introduction

RISKY RETURNS, RESTAGINGS, AND REVOLUTIONS

Through the multivalent frame of “return engagements,” this book examines modernity, popular visual culture, and trauma in contemporary art in Southeast Asia and Asian America, with a focus on Việt Nam and Cambodia—two countries linked historically and regionally with each other and the United States. In this political-economic-cultural-industrial critique I assert that artistic voices strategically emerge in tandem with national, regional, and transnational socioeconomic discourse. This project makes the hierarchies of art histories and art markets—and the negotiations by artists, scholars, and organizers—explicit. I highlight the frameworks of desirability within the art market, scholarship, and institutions, as well as efforts by artists and organizers to make themselves more desirable (and legible) to these external forces. I investigate the desire of many contemporary experimental Cambodian and Vietnamese local and diasporic artists to gain recognition in the international art market and attain both symbolic and real capital.

In its common usage, a *return engagement* is a public exhibition that is “performed, presented, or taking place again.”[1] It is the future promise of a past act; a repeat performance on the stage. The restaging or “reenactment,” as it were, occurs in theater, but I also extend it to other cultural arenas, including theaters of war. I argue that the legacies and strategies of war, culture, and empire are intertwined, recurring, reenacted. To revolt, we must grapple with the material, militarized, and metaphysical aspects of return. As Marita Sturken and Việt Thanh Nguyễn, among others, observe, wars are "staged" twice: once in combat, and then in memory, including in cultural productions (such as visual art and film, the focus of this book).

Art is an ideological and ontological battleground. One of Southeast Asia's most visible returning annual regional exhibitions is tellingly entitled Art Stage Singapore. Its name suggests the interplay—and tensions—between local and international arenas; artists are actors on this high-stakes (art) world "stage." Critics of international art biennales bemoan that the same jet-set circuit of well-known artists return again and again, in different climes at differing times—the future promise of a past act. At Art Stage Singapore, "emerging" and "established" artists are presented—the changing faces of the future of Southeast Asian art, whose works often grapple with the traumas of the past (wars) and present (modernity).

Beyond regional and international showcases, *stage* can also refer to the stages or cycles of life and death. In this sense, the word *return* also suggests cyclical motion, as in "revolve," as well as "revolution." The Spanish verb *volver* roughly translates as "to return" or "to become," and the French *revolutare* means "to roll or revolve."[2] To come back is to become (and to become undone), to transform—to evolve, personally and politically. The segments that follow outline my framing of return and its connection to revolt and revolution as cyclical engagements.

I recenter the importance of return in political and personal—critical and creative—change. Although now seen as linear, revolution is circular. "The development of two words, revolt and revolution, from the sense of a circular movement to the sense of a political rising, can hardly be simple coincidence," notes the cultural theorist Raymond Williams.[3] The word *revolution* is connected with "sudden and violent change."[4] In contemporary use, it is associated with both political and technological turns (e.g., Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution of 2014; the digital revolution). The industrial revolution involved both democratic reform and technical inventions (steam engine, iron, steel).

To revolt, to revolve—return, turn again—and to engage in revolution are intrinsically linked. Tracing the etymology of *revolution*, Williams notes that the term encompasses power's cyclical nature. In its earliest English usage in the fourteenth century, the word indicated a "revolving movement in space or time." *Revolution*'s association with circular movement predated its political usage, but the two are tied. Shifting from "circular movment to a rising," Williams notes that *revolt* and *revolution* had two underlying connections. First, socioeconomic order is upended, the "low" putting themselves over the "high." The second connection is the image of the wheel of fortune: "men were revolved" around fortune's wheel, "topsy-turvy . . . first up, then down."[5] Through rebellion, the normalized top of society is upended by its lowest rungs.[6]

In both connections of *revolt* and *revolution*, top and bottom positions are reversed, repeatedly. "History from the bottom up"—scholarship focused on common struggles (embodied by C. L. R. James's *Black Jacobins* and Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*, among others)—marks a departure from elitist, "top-down" perspectives. The cultural critic and artist Nguyễn Tân Hoàng advocates for a queer "bottom" politics that unmoors top-bottom and black-white hierarchal binaries of racialized, sexualized representation—in politics, pornography, and mass and social media. While powerful interventions, these frameworks still reinscribe hegemonic frameworks, if only to invert them.[7] Instead of arborescent (hierarchical, tree-like, binary) or the rhizomatic (nomadic) knowledge championed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I am asserting a framework that is cyclical, circular, focused on engaged return. What we consider an overturning (revolution) is really a returning.

To return is to recognize repeating rhetoric (across continents, histories, disciplines) and long-term repercussions. The queer theorist Sara Ahmed observes, "The violence of revolting 'repeats' the violence which is its cause. . . . [R]evolutionaries expose violence, but the violence they expose is not recognized as violence: structural violence is veiled."[8] How, then, to recognize structural violence embedded in our institutions, embodied in ourselves?[9] As Frantz Fanon observes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, postcolonial subjects often reinstate neocolonial strictures and structures with more fervency than their colonial forebears.[10] With this in mind, the move toward a decolonial aesthetics merely masks a neocolonial ethics in which the glut of biennials and triennials within the "periphery" may not radically destabilize (art world) hierarchies. Ahmed writes, "To revolt is to be undone—it is to not produce an inheritance. And yet, a revolution does not empty the world of significance; it does not create blank pages. The writing might be on the wall, even when the walls come down."[11] As mentioned earlier, *volver* means both to return and to become. To revolt and to return (*volver*) is to be at once undone and to become—a potentiality. I link this to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming"—a process of exchange and transformation—that I elaborate on in chapter 2.

Revolt, revolve, return. In this framework, revolution does not obliterate "the writing on the wall." Yet this revolt, this return is queer in that it does not (re)produce an inheritance (heteronormative or homonormative). It does not replicate or repeat its root violence. To delink the veiled violence of empire and its cultural hegemony does not mean to shut it down (one cannot entirely erase its traces) or to let it shut one down.

There are affective components of revolution. To revolt is also the "willingness to be stressed, let the present get under your skin. To revolt is an "'out-of-skin' experience," as Ahmed notes.[12] To revolt, return (*volver*, *revolutar*) is to engage the senses, both corporeal and political. Finding something revolting or senseless gets "under your skin"—it may jolt you out of your body and into the political body—from apathy to engagement.

Affective Engagements

An engagement is a promise, an arrangement, an agreement—even a dispute. My concept encompasses both acceptance and refusal but most important, ambivalence. *Engagement* is defined as (1) a promise to wed; (2) a plan to meet someone or do something at a particular time; (3) the start of a military fight; and (4) involvement. In all instances, the term points at contingency, liminality: engagement is a process, a reckoning with your skins. By returning to the site of multiple engagements—military, social, business, and romantic—we recognize that rupture and desire are not separate affairs; they often inform one another.

Late capitalism encourages endless consumer desire: the promise of rapture without disruption. The term *disrupt* has been adopted within commodity's lexicon (for example, "She/he is disrupting the industry"). The Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse argues that capitalism anticipates and absorbs revolutionary sentiments. Yet this counterrevolution is largely preventative—it can be ruptured. Cultural production can be a tool of both domination and liberation.

Aesthetic engagement has long been used for political ends, with varying means. In the chapter entitled "Art and Revolution," Marcuse notes the varying strategies of art to reflect and change sociopolitical reality. The core dialectical tension is between "reality" and symbolic meaning: "political 'engagement' becomes a problem of 'technique,' and instead of translating art into reality it is translated to a new aesthetic form."[13] Regardless of formal or conceptual "technique," Marcuse supports art's subversive potential and its wide berth of (revolutionary) tactics.[14] These strategies can range from pop art appropriation to its opposite, an avant-gardist aesthetics of "total alienation," championed by Theodor Adorno.[15] For example, the composer John

Cage's aesthetics of alienation prioritizes silence and repetition—radical formal and conceptual gestures. Yet revolution is not erasure; Marcuse notes, "The most extreme political content does not repel traditional forms."[16] Again, revolution is not a "blank slate," erase the writing on a demolished wall.[17] Revolution is not amnesia but a re-membering, re-making, re-turning.

Dealing with damage requires an ethics of return that is not reactive but sustained, a gradual shifting of oneself and one's sphere. In *The Long Revolution*, Williams states, "We respond to disturbance not only by remaking ourselves, but if we can, by remaking the environment. . . . [T]his is not only how the artist lives and works, but how men live and work, in a long process, ending and beginning again."[18] By ending and beginning again and again, the world is remade, reenvisioned. Elaine Scarry also observes that after traumatic events in which the world is "undone," artists "remake," reconstitute the world again.[19] The ritual of return is both physical and metaphysical. As artists, we come back again and again to our studios, computers, desks—our paintings, pixels, and papers—our musings and our muses.

The remaking and reconnecting of ourselves and our environs—nature and humanity—is a steady process. Marcuse proposes that nature is key to bridging the personal and the political. Through Cartesian duality (mind/body split) we have become disconnected from both nature and our own nature. We have disassociated our individual bodies from the body politic. Citing the psychologist C. G. Jung, Williams outlines a dialectic between artists and their output, between individual and collective expression. Creativity is a process of return: "The general creative activity is a human process, of which the artist is, in his art, the impersonal embodiment, taking us back to the level of experience at which man lives, not the individual."[20] The creative process may not take us back to a primordial site (Charles Darwin) or a primal scene (Sigmund Freud)—it returns our humanity. Living, then, becomes quest and question ("how the artist works and lives," "the level of experience at which man lives"). The menace of death remains—physical death and social death.

After disturbance, what drives us to remake the world? In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse reframes Freud's "return of the repressed" and society's two main drives, eros and thanatos (sex and death), from the negative to the life-affirming. Nature (and human nature) is not seen as threatening. There is no need to subsume and subdue the natural through scientific rationality and disciplinary regimes. Instead of a force that needs to be dominated and sublimated, Marcuse argues for a liberatory politics that embraces eros (embodied knowledge/desire) alongside logos (rational knowledge/reason).[21] The word *desire* comes from the Latin phrase *de sidere*, meaning "from the stars." This suggests that our deepest desires entail reconsidering our earthbound orientations, returning to our true north, our guiding star. Postcolonial, queer, and feminist scholars also advocate for theories of subjectivity to supplant continental philosophy's overreliance on abstract objectivity.

Apart from the separation of mind and body, the core question is how we deal with eternal separation. Nietzsche's optimistic eternal return predated Freud's pessimistic return of the repressed. Some scholars have argued that the former influenced the latter.[22] Nietzsche's philosophical question obviates the psychosomatic quandary of inhibited instincts. Marcuse and Nietzsche (and Jacques Derrida later on) wrestled with the question of living knowing that we—and our loved ones—will die. In short, unless one's relationship to death is reconciled, individual liberation is impossible. The eternal return, or eternal recurrence, proposes that all energy recurs endlessly: we experience our lives and relationships infinitely. From the infinite to the infinitesimal, every interaction has profound significance: our fleeting interactions, our kindness (or lack thereof) to strangers. Hence, Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati* (love of fate) plays a crucial role: we must embrace the now, this ephemeral yet eternal conundrum. If we must return ad infinitum (literally or metaphorically), then we must affirm life again and again.[23] To live is to accept traumas and disappointment over and over again.[24] Nietzsche claims that only the *Übermensch*—idealized man—can appreciate this new, affirmative concept of life. Marcuse disagrees with this elitist vision and seeks egalitarian liberation for all humanity.

Buddhist philosophy is likewise concerned with liberation and return. Within a Buddhist cosmology, energy is also eternally recurring. Liberation is a question of choice. We choose to embrace this moment, our fate (*amor fati*). Boddhisattvas—those close to reaching enlightenment—choose to return again and again to help all suffering sentient beings find liberation. The Sōtō priest Kōtō Uchiyama writes, "For us as bodhisattvas, all aspects of life, including the fate of humanity itself, live within us."[25] There is no distinction between the inner and outer worlds. Liberation is creative act, deliberate action, not subject to fate (or "karma"). Williams notes that is the artist "taking us back" to the "experience at which [humankind] lives, and not the individual."[26] The Dalai Lama clarifies, "Literally, karma means 'action' and refers to the intentional acts of sentient beings. . . . Intentions results in acts. . . . The chain reaction of interlocking causes and effects operates not only in individuals but also for groups and societies, not just in one lifetime but across many lifetimes."[27] In a sense, this cycle of passions—wars and loves—recurs without end, as human history attests.

Bridging spiritual and scientific perspectives, the Dalai Lama engaged leading thinkers on infinite return and interconnectedness. He writes, "In physics, the deeply interdependent nature of reality has been brought into sharp focus by the EPR paradox—named after its creators [Albert Einstein, Boris Podolsky, and Nathan Rosen]. . . . There seems, according to quantum mechanics, to be a startling and profound interconnectedness at the heart of physics."[28] Other theories of the universe (e.g., big bounce, related to big bang) envision cyclical expansions and contractions of endless (and beginning-less) cosmos, akin to Indian Mahayana conceptions of an "incalculable" multiverse.[29] Like the ethos of Nietzsche's eternal return, the Dalai Lama states, "What we do and think in our own lives becomes extremely important as it affects everything we're connected to."[30] From the micro to the macro level, all is interdependent.

A return engagement takes us "back" from potentially isolating personal experience to empowering, politically transformative encounters. Through this tracing, I assert that discourses on revolution, liberation, and creation hinges on cyclical return, repetition—eternal return, karma. A concept tethered to revolution and liberation, the visual image and imagination is likewise linked to ideas of repetition. This logic can be traced to the nineteenth-century poet-philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge's assertion that artistic perception is a creative act (and not a mimetic one, as Renaissance worldviews, inherited from Plato and Aristotle, would have it). Rather than divine imitation, imagination is reiteration, a reflection of higher consciousness: "Imagination . . . is the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a *repetition* in the finite mind."[31] Imagination, creativity is a ritual, a return to the sacred—an individual's process of getting in touch with the "finite mind" and the infinite.[32] Fleeting individual views become enduring cultural expression. This is part of Williams's emergent "structure of feeling": the ineffable expressions of a cultural moment, political momentum.

Coming back time and again to psychological and physical spaces, imagined and real, we open up new ways to think about the relationship between self and other: humanity lives within us. Images are enacted. Imagination can be both grounded and metaphysical. In contrast, Marcuse idealizes the role of the imagination: utopic visions. As in Buddhist intentionality (karma as thoughts driving action), I see imagination as purpose-driven—intractable parts of mind, body, and spirit. The term *imagination* opens up political possibilities. It also evokes wars over images and ideology, including culture wars and cold and hot wars, then and now.

Arjun Appadurai notes in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* that, through individual and collective imaginaries, communities are created across physical and psychic boundaries. The imagination is viewed as a “social practice,” not a fixed process that allows for multifaceted negotiations of space, temporality, and agency.[33] His celebratory call for examining media, mass migration, and the imagination is a provocative stance. He does not, however, fully address the complexities of such intersections; nor does he address the inequities of such interactions. Building on Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities,”[34] my work highlights the differential hierarchies of legibility, privilege, marketing, and meaning in transnational cultural consumption and cultural work within a more localized, less universally cosmopolitan sphere. Framing communities connected through imagination as celebratory examples of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity can be dangerous.

Imagination has corporeal consequences. Consider the poet Claudia Rankine’s fragment from *Citizen*: “Because white men can’t / police their imagination / black men are dying.”[35] Imagination is also ideology, insidious, invasive—at times, inspired. How do we use our imaginations, and how are we the image of our nations? The racialized violence on US soil also comprises acts of imagination, as Rankine suggests. According to the *Washington Post*’s real-time National Police Shootings Database, there were 963 incidents of fatal deaths in 2016; 984 in 2017; 992 in 2018; and, in 2019, an average two deaths a day. As of August 2020, 1,000 people in the US have been shot and killed by the police since the beginning of the year, in the midst of a global pandemic and in light of protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.[36] Historicity repeats itself: the US Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 banned Asians and Arabs and restricted immigration for southern and eastern Europeans. The Obama administration deported more than 2.7 million immigrants, then the highest of any presidential administration.[37] In December 2017, President Donald Trump proposed restricting the number of immigrants to forty-five thousand.[38] Threats continue: walls for Mexico and Muslim bans. Banner years: Brexit, Rohingya refugees of genocide, international anti-immigrant sentiment in an age in which displacement is at its apex. Imagination as fear wreaks ceaseless havoc. Imagination as empathy calls us back to be engaged with those in need of help, infinitely.

Evolution and revolution appear to be temporal opposites, yet they are aligned. *Evolution* connotes slow biological Darwinian processes, whereas *revolution* implies rapid leaps. Evolution, like revolution, is a cyclical process. Evolution's Latin root (*evolver*) means a rolling out (or unrolling a book). Shifting from the literal (and literary—a book) to the metaphorical, evolution refers to "both to the divine creation and to the working-out, the developing formation, of Ideas or Ideal Principles. It is clear from the root sense . . . what is implied is the 'unrolling' of something that already exists," Williams writes.[39] Again, the creative act is a reiterative act—not spontaneously arising but eternal. This unfurling of "something that already exists" recalls both Western and Eastern scientific and philosophical constructs (eternal return, quantum physics, karma) discussed earlier. The expansion of deep wisdom is a continual working out, working through.

Evolution and revolution can be a dialectic. As stated earlier, one of revolution's root words, the French *revolutare* means "to roll." To roll (revolution) is to bind—to become bound to others in political solidarity. To become unbound, unbidden from the group (evolution) follows the logic of singular advancement: survival of the fittest. Yet to unroll "something that already exists" can be a movement encompassing the individual, social (Ideal Principles) and the spiritual (the divine). To become (*volver* "return") and to become undone (revolt) is to simultaneously bind oneself with embodied experience (eros) and unsheathe scrolls of knowledge (*logos*). It is telos and demos.

For a revolution in ethics and aesthetics to occur, we must abandon dyadic, linear, and reactionary thinking. Williams's call for a "Long Revolution" combines both aspects of evolution and revolution: the development of heightened consciousness. This is the "working out, working through" of an emancipatory cultural politics over an extended time frame. Williams's Long Revolution is a cultural one, which, he suggests, develops alongside democratic and industrial revolutions. His "short" revolutions are political uprisings, insurgencies: "We need not identify revolution with violence or with a sudden capture of state power. Even where such events occur, the essential transformation is indeed a long revolution." His conception of the Long Revolution is a process that arguably spans centuries and countries. This Long Revolution, I suggest, dovetails with Lisa Lowe's conception of the "intimacies" of the four continents in which seemingly disparate disciplines (history, area studies, anthropology) and disparate violence (e.g., slave trade, indigenous genocide, and so on) across time and space are indeed connected by empire's machinations and needs. Instead of taking this roving telescopic view, my study zooms in to focus on the long shadows of the Việt Nam War while keeping this wider geopolitical perspective in mind.

Marcuse and Williams both wrote during the "Vietnamese revolution" (as Anthony Barnett calls it in the updated preface to Williams's book).[40] Barnett observes that we are now indeed living in revolutionary times. The digital revolution has also precipitated political ones (Arab Spring, Taksim Square, and so on). Writing in the early 1970s, Marcuse explicitly references Việt Nam as a beacon, a potential, a paradigm of Third World resistance. And yes, he also references it as a pity and "true horror story": the killing of students at Kent State, "wholesale massacres" of Indochinese and others deemed "in revolt against governments subservient to imperialist [Western] forces."[41] Then, as now, the threat has shifted, but the attack continues: then against communism; now against terrorism, both domestically and abroad. *Volver* "revolt, return"; *revolutare* "revolution": at once undone and "to become." Then and now, Việt Nam returns as political and racialized specter, as Sylvia Chong suggests—a hauntology on the edges of perception. Chong's "Oriental obscene" at once obfuscates, hides "off-scene," the mise-en-scène of eternal racial triangulation for black, yellow, and white bodies within the North American political and mass-media imaginary. At the same time, it is a spectacle of raced, sexed violence on the air, on-screen again and again. Asian American scholars such as Long Bui, Chong, and V. T. Nguyễn, among others, assert that these repetitions continue from the Cold War to today, largely unchanged. Bui calls these valences the "returns of war," in which Vietnamization—Nixon's 1969 policy of public US military withdrawal that was actually a secret escalation—founded other foreign policies that leave legacies of debt from the past to the future through the figure of the refugee.[42]

Suffering Southeast Asian, Syrian, and North African refugees embody the pornography of violence, as I call it. This can be seen as the return of the repressed. The "Vietnamese revolution" succeeded and failed. I argue for an alternative reading in which haunting is not pathology. The recurring ghosts of empire are not symptoms of domination but, rather, spirits of liberation.

I argue that return is a strategic and revolutionary act. To return is to revolt, to be undone, to become. Williams proclaims, "I see revolution as the inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder, to which we can respond in varying ways."[43] Revolution can address traumatic wounds, redress a neoliberal world system in disorder, from short- to long-term strategies—the longue dureé.

Return marks a break, a reconsideration. In returning, something imperceptibly, irrevocably shifts. Revisiting psychic and physical spaces time and again, we open up new ways to think about the relationship between history and modernity, rupture and wholeness. In reengaging personal and public archives, artists and audiences alike participate in forming dialogues beyond dominant mass media and political narratives. These extended engagements, these return engagements, are vexed ones.

Return: YIELD PROFIT

A main focus of this book is the international art market's fetishization of trauma and transnational difference. For example, Southeast Asian artists are often rendered invisible unless they make work that plays into hypervisible discourses of trauma. For instance, Binh Danh—an Asian American artist born in 1977 to a Cambodian father and Vietnamese mother—has built a profitable career grappling with the aftermath of trauma. His best-known and most collected works are "chlorophyll prints" addressing the Việt Nam War. The prints are portraits of soldiers and civilians imprinted on leaves through a photosynthetic photographic process he developed. In 2011 he had a solo exhibition of chlorophyll prints and daguerreotypes at the North Carolina Museum of Art entitled *In the Eclipse of Angkor*. This body of work was the culmination of a trip to Angkor Wat, Cambodia's famous Khmer temple, in 2008, as well as to two sites associated with genocide in Cambodia: Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Choeung Ek.[44] Danh's daguerreotypes "Divinities of Angkor #1" (2008 [plate 1]) and "Ghost of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum #2" (2008 [plate 2]) are, respectively, images of an អប្សរា (*apsara* "celestial female dancer/nymph") carving at Angkor Wat and a re-photograph of a young female victim of Tuol Sleng prison. It seems possible that these works refer to a phenomenon Phnom Penh–based curator Erin Gleeson has lamented: curators' and collectors' interest in art about Cambodia is often limited to depictions of "temples and trauma."[45] In this tourism through art, ancient ruins become aesthetic shorthand for the country. Psychic ruins become anesthetic.

The Asian American cultural studies scholar Cathy Schlund-Vials suggests that artists returning to Cambodia in body and in memory, such as Binh Danh, offer an "alternative memory" to US and Cambodian political amnesia. She notes that facets of the Khmer Rouge genocide are strategically recalled and forgotten by Khmer, Vietnamese, and American politicians—symptomatic of a "Cambodia Syndrome." I argue that cultural producers also engage with cultural institutions in a politics of strategic forgetting and remembering. The cultural industries in which artists such as Danh circulate fetishize such "alternative" visions and voices without the aim of a recuperative politics. Referencing the trauma studies scholar Jenny Edkins, Schlund-Vials states that what is "at stake in such memory work is not what is represented but who is represented."[46]

US identity politics of the 1990s and its backlash has shown that a critical mass of critical voices (addressing race, class, gender, sexuality) do not radically change infrastructures. This redressing is window dressing. When the what and who get conflated—as in Danh's images of Khmer Rouge victims—the artist and his images of "trauma and temples" also collapse in a relational loop. One's subjectivity becomes objectified (as art objects). The question of "authentic" voices and images comes to the fore: who has the right—and institutional access—to represent such vexed stories, and in what manner?

Danh's predecessor is the Vietnamese American artist Đỉnh Q. Lê, who is based in Sài Gòn. Lê has built an even more impressive career out of the legacies of US military involvement in Cambodia, Việt Nam, and Laos. He was born 1968 in Hà Tiên, a Vietnamese town near the Cambodian border. In 2011, Lê's video installation *The Farmers and the Helicopter* (2006) was featured in a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[47] Lê has two series of work dealing with Cambodia—trauma and tourism—that arguably take a less didactic approach than Danh's work. The 1998 series *Splendor and Darkness* literally weaves together photographic images of Tuol Sleng victims and close-ups of Angkor Wat (both mainly black and white), forming an abstract tapestry of sorts, a dialectic of transcendence and terror. The solo show *The Hill of Poisonous Trees* a (translation of the Khmer words *Tuol Sleng*) at the PPOW gallery, New York City, in May 2008 revisits the infamous photographic archive of victims at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. This series of "photo-weavings" superimposes the black-and-white images of victims with yellow-hued shots of the museum—its long halls, its small warren of prisons, and its torture chambers.

Both artists use formal innovations—Danh's "chlorophyll prints" and Lê's "photo-weavings"—to re-present temples and trauma. The formal innovations serve as an aesthetic filter and translation of otherwise gruesome and overused imagery. The formal quality of the work not only allows the viewer to engage in the subject matter but also contains it at a safe remove. All of those who have engaged in dark tourism (real or virtual) in Southeast Asia are familiar with the black-and-white photographic grids of Cambodian Khmer Rouge victims. Postcards and paintings of Angkor Wat traffic in clichés of bas-relief close-ups, sunrises, and sunsets—might artists refresh tourists' or gallery-goers' jaded outlook, providing a new angle? I do not explore the breadth of Danh's and Lê's works in this book because much has already been written on that subject. I do write about their work related to Cambodia here because I want to underscore the fact that visibility for artists from the "periphery" is still contingent on playing to the "center," as evidenced by their focus on temples and trauma. These are strategic uses of the periphery—or "strategic cartographies," a concept on which I elaborate.

Strategic Cartographies

Examining the oeuvre of artists with ties to Phnom Penh and Sài Gòn, such as Đỉnh Q. Lê and Binh Danh, I argue for a reconsideration of "diasporic" and "local." Overseas artists living in Southeast Asia may be marketed—and identify—as "local," whereas their "local" counterparts have "diasporic" outlooks. For these artists, "translations" of local issues are (self-)exploitative gestures. In a competitive international art market, I assert, these artists strategically position themselves as both insiders and outsiders.

I critically interrogate but do not abandon national and regional framings but, instead, ambivalently embrace and interrogate the categories and cartographies that determine "Southeast Asia" as a field. In doing so, I deliberately invoke this framing while, at the same time, I aim to decenter it. Artists must continually position themselves within a global art market, placing themselves within strategic cartographies to be legible. The "global turn" in contemporary art, sparked by the spectacular proliferation of art biennales (echoing imperialist World's Fairs of yesteryear) from Jakarta to Johannesburg, satiates the demands of "diversity" and dividends. Building on the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism," this book attempts to forge strategic cartographies, an affective unmapping and retracing of critical and creative connections within and outside Southeast Asia. Spivak writes about the ways in which multivalent identitarian groups (nationalities, minorities, ethnicities) deliberately present themselves outwardly as a unified entity toward common goals or interests, despite differences. This is "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest."[48] In this frame, subalterns use normally stigmatizing stereotypes as empowering strategies to thwart domination. I move beyond subordinate-dominant binaries to think through how powerful narratives are at once construed and destabilized. What are the aesthetic and ethical ramifications—beyond identitarian politics and politicking—of producing and exhibiting (and critically examining) artwork now, at this "global turn"?[49]

Strategic cartographies deploy geographic and historical identities and (dis)identifications in a tactical manner.[50] This approach is a considered mapping of psychic and physical terrain, connections, disconnections, and affiliations. These subject positions based on national, regional, and transnational coordinates create uncertain terrain—it is both useful and fraught ground for creative and critical inquiries. I recognize epistemic and disciplinary violence, displacements: Enlightenment singular-perspective cartography, as well as area studies' colonial and Cold War antecedents. Strategic cartographies also evoke palimpsest (neo)colonial, neoliberal, transnational subjectivities as a way to acknowledge and thwart these framings.

Strategic cartographies also invoke the interventions of "critical cartography" and "critical art." The urban planner and theorist Annette Miae Kim proposes a "critical humanist cartography" as a means for geographers, artists, architects, and laypeople, among others, to "map the unmapped."[51] This aims to reconceive how political regimes' conventional maps and mapping of its subjects underscore power linked by policies, procedures, and cultural programming. Likewise, a critical art practice—and a practice of looking critically at art (institutions, producers, audiences)—foregrounds performative exchanges of influence. In dialogue with the postcolonial scholar Iain Chambers and the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, the art historian Anne Ring Petersen suggests that "critical art" "should be understood as a performative process of engagement and critical reflection which is undertaken by artists and audiences alike."[52] Artists and audiences critically align with, subvert, and create new geopolitical affiliations and affects.

As part of the uncertain terrain artists, audiences, and institutions are navigating, we are witnessing a shift in geopolitics: the faltering of the "American Century" (the United States' post–World War II socioeconomic dominance) and the hyped rise of the "Asian Century." Has the "Pacific Century" dawned? In the twenty-first century, which is also referred to as the "Asia-Pacific Century," the superpowers (China, India) and emerging Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) "tiger economies" are reportedly displacing—and provincializing—Europe and the Atlantic. "The rest" beset the West.

Mimetic and Antimimetic Theories on Trauma and Art

To better understand Binh Danh's and Đỉnh Q. Lê's memorializing output—and, by extension, other diasporic artists who are part of the first and second generation of Vietnamese immigrants—I briefly discuss different approaches in trauma. The trauma theorist Ruth Leys examines the underlying assumptions of theoretical and clinical approaches on psychic trauma. Leys notes there are two basic currents in trauma theory, which have oscillated through time: (1) mimetic theory; and (2) antimimetic theory. Mimetic theory holds that "precisely because the victim cannot recall the original traumatogenic event, she is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it."[53] Traumatized subjects cannot fully comprehend the original trauma or completely represent it; nor can they integrate it into their worldview. Antimimetic theories hold that the trauma is entirely external to the victim, and it is possible to recall and represent it.

Two historically contingent currents appear to overlap with psychoanalytic and Enlightenment approaches, with mimetic theory aligned with the former and antimimetic aligned with the latter. Mimetic theory is aligned with psychoanalytic approaches in that both are internally oriented; trauma is ingested, repressed. Within this framework, artists are melancholics who constantly revisit traumatic sites, incapable of resolution. Antimimetic theory may be aligned with Enlightenment approaches in that both are externally oriented. Trauma is an outside event that can be mastered, worked through more or less rationally. Within this view, artists gain mastery over trauma through mastery of its representations. However, Leys's Foucauldian genealogy points out that the mimetic and antimimetic paradigms do not resolve themselves. Rather there is a continuing and productive tension (often appearing within the body of work of a single theorist). This ambivalent tension is at the heart of Lê's practice. Lê refuses to offer a "complete" narrative of trauma. Instead, he offers the viewer disjointed fragments, quotations from mass media, and mental images.

Mimetic/antimimetic theories of trauma recall mimetic/antimimetic discourses in art. In Western aesthetic and philosophical traditions, the creative act was first seen as a mimetic act. Aristotle and Plato (and later, Renaissance thinkers influenced by them) asserted that artists only imitated God's creations. Aristotle claimed the importance of "the universal" (which was challenged then by Plato and is challenged now by postmoderns). In contrast to Plato, who saw art and fiction as mere copies of appearances, Aristotle maintained that art (and imitation) was the highest form of learning, getting beyond the specific singularities (of history). The "universal statements" found in art attested to divine ideas of permanence beyond earthly foibles.[54] We have inherited the distinction between the universal and the particular—empire and its "peripheries." Danh and Lê occupy "peripheral" subject positions as refugees and war survivors. Their narrative is not "universal," although displacement is one of the primary hallmarks of the postmodern condition. Their particular histories (and art) do not address timeless grand themes, philosophical traditions.

In tracing the idea of the "creative," Williams states that the shift from art as mimesis to art as creative occurs as Western society transitions from a religious to a humanist framework.[55] Part of the shift to humanist conceptions includes the influence of psychoanalysis, particularly theories of the unconscious (Freud, Jung). Within this new paradigm, the subconscious psyche is the realm just beyond humankind's reach. (Previously that realm was the divine.) In getting in touch with his unconscious, the artist creates anew. Although artists are no longer inheritors of the divine, touched by genius, contemporary artists can be cultural ambassadors. Artists, then, are still conduits. Instead of being messiahs for heavenly realms, they are messengers of our earthly troubles.

In Eastern aesthetic traditions there is no such split between mimesis and abstraction. Representations of earthly realms (landscapes) are represented as voids—negative space is equally important as positive space. For instance, in traditional Chinese and Vietnamese landscape paintings the human subject is often dwarfed by vast mists, voids of cloud, sky. This is consistent with Confucian views of man and nature (man as a small part of nature and not apart from it). Likewise, there is no split among creative, philosophical, and critical inquiry. For centuries, philosopher-poet emperors and literati were seen as exemplary.

The (Western) model of art as mimetic (religious)/antimimetic (humanistic) appears to reverse theories of trauma outlined earlier. Again, in mimetic/psychoanalytic trauma systems, trauma is internal, to be repeated endlessly. In antimimetic/Enlightenment approaches to trauma, it is external, to be worked through. In all formulations, the dissonance between the sacred and the profane; mimicry and creation; unconscious and rational echoes an Apollonian-Dionysian ethos in which oppositional impulses cycle toward balance.

The trauma theorist Ann Kaplan notes that humanities research often does not account for "vicarious trauma"—that is, trauma that is not directly experienced but may manifest in various traumatic symptoms, such as generational trauma and the "empathetic" symptoms of professionals who work with trauma victims. Using the (Freudian) notion of transference, Dominick LaCapra describes similar symptoms as vicarious trauma resulting when "transference takes place in relations between people and . . . in one's relationship to the object of study itself."[56] Danh wrestles with this "vicarious trauma." As part of the so-called 1.5 generation—born to immigrant parents and younger than sixteen before they immigrated—Danh experienced the effects of war and displacement firsthand but largely remembers it through secondhand accounts and media representation. His work does not offer a singular account of his personal traumatic experience but points to how generational trauma is transmitted: through snippets of images in movies and newspaper archives, through stories relatives tell, through the visage of passing strangers who bear the traces of painful pasts. The art of ambivalence, oscillation, and reframing alerts us to discrepant radical frames. Danh, Lê, and their artistic peers do not present authentic tales of woe but point at how constructed narratives of the past, present, and future collide. This is a form of adaptation, reinvention. Theirs is not a dyadic mimetic/antimimetic art in which traumas are endlessly reproduced or one in which there is complete healing. Return is grace.

The concept of "trauma" is often discussed within mainstream media without grounded specificity. Suffering is viewed as a basic human affliction. Tragic narratives are also hallmarks of "the universal," until they become too specific. As Judith Butler notes, certain lives are deemed more grievable than others.[57] Trauma does not transcend geopolitics. Trauma cannot be delinked from place and history, body and memory. The psychologist David Becker acknowledges the universalizing tendencies of the term *trauma* and trauma studies: "Trauma can only be understood with reference to the specific contexts in which it occurs."[58] Trauma is not an event unto itself but part of a social, cultural web: "In each different social context people should create their own definition within a framework, in which the basic focus is not so much on the symptoms of a person but on the sequential development of the traumatic situation."[59] The trauma theorists Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy echo this critique, stating that psychoanalytic theory—and its largely US-centered research—while productive in analyzing Holocaust testimony and First World subjects and subjectivity, may not be appropriate for other contexts across the globe.[60] They call for a shift of the "monocultural discipline" into one "that can inform the study of memory within a global context."[61] They also suggest that postcolonial studies, while inherently engaged with trauma studies, should be more open to cultural studies frameworks that include artistic, aesthetic, and cinematic representations.[62]

While I appreciate the move for a more "diverse" trauma studies, the additive model (more global perspectives of suffering) does not shift pathologizing paradigms of revisiting past wounds. I assert that we must rethink how we conceive of "working on" and "working through" trauma, with all of its local and transnational implications.

Traumas and Modernities

Historic shocks and the trauma of modernization are not separate but are deeply intertwined. I examine the valences of trauma and modernity through visual cultural production. How do Southeast Asians, particularly Cambodians and Vietnamese, remember and represent the conflicts and postwar redevelopment in Southeast Asia? These changes are most apparent for humans in the realm of the visual for humans—changing cityscapes, marketing displays, government propaganda, and feature films.

I challenge the hypervisibility of trauma tropes in Western representations of Southeast Asia and the invisibility of other representational, sociopolitical, and historical narratives. Significant scholarship has addressed the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia's troubled past—distant and recent—and present and the connections inbetween. Similarly, in the United States Việt Nam has become a metonym for a defeated war. We see spectacles of suffering—a naked girl screaming in terror, center-framed; monks and gasoline; villages on fire; rooftop evacuations. My project highlights Cambodian and Vietnamese artistic responses beyond Western narratives of hysterical terror and historical tragedy.

What is the issue with ongoing representations and associations of Cambodia with genocide and Việt Nam with war? As Chong, Schlund-Vials, and V. T. Nguyễn assert, such rhetorical conflations serve as strategic reasons for continuing US violence abroad and at home. The dead justify more deaths. This book wrestles with the uneasy problematics of representation: logos, trauma, modernity. It deals with the politics of the art market, the marginalization of Southeast Asian art history within art history. Rather than fixed identities, I focus on process, displacement, repetition, and cycles. Dislocation, reiteration, and succession mark diaspora and the traumas of history and modernity.

Modernity is both nonlinear and traumatic. The project of modernity is also a historical one, not just a contemporary phenomenon. Different modernities are evident in the French colonial manses in Hà Nội, the Russian brutalist 1970s architecture of Hồ Chí Minh's mausoleum, and the angular modernist university buildings in Phnom Penh. Through visuality (and these buildings' stylistic markers) ideology is marked. Economic growth has created a dramatically shifting sociopolitical, economic, and cultural climate in both countries. Modern subjects in Vietnamese soap operas and Cambodian music videos are portrayed enjoying middle-class luxuries. Modernization, however, is also a traumatic process. Kaplan notes that "trauma is often seen as inherently linked to modernity."[63] Although governments and mass media view them as positive growth, industrialization and globalization are inherently brutal. Modernity's assumed progress is lauded by the state, obscuring its violence. In the shadow of gleaming high-rises and glossy billboards lie deep inequities. Bright shopping malls erase the dark memory of displaced, impoverished populations once occupying the same territory.

Traumas such as military engagement and modernization return as thematic objects of desire and desired art objects on international art markets. I examine artists whose work revisits the traumas of genocide, war, or rapid development in their "homelands" in Southeast Asia. Their work both critiques and capitalizes on these shifts. On the international art market, devastating losses become transformed, translated into delectable art items. These art markets are sites of economic return for artists, gallerists, collectors, critics, and art institutions.

Return of the Real?

The art historian and critic Hal Foster stresses that within these models of trauma discourse, the artist-subject is "evacuated and elevated at once." Following this logic, artists such as Binh Danh and Đỉnh Q. Lê are voided of their individuality as they become representative voices within cultural institutions. They are at once insiders and outsiders, constrained by the limits of institutional knowledge. Foster contends that "trauma discourse magically resolves two contradictory imperatives in culture today: deconstructive analyses and identity."[64] Declared dead by poststructuralism, the author/artist experiences a "strange rebirth" to address multiculturalism's wants.[65] Foster views this "absentee authority" as a "significant turn" in cultural politics and contemporary art and criticism.[66]

To extend this example, Binh Danh's and Đỉnh Q. Lê's works do not overtly address their biographical histories. Their subject positions, however, lend authority to their works that both subverts and reinforces conceptions of Southeast Asia during and after US military involvement. Through works that deal with historical and contemporary traumas, singular universalizing discourses are deconstructed—yet the politics of identity are reaffirmed. Thus, Foster notes, "Here the return of the real converges with the return of the referential." "Referential" modes of art making and thinking of the 1970s and 1980s prioritize text and intertextuality—for artists and scholars, the traditional studio is replaced by the postmodern seminar room. The "return of the real" in art and theory heralded by the 1990s and beyond focuses again on identities and communities as embodied sites. In this turn, the multiplicity of artistic/authorial voices both “evacuates and elevates” the traumatized, minoritized subject. The Southeast Asian artist’s placement within cultural institutions and canons is simultaneously a displacement.

Foster’s book *Return of the Real* argues that the “return” or reappearance of late twentieth-century Western avant-garde artistic strategies (e.g., ready-made objects, pop-culture appropriation, monochrome painting) is not repetition or “belated” imitation of older models but, rather, productive reworkings of them. Lê’s and Danh’s appropriation of popular and vernacular cultures (film, photos) builds on Marcel Duchamp’s and Andy Warhol’s differing tactics while underscoring their blind spots.

Foster’s conception of return differs from mine. He attempts to map a parallel genealogy of the Western avant-garde that simply enfolds “Others” within its art-history framework. Foster returns to Eurocentric modernist canons, whereas my notion of return highlights myriad modernities. Foster’s art-history alternatives largely dismiss alterity, whereas subaltern strategies are core to my study. Excavating the “relation between turns in critical models and returns of historical practices,” Foster asks, “how does a reconnection with a past practice support a disconnection from a present practice and/or a development of a new one?”[67] He traces the shift of medium-specific, New York–centric (minimalism, abstract expressionism) models to discourse-specific modalities, evidenced by the global turn in contemporary art. Echoing the art critic Douglas Crimp’s rebuttal of Foster’s book, I also argue against a revisionist art history and for a visual and cultural studies grounded in politics. Refusing Foster’s assertion that art history is more “rigorous” than visual studies, Crimp declares, “What is at stake is not history per se, which is a fiction in any case, but what history, whose history, history to what purpose.”[68] The next sections attempt to address questions of how art histories—and geopolitical histories—are mapped, and toward what ends.

Negative Return MELANCHOLIA, LOSS, SELF

I advocate for a politics of “negative return”—an inversion. To return does not reinforce a binary between eternal melancholia and “proper” mourning à la Freud. Return does not mean a repetition compulsion. Within common usage, a negative return occurs when total losses outweigh the initial investment. Normally, we want nominally positive result—an outgrowth of our positivist system, which valorizes materiality, empirical evidence (facts, figures), and rationality over intuition and the metaphysical.

Instead, I reframe the "negative" as a desired outcome, against the background of teleological positivism. This "negative return" references Freud's theories on melancholia. Briefly, the melancholic subject forever mourns the lost object. Without successfully reconciling this grief, the melancholic subject is doomed to compulsively revisit this wound.

Postcolonial and feminist revisions—racial melancholia, melancholic migrants—address Freud and his adherents' blindness to the linked traumas of race, gender, class, and empire. David Eng argues in *Racial Castration* that psychoanalytic frames of melancholic return and loss pivot on "idealized images such as masculinity, heterosexuality and whiteness [and] also imply an obverse set of images such as femininity, homosexuality and racialization."[69] Hence, Foster's "return of the real" echoes ongoing rhetoric of the "return" of the dark primitive (racialized, sexualized threats)—against white virility, "high culture," abstraction—hallmarks of Western modernity. Thus, Jackson Pollock and his "action" paintings—the apex of modernist traditions—are obversely mirrored by minoritarian artists who get acted on by traumas such as imperial might or rampant modernization. They are bearers of an identity politics hinged on loss. In this frame, one is made through one's acts ("a man of action"); the other is unmade, undone. Sara Ahmed and Anne Cheng argue that, for racialized, minoritized subalterns, the wounds will never heal, as they are structurally omnipresent, intimately reenacted through micro- and macro-aggressions. Ahmed's "melancholic migrant" is eternally socioeconomically displaced, without recourse. Cheng's "melancholy of race" addresses the trauma of racialization that denies full subjectivity—second-class citizenship. These views of melancholia focus on the denial of personhood—a world shattering. Instead, I focus on negation as subject and world making and its opposite. Inaction is also political activity—passivity as resistance.

I also emphasize return's spatial dimensions. A melancholic requires a place to return to. A negative return is both action and site: it refuses a melancholic's frenzied repetitions. The site of slow, gradual, repeated return is the self. In his later works, Jung wrote about coming to terms with his shadow self as a process of self-actualization. Differing from Freud's unconscious, Jung's shadow concept evokes other archetypes: trickster, wolf, and so on. To become fully integrated, one has to embrace one's darkest aspects. We must choose to return to the troubling. In contrast to the Freudian view—patients assaulted by pathologies need to expel them—

a return to the Jungian shadow is a deliberate, sustained encounter, a return engagement. The shadow, the negative, must be continuously integrated over one's life. Instead of a possession (Freud's melancholic), darkness is assimilated.

Within indigenous American traditions, to become a leader the wounded healer has to undergo a traumatic process (e.g., serious physical or psychic illness). The shaman-to-be has to successfully heal herself or himself in order to heal others.[70] The dark period is a transformation. Similarly, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche recognizes that man cannot ignore his pathos: "I must first go down . . . deeper into pain than ever I descended, down into its blackest flood. . . . Whence come the highest mountains? I once asked. Then I learned that they came out of the sea. The evidence is written in their rocks and in the walls of their peaks. It is out of the deepest depth that the highest must come to its height."[71] The dyad of "blackest" depth and height sees the need for both shadow and light.

The Enlightenment project (and science) is heralded for shedding light on the superstitions lurking within the medieval "Dark Ages"; for remedying the black plague. Likewise, imperial light ennobles the dark, savage continents. In *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*, however, Akira Lippit discusses the shadows of the twentieth century cast by modernity—new light-emitting, "avisual" technologies such as movies, X-ray, and atomic bombs—and their residual traces in postwar Japanese life and cinema.[72] In this context, the blinding radiance of an atomic blast reminds us that encountering light and shadow is also a matter of life and death.

Positivism's rhetoric is one of gain: capitalist accumulation, dominions and domination of peoples, places, and time. A negative return emphasizes loss—losing control, losing oneself. Referring to "shadow feminism" Jack Halberstam writes, "Loss enables another connection to other models of time, space, place and connection."[73] Shadow feminism, like Williams's Long Revolution, forgoes immediate political action and gratification for a longer time span. Other modalities of being (passivity, for instance, over activism) are sites of struggle. This struggle is sustained, repeated, engaged.

The negative return is returning to the void of unknowing—of not knowing precisely oneself (as active agent), of becoming undone in order to become again. Halberstam elaborates on negation's power: "This feminism, grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence and silence . . . [is] a shadow feminism which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unravels their logic within."[74] Like the wounded warrior, embracing the shadow is a negative return. There is both a self and a no-self—a disorientation and a reorientation—as one goes to the "deepest depth" and the highest heights. It is a topsy-turvy turning: one full revolution for one.

We all are entrenched within shadow and light—interpolated within empire, the machinations of capitalism. A shadow feminist response to empire's violence may be not overt action but vulnerability and grief as solidarity. In "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Butler observes, "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself." How do we open ourselves up to be vulnerable, not as mere witnesses or bystanders, but to risk our grasp on our guarded identities and truly identify with the refugee, the displaced, the dispossessed? It is a mourning, letting go of the ego, the id, one's (global North) identities—a (dis)identification, if you will. Butler notes that the "disorientation of grief—'Who have I become,' or indeed, 'What is left of me?' 'What is it in the Other that I have lost?'—posits the 'I' in the mode of unknowingness."[75] Loss as a means for a different kind politics—an unraveling of self, an unknowingness—is a shadow process. It is a "dissolution of the persona."[76]

A politics of negative return is a position of ambivalence, uncertainty. I posit that being unable to place oneself, literally and metaphorically, is a pivot: it is a way of being, unnamed, unknown, unhinged from one's axis and *axis mundi*. One must lose personhood to form a new sense of self and the world. For artists and for art, a negative return is a risky proposal: it unbalances, unhinges. Yet this practice of separation and unity is crucial. The shaman has to journey, to leave in order to return with a message from the spirits to help others. Engaging the Jungian shadow is also a tenuous path of integration: "The ego and shadow are no longer divided but are brought together in an—admittedly precarious—unity."[77] For Marcuse, an art that contains its own contradictions is vital. He notes, "There is no work of art which does not break its own affirmative stance by 'the power of the negative,' which does not, in its very nature, evoke the words, the images of another reality, of another order repelled by the existing one yet alive in its memory and anticipation, alive in what happens to men and women and in their rebellion against it."[78] This sentiment echoes Halberstam's insistence that negation is a tactic to "unravel" capitalism's counterrevolution from within and from outside. Art can insist on negating itself and its conditions.

Binh Danh and Đỉnh Q. Lê both engage in negative returns: through strategic use of the periphery, they at once place and displace themselves and cultural institutions. They simultaneously reinforce and untether topologies of "temples and trauma." Their conceptual art can be seen as "passive," melancholic (versus "active" street protests or cheery pop art). Their conceptual interventions are a form of shadow politics. Marcuse maintains that the highest art must oscillate between jouissance and despair, being and nothing, action and inaction. He writes, "Where this tension between affirmation and negation, between pleasure and sorrow, higher and lower material culture no longer prevails, where the work no longer sustains the dialectical unity of what is and what can (and ought to) be, art has lost its truth, has lost itself."[79] Similar to Jung's and Nietzsche's claims, humanity (the questing artist) has to plumb the "blackest," deepest depths in order to alight. The internal "tensions" between negation and affirmation are also reflected in the mimesis/antimimesis theories on art and trauma outlined earlier in this introduction.

Danh and Lê's return engagements are not driven by manic neurosis (melancholia, repetition compulsion). Instead, their embrace of the shadow is intentional, measured. Their praxis centers the negative, void: multiplicity, unknowing—they are unplaceable and implacable.

Art Historicity THE GREAT DEBATE

Đỉnh Q. Lê and Binh Danh are among the most visible artists of Vietnamese descent on the international art scene. They are famous, but will they ever be included in the household-name, postage-stamp canon of Pollack and Warhol? Or will their ethnicity forever limit them? In her provocative essay "Why Have There Been No Great Vietnamese Artists?" Nora Taylor notes that "artists from peripheral loci of art production—that is, outside the Western art market centers in places such as Việt Nam—often 'exist' or are known only because Western galleries, art auction houses, or even art historians have situated them."

These institutional forces often reflect Eurocentric hierarchies. "Greatness" implies transcending the bonds of race and gender; to be "great," one has to create "timeless" works that speak to humanity. The title of Taylor's essay refers to the art historian Linda Nochlin's seminal feminist essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" which highlights the gendered structural inequities within the art world. Gender, class, and race discrimination persists today both more distinctly and more imperceptibly. Multiculturalism's shadow obscures the lack of opportunities for marginalized artists through celebratory, tokenizing discourse. Global gendered economies of scale reveal a shifting world order that demands difference. Yet this quest for difference is homogenizing. Taylor observes that the identities of artists from the "periphery" are often lumped into a single ethnic or national frame.[80] Both Taylor and Nochlin critique the standards of greatness. Artists from peripheral sites are automatically constrained, geographically and ethnically. They cannot reach the upper pantheon of artists. Rhetorically, the parameters of greatness are indifferent to creed, color, and gender. In reality, however, artistic masters and their masterpieces reinscribe vast hierarchies.

The question of discovering a great Cambodian, Vietnamese, or any artist is a futile exercise. There is no point in raising the issue. "Why have there been no great Southeast Asian artists?" is a query that reveals the power structures and cultural biases by which "greatness" is evaluated and conferred. We must scrutinize the position of those asking and answering the inquiry, even if it is us. Yes, there have been great Khmer and Vietnamese artists, but they are heralded as masters within a national context and unknown elsewhere because of a lack of critical and commercial resources. Greatness is subjective. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written about the "economy of cultural goods": the overlapping networks of art institutions, critics, artists, and academics.[81] Increasing numbers of dealers, collectors, curators, and critics are coming to Southeast Asia.

Within the past decade, the region's emerging art scenes have been trumpeted as the next hot thing. To use Việt Nam as a case study, an article published in the *New York Times* in 2017 proclaims "Vietnamese Art Has Never Been More Popular," noting that "some of Vietnam's greatest artists are enjoying a moment of increasing world attention," fetching record prices at Sotheby's and Christie's auctions.[82] In 2007, the same newspaper quoted the Southeast Asian art specialist Mok Kim Chuan (of Sotheby's Singapore) as saying, "There are many vibrant young contemporary artists in Hanoi, and people are definitely buying their work—hoping it will one day appreciate. . . . Contemporary [Vietnamese] art is very hot right now." Within a ten-year span, the late Lê Phổ's work (which combines post-impressionist, surrealist, and traditional Asian influences) surged at auction, from $300,000 to a record-breaking $1.2 million.[83] Lê's commingling of East and West fits into collectors' conceptions of Indochina: languidly elegant, exotified Edenic imagery.

Artists have varied artistic responses to what is expected of them. "Good" art is still measured by Western artistic canons. It is a form of cultural imperialism. Parallels can be drawn to the French colonial discourses about aesthetics, modernity, and authenticity. The complexities of positioning within a global economic order demand that artistic agency is seen from a variety of sociocultural perspectives. Museums, gallerists, and curators increasingly build shows and collections around the category "Southeast Asian," thematically highlighting flows among countries rather than focusing on lone nations. Art scholarship should also address this trend.

Critical and curatorial work on the artistic output of a single city or country is still important for a deep understanding of cultural influences and developments. For example, Taylor's *Painters in Hanoi*, as its title attests, homes in on different generations of Vietnamese painters within a specific geographic region. Ly Daravuth and his late partner Ingrid Muan[84] contributed to pioneering scholarship on Khmer contemporary visual art through research and through the Reyum Institute, an art center they cofounded in Phnom Penh in 1998 that houses exhibits, offers workshops (dance, art, music), and publishes books.[85] The cultural historian Ashley Thompson writes about the role of memory and the Cambodian state, ranging from ancient Angkorian temples to contemporary visual cultures (including the late painters Vann Nath and Rithy Panh).[86] This book continues to expand these parameters to include Vietnamese and Cambodian local and diasporic artists living in these countries who work in a range of media—video, works on paper, installation, photography. I highlight historical and sociopolitical connections that affect artists' relationships with their audiences.

My argument for transgressing national boundaries also applies to art history, which should continue to shift its Western-centric knowledge base to encompass visual cultures in myriad centers and peripheries. Art historians including Alice Yang,[87] Thomas Crow, and Patrick Flores, among others, note that contemporary Asian art histories are marginalized. I would further emphasize that Southeast Asian and Asian American art histories are marginalized. Addressing the void in Southeast Asian scholarship are a limited number of survey texts, such as *Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990* (2014), by Michelle Antoinette, and *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology* (2012), edited by Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly. Apart from a few special issues of academic journals dedicated to Southeast Asian contemporary art, there is a dearth of sustained discourse, with the exception of *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Asian Art*, a peer-reviewed journal launched in March 2017.[88] Fewer than a handful of art historians are working on contemporary visual artists of Cambodian and Vietnamese descent—namely, Nora Taylor, Pamela Corey,[89] Boreth Ly, Moira Roth,[90] and me.

But art history is not enough. Art history's emphasis on fine art objects, biography, and national narratives cannot fully address affective dimensions of rapid sociopolitical shifts, mass media, and memory. In combining the approaches of visual anthropology with art history, I aim to shift the largely

Western focus of art history. In using art history's attention to close visual analysis of artwork, I further complement the insights I get from intensive fieldwork. To grasp the complexity of an artwork, I rely on close readings of the work combined with studio visits and interviews whenever possible. I also consider critics' and viewers' reactions to art pieces or films. My background in art history compels me to rigorously consider the link between form and content, materials and meaning. I also connect artists with the larger political and historical worlds they engage.

Following T. J. Clark and Thomas Crow's models of a "social history of art," I examine the social, historical, and political conditions in which artists' work is produced.[91] I focus on visual culture because it highlights social and individual visions of what is modern, traumatic, or desirable. Similarly, what is repressed and not seen on an everyday level may be represented. These representations make evident individual and institutional struggles.

Historicity and the Politics of Waiting

I maintain that narratives about the past and the future are mutable. The anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes that "historical narrative [is] one fiction among others"—historicity and futurity get blurred.[92] Historical trauma is not a fixed event but an event that gets reinterpreted and reinvented with each recollection. These personal recollections have public and political dimensions. By the same logic, modernity is also not a static conception. Modernity is not a fixed linear project of progress but one that is constantly reinterpreted, reimagined by its architects and the populace.[93] Yet Dipesh Chakrabarty notes in *Provincializing Europe* that the teleological binary between European "modern countries" and those "stuck" in the past persists. Mimi Thi Nguyễn argues that the invitation to "catch up" to modernity, Derrida's "gift of time," has a catch.[94] The United States must push "liberal war"—promising liberal freedoms—to pull its invaded into modernity.[95] Derrida notes that this "given time" is a requirement and deferral of the gift: "There must be time, it must last, there must be waiting—without forgetting."[96] Here, I conceive of waiting and remembering differently—not as deferral and debt, but as defiance and solidarity. In terms of waiting, José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*, "Those who wait are those of us who are out of time. . . . We have been cast out of straight time's rhythm, and we have made worlds with our spatial and temporal configurations. Certainly this would be the time of postcoloniality, but it is also crip time, or like the old joke we still use, CPT (colored people time).”[97] Colored people time and colonial time—these contradictions, or clashes, in time are integral. Although they are in the same frame, their spatiality and temporality are anachronous. I think of “belatedness as opportunity,” to echo Chakrabarty: postcolonial nations have a discrepant timeline that refuses, upends Western modernity’s timeline of progress. In waiting, we are occupying, embodying different formations of time and space outside of Bergsonian time of the clock. Muñoz notes, “Within straight time the queer can only fail; thus an aesthetics of failure can productively be occupied by the artist for delineating straight time’s measure.”[98] The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “straight time” as “standard working hours within a work week”; it can also be understood as heteronormative or homonormative temporalities of assimilationist mainstream timelines of “success.”

I recall the images in *National Geographic* of “natives” under the watchful colonial gaze, waiting under the hot sun. I remember myself as a three-year-old refugee in a Thai camp, waiting, waiting, waiting. Flash forward to mass-media images of North African and Syrian refugees now, waiting, waiting. In linking passivity, failure, and shadow archives as geopolitical and temporal alternatives, waiting, too, becomes a component of return engagements. A return engagement also requires spatial and temporal lapse—a duration between event and horizon.

Beyond breaking down distinctions in time—the past, present, and future—I challenge the parameters of place and belonging. I connect refugees and returnees then and now and the highly political, personal acts of waiting (as subalterns, refugees, immigrants) and welcoming one another. This builds on the artist Faith Wilding’s performance work *Waiting | Welcome* (as coalition building), as well as Derrida’s insights on the welcome. Derrida argues that the act of welcoming—of hospitality—requires asymmetrical power relations: the host has dominion over the guests. For example, one can think of host countries or host institutions (such as a museum inviting a guest artist for an art residency). He notes that the differences between pure, or “unconditional,” giving and hospitality and “conditional” giving are in endless tension.[99] Specifically addressing immigrants and refugees, Derrida calls for “another international right, another politics of borders, another humanitarian politics, even perhaps a humanitarian engagement which would actually take place beyond the interest of nation states.”[100] Toward this, one must radically reconsider identity and home—not an ethics of hospitality (welcome), but ethics as hospitality.

Waiting, Welcoming | Returns, Revolutions

I now connect notions of ethical waiting and welcoming to my ideas on return and revolution—a turning of self and society. This turn is both disorienting and reorienting. The act of welcoming redefines who is host and guest and, ultimately, what subjectivity is. In his reading of Derrida's "'revolution' of the concept of subjectivity," the philosopher François Raffoul points out that the term *revolution* has to be understood also in the literal sense of a spatial turning around or reversal, the concept of the subject being "turned upside down," so to speak."[101] I stress again these ideas of spatial reversal, as well as subjective turning "topsy-turvy," in my earlier notes—return, revolution, and revolt as being cyclically interconnected. Revolution is not only a "turning around" (about-face—singular reversal), as Raffoul suggests, but a turning around and around (circle). Beyond losing distinction between self and other, the host is also "(g)host"—dematerialized, the site of a "visitation of a face," states Derrida.[102] Within Christian contexts, "host" refers to heavenly as well as military bodies (e.g., heavenly host: army of angels). The sacramental host, or bread of the Eucharist, comes from the Latin *hostia*, which means "sacrificial victim" (the gift, like hospitality, requires sacrifice). These links are not coincidental. Derrida notes that hospitality is always tinged with violence (again, in the same manner as the gift).

I suggest that face (self) and effacement (erasure of self) are coeval. For instance, "saving face" and "losing face" are sides of the same coin. (I elaborate on this in chapter 4.) Referencing Levinas, Derrida observes that the link between host and hostage "involves a paradoxical situation with respect to the status of the host, a peculiar reversal—*revolution*, once again—of the meaning of the host."[103] The subject (as host) is subjected—as hostage—to the other (guest). Finally, hospitality indicates "that originary dispossession, the withdrawal that, expropriating the 'owner' of what is most his own, and *expropriating the self of itself*, makes of his home a place of transit."[104]

These insights on the host and the gift are useful in thinking about historicity not as an end point, but as sites and times of return. In the conventional sense, time and property are subject to regulation. Both space and time are sites to come to: one "arrives at" a destination on time (hence, estimated time of arrival, or ETA). In another example, countries are expected achieve their gross domestic product (GDP) targets within a schedule. While one cannot "own" time, it is a condition of control (hence, "doing time"). First, the dissolution of self questions where subjectivity resides. The "expropriating the self of itself" is a deterritorialization (to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's description of the schizophrenic subjective conditions of capital). Returnees have no ownership of where they return to—they are dispossessed. Second, "home" is not a stable entity but constantly a "place of transit." Through return, polarities of ownership and dispossession (of oneself, one's place in the world) are broken: "If the at-home with oneself of the dwelling is an 'at-home with oneself as in a land of asylum or refuge,' this would mean that the inhabitant dwells there also as a refugee or an exile, a guest and not a proprietor."[105] Hence, a sense of home, oneself, is reached through motion and engagement.

With this reframing, the global South is no longer "stuck in time." For Bliss Cua Lim, fantastic cinema's "immiscible temporalities" evoke modalities beyond homogenizing modern time. Supernatural filmic narratives are untranslatable, unmixable, "immiscible" between two temporal frames: first, "the homogeneous time of Newtonian science and modern historical consciousness"; and second, "the heterogeneous times of the supernatural, the folkloric, and the popular."[106] Instead of reinforcing the opposition between homogeneous national time and the heterogeneity of transnational receptions, my artistic case studies—which deal with the haunted living and not the supernatural—reveal that translation is a strategic act. For artists wrestling with the long shadow of the politics of identity, art is a conscious negotiation between homogenous and heterogeneous rhetorical frames. The two temporal frames break down as the distinctions between local and diasporic, national and transnational collapse.

In this book I go back and forth in time and space to underscore this idea. The past and future—the weight of history and futurity—put us in an unmistakable and perhaps unbearable tension. For Walter Benjamin's angel of history, the tension is a storm blowing: "what we call progress."[107]

Time Lines

Challenging time and place while tracing significant ongoing economic and cultural shifts, I use several temporal anchor points in this book. The year 2008 is one anchor point, as it heralds what the Asian Development Bank calls the "first global financial crisis of the twenty-first century," arguably one of the greatest fiscal crises since the Great Depression of the 1930s.[108] Starting in 2007, the US subprime mortgage market crashed due to unstable investment cycles, eventually leading to an international banking crisis, with epicenters in the United States and Europe and shockwaves affecting the rest of the world. Yet within this economic downturn Asian economies survived largely unscathed.

In an article comparing the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis, the economists Donghyun Park, Arief Ramayandi, and Kwanho Shin observe that Asia "fared much better during the global crisis due to stronger fundamentals and better macroeconomic policies."[109] They note that "Asia's fundamentals [inflation rate, domestic credit expansion, the pre-crisis GDP rate] have strengthened further as a painful lesson of the [1997] Asian fiscal crisis."[110] Instead of constrictive macroeconomic policies of monetary and fiscal tightening, expansionary "countercyclical" policies (such as banks' supporting growth by providing liquidity for their systems) help cushion crisis and aid recovery.[111] The economists Margot Schüller and Jan Peter Wogart observe that Asian economies have responded to these fiscal crises by strengthening regional institutions and trying to shift international fiscal dominance: "Faced with the negative impact of regional and global financial crises, Asian countries have established joint-solution mechanisms over the last two decades in order to better protect themselves from short-term outflows of capital and from currency speculation."[112]

As Asian countries recovered from these fiscal crises and sought to strengthen their economies from volatile global market shifts, cultural spheres were also intrinsically linked. The years 2011–13 mark another turn and anchor point in my study: the art world's "global turn" directly spotlighting Southeast Asian contemporary artists, particularly Cambodian artists. Corey notes that this time frame heralds the rise of Khmer contemporary art's international visibility from exhibitions sponsored by East Asia and Southeast Asia (such as the Singapore Biennale and Fukuoka Triennale) to epicenters of Western art such as Documenta [Kassel] and the Guggenheim [New York]).[113] This shift from Eastern regional venues to Western stages is part of larger timelines linked to Khmer postgenocide socioeconomic redevelopment—or periods of "cultural restoration," as Muan terms it.[114] Corey "suggest[s] that from roughly 2003 to 2010, in the art world largely centered in Phnom Penh, there was a shift in the reception and discourse of contemporary art in alignment with growing international interest."[115] Cambodia is a compelling case study for the intertwined ways in which local postwar, post-fiscal crisis (re)development meshes with international institutional circuits of support and visibility.

I thus map these different nodal points—Southeast Asian wars, global fiscal crises, the "global" art turn—as palimpsest traces that inform and influence one another. In this rendering of "immiscible temporalities"—recalling again Lim's term to describe "that hint of untranslatable times, that trace of containment and excess"—I seek to draw out unexpected connections, affiliations, and responses.[116] These "untranslatable" temporalities are inherently tied to shifting geopolitics and the politics of translation. The legacies of such traumas have yet to be understood (or translated) beyond uplifting narratives of socioeconomic reconstruction. For instance, in the wake of the 2008 global fiscal crisis, unemployment in the United States rose 10 percent in 2010; it had fallen to 3.9 percent in 2018 and remained steady at 3.7 percent in 2019. Triggered in part by COVID-19, US unemployment is at 11.1 percent (affecting 17.8 million people as of August 2020), a decrease from previous highs at the outset of the pandemic (14.7 percent in April and 13.3 percent in May 2020, according to US Labor Department statistics).[117] This crisis still has long-term and far-reaching repercussions, despite positive state statistics. *The Economist* observes that this financial crisis has "evolved into the [ongoing] Euro crisis."[118] The economic historian Adam Tooze writes, "The financial and economic crisis of 2007–2012 morphed between 2013 and 2017 into a comprehensive political and geopolitical crisis of the post–cold war order"[119]—one in which increasingly nationalist right-wing power has coalesced in Europe and the United States (e.g., Brexit, Donald Trump). The Asia Development Bank observes two responses. The first response is a xenophobic, nationalist "'corrective' move toward greater domestic-led growth [in the West]—from an excessive dependence on export-led growth—particularly in the large current account surplus countries in Asia."[120] The second response sees the continued need for foreign investment and financing.[121] Although at odds outwardly, the two currents are still in play. As nationalist sentiment congeals, transnational coalitions realign. Against this backdrop, emerging Eastern countries align themselves with the West for cultural capital (hence, the emergence of Khmer contemporary art programs within art-world capitals). At the same time, Western countries try to stabilize their fiscal capital structures by tactically positioning themselves with Eastern superpowers, as well as the global South. I expand on these seemingly immiscible alignments later.

Another example of strategic cartographies: formerly economically and culturally aligned with Europe, Australia has shifted its foreign policies to embrace its position within the Asia Pacific and with Asia at large. In the 1960s, Australia's trade centered on Britain and the United States; today, it is focused on Asia, with four out of its top five two-way trading partners located in Asia, reports the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.[122] In 2017–18, ASEAN was among Australia's top-three import- and export-trading partners, according to the Australian government's Trade and Investment Commission.[123] The East Asia Forum notes that Australia's trade with Asia is "bigger than with Europe and North America combined. Over three-quarters of Australia's commodity exports already go to Asia, and it draws close to 70 percent of its imports from this same region."[124] As with all strategic relationships, Australia continues to (re)position itself. Europe is vying for top partner status with Australia. On May 22, 2018, the Commission of the European Union (EU) opened up the renegotiation of free trade agreements, last visited a decade ago.[125]

As it turns out, the EU is also looking to the global South, having secured successful close trading agreements with Việt Nam, Singapore, and Mexico.[126] Part of the shift toward the global South and Asia may be an outgrowth of Asian economies' response to solidifying economic power since the fiscal crises. An *Asia Europe Journal* article notes that "European countries are supporting Asia's attempt to gain more weight in global financial governance. . . . and, thus, contribute to the acceleration of the power shift away from the USA toward emerging Asian economies in general, and China in particular."[127]

These Asia-centric statistics, press releases, and news headlines, however, may be misleading. Australia is facing both West and East: the EU is Australia's second-largest director and trading partner, behind China.[128] Chakrabarty reminds us that capitalism, Eurocentric knowledge production, and modernity are coeval and complicit. It is not "the West" versus "the Rest." Rather, the "West" is but one of many rest posts, a region among many. Western theory is both "indispensable and inadequate."[129] Whether this is the "American Century" or the "Asian Century," flows of culture, labor, and commerce are at once increasingly porous and policed—a paradox and a new paradigm.

The distinctions between "global" and "local" aesthetic practices and art histories are arbitrary and unnecessary. In an interview published in *Art Asia Pacific*, the curator and art historian Patrick Flores states, "I'm trying to get away from the local-global dichotomy, which doesn't hold, and to insist on an extensive locality or even an equivalent locality. It's not like 'you guys are the global and we are just a local articulation of the global.' No, we co-produce the global through our locality."[130] The global and the local are coterminous. As I have been asserting, the local and diasporic are also coeval concepts.

The issue of space and place—and, by extension, site specificity and locationality—is an underlying, unifying thematic of the book. Again, it is not about the outdated binary between the local and global. The art historian Miwon Kwon suggests that it is "not a matter of choosing sides—between models of nomadism and sedentariness, between place and space."[131] The fluidities of time and space in our digitized, global world call for a "relational specificity" that accounts for our proximities to, and distances from, one another. How do we critically engage "the visual turn" (to use Martin Jay's term) within contemporary culture, ranging from high art and couture to "lowbrow" pop entertainment?[132]

Kwon's relational specificity addresses the uneven formations "between one thing, person, one place, one thought, one fragment next to another." By placing these relationships, these conditions, side by side, the relationship becomes lateral, even, rather than horizontal, hierarchical. Kwon insists, "We need to be able to think the range of the seeming contradictions and our contradictory desires for them together; to understand, in other words, seeming oppositions as sustaining relations."[133] The local and the global mutually sustain each other; they are coproduced, as Flores points out. Similarly, history and modernity are not contradictory; they are produced in relation with each other. This is not a "relational aesthetics," an ending encounter (against which Claire Bishop has argued).[134] To conceive of no end is an endgame. This is not art about engagement (social practice) but the art of engagement. This is an art of multiple encounters, return engagements. These relationships are sustained only by returning again and again—gestures of reciprocity.

Return Engagements

"Return engagements" also evokes the term *return on engagement* (ROE), the social media version of monetary "return on investment" (ROI). Beyond short-term hard cash (ROI), soft influence (ROE) indicators are now seen as equally important as hard currency (ROI). Consumer participation (shares, likes, comments) builds long-term brand loyalty. According to *Forbes*, "Return on engagement can show you how well your brand is performing in terms of building and sustaining relationships with both consumers and influencers."[135] In contemporary art, who are the consumers and influencers, and what are the relationships in between them? Collectors and speculators see art as a lucrative return on investment. In this era, individuals market themselves as commoditized brands—the corporatization of identity (politics). The lines among audience and consumer, cultural production, and capital product are blurred.

Finance (ROI) and the terms *revolution* and *revolt* are linked by circular imagery: turns of stock portfolios or politics. As I outlined earlier, *revolt* and *revolution* connote looping cycles, not linear movement. Williams notes that the connection centers "the important image of the Wheel of Fortune, through which so many of the movements of life and especially the most public movements were interpreted. In the simplest sense, men . . . were revolved, on Fortune's wheel, setting them now up, now down." In fifteenth-century Europe, about-turns were expected—cycles of trade and trading sociopolitical places became enmeshed. The main emphasis was not "the steady and continuous movement of [Fortune's] wheel" but the idea of a reversal of fortunes—endless turning: the "top and bottom point [are] as a matter of course, certain to change places."[136] Instead of late capital's emphasis on economic upswings or metastatic growth, the original image of fortune's wheel focused on a downward spiral.

"Negative return" challenges the expectations of positive outcomes—return on investments. It is a divestment. Neoliberalism is tied to free markets, constant expansion. Trade expansion can hinge on control of land and lives. Halberstam argues that one must reject binaries of "freedom in liberal terms or death—in order to think about shadow archives of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing."[137] Here I connect the term *evacuation* to military evacuations—a dissolution. To disarm is to disengage.

The acronym ROE also stands for "rules of engagement," or military directives. Both return on engagement and rules of engagement pertain to the social. With the former, there are implicit rules on what will garner positive outcomes (likes and followers). The latter, rules of engagement, is a more formal code for social and military behavior. Both ROEs facilitate social and monetary exchanges (e.g., Instagram shopping, military spending). Finally, rules of engagement are internal to governing bodies, whereas the social media return on engagement is public-facing (for PLCs [publicly listed companies/public limited companies]). Rules of engagement pertain to a country's military forces (naval, air, army) and refer to "the orders issued by a competent military authority that delineate when, where, how, and against whom military force may be used."[138] For individual combatants, ROE is the intermediary between action and abstraction: when and how to kill, and for what causes; ROEs "have implications for what actions soldiers may take on their own authority and what directives may be issued by a commanding officer."[139]

Rules of engagement differ in each country and can shift in tandem with other countries and military contexts. The United Nations has a handbook for peacekeeping operations (published through the support of the United Kingdom and Germany) that states, "The use of force of any kind by a member of a peacekeeping contingent is defined by the rules of engagement (ROE). The ROE are tailored to the specific mandate of the mission and the situation on the ground."[140] Within this guidebook there are listings for sections on "Civil Affairs" and "Gender Mainstreaming," among other topics. While advocating for gender diversity in military and governmental posts, it also states that "gender roles are learned and are therefore, changeable."[141] On the surface the text comes off as forward-thinking, but it reinforces the rhetoric (oppression of gender/sexuality; human rights abuse) that leads to military occupation.

In the United States there are two types of rules of engagement. The first, a standard rule of engagement (SROE), operates when the country is not at war. It aims to limit armed fighting. The second, wartime ROE (WROE), attempts to moderate civilized, efficient combat. According to the Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other than War, standard operating procedure (SOP), often culled from SROE and WROE, is a working "field list" of what is and is not acceptable behavior.[142] Despite these aims, ROEs have come under attack: "It was media exposure during the Vietnam War that highlighted the problems of requiring soldiers to fulfill *ambiguous* objectives."[143] On one hand, these rules were abused. The cultural critic Gina Marie Weaver argues that widespread racialized, sexual violence against Vietnamese women was "standard operating procedure." Weaver interviewed a veteran who calls this a "mass military policy," but this violence is erased from official narratives of the war. Military operations such as Richard Nixon's "secret war" on Cambodia and Laos (discussed earlier) also blurred the line between unofficial and official sanctions. On the other hand, pro-war supporters felt these rules were restrictive: "The standard operating procedures imposed on US troops during the Vietnam War resulted in accusations that domestic concerns were inhibiting the military's freedom of operation."[144] Standard operating procedure was also questioned during the Abu Ghraib scandal in 2004, in which US soldiers committed human rights abuses against Iraqi detainees.

In the American wars in Việt Nam and Iraq what I call "excessive images" triggered uncontainable outrage. These images are "excessive" because they embody a return of the repressed. The sexualized atrocities exceed conventions of civilized warfare: this was inhumane. Both ROE and SOP were supposed to control our basest impulses, unleashed in war. Although their intended audiences varied, both were a form of military documentation. What was normalized violence on-site seethed beyond the edges of their frames.

Television images of Việt Nam's "living room war" and photographs of Iraq's denuded male prisoners buttress empire's growing pornographic archives of violence. The abject spectacles of emasculation (sodomy, torture, rape) in the Abu Ghraib images are fueled by US sexual exceptionalism.[145] On US soil, figures of queer degeneracy threaten nationhood and must be policed and excised, then and now.[146] In Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the United States, the menacing "Oriental as deviant" allows—and disavows—unethical behavior. Despite public shock and awe, all of this is business as usual.

I consider all types of ROEs (rules of engagement, return on engagement) outlined earlier as *return engagements*: recurring and permeable structures for relations. Rules of engagement have similar criteria for return on investment (ROI). Both outline ways to collect data and report constituent information, whether they are target markets or military targets. Both ROI and ROE try to quantify socioeconomic and political commitments. Military, diplomatic, and business affairs all have degrees of investiture. These are enduring commitments. Both ROI and ROE qualitatively measure, and adjust for, failure and success. Return engagement invokes military engagements and the ties between geopolitics and economic development. For instance, despite close borders and ties, heated Khmer border disputes continue with Việt Nam and Thailand.

All three countries have set up shifting rules of engagement to respond to border issues. The Cambodian opposition party ruler Sam Rainsy has railed against Vietnamese border encroachments on Cambodian territory. Cambodia is also known as Kampuchea (កម្ពុជា). The Khmer press often refers to southern Việt Nam (formerly Cochinchina) as Kampuchea Krom (Southern Cambodia) because Sài Gòn and its vicinity were once Cambodia. Human Rights Watch has noted that the Vietnamese and Cambodian governments both abuse the Khmer Krom, the ethnic Khmer who live in Việt Nam. Regarded as Cambodian in Việt Nam, they have no religious freedom or land rights. If they take refuge in Cambodia, as some have, their neighbors see them as ethnic Vietnamese. As Human Rights Watch says, they are one of the "most disenfranchised groups" in the country, facing "social and economic discrimination and unnecessary hurdles to legalizing their status." Their case is just one example of the vexed contemporary relations between Cambodia and Việt Nam. Another is that the Cambodian minister of foreign affairs called on Việt Nam—in its capacity as the ASEAN chair in 2010—to prevent armed conflict between Cambodia and Thailand.[147]

Despite sensitive regional border issues, Việt Nam and Cambodia have a bilateral military relationship, including joint naval patrol and border cooperation. Honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the two countries' diplomatic relations, Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh and Vietnamese Defense Minister Ngô Xuân Lịch met in mid-January 2017 to review and outline their defense ties for 2018 and beyond. Among them, Việt Nam supplies the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces "with military equipment, infrastructure, and training," as *The Diplomat* notes.[148]

Clearly, Cambodia sees Việt Nam as an important ally. Việt Nam is one of the top five investors in Cambodia, with $3.1 billion in 214 projects (expanding the $2.83 billion invested in 183 projects in 2018), Quach Dư, Vietnam's ambassador to Cambodia, stated at a Cambodia–Việt Nam Trade Forum organized by the two countries in 2019 in Phnom Penh.[149] Việt Nam is Cambodia's third-largest business partner; bilateral trade between the countries is projected to reach $5 billion. Ambassador Dư also noted that Việt Nam is the top tourist spot for Cambodians.[150] To regulate external economic shocks, Việt Nam's foreign reserve was at an all-time high in 2019, at $63.75 billion. This upward trend was expected to continue in 2019–20 and beyond: in 2019, the State Bank of Việt Nam bought $8.35 billion from credit institutions to build up its reserve; by April 2020, its foreign reserve was noted to be at an all-time high of $84 billion dollars.[151]

Anthropology | Ethnographic Returns

Diasporic (dis)identifications are psychologically and physically uncertain: at once geographically intimate and distant. Simultaneous separation and closeness is a hallmark of return engagements. This "structure of feeling" has not been fully explored. As Williams notes, as an analytic frame it is "as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible part of our activities."[152] My work moves away from the study of lived experiences of a specific generational place and time. Instead, the concept of return shuttles, shifts through varied spaces, times, and artistic cohorts—the living archives of memory and modernity.

My position as a researcher undoubtedly affects my relationships with my subjects. Within anthropology, as in other disciplines, self-reflexivity is crucial and increasingly challenged. I am indebted to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's use of "thick description."[153] This interpretive approach delves into layers of mediated social meaning. Culture is a semiotic system, open to fissures and gaps. Geertz observes that "culture is not a power." It does not cause "social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes . . . ; it is a context, something within which [interconnected systems of meaning] can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described. Culture is context."[154] Following this logic, I describe scenes in detail to give the reader an affective sense of the relationships among artist, art communities, and researcher. Although these personal anecdotes may appear casual, they convey the complicated networks that the artists and I write about must maneuver.

Unlike older anthropological models of immersive research for a year or two "in the field" and a return "home" to write up the findings, my return engagements are both intensive and sporadic. The traditional ethnographic divides between home and research abroad have been questioned for their hierarchical distinctions. Objects of inquiry (the field) and normative sites of knowledge (home institutions) are separated. For nearly two decades I have built my professional and personal archives. Like those of the anthropologists Anna Tsing and Christina Schwenkel, my "patchwork" ethnography embraces "long term and cyclical returns 'to the field.'"[155] Annual returns to Southeast Asia, which I also consider home, supplement my four plus years in "the field." Researchers such as Schwenkel and I challenge where fieldwork is and where home is. The continuing "return engagements" in which we participate are cyclical, sporadic, visceral experiences. Contrary to older models of diaspora, our movements reveal myriad subject positions. As transnational subjects, we do not experience a clear line between home and abroad.

Affective borders between here and there have become increasingly entrenched since the "ethnographic turn" of the 1990s in international exhibitions described by Foster. He notes that the "artist as ethnographer" role grew from attention in the 1960s to culture, media, and mediation in Western academia and art. This timeline can be traced back further. Anthropology serviced colonial aims; related fields such as area studies became institutionalized during the Cold War hysteria of the late 1940s. Knowledge of various cultures—and the production and dissemination of that knowledge—can serve political and military agendas. Who and what, then, are contemporary Southeast Asian artists in service of during this moment's ethnographic turn? Vincente L. Rafael, a historian of Southeast Asia, observes that "area studies not only reiterate different versions of Orientalism; they also produce by necessity multiple repudiations of these versions."[156] Following this argument, artists tied to Southeast Asia both reinforce and refute liberal pluralist institutions.

Foster, however, claims that institutions (academic, cultural, state) are no longer sites of inquiry (institutional critique). Rather, the artist becomes sited: "As the artist stands in the identity of a sited community, he or she may be asked to stand for this identity, to represent it institutionally. In this case, the artist is primitivized—indeed, anthropologized—in turn: here is your community, the institution says in effect, embodied in your artist, now on display."[157] For example, 1.5 generation Khmer American artists dealing with memory work are representatives of two communities by default: the United States and Cambodia. They must speak for—and embody—a double displacement. The traumas of assimilation to the United States are echoed by the more horrific traumas of the root of that displacement: the specter of genocide. These losses and this othering gets naturalized.

As Schlund-Vials notes the importance of who and what get represented, I assert that it is the who, what, and where that get conflated within a global art market. Thus, my work attempts to redefine relationships between "locals" (as "native informants") and locales. Regardless of terminology—"ethnographic turn" or "global turn"—the Southeast Asian art historian Michelle Antoinette argues that "international" shows from the 1990s to today still have decidedly Western-centric foundations, albeit with the gloss of artistic and theoretical diversity. Self-reflexive approaches by non-Western artists, scholars, and curators support, but do not supplant, institutional desires for counterhegemonic perspectives. How, then, can we tackle the paradoxes of representation?

My ethnographic training gives me another set of tools to engage creative producers—ways to think through authorship and authority. Through extended participant observation and oral interviews, I gain insight about each artist's unique process and the organizations with which each works. The Asian American art historian Margo Machida calls this process an "oral hermeneutics": an "exploratory form of dialogic engagement which seeks to share interpretive authority with artists by linking the use of oral history methods with a hermeneutical orientation toward textual interpretation."[158] This is simply ethnographic methodology applied to the analysis of art history. Although I do not refer to my approach as "oral hermeneutics," I also combine insights culled from conversations with artist-organizers with close readings of artwork.

Artists shift identities in local and international contexts. I use a range of methodologies to understand how artists and cultural organizers self-identify and are identified by critics, gallerists, and arts organizations in Cambodia, Việt Nam, and abroad. A work of art does not exist in a vacuum; neither do artists. It is my goal to both rethink and bridge the gap between transnational identities in Cambodia and Việt Nam. Currently, there is no conceptual art education or sustained contemporary cultural criticism in Việt Nam or Cambodia, yet there are vibrant cultural communities in these locales. Apart from text-based modes of interpretation and analysis, the intersections of ethnography and visual culture offer fresh insights into issues of voice and visuality. Through a combination of disciplinary approaches, the artist's perspective and working context become clearer.

Local and Diasporic

Although I focus on output by local and diasporic artists and filmmakers situated within Cambodia and Việt Nam, I am also attentive to work and networks outside of these nation-states, particularly in the United States. I focus on localized subjectivity and agency in both Việt Nam and Cambodia, thus decentering dominant US-centric discourse on the legacies of the war in Việt Nam and narratives that prioritize US military involvement. Cambodia's traumatic past is overdetermined. Social and political discourse—as well as artistic production and consumption—are not limited to specific national, ethnic, and diasporic boundaries; they traverse many disparate borders. These "contact zones" create unforeseen social, cultural, and economic interactions.[159] In the realm of cultural production, these unforeseen interactions can be the unpredictable strategic cartographies in which artists engage. How artists choose to self-identify and which facets of their identities get associated with their creative output are continually shifting, dependent on negotiations between individuals and institutions.

My work seeks to blur national and ethnic distinctions by drawing thematic comparisons between artists and artwork. The contested "contact zones" between identifications and geography, between "local" and "diasporic," make for uneasy, if convenient, exchanges and framings. Again, diaspora's fluidity unanchors the fixity of the nation-state and identitarian politics.

I define diaspora as a fluid process marked by continual encounters rather than as a fixed location. Diasporic crossings are return engagements—a continual crisscrossing between here and there, between now and then; a process of shape-shifting. Rather than seeing diasporic subjectivity—and identity at large—as stable positions, an "already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent," Stuart Hall conceives of "identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."[160] This porous process is one that is at odds with the nation-state and the politics of identity, which the international art circuit embraces even as it relegates artists of color to the margins. On the surface, the global art market embraces this flexibility while reasserting deeply entrenched hierarchical borders. Despite being challenged, national boundaries and the parameters of high conceptual art remain fixed.

A number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have noted that migration, as a pressing geopolitical fact, has become a core focus of contemporary art and scholarship. The cultural critic and art historian T. J. Demos has outlined three overlapping concepts tied to migration in the humanities and social sciences over the past three decades: diaspora (referring to a collective geographic dispersal); nomadism (particularly "artistic nomadism," or unbounded creative movement); and refugees (those affected by forced displacement, persecution, or disaster).[161] Likewise, the anthropologist and art historian Saloni Mathur wrote in 2018 about a "mobility turn" in the arts and social sciences. In contrast to the celebratory discourse on nomadism that Demos traces in the West in the 1990s, Mathur argues that the migrant is not automatically a figure of resistance, echoing Hall's assertion that such identities are not a priori givens. Like Hall's figures in process and in "production," always founded within representation, Mathur sees the "paradigm of the migrant" as "ambivalent and indeterminate."[162] Hence, the geographic and historical specificities of migrancy "represent some of the most difficult forms of entanglement and separation."[163]

To grapple with the complexities of dispersal (without conflating lived realities) from the politics of creative representation it is important to parse out realpolitik and poetics yet still recognize their embedded ties. For instance, the art historian Anne Ring Petersen differentiates these two facets as "politics" and "the political." When migration becomes an object of politics, it "becomes an issue in some way—whether in national legislative and administrative immigration policies; in the ideological debates about multiculturalism and the recognition of minorities; in the image politics of news broadcasts about immigrants; or the strategies of cultural institutions vis-à-vis artists with a migrant background." However, Petersen asserts, the political is a sociocultural everyday lived framework as "migration and artistic representations of migrants' lives unfold": "The act of migration is usually followed by some kind of everyday life in another place where the migrant experience becomes an integral part of everyday practices and the social life and identity of the subject."[164] While the distinction between the objective of "politics" and subjective lived experience of "the political" is useful, I do not agree with Petersen's assimilationist framing. Rather, to echo Hall, this migrant subjectivity is eternally produced and reproduced through lived experience and through art. Through these various views on migration, I connect notions of entanglement, ambivalence, indeterminacy, and process.

In thinking through politics (as object of action) and the political (as lived sociocultural experience) I build on the writings of the art historian W. J. T. Mitchell and the artist-theorist Hito Steyerl on the relationship between migrants and images. Mitchell observes that migrancy has dual components: as theme and as image. In the first aspect, migration appears as a thematic within cultural production (as noted by Mathur, Demos, Petersen, and so on). Second, Mitchell states that the image of the migrant precedes the migrant's arrival. Images are by nature migratory. Yet Steyerl notes that, like classes of migrants that range from the privileged to the dispossessed, images are hierarchical. Her essay "In Defense of the Poor Image" observes that the global economy of proliferating pictures ranges from high-resolution limited-run and limited editions to viral, pixelated, and even pirated copies. Following these arguments that migration—as theme and as image—are in constant, enmeshed circulation, I assert that the migrant's image (as sociopolitical projection and as cultural production) is under constant negotiation.

Beyond parsing migration as a thematic (subject and subjectivity) and as a politic (object of action), it is difficult to account for its myriad manifestations. How does one group the proliferation of art addressing migrancy by artists who are "professional labor migrants"?[165] For a certain privileged class of artists, curators, and scholars within the globalized art market, itinerancy is a job requirement. Art history has long been preoccupied with categorization of genres (e.g., landscape, portrait, still life), yet migration as subjective experience and object of politicized action defies labels. Petersen writes that the "breadth of 'diaspora aesthetics,' or 'migratory aesthetics' . . . makes it clear that the category of genre cannot encompass it."[166] I want to address the divides between a "diaspora aesthetics" and shifting notions of diaspora itself. Just as images of migrants precede the migrant, as Mitchell notes, images of diasporic and local subjectivity precede the artist. The local and the diasporic are viscerally embodied, conjured, through visual cultures.

It is important that Asian American studies researchers reconsider our definitions of diaspora to make our focus truly transnational. The editors of *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur, state that cultural critics, anthropologists, and literary scholars increasingly use the term *diaspora* to describe the twentieth century's mass migrations and displacements, including "independence movements in formerly colonized areas, waves of refugees fleeing war-torn states, and fluxes of immigration in the post–

World War II era."[167] This older view of diaspora emphasizes the boundaries of the nation-state. As a consequence of political or economic upheaval, refugees, migrants, and exiles flee one state for another. "There is no diaspora without borders and no borders without states," observes David Palumbo-Liu.[168] In crossing borders, diasporic subjects reinscribe the boundaries between home and exile.

The earlier meaning of diasporic movement referred to a diasporic population's dispersal from one location to a host of other places. The singular point of origin—former colony, war-torn nation, repressive regime, impoverished nation—ends in multiple possible destination points. Diaspora also "etymologically suggests the . . . fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds."[169] The seed-spore analogy has been widely used in Asian American studies in reference to talk about the Asian diasporas across the globe. Scholars describe communities that have settled and taken root in their new chosen homes. In this view, the homeland is a fixed entity, the essentialized site of origins.

More recently, scholars have veered away from simple constructions of nativist belonging to account for diasporic subjects' multiply situated identifications. Migrants, immigrants, and refugees often do not settle in one location; they take part in multiple movements, physical and psychological. Lowe, Paul Gilroy, and Rey Chow, among others, acknowledge that repeated geographic crossings, rather than binaries of home and exile, shape diasporic identities. The seed-spore model has ceded to frameworks that attempt to capture the "heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity" of diverse diasporic experiences.[170] To return to one's homeland does not mean returning home.

Karin Aguilar-San Juan suggests that for many Asian American subjects, looking back does not mean returning to the mythic site of ethnic origins. Reversing the logic of returning to an Eastern homeland, she writes, "To go westward, is to go home, in the sense that many Asian Americans have family in California, Washington state or farther in Hawai'i." For Aguilar-San Juan, Asian Americans find home in America, not necessarily in Asia.[171] Palumbo-Liu's binary between the "memory of the homeland and the consciousness of the diasporic new land" is no longer a relevant distinction.[172] The immigrant's "new land" and old homeland are no longer distinct spheres. The old country is now a brave new world. Cambodia's and Việt Nam's breakneck growth ensures that the landscape of memory is altered. For some, the diasporic new land has been home for generations. Thus, heterogeneous diasporic frameworks must account for the different experiences of immigrants who settled in the United States near the turn of the twentieth century, as well as more recent economic migrants and flexible citizens.

Digital Divides

In this digital age, borders are increasingly permeable. At the same time, borders are ever more vigilantly policed, fueled by anxiety over terrorism, global economic downturns, and the decline of US empire. The new diasporic subject questions these demarcations and fears. The anthropologist Ashley Carruthers observes that, for Vietnamese diasporic subjects, the distinction between homeland and diaspora collapses. Home is Việt Nam and abroad, and in between.[173] Overseas Vietnamese negotiate different ideological systems at once: capitalism, market socialism, democracy. The exchange of cultural goods such as music videos and films and repeated returns, both real and imagined, facilitate the breakdown of borders. What happens when the diasporic imaginary is distressing, as Khatharya Um asks, "signifying both an indelible connection and, simultaneously, a rupture?"[174] What does the current digital age mean for the making of the diasporic subject?[175] Diasporic and local communities are increasingly connected, as well as divided, by technology: YouTube videos and Facebook groups create a sense of shared commonality across space as online factions emerge. Again I stress the importance of envisioning diaspora as interactive processes and relations. Rupture, connection, and disconnection are part of the cyclical nature of return engagements.

This bond and split is the space of return, or lines of flight, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term.[176] "Line of flight" is translated by Brian Massumi from the French *ligne de fuite*, in which *fuite* refers not only to fleeing but also to flowing, leaking to a multiplicity of points.[177] One can think of a refugee fleeing from her home country, but also of the myriad movements, flows—actual and virtual—in which she engages. Here the subject is "leaky," unbound by infrastructure. Sara Ahmed suggests that "to leak is to lead"—a leak can cause damage, a rupture, but it can also radically transform existing structures from within.[178] The line of flight is the point of change in which two paradigms are transgressed. Here, the subject (I suggest the digital diasporic) shifts from actual to virtual conditions. I see transgressing local and diasporic distinctions as a line of flight: connection and rupture.

The lines between diasporic and transnational identities are blurred. Palumbo-Liu marks a distinction between a "cross-cultural" version of diaspora with "ethnicized" subjects and a transnational one of "transmigrant, multiply situated identities."[179] The cross-cultural diasporic subject has been incorporated by the state's multicultural logic, whereas the transnational subject refuses assimilation. This seems like the difference between racialized, settled Asian Americans versus more recent migrants who are in limbo, shuttling between identities. But this dichotomy may be a false one. One can be both a cross-cultural subject and a transnational one. The terms *diaspora* and *transnationalism* overlap, since both address movements across borders. Explicating the difference between the two terms, Braziel and Mannur note, "Diaspora refers specifically to the movement—forced or voluntary—of people from one or more nation states to another. Transnationalism speaks to larger, more impersonal forces—specifically, those of globalism and global capitalism."[180] They define diaspora as movements of subjects and transnationalism as movements of objects. The forces of global capital, however, cannot be decoupled from humans. I reframe transnationalism as a subject position, not an abstract force. Contrary to Braziel and Mannur's framing, diasporic movement from one state to another—and from one state of mind to another—is not only limited one-way crossings. Transnationalism accounts for myriad crossings.

Placing concepts of diaspora within transnational movements and moments grounds them. Much of Asian American studies inquiry has been focused on what happens in America and not Asia, since that was seen as the purview of Asian studies and area studies.[181] We must not overlook the links between Asia and America for diasporic subjects. Diasporic outlooks have long placed emphasis on zones of settlement, looking West, looking home, as Aguilar San-Juan muses. A transnational perspective focuses on movement rather than settlement. As transnational subjects, we are never truly settled. A transnational outlook is a return gaze, away from the West toward the East. But this differs from old homeland–new exilic land binaries and seed-spore metaphors.

Return engagements problematize the local-diasporic divide; the artists I examine use this very divide to strategically position themselves.[182] Looking to the East, Western-trained artists are essentialized as embodiments of the East by international art markets. Looking to the West, artists residing in the East (both local and diasporic) are expected to translate for hegemonic Western audiences. We must, once again, reconsider and redefine diaspora to account for new global realities.

As most Southeast Asian studies work focuses on Asia, and Asian American studies scholarship centers America, my project seeks to invert and question these lines of inquiry. Việt Thanh Nguyễn notes the "billions in overseas remittances, de facto nations in exile, and transnational traffic in ideas and people" as reason for looking at flows, leaks.[183] I also argue for a Southeast Asian studies attuned to larger diasporic movements—an area studies not focused only on local interactions. Most area studies scholarship focuses on a single nation-state, inattentive to regional and international interactions. Here I advocate for an Asia-centric focus (as Southeast Asian studies proper) yet with a diasporic outlook. For Southeast Asian subjects, the link between Asia and its diasporas is also important. Asian American studies should not only trace Asian American subjects transnationally. Transnational foci should lead, leak away from—not reinforce—American empire. Likewise, Southeast Asian studies can benefit from more research on Southeast Asian diasporas—not only to the global North, but to other axes and affiliations in the global South.

Relocations | Returns CRITICAL REFUGEE STUDIES

The emergence of critical refugee studies reconstrues the affective borders of belonging and relationality. While much of this growing body of work focuses on the United States and its subjects, the locus of return engagements is firmly grounded in Southeast Asia, not the United States. This project unmoors the centrality and the mythos of Euro-America within the discourse on memory, trauma, and cultural responses. Furthermore, my work unfixes the preoccupation with US militarization through Southeast Asian (particularly Khmer, Vietnamese, and Lao) diasporic subjects. Beyond the aftermath of war and militarization, my book also looks to (post)modernity and its constituents as sites of inquiry. Examining relocations sparked by conflicts then and now is important. A critical look at returns is equally crucial in understanding the myriad manifestations of neo-empire and the postmodern condition.

Yến Lê Espiritu notes that America's rhetoric of refuge masks the perpetration and perpetuation of violence against its refugees, immigrants, and second-class citizens. In the aftermath of war, Espiritu highlights first- and second-generation Vietnamese refugees' counterhegemonic culture and knowledge production. She notes that American "military colonialism" in the Asia Pacific region lays the bloody path for the United States as sanctified "refuge."[184] The same routes of military personnel and weapons from the United States to Pacific Asia enabled the "return" of Southeast Asian refugees to US empire. This dynamic precisely exemplifies our troubled return engagements. These interactions constitute an interconnected, intimate web of social, cultural, and military relations. Espiritu states, “If you resurrect the history of the displacement and flight of the Vietnamese people, you will simultaneously call attention to other histories that have been systematically erased.”[185]

This emphasis on buried narratives and revivification reinforces the refugee as liminal specter—half living and half dead—caught between memory and forgetting. The alignment with erased others centralizes US hegemony. Instead of highlighting one-way movement to the heart of empire, my work focuses on how artists displace and destabilize imperial cultural institutions through multinodal journeys. In addition to viewing Vietnamese refugees—and, by extension, other Southeast Asian refugees—as a “critical site of social and political critique,” which places emphasis on disenfranchised bodies, I suggest artistic oeuvres open up other bodies of knowledge, other modes of (anti)sociality and unknowing. I see return and returnees as sites of critique. These returns do not unearth erasure—and reaffirm visible-invisible binaries—but, rather, question the hypervisible tethers and tropes of empire.

I maintain that through return engagements, this aesthetic and ethical entanglement is unending, and endlessly shifting. Việt Thanh Nguyễn’s *Nothing Ever Dies* suggests memory and forgetting are coeval, asserting that “all wars are fought twice”: once on the battlefield, and the second time through individual and social recollection (echoing arguments by Sturken and James E. Young). Nations and their displaced are not fixed discursive “sites.” I trace how geography and subjectivity are constantly negotiated for transnational individuals and institutions. The crux is not what is remembered and forgotten within national agendas. The battle is over representation itself.

Addressing American wars in Việt Nam, Korea, and Laos, as well as the Cambodian genocide, Việt Thanh Nguyễn proposes a transnational purview, albeit through an American axis.[186] My earlier work with Yong Soon Min on Việt Nam and Korea also asserts that historical trauma and popular culture are deeply intertwined but argues for a Pan-Asian nexus.[187] Toward this I traced Korean and Vietnamese connections then (both countries were vassal states of China) and now (Việt Nam and Korea have significant bilateral economic exchanges). The basis for South Korean modernity—embodied through K-Pop (*hallyu*)—was founded and funded through war: the United States paid more than $2 billion to Korean mercenary soldiers in Việt Nam. Republic of Korea soldiers were brutal, slicing off ears, echoing earlier Japanese occupation in Korea.[188] I build on my earlier work to look at military engagement and economic and cultural development from translocal and transhistorical perspectives.

In the chapters that follow, I intervene in anthropology, art history, and visual culture, as well as Asian American studies, American studies, and Southeast Asian studies, the boundaries of which are both permeable and patrolled.

Book Structure

Chapter 1 examines two documentaries: Rithy Panh's *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) and Spencer Nakasako's *Refugee* (2003). Both films focus on Khmer and Khmer American returns, confrontation, and silence. Revisiting David Eng and David Kazanjian's notions of loss as a productive space, I argue that these filmic subjects are melancholics unable to "successfully" mourn, whereas the spectators of these "trauma dramas" are exempt. Considering the Khmer Rouge tribunal verdicts and my stance on loss as nonproductive, I build on Schlund-Vial's call for a juridical activism and Việt Thanh Nguyễn's insistence on "just memory": recuperative cultural projects may aim to "produce" social justice, at the same time recognizing its impossibility. In contrast to conceiving refusal and silence as lack of voice—based on psychoanalytic loss, lack, and reclamation—these films serve as a Derridean *supplément*, both compensating and supplanting narratives of Khmer genocide. I propose silence and repeated gestures as alternate embodied and spiritual sites of intuitive comprehension, ambiguous and ambivalent.

Chapter 2 focuses on the Sài Gòn returnees Sandrine Llouquet and Tiffany Chung and how, as artist-organizers, they strategically position themselves as both Western-educated insiders and Southeast Asian outsiders on the global art market. I assert that artists, as well as national and cultural institutions, employ these strategic cartographies—shifting geopolitical identifications and affiliations. This critical process of reworlding (following Aihwa Ong and Rob Wilson) and remapping—reconfiguring oneself repeatedly—is in keeping with my frames of cyclical return and revolution. Late capital's ever-evolving demands for products and cheap (raced, gendered) labor and products dovetails with the strategies of internationally visible Việt Kiều (Vietnamese returnee) artists such as Jun Nguyễn-Hatsushiba, Đỉnh Q. Lê, Liza Nguyễn, and An-My Lê.

Chapter 3 explores the return to archives—personal, postcolonial, and spiritual—of the Cambodian collagist and painter Leang Seckon and the Vietnamese American experimental filmmaker Hồng-Ân Trương. Throughout the chapter, I assert that the reappearance of history's fragments—colonial and modern—as well as the formal use of fragmentation in their works rework Bergsonian notions of space and time. For instance, as nostalgic Americana and Indochina whets the appetite, Seckon's and Trương's fragmented appropriations of cadavers reinscribe this cannibalistic hunger within the fevered archive.

Chapter 4, the final chapter, deals with urban-rural development for economic return in Cambodia and Việt Nam through the work of the sculptor Sopheap Pich of Phnom Penh and the conceptual artist Phan Quang of Sài Gòn. I maintain that Pich's and Phan's translation of these issues are (self-)exploitative gestures. Similarly, Đỉnh Q. Lê's artwork on Agent Orange—first conceived in 1989 as kitschy souvenir objects sold in a Sài Gòn market stall and then presented again in 2009 for a group exhibition in Germany—pivots on the use of ongoing environmental and corporeal damage. By using the term *exploit*, I note that their strategic positioning proves both harmful and beneficial as they extract naturalized resources: nature (as art subject and art material), and their self-naturalizing stories.

The Gift STRATEGIC GIVING AND TAKING IN RETURN

The stories one tells are an offering, a gift. I conceive of enacting strategic cartographies as tactical, reciprocal acts of giving and receiving. In giving oneself (via artistic representation), one also gains—receiving both real capital and cultural capital. In common understanding, to receive a gift is a choice. A paradox: to give is also to destroy, undo—themes on which I expand. Mimi Thi Nguyễn critiques the double-edged "gift of freedom" that US empire promises, exacting an eternal debt for refugees of its violence, ranging from wars in Southeast Asia to wars in the Middle East. Aesthetics and culture are core to this gift's contradictions: "We need not deny the violence and destruction that undergirds the gift of freedom to also take seriously its promise to reverence beauty, or respect aliveness, because these are part of its power."[189] In short, there is no choice in accepting the gift of freedom. For those constructed as subjects of freedom's benevolence and subjected to its brutality, strategic cartographies, and tactical alignments may be a means of achieving agency. Mutable freedom is given under the guises of free trade or freedom of expression—creative, sexual, political.

Part of this gift's debt is paid through economic capital, as well as cultural capital. In some instances, Vietnamese refugees become multicultural excuses for new abuses of ethnonational Others, renewed through the war on terror. A case in point: US Assistant General Việt Đ. Định, chief architect of the USA Patriot Act, was celebrated as a freedom-loving Vietnamese American immigrant who now worked to ensure counter-"terrorist" protection at home and dissemination abroad. In the age of "liberal empire," freedom is a gift housed in Pandora's box. Following Derrida's formulation of the gift, Mimi Thi Nguyễn notes that a gift always demands debt.

Giving presupposes taking in return—a reciprocal, if unbalanced, gesture. This relational act is a cycle, which I connect to circular movements of becoming, overturning, and undoing. Derrida asserts that a true gift builds to overcoming, as well as madness.[190] In contrast to Mimi Thi Nguyễn's framing of the gift as empire's rational, calculated one-sided domination of its subjects, I see artistic production as gifts that undermine (neo)colonial logic of eternal indebtedness.

The political theorist Kennan Ferguson notes that "to give" and "to take" have the same Indo-European roots: "In middle Dutch, the word *gif* meant both a gift and a poison; the German word *Gift* means toxin."[191] He elaborates, "From the gifts given by European explorers and colonists to native peoples . . . to the gift of economic development through industrialization and free trade, the poison has long been indistinguishable from the gift."[192] To recompense and to represent are also part of the dialogic of giving and taking, presents and poison. Representation is both form (in the case of art) and a formalized process (e.g., democracy). The gift can be both physical and figurative, simultaneously a realizable project and a projection.

Return engagements, while cyclical, rupture the giver-receiver dyad, asserting that the two roles are mutually constitutive. I draw another impossible aporia: the receiver is giver; the artist is audience; subjection is also dominance. The artist benefits and is bounded. She or he is the object of the gaze and its subjective maker. As artists enact strategic cartographies, they both reinforce and undermine the trappings of identity and nation.

Tracing thinkers on the gift—the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, the philosopher Georges Bataille, and Derrida, among others—Ferguson observes that obliteration of the symbolic gift is key in each of these analyses: "In the annihilation of the thing, the subjugation of the other is all that remains."[193] Seen in this frame, art can be both enactment and annihilation of subjecthood.

The idea of enactment and annihilation within gift giving connects with how artists within the "ethnographic turn" (or global turn) are at once "evacuated and elevated," to invoke Foster's phrase again. Minoritized artists simultaneously embody, bear, and receive the gift. They do this tacitly and tactically—there is no overt announcement of strategic cartographies at play. Within avant-garde conceptual art discourse, the "thingness" of an artwork (e.g., Duchamp's upturned urinal) is annihilated. The artwork is no longer an amalgam of found objects—the ready-made seeks to ultimately overturn institutional and art-history traditions. Thus, the subjugation of the other—in this case, hegemonic dictates of high art—remains, its annihilation figured as a leftover, a relic of industrialization. Within the lineage of conceptual contemporary (Western) art, thingness is effaced.

In another formalist art lineage, as espoused by the evaluative modernist art critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, an art object's thingness is highlighted (e.g., paintings should only assert the medium's essence and not address sociopolitical concerns). In the essay "Art and Objecthood," Fried argues that art objects ideally are self-contained, timeless, separate from the world of everyday objects. Minimalist art foregrounds its status as material object, its "objecthood." Fried also plays semantically with the idea of "objecthood": "object" is cast as refusal, and an objection is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a statement thrown in or introduced in opposition." As mentioned, the artist-giver both objects and accepts, receives. This objection can be the artist's interventions into a given medium or her critiques of the institution, or of society. Simultaneously, the artist knows that to make, to give to, is also to make up for—a lack. Lacan's *objet petit a* posits that our desire for knowledge of the Other remains perpetually unfulfilled. There will be no reciprocity.

Whether one straddles conceptual or formal camps, avant-garde art movements are claims for primacy—negation of one aesthetic paradigm over another. Cultural theorists such as Benjamin have speculated on how an artwork achieves its power, cultural resonance, or "aura." Thus, the art piece is remnant, remains—sign and signifier—that at once annuls and embodies dichotomies of subjugation and dominion. The art piece comes to signify the artist.

Beyond its materiality (and material conditions of production), art objects are symbolic gifts (that can create/destroy). Artworks are activated when exhibited, or "given" to the public. Bataille asserted that the crux of the gift was the metamorphosis of a thing into rank. The given/destroyed object transmutes into power (rank). I see this alchemy occurring in aesthetic realms where "prestige is power, this is insofar as power itself escapes the considerations of force or right."[194] Art—and artists—are transformable object-subjects circulating within and outside the logic of the gift. Within cultural diplomacy, art is both treaty and toxin, upholding and undermining infrastructures.

Antonio Gramsci's notion of the war of position (as opposed to the war of maneuver) situates cultural production as an active site of resistance and a space to question hegemonic structures. The war of maneuver is physical combat, whereas the war of position operates within the realm of culture.[195] In my earlier discussion of a revolution of culture—a turning of hegemonic discourse—I echo postcolonial theorists in noting that it is an ideological battle. As US wars on terror continue overseas, a longer, recurring battle over winning "hearts and minds" rages. Gramsci cautions that "one should refrain from facile rhetoric about direct attacks against the State and concentrate instead on the difficult and immensely complicated tasks that a 'war of position' within civil society entails."[196] One can see North American "culture wars" of the 1990s and of today—overlapping turf wars over religious, political, and aesthetic values—within this frame.

I read the war of position also as a war of positionality. Positionality theory posits that identity is fluid, not a fixed phenomenon but in constant flux, dependent on context and relationships.[197] I suggest that the war of position(ality) dovetails with Williams's Long Revolution, as both are directed toward tactical maneuvers over an extended period. Strategic cartographies also operate within this rubric. In this space, one can be camouflaged, a shape-shifter, a becoming. It is vital to be facile, porous as a way to concede and contradict institutional demands. It is a way to flexibly maneuver civil society's continual absorption of challenges to its structure. The counter-revolution already anticipates attacks, as I noted in my discussion of Williams earlier in the introduction. Gramsci echoes this idea: "When the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The State was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements."[198] Williams and Gramsci suggest that radical change within neoliberal democracy is possible only through culture.

What happens when one cannot fight back, speak back, look back? What happens when return is foreclosed? There may never be recourse, no true "just memory" or "belated" justice, as Việt Thanh Nguyễn and Schlund-Vials recognize yet still advocate for. For Mauss, the enemy can be vanquished only when the gift given "cannot be returned."[199] An asymmetrical relation of power is thus established. The cycle of giving and taking is both requirement and impossibility—forever recapitulated. Liberal empire promises to give vitality while taking life. Quoting Derrida, Mimi Thi Nguyễn notes, "Such violence may be considered the very condition of the gift, its constitutive impurity once the gift is engaged in a process of circulation."[200] Contagion is embedded within the gift's circular logic and cyclical movement, represented by the image of fortune's wheel I described earlier. Whichever direction the wheel turns, carnage is constant: "The violence appears irreducible, within the circle or outside it, whether it repeats the circle or interrupts it."[201] As the wheel turns topsy-turvy, a system's fruition also lays the seeds for its dissolution. This violence is enacted through the gaze, through "scopic regimes" (to borrow Martin Jay's term). From the age of the world picture (Martin Heidegger) to the age of the world target (Rey Chow), circuits of looking are lethal. Through mapping, one is made and undone. Those who are targeted as objects of liberal empire's gaze, framed as gift, may not be able to return—overturn—its life-affirming and life-denying look. As the saying goes, an eye for an eye.

Stages (RETURN | GIFT | SACRIFICE)

I end this introduction by circling back to where I began: thinking of gestures of giving and what is expected in return—and of returnees—on local and international stages. The symbolic or real destruction of the gift—the sacrificial act—reveals the power of the giver. Also describing the United States' gift of freedom, Ferguson notes that "the bodily materialism of the armed forces themselves proves both symbolic and incontrovertible; the numbers of US soldiers wounded and killed constitute part of the cost of the [Iraqi] war."[202] If war dead are part of the material and symbolic price of freedom, how does one measure the value of this gift? Is it through comparison of other sacrifices and losses? Việt Thanh Nguyễn quotes the war photojournalist Philip Jones Griffith: "The Washington DC memorial to the American war dead is 150 yards long; if a similar monument would be built with the same density of names of the Vietnamese war dead in it, [it] would be 9 miles long."[203] What, then, are the real wages of war? As we see in the examples of wars in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, "The gift stages the circulation of persons and things (in the case of war, troops and armaments) to bind a relation of giver and recipient across the globe."[204] Within this frame I come back to my idea of return engagements as stage, staging, repeated enactment—repayment of an offer to perform. The act of giving (offering and receiving, in turn) is performative.

In addition to being a poison, the performance or ritual of gift giving can also be a salve, restorative. Derrida states, "The performative that comes on the scene here is a 'restoring of sight' rather than the visible object. . . . Truth belongs to this movement of repayment that tries in vain to render itself adequate to its cause or to the thing."[205] In returning the favor, repaying one's blood debt, the eternally grateful refugees must be able to see the benefits they have been granted (the "visible object," the American dream). The "restoring of sight" Derrida refers to is internal vision (intangible faith, belief) rather than external vision (external materialist modernist objects). As an act of performative resistance, one can turn a blind eye, reject offering in vain "adequate" payment. To turn a blind eye to empire's binds is to embrace the invisible, the negative, the shadows. The ritual of return requires engaging the unseen, the unforeseen. To our blind hearts we now turn, again.