For many Americans, the war in Việt Nam is more than just an object in the rearview mirror of the fabled American automobile, aimed always toward progress and intent on leaving behind a past that is closer than it appears. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have compelled Americans to look in the mirror, checking to see whether that object is a ghost from a horror movie of their own making or something that is safely dead, autopsied repeatedly by academics, journalists, politicians, and generals hoping to extract useful lessons for current campaigns. The war’s first impressions in American memory remain mostly visual, as seen on television, in the movies, in photographs, and in high art, morphing to such an extent that the war lives again through parody and pastiche, through repetition and invocation. These visual resurrections range from big-budget comedies like Tropic Thunder that assume no knowledge of either the war’s real or cinematic history to the passionate guerrilla art of Martha Rosler, whose contemporary Iraq War collages quote her Viêt Nam–era antiwar collages, with their graphic scenes of war and human damage inserted into the manicured domestic propaganda of fashion and beauty ads. The war is over, but its visual images live on.

As America remembers, so to some extent does the world. Even if the United States is a reduced industrial base, it is still a superpower in the globalization of its own memories. The American memory industry is on a par with the American arms industry, outpacing Detroit with its exports and compelling other countries, regardless of their own memories of the war, to cope with Hollywood goods and the instantly infamous snapshots that struck viewers between the eyes. There was Colonel Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, shooting a Viet Cong suspect in the head (captured by the camera of Eddie Adams), or Phan Thị Kim Phúc running naked and screaming down a road after being flayed by an airborne napalm strike (framed by Nick Ut).1 These
shots were seen around the world because American media possessed the apparatus to helicopter journalists into and out of battlefields with endless film rolls, processing their negatives almost immediately and printing them globally. In contrast, North Vietnamese photographers lived in the jungles, hoarded their handfuls of film rolls, and dispatched their negatives over treacherous land routes to Hà Nội via messengers who risked death—some of whom were indeed killed in bombardments. These circumstances limited what was seen by North Vietnamese eyes.2 Even nearly forty years after the war’s end, Việt Nam’s premier film director, Đặng Nhật Minh, acknowledges Hollywood’s influence with his last film, Don’t Burn, which gestures explicitly at the helicopter assaults and peasant massacres of Platoon and Apocalypse Now. Don’t Burn tells the true story of a heroic young North Vietnamese doctor, slain in her prime by American troops in 1972. Đặng Thùy Trâm’s recovered diary became a Vietnamese publishing sensation in 2005, but the movie based on her words opened in Việt Nam during the same week as Transformers 2. While the American blockbuster was a monster truck crushing all competition, his film, the director said, “was a bicycle.”3

In short, memory is the outcome of an industry in which the individual who remembers, feels, or propagates a memory is only a pieceworker on an assembly line. The individual’s memory matters to the individual, but the real matter of memory for the world is determined by the industry of memory, by which I mean something more than a set of technologies through which memories are fashioned, or the network of professionals who curate, design, and study memories.4 The industry of memory includes both of these and also incorporates the processes of individual memory, the collective nature of its making, and the social contexts of its meanings; in addition, it acknowledges memory’s means of production. These are the possibilities that determine how memories are made, whose memories get made, in what quantities, and the extent of their distribution. Mass memory’s impact depends on vertical integration and economies of scale, with those who control the most significant means of production seeing their memories exported to the world’s far corners. This industry of memory cannot be considered separately from other industries, as the case of the United States and Việt Nam makes especially clear. Wealthy and powerful countries can export their memories more effectively than poorer ones, and war only exacerbates this inequality. Countries with more massive war machines can not only do more human damage than weaker countries, but they can also justify that damage through the manufactured memories of the related industry of memory.

So, in Việt Nam, memories are peddled in ways that differ from the American manner, both for the Vietnamese and their visitors. As industrial
and postindustrial products, memories are a form of transportation to the past and a form of transportation in the present, if we believe that the past is what propels us ever forward (if we stopped remembering, we would be dead). Đặng Nhật Minh’s metaphor is therefore an appropriate one, for if America is dominated by four-wheeled machines, Việt Nam is a two-wheeled country, characterized first by precious Chinese-made bicycles during the war and its aftermath and now by Japanese-made motorbikes as the sign of middle-class prosperity. While America had the Model T Ford, Việt Nam had the Honda Dream, these vehicles symbolizing the differences in the ways that people travel, enabled by their nations’ wealth and correlating directly to the ways their memories circulate both domestically and abroad. Memories are not merely personal, even if they begin and end that way. Rather, as industrial and postindustrial products once they enter the public sphere, memories are as anemically or as aggressively manufactured, branded, sold, and exported as the rest of a nation’s goods under globalization, which means that the industry of memory is structured through relations of exploitation and inequality. Memories exist for fun and as fetishes, but they also exist for profit.

As feelings and as products, memories circulate not just in social, personal, or aesthetic worlds, but also in political and economic ones. So, after the shooting war, the United States continued a quiet war, effectively embargoing for twenty years not just Việt Nam but also Vietnamese memories, allowing only a few token imports past American borders—a handful of novels by the celebrity dissidents Dương Thu Hương and Bảo Ninh, a clutch of other literary works translated and published by independent presses, brief exhibitions of art, and films for niche audiences. The Vietnamese have their own memories, of course, but these home-grown products must contend with American ones, so much so that Vietnamese are more aware of what Americans think and feel about their shared past than Americans are. This inequity shapes the public presentation of Vietnamese memories in a doubly conscious fashion. The memories are addressed to locals but also to others, articulated specifically with Americans in mind or with the awareness that visitors from other countries will come bearing American memories like lint in their pockets. The French, Japanese, and Koreans—other peoples who have had American soldiers fighting wars on their territory—do not face the same situation. France and Japan are large, wealthy nations with considerable memory industries of their own, while the Korean War is a forgotten conflict that left few memories behind, outside of Korea, for the world to ponder. But the American output of memory on the Việt Nam War is impressive, the prodigiousness of it equivalent to the rage of loss that Americans felt. While visitors of all nations are likely to have bumped into an
American rememory somewhere in the world, these visitors are unlikely to have seen, read, or heard the Vietnamese-language documentaries, feature films, novels, memoirs, short stories, speeches, and ceremonies commemorating the war, or to witness the private and public rituals that Vietnamese have to honor the dead, almost all of which recount a mostly heroic legend of the warrior past.5

This is hardly a surprise, since many Vietnamese themselves are not eager to undertake the drudgery of dredging up the past. The historical ignorance of the young that is periodically bemoaned in the United States is hardly an isolated American phenomenon. Vietnamese youth must be reminded that the war was sacrosanct and that the terrible human toll of the war was justified. One way this reminder is delivered is through Hồ Chí Minh’s omnipresent slogan, “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom.” But in visiting Việt Nam at the beginning of the millennium, I knew Uncle Hồ’s words had taken on an ironic cast when I heard the popular joke about his slogan: What’s more precious than independence and freedom? Nothing! In other words, independence and freedom are worth less than nothing, and revolutionary ideology is bankrupt in a postrevolutionary society interested less in justice and equality and more in turning the đồng into a dollar. Since Việt Nam does not seem free to many people inside or outside of the country, memorializing the costly struggle for independence as a necessary war is crucial for the Communist Party, which grinds away at its own industry of memory, mostly a domestic affair.

Contemporary art has been key to these memory industries in both countries. If memory is an industry, art is one of its machines. What concerns me are nationalist ways of commemoration, in which art occupies a sanctified place, as well as the antinationalism of many artists whose works are not mass-produced on the assembly lines of memory but instead handcrafted in studios, garrets, and workshops—experimental, avant-garde, and artisanal one-offs in comparison to a Hollywood blockbuster or a state-sponsored museum. The negotiation and tensions between nationalism and its critics lead some of these artists and their audiences to jury-rig another kind of memory machine, an ethical one. Even as an ethical memory calls on its users to remember both sides, it acknowledges memory’s inevitable elusiveness, the fact that something is always forgotten. An ethical memory remembers both sides of a battle over the past, but it is also dissatisfied with that gesture and its implication of reconciliation, which many (although far from all) Vietnamese and Americans profess they want in the postwar era. What gets left out in reconciliation? What does it enable and what does it foreclose? Instead of being locked into the gears of either mourning or melancholy, or seeking reconciliation and closure at all costs, ethical memory
Industries of Memory

is constantly in motion, craning to look over its shoulder at the blind spot where danger lurks, or at that spot between the shoulder blades that cannot be seen and cannot be scratched, and in so turning nags at us, asking us what we should we do with these memories for the future as it also reminds us that no one is innocent in the war over remembrance.

State of the Art, or the Artist as Weapon

Not everyone remembers in the same way, and not everyone values art in the same way. In the United States, art that critics consider to be important is usually oppositional in one fashion or another, resisting capitalist values, depicting alienation, confronting the state, deriding bourgeois tastes, or criticizing itself or its artistic forebears. The war in Viêt Nam was a focal point for a small group of artists who were determined to make art that was explicitly political and antiwar, a movement in which art was a weapon against the state and its war that these artists saw as unjust, brutal, racist, and sexist. Until very recently, Vietnamese art generally worked in exactly the opposite fashion, with art stressing harmony, beauty, and tradition, even when it comes to war. The art historian Bùi Như Hu'ong notes drily that even though the Vietnamese experienced a thousand years of war, few images of death, pain, brutality, or trauma can be found in Vietnamese art, despite Western assumptions that art should confront those experiences, which feature heavily in antiwar American art. The absence of such images is not due to the restrictions of a political system but rather is evidence of a Vietnamese “national identity” that is found in “racial origins,” “inherent in the nation’s subconscious” (Bùi 86). The claim of a unified national and racial identity is doubtful, particularly if we remember that Viêt Nam has fifty-three ethnic minorities that are not easily included in the nation despite the state’s best efforts, as a memorial mosaic at the Cu Chi tunnels shows (figure 12.1). Here minorities are marshaled as part of the revolutionary effort to defeat American occupiers, liberate the South, and unite the country (a depiction that conveniently forgets how the contemporary Communist Party periodically suppresses minority groups when their members clamor for their economic, political, or religious rights). Here and elsewhere in Viêt Nam, art works in service of the state, with art being a weapon wielded by and for the state as it stresses unity and solidarity rather than individuality and opposition.

Thus, the repeated themes of the war art exhibited in Vietnamese museums and at memorials are heroic struggle; military and peasant life; the glory of labor; revolutionary heroes; and women at work, war, and mourning. Such works of art are found at the Fine Arts Museums, Revolution
Museums, and History Museums of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, as well as numerous smaller museums and memorials. Among these, the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội is the country’s best art museum, if by best we mean one that follows most closely Western standards of exhibition, display, lighting, and captioning, and one in which art is hallowed work. The war art in this museum occupies perhaps a third of the space, with the texture of the art similar to the texture of the other art on display. Both types of art are outcomes of the country’s colonial history, in which France introduced the concept of Western art to its Indochinese colonies in the early twentieth century. Prior to the establishment of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine (EBAI) in Hà Nội in 1925, artistic practices in Việt Nam were artisanal and crafts-oriented, based in villages and with anonymous creators. With the EBAI, an artistic tradition was created by French teachers and their Indochinese students, with auteurs steeped in impressionism and romanticism, trained in Western aesthetic techniques and media such as oil painting and gouache on paper, and ready to transform indigenous practices like lacquer and silk painting with these techniques. The war against the French (1945–
put an end to the EBAI. This war plus the subsequent one against the Americans and South Vietnamese (1961–75), followed by a period of isolation abetted by an American embargo (1975–86), effectively froze dominant Vietnamese art in a moment of aesthetic and political stasis. In this period of nearly half a century, Vietnamese art became a partner with the state’s military efforts, expressing itself via an appropriated Western aesthetics from the early twentieth century.

The Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội and the other state-sanctioned museums are thus time capsules of a certain kind of art, blending state memory with aesthetic nostalgia, the fervor of the revolutionary expressed through the assimilated techniques of the colonizer. These museums are among the state’s strongholds of memory, where art is on a pedestal, as long as it expresses the correct sentiment regarding the nation and revolution. Since the state exerts a powerful grip on art production through sponsoring and approving exhibitions and awarding prizes, the place of art in the public spaces controlled by the state is not merely ornamental and official. State-sponsored art was dominant in Việt Nam’s art world, but its decline in importance began in 1986 with the introduction of Đổi Mới, the economic renovation policy of the Communist Party that slowly opened the doors of the nation to capitalism. After a decade of disastrous inflation, failed collective economic policies, nationwide rationing, and American embargoing, the postrevolutionary phase that began with Đổi Mới brought forces of change that affected the art world. The most visible effect was the influx of tourists eager to buy high-quality facsimiles of Western masterpieces or lush, romantic renditions of Vietnamese life—bucolic scenes of the countryside and its rural inhabitants and creatures or idealized sightings of willowy women in flowing áo dài, the national fetish outfit that every Western male visitor feels obliged to compliment and comment upon, from the average sex tourist to the iconic Graham Greene. Following these tourists, however, came collectors looking for higher-quality and more expensive artwork.

The Vietnamese art world is now split into at least three parts: the commercialized art market with low and high price levels; the state-sponsored world of ceremony and commemoration; and the emerging, energetic independent art scene that foreign artists and curators are most comfortable with. This scene speaks in the language of the avant-garde, Master of Fine Arts programs, the Venice Biennale, the art gallery, the international art circuit, and Western tastes and values imported into Việt Nam to create a fusion art that is undoubtedly exciting but perhaps not appealing to local and foreign cosmopolitan classes. These divisions in the art world resemble the divisions in Vietnamese society as it becomes a market economy. The country is assimilating capitalist practices while attempting to maintain an
official Communist ideology; in a similarly hybrid fashion, the art establishment has used Western techniques to describe native life and transform indigenous art practices. The paradox is that the politically dominant art commemorating war is not the economically dominant one. The political art is major in one sense but minor in another, playing the role of the revolutionary grandfather espousing Communist ideology at a time when only a very small minority of the population belongs to the Party (about two million people out of over ninety million). The lack of participation in the Party finds its art world corollary in the fact that the halls of state-sponsored museums are mostly empty of local visitors, while the local artists are attentive to the commercial market or the independent art scene, where the war is barely recalled—if it is acknowledged at all.

To the extent that the state makes any concession to the present in the official memory of the war, it is in the acknowledgment that the war was not only a just and heroic one, but one that occasioned great mourning, as shown in a sculpture by Nguyễn Phú Cường of a mourning mother who is literally hollowed out by loss as she cradles the helmet of an absent, dead soldier (figure 12.2). In dominant Vietnamese culture, the dead soldier is commemorated as a heroic martyr, paired with the heroic mother in a relationship that leads to the soldier’s continual infantilization, as Huetam Ho Tai points out. This infantilization is matched by the mother’s eternal maternalization, in which sacrifice is prized above all—especially the sacrifice of sons for the revolutionary cause, with more dead sons leading to more glory. The idealized image of this mourning, heroic mother resonates both with the aesthetic tradition of Vietnamese fine art and with dominant social mores about the importance of the family; filial piety; sacrifice; and the proper roles of men and women, young and old. These images continue in the postwar era, with sculptures of mourning mothers and heroic martyrs flooding the urban and rural landscape, from memorials in city centers to remote martyrs’ graveyards, commemorating revolutionary heroes and forgetting everyone else, aimed primarily at Vietnamese who would come to mourn or remember the revolutionary dead (figure 12.3).

While mourning is a crucial register for state-sponsored art, another public face of art exists as well, a more provocative and confrontational one that belies the local and Western perception that Vietnamese art does not deal with death and pain. These images appear at sites remembering the war where local and foreign tourists are not only likely to come but do in fact visit in significant numbers. At the museum in Sơn Mỹ commemorating the Mỹ Lai massacre, a diorama uses sculptures of American soldiers shooting and stabbing Vietnamese women and children against a painted backdrop of dead bodies and burning homes (figure 12.4). On Côn Sơn Island, where
over ten thousand political prisoners died in French, South Vietnamese, and American prisons, several restored jails house scenes of torture and imprisonment staged with hundreds of life-sized sculptures (figure 12.5). For a Western visitor, these scenes may evoke American horror movies and torture porn such as the butcher-shop franchises of Saw or Hostel. But perhaps those horror movies and torture porn so in fashion today recall indirectly the actual horrors committed during war and lurking in the American conscience.

These memorials and monuments are typical, not exceptional, in Việt Nam, trafficking not in fine art but in a low art of the kind that is not discussed by either Vietnamese or American critics. This art of anger and atrocity is not high-minded like state art, romantic like commercial art, or edgy like independent art; instead it is profane and crudely done, and it takes on itself the documentary impulse of Western photography. This art of anger and atrocity is the other side of the propaganda poster used by the revolution to bolster morale during the war, encouraging people to work hard and fight hard against foreign aggression. Ironically, propaganda posters are now revolutionary chic, with entire shops devoted to the sale of originals and
Figure 12.3. Statue of a mourning, heroic mother at the Martyrs Cemetery of Hồ Chí Minh City.
reproductions, purchased mostly by foreigners. But I find it hard to imagine anyone wanting to purchase the images of atrocity. The art of anger and atrocity, like the independent art that privileges performance, installation, and the ephemeral, resists the invisible hand of the market by not turning pain into entertainment. Instead, this art uses pain as pedagogy for tourists, both foreign and local. The written narratives that usually frame these images of anger and atrocity blame American soldiers and French colonizers, and as a result stir up either guilt or loathing on the part of foreigners. For them, war art, whether high or low, induces memories of a past that is not theirs and a historical narrative that they may or may not agree with. The art also has a contradictory effect on the Vietnamese. The narrative offered by museums and tour guides is usually one of national pride and anticolonial resistance, which explicitly serves to reaffirm the story of the state. Implicitly, however, a narrative that recalls the glories of the revolutionary past may also remind the Vietnamese that the present ruled by the Party has not lived up to the sacrifices of the martyred. For either foreigners or locals, the art of the war is at base ambiguous, even if on the surface the meaning seems to be clear—the low art of anger and atrocity seeming to demand acknowledgment of guilt by association from Americans, the high art in state-sponsored museums seeming to demand loyalty to the Communist Party.
One last kind of art exists that the critics have not commented on: the genre of captured war materiel displayed at various battlefield sites and museums. In most cases, the war materiel is merely a tank or a cannon, and its display is not ironically repurposed as art in the way that Marcel Duchamp christened a urinal as art. In at least one memorable instance, however, the sheer scale and style of the display qualifies as art—a remarkable monument of airplanes and their remains shot down by Vietnamese antiaircraft gunners, many of them women. This is the detritus of what the Vietnamese called the “Diên Biên Phú of the Air” for American bombers, and it looms in the courtyard of Hà Nội’s Military History Museum, the Vietnamese military itself a sponsor of art during wartime and afterward, unlike the American military (figure 12.6). Fashioning art from junk is a common Western gesture, and while the technique of the monument is not much different, its spirit is grander and more historical, and it is displayed at a military museum instead of a fine art museum. This artistic integration of the remains of a war machine and of memory work as an industrial practice expresses absolute triumph on a massive scale, with an unnamed collective of artists instead of the individual artist transforming weapons into art. In its form and its content, this mass of metal is an expression of how revolution can fuse art and politics together.
Industries of Memory

An Eye for an Eye, or the Art of Anger

American and Vietnamese societies share two features in their remembrance of the war: one is to remember their own dead, and the other is to remember in anger, usually expressed through what Lucy Lippard calls “gore galore” (62). Recalling one’s own dead is a mark of the dominant way of remembering, expressed most vividly and memorably in Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The powerful abstraction of the wall—with over 58,000 names of the American dead on black granite—takes place against an implied backdrop of figurative representation, in which the most powerful American images of the war, from mainstream print journalism to oppositional art, focus on the pain, suffering, and sorrow of human beings and bodies. The function of a war memorial usually is to remember only one’s own, as is the case with the Trương Sơn Martyrs Cemetery in Quảng Trị, the largest martyrs cemetery in Việt Nam and one that shares the idea of listing the names of the dead. But it is also often the case that war memorials will list the names of dead allies, as the War Memorial of Korea does for Americans and many others from countries in the United Nations. This acknowledgment of allies and friends is something not done by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, despite the fact that the United States called...
on many of its allies to send soldiers to Viêt Nam. Thousands of Korean, Australian, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong soldiers and smaller numbers of soldiers from several other countries also died, not to mention over two hundred thousand South Vietnamese soldiers, who were not allies inasmuch as they were the principal fighters for their own country. The absence of these non-American names is an aesthetic feature of the memorial just as the presence of American names is an aesthetic feature, marking the Viêt Nam War as an American war rather than an international one in which the numbers of non-American military dead greatly outnumbered American military losses. Much of the discussion about Lin’s wall remarks on the power of those names emerging from the black granite of the wall, merging with the reflection of visitors’ faces in the granite and generating a communion between visitor and veteran, living and dead. But if American names are in the foreground, then the unseen names of others compose the dark matter of this wall, the invisible substance against which American mourning and healing shines.10

While Lin’s wall has not been without controversy, it has triumphed as the most memorable memorial to war or its afterlife in the United States, and it stands as the major work of art about the war—perhaps even the only major work of art about the war, if by that we mean something most Americans would recognize. It is an industrial product, the effort of a state and a movement of veterans and citizens, and it is the manifestation of an entire society’s bureaucratic and technological prowess, channeled through the vision of the individual artist, who herself is the outcome of an American program of immigration that funneled some of Asia’s best and brightest (and their children) into American higher education. In contrast to her wall, the minor art about the war is marked by its much smaller scale, its methods considerably more modest than the industrial methods required by the wall. Minor in this sense does not mean lesser in terms of artistic accomplishment, but it does mean being overshadowed, harder to find, and less known to the general public. But the most significant difference is that this minor work is signed in anger and rage, premised as it is on opposing either the war or neutral stances to the war like Lin’s. This oppositional stance is most explicit in Chris Burden’s “The Other Vietnam Memorial,” printed with three million Vietnamese names. Burden is a major artist, and this work is housed in Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. Nonetheless, I call it minor because it speaks in opposition to the majority, nationalist impulses evident in American film, TV, pop culture, and political discourse on the war, most of which is narrowly focused on American experiences. In contrast, many American artists in their minor role not only oppose the war but ask audiences to commemorate the dead of the other side or the dead of both
sides, a gesture that is certainly antipatriotic and, in some cases and at some times, potentially treasonous.

Perhaps the most famous of these artists are Nancy Spero and Martha Rosler, who fuse antiwar critique with feminist politics. Spero’s works from the time of the war and afterward are ghastly, graphic permutations of the war’s horror into sketches and drawings of insect-like helicopters, bombs spewing pus, deformed body parts, and monstrous bodies. She treats combat not just as blood sport but gender clash, with phallic instruments of war and feminized victims (figure 12.7). Rosler likewise sees the war as an extension of deeply held gendered feelings. Whereas many Americans prefer to think of their wars as distant affairs being fought by their men, out of sight and out of mind, Rosler literally brings the war home in her collages, inserting wounded Vietnamese women and children into high-gloss living rooms, or having smiling American housewives open their curtains to scenes of warfare in Viêt Nam (figure 12.8). For Rosler, the human and financial costs of war are hidden in the very fabric of American décor, domesticity, and bliss, leaving blood on all American hands, including those of women and consumers—haunted houses, indeed. Rosler’s collages force viewers to notice what they do not want to see and remember what they do not want to recall by taking images from far away and bringing them very close. This spatial move is characteristic of antiwar art, which not only makes the world smaller but also conversely engages in a widening of the field of memory, working directly against the narrowness of vision that characterizes the nationalist memory of Lin’s wall. Even as that wall has been seen as a statement against war, it is first and foremost a demand to remember dead American soldiers (almost all of whom were male), which Spero and Rosler refuse to do, including in their work instead the images of civilians, women, the mutilated and the disabled, and the enemy dead. By nationalism’s standards, which are premised on refusing to remember the enemy, refusing to remember civilians, refusing to remember shattered bodies, and refusing to acknowledge war’s gendered drive, this is perverse memory work, which is also an ethical memory that stands against the patriotic ethics of nationalism.

While major memory of the nationalist kind has the resources to be expansive, to see and recall widely, it refuses to do so, preferring the narrow focus of remembering one’s own. In striking contrast, the minor art of war memory is committed to using its resources not just to expand memory across national boundaries (a move that is premised on resemblance, implying that the enemy is not so different from us) but also to expanding it across time (mostly through the act of repetition, implying that what happened before can happen again, or that what is happening now has already happened). Thus, Rosler repeats herself with her Iraq War collages, where
she uses the same method as in her Việt Nam War collages to say that nothing much has changed. Sam Wiener’s “45,391 . . . and counting” from 1970 makes the point of repetition explicit in its content, a phalanx of coffins draped in American flags whose images are repeated endlessly in a box of mirrors. Later Wiener turned the repetition of the dead into the repetition of the war when he retitled his work “Those Who Fail to Remember the Past Are Condemned to Repeat It,” referring to US involvement in Central America and perhaps, Lippard thinks, to American wars in the Mideast in 1991 and 2003.\(^\text{11}\) The theme of repetition deals with more than just history. Repetition is also enacted formally, as evidenced in Wiener’s endless coffins and in Burden’s asking us to remember the Vietnamese dead, a task premised on impossibility. Unable to find three million genuine Vietnamese names, Burden repeated four thousand Vietnamese names he found in a phone book (belonging to people who were obviously not dead). What also
marks Burden’s art as minor, especially in contrast to Lin’s, is that neither he nor the Vietnamese state had the resources to find those three million names, whereas Lin and the United States did have the resources to remember the much smaller number of American dead. This capacity is also part of the industry of memory from which art about the war begins: the memory of the state itself, which, in keeping track of its citizens, can enable their memorialization or their erasure through its ability to archive. In contrast, one marker of the minority, to paraphrase James Baldwin, is that nobody knows their names.

Perhaps the ultimate act of repetition and memory in American art about the war is Harrell Fletcher’s “The Art of War” exhibition. Here he photographs the exhibits of Hồ Chí Minh City’s most popular tourist site, the War Remnants Museum, a substantial portion of which is a series of reproductions of Western journalistic photographs recording war atrocities. Many rooms in the museum are dedicated to more mundane matters—international antiwar movements, the history of colonization, postwar reconstruction, and so on—but without a doubt, most visitors remember the atrocities. I saw an abbreviated portion of Fletcher’s exhibition when it came to Los Angeles,
for which he had chosen to cut down his show to focus on the atrocities, even though he had photographed many of the mundane exhibits as well. Like Wiener’s work, Fletcher’s exhibit amounts to a house of mirrors in its concept. Fletcher has photographed reproductions of photographs recording horrendous history, and in so doing both replicates one purpose of the museum—to treat photographs as transparent windows onto factual atrocities—and also reminds us that what we are seeing is not transparent but is instead an aesthetic of brutality, fashioned to respond to the outrageous brutality of an American war machine, as Molotov cocktails might be thrown against an M-60 tank. In Fletcher’s exhibit, the viewer encounters not the museum but framed photographs of photographs, in which—by the simple gestures of reproduction, repetition, and framing—he has turned documentary and journalism into (good or bad) art. Thus, instead of offering a cropped image of Fletcher’s work, I include here my photograph of his book of photographs recording the photographs of the museum’s exhibit (figure 12.9).12

Fletcher’s work reminds viewers that when they look at photographs of atrocities or human damage, they are looking at representations and not just reproductions. They are seeing art in addition to photography, and they are encouraged to remember that photography is art, not just a capturing of reality. That is a generous reading about the power of repetition in Fletcher’s work. A less generous reading arises from my memory of visiting the museum for the first time in 2002, when I was so deeply disturbed by what I saw that I could not bring myself to take a photograph. Was nothing sacred, was nothing private? (No, says Salman Rushdie.)13 I sympathized with the mission of the War Remnants Museum but felt brutalized at the same time, for while I recognized the need to call up the memory of the victims, I felt that they were being violated yet again through another exposure of their dead, tortured, naked, or massacred bodies. Since the museum had already done this, then of course Fletcher himself could do so, too, and thus it is the Vietnamese curators who authorized the repetitions. The dead, violated once through their murder, are violated again in the repetition of their images, even for a supposedly good purpose. For Fletcher, this purpose is twofold: first to force Americans to confront a difficult history, and second to remind them, by analogy, that the war in Iraq has an American prequel in Viêt Nam. Likewise, Burden was intent on signaling obliquely about Iraq in his “The Other Vietnam Memorial.” We’ve done this before, the artists are saying, and we’re doing it again. (Same-same but different, the Vietnamese supposedly said during the war.) Even the dead must be marshaled to fight in the war against war. Eventually I submitted to this message and its political imperative, as well as to the fear of not remembering what I was
seeing—the fear that the museum’s memories themselves would change over the years without my knowing, as evidenced by how the bottled, deformed fetuses of Agent Orange victims, an apparently permanent part of the exhibit, disappeared. I could barely look at them in 2002 and had a graduate student take pictures of them for me in 2008; by the time I visited again in 2009, they were gone. So then I took pictures of everything—the mundane and the horrifying, the machinery and the humanity, the living and the dead—furiously.

**Vietnamese American Art, or Somewhere between Triumph and Trauma**

If the war in Viêt Nam was a total war, then must the war in art be a total war? So it would seem in Vietnamese war art, where the entire population of the north and the patriotic south are depicted, not just fighting soldiers: women, children, the elderly, the militia, civilians, laborers, and party leaders, all cast visually in one way or another as part of a massive liberation campaign. From art museum to history museum and from historical site to memorial park, the ideological messages and images of war and revolution tend to be repetitive, working in either the high mode of celebrating state,
soldier, and supporter or the low mode of tattooing atrocity onto the visi-
tor’s eyeball. Trauma turns into triumph through the therapeutic narrative
of revolution as closure to a history of French colonialism and American oc-
cupation. The closure is far from complete, however, as the insistent images
of death and destruction remain visible, raising other ways of interpreting
revolutionary history through the haunting presence of the unspeakable and
the dead.

Repetition is at work in American art as well, although for different pur-
poses, where the difference is not so much between high and low as between
state art and private art. In American state art, all the forces of American
society were required for the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,
a massive work chiseled into the American earth where the American dead
are recalled repetitively, via their names. In antiwar American art, imagi-
native reach and commemorative desire become global even if the formal
scale is small—the artists link past to present and future through repetition,
connecting the war in Viêt Nam to other wars and wars abroad to conflicts
at home about race, poverty, and inequality. In state art, therapy is done via
the citizen’s and the survivor’s patriotic communion with the heroic military
dead. But in antiwar art, the intent is to prevent therapy, closure, and rec-
onciliation; to prevent the viewer from moving on; to jam a stick into the
gears of the war machine. In all these cases, artists are aware that confront-
ing or acknowledging the awesomeness of the American war machine calls
for a memory machine. In this memory machine, the artist and her product
are only part of something larger, an effort by the state or a movement of
like-minded artists, curators, and activists. Each of these memory machines
needs an ethics to guide it—software or a set of decisions about who or
what to remember, and who or what to forget.

Like the digital language of software, memory works as an endless set of
binary decisions about remembering and forgetting, with an implied, mys-
terious third term—the “and” or the gap between a one and a zero. The
filmmaker Chris Marker uses a different metaphor in his film Sans Soleil to
suggest the same outcome when he says that the “function of remembering
is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining.” A garment and its
lining, the outside and the inside, the face and the back—all are joined to-
gether rather than remaining simply one or the other. As remembering and
forgetting are entwined together, so are the histories of Viêt Nam and the
United States. An ethical memory does not condemn forgetting for forget-
ting’s sake, since forgetting is necessary for memory, clearing the ground to
let memory happen. Instead, ethical memory points to the most grievous of
errors in forgetting—usually the forgetting of those whose memories contest
our own—while also acknowledging that those we choose to forget commit
those same errors. In their own ways, Vietnamese and American cultures have made efforts to remember the other side. Perhaps because those are mostly minor efforts on the American side, the Vietnamese do not notice them, and perhaps because Americans who visit Việt Nam tend to see what they want to see—a repressive society hung up on war trauma—they do not notice the Vietnamese efforts. Thus, visitors remark on the uniformity of war representation and the oppressiveness of state memory, without noticing how Americans are acknowledged, as shown in the War Remnants Museum’s exhibits on the American antiwar movement and on Agent Orange’s effects on Americans. Is Vietnamese memory selective? Yes. Amnesiac? Not completely. Racist, as is the usual dominant American version of the Vietnamese? Rarely.

Given the one-sidedness and dominance of nationalist memory, however, efforts to be judicious and to remember both sides are notable even when they are flawed. The war comic *The Other Side* by Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart is a radical departure from the war comics of my youth, in which the Japanese of World War II, the Chinese and North Koreans of the Korean War, and the Vietnamese were interchangeable yellow-skinned little men screaming “Aiieeee!!!” *The Other Side* cuts between the story of an American soldier and a humanly rendered North Vietnamese soldier, both enduring horrific combat until their fateful confrontation. The American kills the Vietnamese and returns home, where he is haunted not only by images of dead friends and dead enemies but by visions of his family and neighbors with their heads blown off, as were the heads of Vietnamese villagers. *The Other Side* is a remarkable work of popular art, but in retrospect, it is no accident that the Vietnamese has to die and the American has to be haunted. Hollywood film has already established the narrative about the person of color whose suffering serves the white man, who is traumatized but nevertheless survives. Beyond this problem, however, what the comic displays very graphically is the problem of duality, of the limits of lending memory to the enemy, for one thing that is forgotten is the South Vietnamese who fought with the Americans. They are never shown.

Thus I give equal weight here not just to the art of Vietnamese and Americans but to the often overlooked South Vietnamese Americans who fled their lost war and came to the United States, where they found that no one likes losers. Their stories fit into neither the triumphant national narrative of Việt Nam nor the sorrowful one of the United States. Ironically, to the extent that Americans want to remember Việt Nam and reconcile with it, they are mostly interested in their former Vietnamese enemies, not their former allies who have settled in their own country. It is likewise the case with the Vietnamese that they are more interested in the memories of their American
enemy than in the memories of their evicted cousins in the Vietnamese diaspora. But these Vietnamese American cousins are not just victims or saints. Even as they clamor to be remembered by both Americans and Vietnamese, they are hardly immune themselves to amnesia. It is this triangulation of memory that concerns me, rather than the bifurcation of memory between two sides, so suggestively alluded to in the usual dichotomies of remembering and forgetting, memory and amnesia, and history and the present, in which what is almost always privileged is everything associated with recall, particularly for members of the minority whose names no one knows. But recalling the past and remembering injustice is not as uncomplicated a good as it may seem, as Vietnamese American art shows.

Vietnamese American artwork expresses and reflects the tensions of being in between opposing sides and of being an aspiring minority in the United States, framed by the history of the war and by the cultural politics of art markets. These tensions and aspirations lead to contrasting tendencies, depending on whether Vietnamese American artists are participating in a minor aesthetic oriented toward their ethnic community or a major aesthetic targeted at national and international audiences, particularly when the topic is war and memory. The minor aesthetic and the discourse through which it is received are shown most clearly in the case of controversial works that supposedly deal with communism. One of the best-known examples is the controversial FOB II art exhibit of 2009, organized by Orange County’s Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association and staged in the largest Vietnamese diasporic community in the world (FOB stands for “fresh off the boat,” an ethnic slur against refugees that refugees sometimes use against each other, maliciously or humorously). The exhibit featured over fifty artists from Việt Nam and its diaspora, most of whom did not deal with communism or the war, and many of whom showed sophisticated work. But a handful of pieces that foregrounded communist imagery drew the ire of the community, most notably Brian Doan’s “Thu Duc” (2008). “Thu Duc” features a young woman wearing a tank top with the Communist flag and a small bust of Ho Chi Minh. Community protestors defaced the image during a significant and vocal demonstration against the exhibit, charging that it showed sympathy toward communism. The protestors were ultimately successful in making the exhibit a citywide issue and forcing it to close. The controversial artwork was nowhere near as interesting as the protests it provoked and the questions protestors raised concerning artistic freedom, censorship, filial piety, respect for the community, and the politics of representation. In this case, the artwork and the debates about it are minor because the discourse addressing them exemplifies how the space of
the minority is one in which everything is political, becomes political, or is perceived as political, with the political defined in rigid ways—in this case, communist or not communist, the only distinction that matters in Little Saigon, Orange County. Representational art of the kind that sparked the protest against the FOB II exhibit speaks to memory explicitly, and in minor discourse, memory is one of the most dangerous of battlegrounds.

The Vietnamese American artwork that is major negotiates this battleground more successfully in the sense of not being as provocative, and of having aesthetic features that are more refined and political sentiments that are more ambiguous. The result is reward outside of the ethnic community, both for the artists and their works. Dinh Q. Lê is perhaps the best known Vietnamese American artist, and his work exemplifies the strategy of negotiation, ambiguity, and refinement characteristic of the major discourse in Vietnamese American art. His most famous body of work weaves iconic American images of the war together with anonymous Vietnamese photographs, the method of his work literally being a form of reconciliation (figure 12.10). As I have discussed his work in greater detail elsewhere, I focus here on two other artists who have achieved some significant recognition in the mainstream art world, Binh Danh and An-My Lê. In all three cases, what is notable is how the artists have been recognized not only for the content of their work but also for

Figure 12.10. Dinh Q. Lê, “Doi Moi (Napalmmed Girl),” C-print and linen tape, 48 1/4 x 70 inches, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.
their technical precision and formal achievements. Thus, in Danh’s work, what strikes his critics is his use of wartime photographs combined with an innovative approach in which he imprints the images of the photographs with chlorophyll on leaves (figure 12.11). Photography and its evocation of death and haunting are well known, and Danh takes that formal element of photography; selects photographs that are often explicitly about combat, pain, trauma, or the dead; and layers the photographic medium on the medium of leaves, which evoke nature and the cycle of life, death, and regeneration. The blending of media, as in Lê’s case, is harmonious, while at the same time gesturing at the discordant—the legacy of war and death in memory.

In contrast, minor art work gestures at the discordant without at the same time finding a method that allows the viewer a moment of communion with the pain being displayed. The distinction between major and minor speaks to the way the work is received by critics and mainstream audiences, not necessarily to the inherent value of the work itself. In some contexts, the minor is necessary, a needle in the eye of the person who would rather look away from the horror of the past, and who will respond in kind to such provocation. But the pleasures of major work such that of Lê or Danh comes with a cost, both for the viewer who must pay the requisite price for owning such popular work and potentially for other artists and viewers. Viewers are spared the discomfort of confrontation, not necessarily in the work itself,
but through the transformation of pain into art. The making of trauma into something beautiful reduces the likelihood that communities outside of the art world will respond negatively to the work. Focusing on American soldiers or on the Vietnamese as victims, the work of Lê and Danh avoids dealing with the symbols most likely to inflame the Vietnamese American community—flags, Hồ Chí Minh, communist images, and anything else that could evoke communist representation or the idea of the South Vietnamese as being anything but victims. Where Lê and Danh’s work is potentially most controversial is where it approaches those who cannot speak back, the dead—in this case their use of photographs from Tuol Sleng. These are photographs of the Cambodian victims of the Khmer Rouge, taken by the Khmer Rouge themselves, who stole not just the lives of their victims but also their images. These photographs are powerful in both their muteness and in their presentation by Lê and Danh (figure 12.12). But the beauty of the works and the use of images of the dead inevitably raises the question of the artists’ ethical obligations to the dead, which is different from the ethical obligations of documentarians and photojournalists. Is there another way for artists to picture the dead without using their images?

Lê’s book Small Wars responds to this problem by implication. Small Wars contains three of her photographic exhibits, and in the title exhibit she photographs Americans who reenact the Việt Nam War. Absent from these images are the blood, death, trauma, and pain of war photography, particularly Việt Nam War photography. She is cognizant of such images, as are her subjects, as is clear in a photograph for which the war reenactors asked her to play the role of a Viet Cong sniper (figure 12.13). American war photographers never captured such an image, which is more comparable to what North Vietnamese photographers shot. The framer is framed here, which brings attention not only to Lê’s status as a Vietnamese shooting these Americans in more ways than one, but also to the history of posed scenes in war photography. Most infamously, it is the dead who are repositioned by the photographer, as in Matthew Brady’s Civil War photographs, but here it is the living, playing out images already seen in photographic history. Instead of simply looking at photographs and identifying with their subjects, these reenactors literally embody the past, as does the photographer in this instance. Lê’s photograph suggests the intensity of identification for both Americans and Vietnamese who have seen war photographs, either as viewers or as photographers themselves. This intensity of identification is also possible for the viewers of Lê’s photographs, which are ultimately less about the history of the war than about our relationship to the memory of that history.

The absence of the dead in Lê’s photographs and in the reenactment she records signals at least two things. One is that we should leave the dead
alone: they have suffered enough already. But the other is that the absence of
the dead allows war’s reenactment, both in the playful sense that is recorded
in Lê’s photograph and in the more troubling sense of war’s repetition on
real battlefields. The Viêt Nam War continues to have meaning for many in
this sense of repetition, found in the debates over the wars in Iraq and Af-
ghanistan. Are they repetitions of the previous tragedy of the Viêt Nam War,
or are they repetitions with a difference, new wars that can be won through
having learned the lessons of the lost war? The paradox in writing about
the memories of this war is that I may reinforce the tendency for Americans,

Figure 12.12. Binh Danh, “Ancestral Altar #20,” chlorophyll prints, butterfly speci-
men, and resin, 32 x 27.5 inches, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.
and many people elsewhere, to remember Viêt Nam as a war rather than a country. But my purpose is not to argue that we should remember the war for its own sake or even for the purpose of mourning the four million dead of the many countries involved, since the war was but one conflict in a long line of horrific wars. Instead, the most important reason to remember is the fear of repetition. As Freud said, what we do not remember, we will repeat. What we do not work through, we will act out. Both Viêt Nam and the United States, and their diverse populations, share this problem posed by amnesia. The war remains important because we have more to fear from consigning it to the past than from confronting its continuing relevance, this war that remains impossible to forget, yet difficult to remember.

Notes

1. I use Vietnamese diacritics in Vietnamese personal and place names, with exceptions for those Vietnamese Americans who generally do not use those diacritics in describing themselves.

2. For a valuable study of North Vietnamese visual and war memories, see Schwenkel.

4. On technologies of memory and the Việt Nam War, see Sturken.
5. On Vietnamese memorial practices, see Malarney and the essays in Ho Tai, *The Country of Memory*.
6. Since the first draft of this essay was written, the Revolution Museum of Hồ Chí Minh City changed its name to the Museum of Hồ Chí Minh City.
7. For a more detailed exploration of the painting tradition in Vietnamese art, see Taylor.
8. Many of these tourists have recorded their sentiments in the comment books that are a common feature of Vietnamese museums, as Laderman documents.
9. For an example of junk repurposed as art, see Nancy Rubins’s sculpture *Airplane Parts* in the courtyard of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.
10. Sturken provides an excellent reading of Lin’s memorial. For additional criticism and context, see Hass.
11. The art of Weiner, Rosler, and Spero, as well as that of many other artists dealing with the war, are found in Lippard.
12. Fletcher’s exhibit was called “The Art of War,” but his book was titled *The American War*.
13. Rushdie’s answer is found in his essay “Is Nothing Sacred?,” in *Imaginary Homelands*.
14. For a very useful account of Vietnamese American art, see Lê.
15. For an account of the FOB II controversy, see Duong and Pelaud.
16. For more on Dinh’s artwork, see Nguyen.

**Works Cited**


