the ancestral language as well as Asian values and norms. . . . They mediate not only between different generations in their families, but between American and Vietnamese ways of life and thought as well” (xiv).

⁵ Tiffany Chung is another Viet Kieu artist who is now based in Ho Chi Minh City. Having emigrated with her family to the United States after the Vietnam War, Chung was educated on the West Coast and then returned back to Vietnam in 2000 where she is quite active as a multimedia artist. She exhibits her works across the world: for example, she presented an installation titled “*between the blank spaces of Hitachi Factories I read poetry interwoven with tales of the barbarians, famines and war sacrifices*” at *Kenpoku Art 2016*, held in Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan, September 17–November 20 2016. See <https://kenpoku-art.jp/en/artists/tiffany-chung/>.

⁶ Monique Truong, author of *The Book of Salt* (2003), is counted among those who are most reluctant to travel back to Vietnam, for she is still unable “to forgive and to forget.” She describes it as “corruption; greed; lust for power; domination replacing freedom as a guiding principle and goal; brothers fighting brothers; mothers giving birth to children who grow up to kill one another” (par. 14).

⁷ Another censored and controlled area is education, even though deregulation has been rapidly facilitated so the nation can catch up with the international community, particularly in business and computer technology. Instructors from outside of Vietnam, however, still must accept certain restrictions on what they can teach. Typically, they are allowed to teach all the techniques that people in Vietnam must know to compete in the global marketplace, while they are forbidden to discuss and evaluate the technological content, which the government fears might lead to criticism of the status quo.

⁸ Lê asserts that “the government was very watchful of southerners” in the early twentieth-first century: “After all, the south was on the wrong side of the war. The artists were scared stiff of the cultural police, which is why the southern artists at the time did not organize themselves to create an alternative scene. They were fearful of being accused of being subversive by the government and didn’t want to end up in jail” (“The Pilgrimage” par. 6).

⁹ Paradoxically, the Vietnamese government also requested a significant amount of money for the creation of the library. In other words, the government required a cut of the donation (Lê, Personal interview).

¹⁰ The websites are restored today, as the server is “based in the USA” (Butt, Message to the author).

¹¹ The story of the French Vietnamese film director Trần Anh Hùng is a famous one: he was allowed to shoot his second film *Cyclo* (1995) in his homeland after the international success of *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993); yet, the government did not authorize the release of *Cyclo* in Vietnam because it was considered to be antisocial and thus antigovernment. See Barnes “Cinema as Cultural Translation” for an analysis of the significance of *Cyclo* as a transcultural production.

¹² In the interview with Araki, Lê argues that “I don’t think I insert a message in my work.” At the same time, he acknowledges that “through research, interviews, and talking to the people involved, certain kinds of issues emerge”: “Rather than putting messages in the work, I present issues that people present themselves, through their voices or my research—and they then become part of my work” (38).

¹³ “Cosplay” is a coined Japanese slang word derived from “costume” and “play” used in popular and street culture. Most typically, “cosplayers” wear costumes and accessories to look like specific characters in animation videos and comic books. They also imitate historical people and groups, as in the case of Yasukuni visitors.

¹⁴ Reenactments of historical battles are quite popular in both the United States and Japan:

groups of people regularly gather together for reenactments of battles of the Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War, for example. For more information about Japanese reenactment groups of the Vietnam War, see, e.g., the following websites: *Ho Chi Minn Trail Hiking Club (sic)*, <http://www.geocities.jp/hthc1968/>, and *Mickey Mouse Club*, http://mickeymouseclub.ifdef.jp/html/mmc_top.htm.

¹⁵ The uniforms were borrowed from Nakaura for the exhibit at the Mori Art Museum, and, according to Lê, the Japanese said that they are “original” (Lê, Message to the author, 18 May 2016).

¹⁶ A typical example is the popular TV drama *Oshin*, which was broadcast by Nippon Hoso Kyoukai (Japan Broadcasting Cooperation) in Japan from 1983 to 1984 and then in other countries, including the United States and part of Europe and also China, Indonesia, and other Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Produced by a semi-national TV station, *Oshin* spread the image of Japan as a victimized heroine, while underplaying its military imperialist side. See Suzuki for a critical reading of the drama (esp. 131–39).

¹⁷ Exhibitions of *The Colony* were also held at Artangel in London, August 25–October 9, 2016, and Site Gallery in Sheffield, September 3–December 3, 2016.

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