

Obdurate History: Dinh Q. Le, the Vietnam War, Photography, and Memory

By Moira Roth

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Photography is now so vital to memory, as a safeguard that the past will not be erased. With the Jewish Holocaust, for example, photographs have become so central to the process of remembering [1] --not necessarily private, but certainly collective. And ironically, we often rely, as with the Khmer Rouge, on the photographs taken by the murderers. --Allan deSouza [2]

It became the most remembered photograph of the foil of Saigon. ... But, as with much about the Vietnam War, the caption is wrong. --New York Times, April 23, 2000 [3]

April 2000, Berkeley, California

After months of writing texts for specific books and catalogues, I have entered again a time and space of floating thoughts and feelings.

I have been reading intensely, but incompletely--opening and closing book after book, then slowly returning to select a chapter, a short text, a paragraph, a phrase, a word--including Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces." There he talks of the nineteenth century's "great obsession" with history, and the "ever-accumulating past," as opposed to the present, which he describes as "an epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."

But I stubbornly want to stay attentive to the ever-accumulating past in order to make (at least temporarily) some sort of sense of it.

In April 2000, in the midst of headlines about the stock market's temporary collapse and the mounting tensions between Cuba and the United States over the case of the child Elian Gonzalez, I find myself studying the obdurate resurfacing of earlier history(ies) of El Salvador, Iran, and Korea. In the newspaper pages, I find these exhumed histories--histories that have literally been buried for years, or have been recorded in previously secret government documents and photographs.

And I am particularly immersed in the barrage of new information in the New York Times about Vietnam, which has been stirred up by the forthcoming twenty-fifth "anniversary" of the end of the Vietnam War, in which 58,000 U.S. soldiers and 3 million Vietnamese were killed.

It is during this month, too, that Dinh Q. Le, the Vietnamese-born artist, who now divides his time between Los Angeles and Ho Chi Minh City, exhibits *Mot Coi Di Ve* in Southern California. (Sadly, I am not able to see the show.) The title of the piece, drawn from a popular Vietnamese song, means "spending one's life trying to return home."

Mot Coi Di Ve is a huge, curtain-like story-quilt hanging from the gallery's ceiling to the floor. It can be viewed and literally "read" from all sides. Composed of hundreds

of old photographs, together with texts, inscribed in English, French, Vietnamese, and Chinese, it is a continuation of Le's passionate, poetic, and original exhuming and navigating of the obdurate history of Vietnam.

1 .The Vietnam War/The American War "Anniversary"

It is unbelievable the amount of press on the 25th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon. It's always so surprising for me to see how deeply America was affected by Vietnam.--Dinh Q. Le, April 27, 2000

April 13, 2000, New York Times Report I

Seth Mydans reports in the New York Times that Ho Chi Minh City (the city still often known in the United States as Saigon) is "smartening up" in anticipation of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the North Vietnamese victory on April 30, 1975. Mydans writes that this day witnessed the end of "the ruinous decade-long conflict known to Americans as the Vietnam War, and to Vietnamese as the American War."

April 19, 2000, New York Times Report 2

Mydans discusses a series of photographs of this "American War" from the Communist side. Apparently little known even in Vietnam, these images are now being gathered by two U.S. researchers. "Twenty-five years after the fighting ended, something surprising is emerging: a new visual record of the war whose images have become so familiar." One of the photographs reproduced is by Duong Thanh Phong. It is a scene of hundreds of pairs of military boots and uniforms scattered on a road, abandoned by fleeing South Vietnamese soldiers.

April 23, 2000, New York Times Report 3

In an article entitled "Getting It Wrong in a Photo" by Fox Butterfield with Karl Haskell, there is a reproduction of the "most remembered photograph of the fall of Saigon." The somewhat blurred image shows a ladder on which people are surging upwards; on the roof a figure leans forward to help them, while behind him is a helicopter. Until now it was believed to depict the roof of the United States Embassy with the last Americans clambering up to board a helicopter on April 29, 1975, as the North Vietnamese were about to enter the city.

But now Hubert Van Es, the United Press International photographer who shot this image, states that scene actually took place on the roof of 22 Gia Long Street, not that of the U.S. Embassy's. This apartment building (its top floor occupied by the CIA deputy chief for Saigon) was about half a mile away from the embassy, and those escaping are not Americans, but senior South Vietnamese politicians, generals, and police officers who had aided the CIA, and their families. [4]

May 5,2000, Berkeley

I meet my friend Boreth Ly today, and he shows me three photographs that his aunt, who lives in Paris, has just sent him. (She had managed to preserve a handful of photographs when she left Cambodia.) It is the first time he has ever had in his possession photographs of his family. I look tenderly at the images: his young mother, the wedding portrait of his parents, and himself (with his two siblings) as a three-year-old, laughing at the Independence Monument, not far from the Mekong

River in Phnom Penh, where he lived until the Khmer Rouge took over the city--and his family's house--on April 17, 1975, forcing all its occupants to leave.

I sit thinking about photographs, public and private, and their relationship to obdurate history.

Of photographs lost

Of photographs found

Of photographs of the dead

Of photographs of the living

Of forgetting through photographs

Of remembering through photographs

Of...

2. Mot Coi Di Ve

("Spending One's Life Trying to Find One's Way Home")

A hundred years--in this life span on earth talent and destiny are apt to feud. You must go through a play of ebb and flow and watch things as make you sick at heart.

Nguyen Du, *The Tale of Kieu* [5]

Although I have never met Dinh Q. Le, we have been corresponding intermittently by email since June 1999, when a mutual friend, Yong Soon Min, suggested that his work would interest me. In an email of February 20, 2000, Le writes to me about *Mat Coi Di Ve*, which he has just completed in Ho Chi Minh City.

"I just finished a giant piece of work. It measures 3 meters high by 6 meters wide. The piece consisted of about 1,500 black-and-white photographs that I bought here at secondhand stores. Initially, I was interested in finding my family's photographs that we were forced to leave behind when we escaped from Vietnam. Shifting through these old photographs, I was hoping that one day I would find some of ours. Along the way, I realized these photographs in a way are my family's photographs. These people probably were also forced to abandon memories of their lives as well, either because they did not survive the war, or they had escaped from Vietnam."

On the back of most of the photographs are inscribed lines from Vietnam's classic epic poem, *The Tale of Kieu*, by Nguyen Du, together with interviews with Vietnamese Americans about their memories of Vietnam and their experiences as immigrants (from James Freeman's 1989 book, *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese-American Lives*), and selections from letters from soldiers sent home during the war.

In her April 2000 catalogue essay on the work, Rebecca McGrew writes about Nguyen Du's early nineteenth-century narrative poem. The heroine of *The Tale of Kieu* is a Vietnamese woman "from a good family, who had to turn to prostitution but was eventually redeemed. Due to tragic events, she was forced to leave her home

and country ... and subjected to terrible ordeals and suffering. Eventually, she was able to return to her homeland and be reunited with her family. ... Kieu stands for Vietnam itself, a land well endowed with natural and human resources, but often doomed to see such riches go to waste or be destroyed. Particularly, during and after the Vietnam War, many people identified with Kieu." [6]

3. Oan Hon (Lost Souls), Email Exchanges with Dinh Q, Le, June 1999-December 2000

At the beginning of my exchange with Dinh Q. Le in June 1999, I send him a copy of an essay (part of my ongoing series *Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds*) in which I write that the artist SuChen Hung told me of a custom in China, in which when "someone leaves home and moves to another place, they take a little earth and a little water with them...a way to carry home with you and to make a new place home." [7]

Dinh Q. Le, June 15, 1999, email, Ho Chi Minh City

It was really interesting for me to read about SuChen Hung's story. ... In the last four years, I have done something similar to what SuChen talked about. However, my reasons are a little different.

Every trip back to Vietnam, I would bring a handful of American soil to Vietnam. I would mix the soil in the heavily silted water of the Mekong River as a way to spread this handful of soil throughout Vietnam. By doing this I hoped to help the wandering souls of all American MIAs lost in the jungle of Vietnam to have some sense of home. Hopefully this will help them rest in peace. I feel that in order for Vietnam to heal from the war, we need to help all the "oan hon" (lost souls) from the war to find some peace.

Shortly after I receive this, I include a reference to Le's poignant ritual in a text I am writing at the time. [8] This essay, a series of broken narratives, is drawn from my experience of traveling with Boreth Ly in Cambodia in May 1999 and going to the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Phnom Penh, the main interrogation-extermination center, and the Killing Fields in Choeung Ek. I also weave in references to a book I had discovered when I returned to Berkeley, where I live, in the latter part of June. The book is Toyofumi Ogura's *Letters from the End of the World*, an eyewitness account of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima Written as a series of letters to his wife, who died that day, August 6, 1945.

Dinh Q. Le, email, July 4, 1999, Ho Chi Minh City

It has been raining here almost every day. The rain cools everything down and softens the harsh city. It is great to be in the studio working while the rain pours loudly on the roof, on the pavement.

I am starting to get back to work on old and new projects. Thinking and rethinking about Tuol Sleng, the horror and the anger in the space, I am trying to incorporate that space into my new work. I need to go back to visit Tuol Sleng again--a trip I have been trying to avoid but cannot any longer.

I am so happy to hear about Toyofumi Ogura's Letters from the End of the World. While in college, I used to have this recurring nightmare about the need to tell of the horror I saw as a child.

Dinh Q. Le, email, July 8, 1999, Ho Chi Minh City

I am currently working/thinking about a couple of projects. The first project is a double video projection installation. The video will focus on the rapidly changing cityscape of Ho Chi Minh City.... The video shoot will consist of two video cameras mounted on my moped, one in front facing forward, and one in back, facing backward. I will be driving, weaving in and out of streets and alleys, recording the extreme contrasts in architecture and living conditions of the people in the city... as it is trying to move forward to the future.

Note: This video footage is eventually incorporated into a video installation, Snake Juice, shown at Pomona College in the spring of 2000. Rebecca McGrew describes its blending of contrasting images of Ho Chi Minh City traffic scenes with the making of a traditional "Snake Alcohol" from nine different snakes and a blackbird, pickled in rice wine and herbs, which is said to cure both psychic and physical ailments. Le uses the metaphor of the making of the alcohol as the perfect way to talk about violence, the war that Vietnam had to go through in order to heal and make the country whole again. [9]

The second project ... basically will deal with memory, specifically of the My Lai incident. [10] I am interested in the way nature actively erases both physical evidence as well as our memory of the event. We cannot keep all memories because not all memories are meant for us to keep. The question then is what memories to keep and what to let go of as the way nature intended.

The last project is more vague ... to go back to Tuol Sleng to photograph ... the upstairs prison holdings and the tortur chambers. I just want to photograph the empty interior architecture, no objects. I am not quite sure why at this point, but I think I need to create more of a context for my earlier Tuol Sleng portrait work. I will be headed for Cambodia in September or November.

Maira Roth, email, July 10, 1999, Berkeley

What does the site of My Lai look like now? ... Do people speak about My Lai in Vietnam? How do you as an artist (as well as a person) decide what memories to preserve?

Dinh Q. Le, email, August 7, 1999, Ho Chi Minh City

I have never been to My Lai but I plan to go on August 12. People here don't talk at all about My Lai. The older people remember but know very little about it. I think that nature definitely has a hand in the way we slowly forget things. Nature designed our brains to remember but also to forget. Nature never intended for us to remember everything.

In the My Lai case, as an artist and as a person, I feel that one of its most overlooked aspects is the victims. Our memory of the incident is only of the massacre. I do not want only to remember the victims at the most horrific moment of their lives. What were their lives like before they were taken from them, and what

would they be like today if they had not died? What gives them hope, keeps their dreams and happiness?... Who were these people that have become a symbol of guilt in America's conscience? These are the memories that have been completely forgotten, and these are the memories I want people to start remembering.

Dinh Q. Le, email, August 25, 1999, Ho Chi Minh City

I have just gotten back from My Lai. It was nothing like what I had expected or heard. It is an unpretentious little park, which from the outside looks like a little school with two little buildings on the property. The second is the exhibition hall where the photographs of the incident are on display--gruesome, but I felt they were necessary. There is a list of all the victims and their ages, and in a display case are household objects belonging to them, ranging from hats to pots. ... I do not feel it was a "theme" park or full of propaganda--which makes me quite curious about the reactions of American friends and some American Vietnam vets who see the place as full of propaganda. To tell you the truth, I haven't got a clue as to how to approach this project at this point. It will take some time for me to work out all the issues.

Dinh Q. Le, email, September 13, 1999, Ho Chi Minh City

Three more days and I'll be back in the States for two months. I feel I have just settled down in Saigon and now am off again--california 1.5 months, Denver 1 week, Cambodia 2 weeks, Hanoi 1 week, Ho Chi Minh City 1 week, London 1 week, hopefully Bilbao 1 week, then back to Ho Chi Minh City and work.

After reading your writing on Tuol Sleng ... I am fascinated by the point you bring up about the "torturer" and the "tortured" - "you/I." I want to combine the interior images of Tuol Sleng with the text of the prison's ten rules, as well as look into using the forced confession texts from the museum's archives. This is the next project I will be working on after I get to Cambodia in November.

Dinh Q. Le, email, September 13, 1999, Bangkok

I am currently sitting in the Bangkok airport waiting for my connection to London. This is my first time going to Europe. I have been focusing all my resources and energies on two continents, Asia and North America, all these years, and now I am going to step foot on the third one. It feels like a big event in my life--I am going to London to put up my installations, Lotus Land and Damaged Gene. The show opens on the 25th, Thanksgiving. I guess there is no Thanksgiving Day in England.

Note: In an email to me dated December 13, 1999, Le describes Lotus Land. "The installation is based on the idea of a lotus pond--the idea of purity growing out of these muddy and contaminated soils. Sitting on nine lotus and nine leaves are seven Siamese twins in various positions, mimicking religious poses. The piece is about the birth defects in Vietnam as a result of the chemical defoliant (Agent Orange) used by the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. One of the effects has been a tremendous increase in Siamese twins born in Vietnam. ... Most of the twins do not survive due to limited expertise and facilities here. I have found that in some villages where the children are born, they are starting to worship them. The villagers believe that the children are special spirits. ... What is fascinating to me is that some Vietnamese deities also have multiple arms, legs, and heads. The piece grows out of my fascination with the idea of collapsing distance between mythology and reality."

Chanika Svetvilas's article on Le, "The Art of War," contains Le's account of Damaged Gene, a public project created in Ho Chi Minh City in August 1998: "I rented a kiosk in the open market and sold handmade clothing for conjoined twins. The clothes were embroidered with names of companies that produced Agent Orange. ... I also sold Siamese twin figurines and T-shirts printed with statistics about the use of Agent Orange and the damaging genetic effect it has had in Vietnam. The project is a big departure for me. ... Culturally I was bringing a taboo subject and putting it right in the middle of the market for one month. It was the scariest opening I have ever held. My kiosk no longer exists, but I am planning to raise money to open a permanent shop. This time I hope to have international artists' participation in designing T-shirts and creating objects for the shop. The profits will be donated to medical facilities that treat children suffering from dioxin." [11]

Dinh Q. Le, email, December 4, 1999, Ho Chi Minh City

I just got back to Ho Chi Minh City ... and now will be able to go into the studio and focus on the new work. I am rethinking the My Lai project again. It will take some time for me to sort out my feelings about the incident, the site, and the memory of that place.

Dinh Q. Le, email, December 13, 1999, Ho Chi Minh City

I am getting ready to fly to Cambodia tomorrow to shoot the interior of Tuol Sleng.

As for the My Lai project, I know that there are three elements to be included in the piece. The first is the site at the present time. How nature is erasing these sites of "evidence." The second is the way our memories retain or forget this incident. The third element is the question of how these people's lives would be if they were alive today. Of course, this question can never be answered, but I hope with spending more time in My Lai learning about the daily activities of the locals, I will at least get a shadow of the answer.

In February 2000, Le returns to California, bringing with him Mot Coi Di Ve.

Maira Roth, email, April 23, 2000, Berkeley

Dear Dinh, I have started in the last few days to write another of my Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds pieces, and it seems to be centering on Vietnam, a response in some way to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ending of the war. I would like to include Mot Coi Di Ve.

4. Email Exchanges about Vietnam and Cambodia, December 18, 2000-January 28, 2001

Dinh Q. Le, email, December 11, 2000, Ho Chi Minh City

I am trying to publish a catalogue here in Vietnam about my new work, which was inspired by many things. It revolves around the issue of hysterical blindness. There are some two hundred cases of Cambodian women in the Los Angeles area

experiencing hysterical blindness as part of their post-traumatic stress disorder. If you haven't read about it, I will go into it more in the next email.

I have been working with a number of women here doing embroidery--a series of portraits of the prisoners at Tuol Sleng which are being embroidered on thick white cotton, white threads on white sheets. They are being stretched over a frame like a painting. It is a little hard to see until you are near, then the portraits emerge. Viewers are encouraged to touch these portraits, like reading Braille. I hope over the years the viewers' touch will stain the embroidery parts and make the portraits more visible. Like the carvings at Angkor, where the more people touch, the shinier it gets, and the more visible it becomes. In a way, the more people who participate in the remembering process, the more these memories will become alive. The series at this point is called The Texture of Memory. It is inspired by James E. Young's book of the same title.

On December 18, 2000, I send Le several emails with questions, and two days later he replies.

Dinh Q. Le, email, December 20, 2000, Ho Chi Minh City

What was the first work you did that specifically addressed Vietnam as its subject?

The first work I did about Vietnam was during my senior year (1989) at U.C. Santa Barbara, I was taking a class about the Vietnam War with Walter Capps, which focused on the American side. I think we spent two days talking about the Vietnamese and the rest of the ten weeks talking about how much U.S. soldiers suffered. I was getting so frustrated that I started making political posters listing the casualties and suffering from both sides. These were posted all over campus, and in some parts of downtown Santa Barbara.

I also did a similar poster and postcard in 1992 that was funded by Creative Time in New York. It was during the negotiations for normalizing relations between Vietnam and America. All I kept hearing was how the Vietnamese should be held "accountable" for all the American MIAs before the normalization process could begin. There was no talk at all of America's responsibility to Vietnam. The poster and postcard asked, "If we hold the Vietnamese accountable for all the MIAs, then shouldn't we be held accountable for 2,000,000 Vietnamese killed, 10,000,000 refugees . . . xxxxx orphans. . .

xxxxx gallons of Agent Orange being used ... xxxxx acres of land being contaminated during the war?" (I don't remember the exact numbers or the exact list anymore.)

The posters were plastered all over New York and Los Angeles. The postcards were sent to the President, Vice-President, and all the Senate and House members.

For the last five years--yes?--you have gone back and forth between the States and Vietnam.

The first time I came back was in 1992 for two months. I was in total shock the first month. From 1994 to 1997, I spent somewhere from three to six months in Vietnam each year. Then from 1998 on, I spent from six to nine months here. Now I only come back to the States for exhibition commitments and family visits.

Do you make art in both countries?

I used to make work in both countries. These days, I do most of my research in the States and make work here in Vietnam.

Do you mix with artists in both countries?

I mix more with artists in the States when I am there. I know only a few artists in Saigon. Most of my friends here are not artists.

Perhaps most important, why do you make art and for whom?

I used to have a recurring dream that might explain why I make art and for whom. I dreamt my family was evacuating from the Khmer Rouge invasion with thousands of other families. In the dream, I am about nine years old. All the belongings we could take were stacked on a push cart. We were heading toward the river to cross on the ferry. When we reached the dock, I realized that I had left my camera at home. (My family never owned a camera when we were in Vietnam.) I wanted to go back to get the camera so I could record what was happening. I asked my mom for permission to go back to the house and she refused. It was too dangerous. I always woke up from this dream so upset that I was not able to record what was happening.

Moira Roth, email, January 17,2001, Berkeley

Would you tell me about the evolution of Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness, those extraordinary 1997 photoweaving works you made which combine Tuol Sleng prison photographs with their identification tags together with images of Cambodian temple carvings? How did you make them? Where? Why did you make them?

Dinh Q. Le, email, January 20, 2001, Ho Chi Minh City

How did you make them?

There is no loom involved, but rather the weaving process takes place on the floor. Usually there are two photographs, but there are some made out of up to eighteen photographs. The photos are cut into strips, one image horizontal, one vertical. The horizontal strips are slowly woven into the vertical strips.

I have pretty much developed my own style of weaving. There are parts where I skip weaving to make a certain part of the image clearer or to hide an area. When I want to have two images merge into each other, then that particular area is heavily woven. My aunt, who used to weave grass mats, cannot comprehend what I am doing, although the funny thing is that it was she who taught me how to weave when I was very young.

Where?

Some of the pieces were made in California, but most of the work was made in Vietnam.

Why?

In 1994, I did a workshop with mostly Cambodian refugees' children in the Bronx, New York. After seeing the slides of my work, one of the parents started to relate her experience with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. She asked me to make more work that would have the image of the Buddha. I was fascinated by her finding refuge in Buddhism after all she had gone through. It also awoke my memory of the Khmer Rouge invasion of my home town--a memory that I had suppressed for a long time. Three months later, I quit my job and traveled to Cambodia and Vietnam.

I went to Phnom Penh to see the prison. It was an overwhelming experience. I will never forget the rows of photographs of the victims staring out from the wall, the crudely made tiny little cells, and the knowledge of what happened in that place. Throughout the trip--visiting temple after temple--everything was shrouded by what I had seen at Tuol Sleng. I kept asking myself, how could a country that is capable of creating such beauty also be capable of such evil?

After learning about the history of Cambodia, I realized that violence is also rooted deeply in Cambodia's culture, as in so many other cultures. Much of its violence is carved on the walls of the Angkor Wat and Bayon temples, temples built as monuments to the victories of kings. Our culture has a tendency to build monuments only. I wanted to include the faces of the victims in these monuments and turn these monuments into memorials.

The Cambodians themselves were obsessed with their glorious past. Everywhere I went in Cambodia, I kept seeing the five towers of Angkor Wat.... Pol Pot wanted to return Cambodia to the glorious days of that Angkor Empire. Misguidedly, he believed that through farming, as during the Angkor period, Cambodia could become glorious again. This belief, with others, led to the forced mass evacuation of people from the cities into farming communities and began the Cambodian holocaust.

I see Angkor and Cambodia's holocaust as connected with each other. [12] That is why I started to weave together images of victims of Pol Pot and the wall carvings of Angkor Wat and other temples.

Boreth Ly, email, January 28,2001, Berkeley

As you know, I got back from Cambodia a week or so ago, and have been thinking a lot about my visit with Dinh Le there--it was the first time I had met him--and seeing his Texture of Memory series. We met in Phnom Penh and went to Tuol Sleng together. I talked to him as a brother and a fellow refugee. He was a "border child" living in Ha-Tien, a small town on the border between lower Cambodia and Vietnam. We spoke about ourselves and our similar backgrounds--living abroad (in the U.S.) but at the same time finding meaning in Asia, he in Vietnam and I in Cambodia. [13]

Dinh unpacked seven pieces of white cotton sheets (the size of a single bed sheet) from his black suitcase, and we stretched them out on the hotel's unmade bed of white sheets. He told me that the series--there are to be more than seven sheets--will eventually be stretched on bamboo frames. The layering of meanings embedded in these textiles read like a literary text.

My initial thought at seeing Dinh's white threads embroidered on white cotton cloth was that white is the color of mourning in the Asian tradition, which gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation of the series.

The work is very difficult to see clearly because the images outlined by the embroideries are barely visible to the naked eye. This difficult process of seeing or seeing clearly reminded me of the fragmented nature of the act of memory itself--an experience that is both tangible and intangible. The second thought that immediately came to mind was that of gender. I had read the article, "A Changed Vision of God," from the New Yorker about the hysterical blindness among Cambodian women in Long Beach, so I saw the connection between them and these embroideries that Dinh Le had commissioned a group of women to do in Vietnam. [4]

5. Lich Su Bat Khuat Bat Diet

Moira Roth, email, January 28, 2001, Berkeley

Do you have a suggestion as to how we should title our text for Art Journal? As I reread our exchange over the last year and a half (an exchange that has profoundly affected me), I keep returning to the notion of "obdurate history"--be it public or personal--that stubbornly and insistently returns to confront us. Is there a Vietnamese word for "obdurate"? Or another word, phrase, or metaphor that you would prefer as the title? Something that for you suggests the nature of your concerns? Do let me know.

Dinh Q. Le, email, January 31, 2001, Ho Chi Minh City

I am still looking for the equivalent of "Obdurate History" in Vietnamese, and a couple of close Vietnamese friends are helping me with this. It has been a slow process due to the Chinese New Year. The literal translation is Lich Su Buong Binh, but this only carries the stubborn meaning and not the insistent part, so we will keep looking for a phrase that is the equivalent to "Obdurate History."

Dinh Q. Le, email, February 6, 2001, Ho Chi Minh City

Another translation of "Obdurate History" has just been given to me--Lich Su Bat Khuat Bat Diet, which means a history that won't give up, that will never disappear. This is a much more poetic interpretation than Lich Su Buong Binh.

Still, I don't think it translates completely.

It has been interesting for me to see the progression of my work over the years, from the angry political posters to The Texture of Memory. Gone is the raw voice of anger.

I realize that, in a way, I have learned to write poetry and to answer for myself Adorno's observation that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today." [15]

February 9, 2001, Berkeley

How does one translate?

Be it from Vietnamese to English

From English to Vietnamese?

From seeing to writing?

What is lost in translation

From one place and time

To another?

From firsthand experience

To representations seen by others?

And how do such acts of translation

Relate to the texture of memory?

To Lich Su Bat Khuat Bat Diet?

Moira Roth, Trefethen Professor of Art History, Mills College, Oakland, published her first volume of collected writings. *Difference/indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp, and John Cage*, with a commentary by Jonathan D. Katz (G & B International, 1998). Currently, she is writing "The Library of Maps," a series of short fictional texts, and preparing a book of her "Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds" essays. She was a recipient of the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award in 2000.

Dinh Q. Le was born in Ha-Tien, Vietnam, on the border of lower Cambodia in 1968, during the Vietnam War. In 1975 the war ended with the North Vietnamese Communists' capture of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). North and South Vietnam were unified a year later. In 1979 Vietnam invaded Cambodia. That same year Le and his family immigrated to Los Angeles. In 1989 Le received his B.F.A. from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and in 1992 he received his M.F.A. in photography and related media from the School of Visual Arts, New York. In 1992 he returned to Vietnam for the first time; by 1998 he was spending six to nine months a year there, coming back to the United States only for exhibition commitments and family visits. In 1994 Le received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship; he worked with Cambodian refugee children in the Bronx and traveled to Cambodia three months later, where he saw the Tuol Sleng prison museum for the first time. He presently divides his time between Ho Chi Minh City and Los Angeles.

Le's one-person exhibitions include *Accountability* (Creative Time, New York, citywide poster/postcard project. New York, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., 1992); *The Headless Buddha* (Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies. 1998); *Dinh Q. Le: True Journey Is Return* (Montgomery Gallery, Pomona College, Pomona, Calif., 2000); *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* (The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Ky., 2000); Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Ore., 1998 and 2000; P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York 1998 and 2001; Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, 1999 and 2001. His group exhibitions include *Combinations: Dinh Le and Martina Lopez* (The Friends of Photography, Ansel Adams Center, San Francisco, 1991); *The Definitive American Contemporary Quilt* (Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York, 1992); *A Labor of Love* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1996); *Paints of Entry* (High Museum

of Art, Atlanta, 1997); Slew Release (Bishopsgate Goodsynd, London, 1999); Made in California (Los Angeles County Art Museum, Los Angeles, 2000).

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This text is Part 9 of my ongoing Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds series, originally commissioned by Art Journal, in 1998. Please refer to the Art Journal web page at www.collegeart.org (Publications[greater than]Art Journal)

- (1.) The Nazis took some forty thousand photographs of Auschwitz victims (the current estimate is that between 1 million and 1.5 million were killed in the concentration camp) before abandoning this documentation (New York Times, January 28, 2001).
- (2.) Allan deSouza, "Interview," in Dinh Q. Le: The Headless Buddha (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, 1998), 5.
- (3.) Fox Butterfield with Karl Haskell, "Getting It Wrong in a Photo," New York Times, April 23, 2000, sec. WK, 5.
- (4.) Also in the Times of April 23, 2000, there is a fascinating discussion of another disputed photographic caption, "Cuban Boy Seized by U. S. Agents and Reunited with His Father," This cover story is accompanied by two photographs-of a terrified Ellen Gonzalez in Miami before dawn in the arms of an Immigration and Naturalization Service official, and of the child a few hours later smiting in the arms of his father at Andrews Air Force Base. Almost immediately, there are arguments in the press and on television about the authenticity' of the photograph of the Gonzalez father-son reunion, with Miami relatives arguing that it is a fake. The Associated Press is given more photographs to develop, and the battle rages on. Within a few days the various photographs are juxtaposed in different ways, with resultingly different visual messages, on the covers of Time ("'Papa!' The Raid, the Reunion, the Fallout") and Newsweek ("Seizing Elian, Inside the Raid").
- (5.) Nguyen Du, The Tale of Kieu, trans. Huynh Sanh Thong (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), quoted in Dinh Q. Le: True Journey Is Return (Claremont: Montgomery Gallery, Pomona College, 2000), unpag.
- (6.) Rebecca McGrew, "Journeys: New Work by Dinh Q. Le, in Dinh Q. Le: Tine Journey Is Return, 6.
- (7.) Moira Roth, "Working Notes: Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds," Art Journal 58, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 85.
- (8.) Oan Hon (Lost Souls), Lament for Cambodia, Hiroshima, Kosovo, and East Timor, May-September 1999." This text was published in the Spring 2001 issue of Performance Research; for the Web version, see www.collegeart.org (Publications[greater than]Art Journal).
- (9.) McGrew, 6.
- (10.) On March 16. 1968, the 11th Brigade of the U.S. Army entered the village of My Lai under the command of Lt. William Calley and killed over three hundred

civilians, including women, children and the elderly, in a "search and destroy" mission. A U.S. military investigation charged Calley with murder in September 1969. He was sentenced to life imprisonment but was released in 1974 after many appeals.

(11.) Chanika Svetvilas, "The Art of War," Dialogue. Spring--Summer 1999, 27-28.

(12.) Angkor Wat, an early twelfth-century Hindu monument constructed under King Suryavarman II, was converted to Theravadin Buddhism in the fifteenth century, and has continued to be revered by Buddhists ever since as a sacred Site. The Khmer Rouge destroyed many national monuments, but they left Angkor Wat (together with almost all the Angkor monuments) untouched because they saw it as a main link to their self-defined national lineage.

From 1969 onward Cambodia was drawn into the Vietnamese conflict. On April 30, 1970, U.S. troops invaded Cambodia in order to destroy the North Vietnamese Communist troops camps ("sanctuaries"), which had been installed on the Cambodian side of the border. The Vietnamese forces reacted by moving more deeply into Cambodia and occupying Angkor. By the end of the next month, the U.S. forces had withdrawn to Vietnam. but continued bombing Cambodia.

In 1972 Lon Nol named himself president of Cambodia and eliminated all legitimate opposition to him. At the beginning of 1973, the United States and North Vietnam signed an agreement in Paris to end military action in Cambodia. This was quickly broken on both sides, but by mid-year Congress had ordered the bombing of the country to halt. For the next two years Lon Nol and his supporters fought a losing battle against the Khmer Rouge, who slowly took over most of the countryside.

On April 1, 1975, the Khmer Rouge besieged Phnom Penh: Lon Nol resigned and fled to the United States. On April 12, the United States abandoned its embassy in Phnom Penh, and on April 17, the Khmer Rouge "liberated" the city and evacuated almost all its inhabitants. The Khmer Rouge regime lasted from 1975 until 1979, during which time more than a million Cambodians were killed: its extermination camp, Tuol Sleng (S-21), a former high school located close to the Phnom Penh city center, was the site of the murder of some sixteen thousand men, women, and children. The regime forbade cameras, currency, education, newspapers, postal service, property, radios, religious practice, television, and Western medicine: instead its focus was on the creation of large agricultural communes controlled by Angkar ("the organization"), which was, in fact the Cambodian Communist party, led by Pol Pot.

On April 30, 1975, thirteen days after the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh, North Vietnamese troops took over Saigon from the South Vietnam government, thus ending the Vietnam War. (Shortly after North Vietnam seized power in Laos.) In 1976 Vietnam was united. There were increasing skirmishes on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border (Khmer Rouge raids and Vietnamese camps set up for prisoners and Khmer Rouge defectors) and in December 1977, Cambodia broke off diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

In January 1979, the Vietnamese army captured Phnom Penh. In February 1979, China, Cambodia's ally, made a short punitive invasion of North Vietnam as a retaliation. Cambodian politics were then dominated by Vietnam. and it was only in 1989 that the last of its occupation troops withdrew. In 1993 Norodom Sihanouk was

made king and prime minister of Cambodia. In 1998, Pol Pot died, and the last Khmer Rouge stronghold was captured by government forces. 13. Boreth Ly presented a paper entitled "Memory and Violence: Painting the Khmer Rouge Genocide at Tuol Sleng Prison," at the College Art Association's Annual Conference in Chicago on March 1, 2001, that included an analysis of Dinh Q. Le's work. 14. Alec Wilkinson, "A Changed Vision of God." *New Yorker*, January 24, 1994.

(15.) Theodor W. Adorno, *Cultural Criticism and Society*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981). 34.

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