

## Moths to a Flame

Malcolm Browne, Thích Quảng Đức, and Immolation Photographs

He was always known as a kind of eccentric character, kind of spooky in a way.  
—Richard Pile<sup>i</sup>

Malcolm Browne was the first Associated Press correspondent to be sent to Vietnam on long-term assignment to cover the escalating conflict, yet his first memories of the country were conjured through smell. He would later say that whiffs of a spice from the bark of a tree called *Saigon cassia*, a close relative of cinnamon, were his earliest associations with the foreign city. In his 1993 autobiography *Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A Reporter's Life*, Browne reminisced: “I’ll always associate the name *Saigon* with that delicious smell.”<sup>ii</sup> Smell—the most biochemical, urgent and ephemeral of our senses—is a process activated by vaporous molecules that ignite a chain of cellular interactions. For Malcolm Browne, Vietnam (and Saigon in particular) was at once both an otherworldly ecosphere and professional site of reportage. All of his first impressions were atmospheric, sensuous. And as we will see, all sorts of chemical reactions, not just smells, would cast a resonant spell over his perceptions of the Vietnamese landscape, shaping his engagement with the situation there in early 1963.<sup>iii</sup>

This chapter explores the strange career of Browne and the reasons for his presence in Saigon during the spring of 1963. Who was Malcolm Browne? Why was he the sole foreign photo-journalist at the scene of Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation? How did his lifelong affinities for chemistry and fascination with death inform his life as a reporter in Vietnam? In this chapter, an askance biographical reading of Browne’s life orients the early 1960s landscape. A native New Yorker raised in a traditional Quaker household, Browne was a somewhat eccentric personality. As a young boy he was mesmerized by fire, and like the rest of the world, in 1945 came to know the devastating spectacle of nuclear fusion. Following, I similarly explore the pathos of chemicality and situate Browne’s bearing witness to Quảng Đức’s fiery trauma as an act of solidarity. The sole foreign picture-maker present at Quảng Đức’s act of Buddhist immolation, Browne was an aberration—his presence a further ripple in the quixotic death-event on the morning of June 11, 1963.

The first full-time US foreign correspondent in Southeast Asia, Browne seemed to sense the cataclysmic potential of spiritual strife, local identity, and Catholic political regime overwhelming southern Vietnam. More importantly, in the early years of conflict he was one

of very few foreign reporters paying attention to the developing Buddhist crisis. In 1963, his personal experiences from wartime Korea and attention to cultural nuance in South Vietnam led the precocious young journalist to believe that Buddhist resistance movements would become part of a larger national revolution. He was right. Browne's intimate relationships with a cohort of monks in Saigon alerted him to the potential import of what unfolded on June 11. In the process of revealing Browne's identity and artistic sensibilities, I discover how his extant reporting provides further insight into the stakes of the Buddhist crisis in spring 1963.

Conceptually, I take seriously the psychic work of friendships—even those latent, unknown, or never identified. I follow art historian Maria Loh's idea that "friendships [have] the ability to reanimate the dead."<sup>iv</sup> Loh's notion of ongoing friendship and necromancy help uncover the strange electrical current conjoining Malcom Browne and Thích Quảng Đức. Though Browne and Quảng Đức were not friends in a practical sense, the fateful morning of June 11 intertwined them in a continuous, universal conversation. While the now iconic photograph of Quảng Đức enveloped in flames is surely the most ineluctable record fusing the two independent actors, Browne's political ideals and portentous nature equipped the young reporter with an alike set of civic principles. Albeit an ally in spirit, the impassioned American reporter was still, however, driven by exhilaration: for Browne, action outweighed reflection.

The photo-journalist describes in his memoir this sense of zealously lived experience: "Life itself [was] a vehicle for attaining *the Feel*... Life was a quest for the greatest possible range and depth of experience, including physical sensations, of course, but much more. . . *The Feel* arises from exultation, despair, agony, pleasure and revelation, not from a TV screen or a printed page."<sup>v</sup> In short, I propose Browne's manifestation on the street-stage of June 11, 1963, was not mere chance coincidence or simple journalistic assignment. In fact, he lived for, even envisioned, this kind of critical scenario: an intense constellation of forces, vernacular politics, and social engagements. The sacrificial pictures of Quảng Đức aimed to register the 'despair and agony' of life that Browne describes. While the gamut of this American personal chronology sculpts this mid-1963 epoch, I conclude by outlining the last days of Quảng Đức's devout mission—his penultimate life sacrifice and the uncanny role of photography.<sup>vi</sup>

Browne's rarely explored other photographs from that day—the ones that did not win awards—document the events leading up to and after Quảng Đức's final moments in flame. They are the only extant visual record of this prolonged encounter. In order to complicate the tangled ideas of authorship, media journalism, and photographic truth disclosed on the streets of Vietnam, June 1963, I mobilize three specific contemporary scholars of the image—Ariella Azoulay, Eduardo Cadava, and Susan Sontag, who together reveal the greater shadow affect and influence of mechanically reproduced pictures.<sup>vii</sup> As a postcolonial media studies expert, Ariella Azoulay's work problematizes the static, proprietary notion of photography. Her theorizing of the camera punctures any cohesion to the photographic medium itself as stable, independent, or objective. Azoulay contends rather that “photography is an event...the event of photography is subject to a unique form of temporality—it is made up of an infinite series of encounters.”<sup>viii</sup> Through her polemical interventions, singularity of vision and authorial vantage are upended: for Azoulay, encased otherness and relational capacities are the shadow catacombs inside image-making.

Through the political miasma of her wide philosophical lens, I deconstruct traditional interpretations of Browne's individual images. I argue the matrix encounter of photographic conditions discloses a colliding interstice of contact and traces, indices and signifiers—process becomes the operative word for pictures made *in camera*.<sup>ix</sup> Alas, the complicated veritas of Browne's visual announcement and Quảng Đức's embedded death remain snared in a holographic web of obfuscation and transparency: the unknown. Following this exposition, however, I continue to further apply pressure on Azoulay's critique; more precisely, I situate Eduardo Cadava's catastrophic ‘image in ruins’ (*lapsus imaginis*)—his quasi-messianic dictum—as even more clairvoyant and disruptive. His text is surgical; a refined incision and sharpened psychoanalytic tool for thinking through photographs. Albeit kindred spirits, Cadava resists the confines of immediate historical indexes (i.e., Walter Benjamin) that Azoulay often champions across her political discourse on documentary photography. Instead, lodged within the electrical terrain of Cadava's *lapsus imaginis* all static edges of history burst; and like a photographic flash, the illegibility of time and trauma, disaster and memory percolate infinitely to haunt the optical landscape of June 11, 1963.

Although Azoulay and Cadava are together perhaps the more robust interlocutors when approaching the collective scene of trauma—Quảng Đức's entombed death—

witnessed by the larger community, I likewise place Susan Sontag's formidable post-9/11 text *Regarding the Pain of Others* beside Browne's corpus of unseen photographs. I parse Sontag's understanding of melancholic wounding: the psychic grid of empathy and phenomenological paradigm of belated co-spectatorship (in viewing the mechanically reproduced images of Quảng Đức in flames) discloses a precarious moral dimension within the photographic medium. Moreover, situating Sontag beside the acerbic critic Azoulay—her notions of civic imagination and the political ontology of pictures—encourages a more empathetic rereading of Browne's shocking project in news-making. Sontag astutely writes, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers."<sup>x</sup> Saturated with a form of eternal *eros*, the grief riddled affect of Quảng Đức's death quakes with Buddhist compassion amidst his own noble devotion to righteousness.

With this ideological apparatus and psychoanalytic material at hand, I finally suggest Quảng Đức's disappearing visage in camera be read as an *eternally dissolving monument*: the tenebrous assemblage of photographic forces, transcultural circumstances, and Vietnamese Buddhist ritual dovetail inside the precarious filmic terrain of Malcolm Browne. This primal scene of unmediated exposure teems with liquid life; and a shared mood of communal solemnity burnishes the photographic surface. It seems too, in fact, that the geographic locale (Saigon), global political implications (America, Communism), and Vietnam's anti-imperialistic aspirations would configure the photographic event with an ulterior purview of sight and power. Or more precisely even, the contentious postcolonial milieu—a rubric of foreign language and lands, nation-states and media-reportage—not only made possible the immolation and pictures, but also bestowed the scene with a robust and unusual potentiality.

Across this subterranean platform then, the constitutive pathos of Quảng Đức, Browne, and the photographic medium—when situated in tandem—show this *eternally dissolving monument*. Intentionally metaphysical, Walter Benjamin is our absent interlocutor, an apocalyptic guide tunneling inside the rubble of history.<sup>xi</sup> Benjamin's fabled 'angel of history' and his surreptitious notions of photography's 'optical unconscious' entwine to create space for my own visual archaeology: dissolving monuments like angels of history. These ethereal subjects of the sky and ground alike look at once both outward and inward; silent howling in trance, tragedy unfolding beneath the stage, some melancholy of dreams afar always just out of reach. The flash shock of Browne's camera lens rapidly shuttered; and then exposed

Quảng Đức's luminous body ensconced in flames. The resultant reel of images is material witness to dying in process, or in other words uttered, a light of life still living through death.

## I.

Already on the opening pages of his memoir, Browne is speaking of Saigon's lush landscape: "One of the most pervasive images I retain of that fascinating city is of tamarind trees—arboreal patriarchs that arched over downtown streets, bearing sour, black, beanlike pods of fruit."<sup>xii</sup> He soaked in the aromatics of the place's biological diversity—spices, trees, and other plants, paths in bloom, and ornate serpent balustrades (fig. 1). Throughout Browne's time in the country, evocative sights and sounds, fragrances and scenery, would interweave, and climax in his documentation of the death of Thích Quảng Đức.

This ecological fascination was not purely sensorial or fetishistic but played to Browne's writerly acumen and journalistic interests. For the young AP reporter, Vietnam's novelty was rooted not in armed encounters or adrenaline-laced reportage, but in the natural environment. Vivid greens and verdant roots were everywhere—until they weren't, and the brackish detritus of tropical war flooded with ghoulish rainforest apparitions crept in. In February 1962 Browne made his first trip to Ca Mau, the southernmost peninsula in the delta. Perhaps Browne himself may have missed picturing a visual record from the southern scene while on attentive duty reporting. Instead, his prose describes the setting:

We chugged off down the river. The marketplace, jetties and riverside huts slipped away and were replaced by a dense, green wall of palms and bamboo on both sides of the narrow river. . . . It was about 2 p.m. when the convoy reached a fork in the stream along which it had been traveling. The banks at this point were so close together the long palm fronds spreading from opposite banks almost touched overhead. The fork was sharp, and the banks on each side of it were steep. They were also studded with dagger-sharp bamboo foot spikes hardened by fire.<sup>xiii</sup>

The mission was submerged in aquatic otherness: a primeval swamp, emerald-green palms, bamboo spear steeples. Today, life in this southern delta is still often referred to as "song-nuoc," literally translated as water-life or living-water: it is a colloquial expression of temperament that likewise implies some collective aquatic mind, and at once too bespeaks an imagined underwater place that exists down south—out of mind, out of land; out of place, out of time.

In winter 1961–62, US political commitments to the Republic of South Vietnam and Diem's regime dramatically changed. Recall that at this juncture, US military forces were

nominally categorized as advisors. Journalist David Halberstam, one of the earliest war correspondents working alongside Browne in Saigon, explains: “From the position of a relatively cool backstage backer with only about six hundred advisors in the country—a relationship not too different from many others throughout the underdeveloped world—the United States had gone operative. It committed itself fully to Vietnam and placed its prestige in Southeast Asia at stake—and in the hand of the Ngo Family.”<sup>xiv</sup> At this tense moment of political fragmentation and social fragility, US government monitoring of media reportage was acute. Correspondents were limited in what was reportable.

Halberstam again: “It had become clear to me very soon after my arrival in Saigon [1961] that the relationship between the American mission and the American press in Vietnam was quite different from any other in the rest of the world. In Vietnam there was a sharp and unfortunate polarization of the press reporting on the one hand, and the official position on the other.”<sup>xv</sup> A visceral token of political schism between the US press and US executive operations in Vietnam is exemplified in a quote from Madame Nhu, wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu, and by many accounts the woman (along with her husband) who held real political power in South Vietnam: “Halberstam should be barbequed, and I would be glad to supply the fluid and match.”<sup>xvi</sup> At the time of her sinister remarks Nhu was still actively supported by the US political machine.

Nevertheless, even at this early juncture of involvement Browne was bold in articulating the appeal of the assignment: “War brings out the worst in us [reporters, young newsman]. It draws us like moths to a flame, congregating in great and grossly counterproductive numbers around ‘the news.’”<sup>xvii</sup> The language suggests spasmodic flying creatures agape at the feral life of fire or perhaps inexorably trekking zombies. In a writerly sleight of hand, the organic landscape became psychically part and parcel of field reportage. For Browne, this insectile metaphor made sense, and it seems, news reporters were habitually a predatory nuisance, emitting a buzzing drone. Like hypnotic, magnetic waves, foreign calamities and disasters drew their attention: a blind regiment of moths toward a flame.

### A Reporter’s Reporter

In a 2012 interview, Robert Pile, Browne’s colleague at AP’s Saigon bureau in the early 1960s, admiringly described Browne’s persona and unwavering convictions: “He was a

brilliant journalist, and courageous. He was all the things that a war correspondent needed to be. . . . He was confrontational with officials and people who tried to shut him up, and that sort of thing.”<sup>xviii</sup> Most poignantly, Pile remarked that Browne was an “enemy of those who would obscure the truth.”<sup>xix</sup> Browne still rather young at the time, just 30 years of age, but he flourished in the nascent field of minute-by-minute war coverage. During this era of questionable US foreign policy, expansion in channels of technological communication, and heightened politicization of news dissemination, he and his colleagues held tremendous moral responsibilities and social obligations. The media atmosphere was ballooning, and a spotlight was cast on reportage itself, as well as its subjects.

“Electric circuitry, the medium of our time, is an extension of the central nervous system,” wrote Marshall McLuhan in his groundbreaking text *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).<sup>xx</sup> With great alacrity, images and news would become imbricated in the newfangled frontiers of media ecology, instantly embedded in “the central nervous system” of the planet: think war reportage and photographs of trauma from Vietnam. In other words, affective visual documents flooded new media channels in the 1960s “electric information environment”—technologies that until very recently had been inconceivable. “Wars, revolutions, and civil uprising are interfaces within the new environments created by electric information media.” Encompassing the complete human sensorium, optical documents hovered indefinitely in an undetectable sphere of broadcast frequencies, creating a “new forms of politics.” As we will see, Browne’s photography of Quảng Đức’s immolation was a kind of swirling protean agent enmeshed in the tangled embryonic lattice of electrical information. Soon enough, the frightfully impactful and in many ways more demoralizing role of television journalism would surface with a vengeance.

In a still largely indecipherable network of broadcast information and image proliferation, the gravity of visual replicability—and pictorial mass communication generally—not only presented a revolutionary cultural phenomenon of disorienting “sense perceptions,” but just as significantly, created an unforeseen, circumspect situation for institutions of political power—most importantly for this study, the White House and Kennedy’s administration. Editorial news stories and the matrix of image culture began to inundate even an inattentive audience.<sup>xxi</sup> According to McLuhan, the disruptive potentiality of new media was “reconstituting dialogue on a global scale . . . and ending psychic, social, economic, and political parochialism.”<sup>xxii</sup> During these initial stages of precarious

newscasting from Vietnam, few predicted that in a few years' time warfare from a foreign rainforest environment would soon constitute the first televised war. "*The war as spectacle* was consumed by the American public principally on television. For television had become the visual medium par excellence."<sup>xxiii</sup> Beyond merely 'facilitating the conquest of the world as spectacle, creating new conditions for the gaze,' however, photographs complicated the phenomenology of living (Azoulay 306). The veritas of vision and experience, tangibility and political power erupted across real-time thresholds of reportage.

Consider an on-the ground reflection by reporter Neil Sheehan: "If the government is telling the truth, reporters become a minor and unimportant conduit. But when the government doesn't tell the truth, then the journalist becomes infinitely more important."<sup>xxiv</sup> In the early 1960s, misinformation in reports from both Saigon correspondents and the US political machine became an increasing concern. Browne regarded his responsibilities as author, picture maker, and truth teller as sacred. Figure 2 shows Browne (at center), with Sheehan and Halberstam in front of a helicopter in matching military attire. They may be physically proximate, yet also appear as somehow separate and isolated, immersed in their own private universes, reflecting the new world of classified information and clandestine living they have entered. Browne commented in his memoir on the "jaded journalist" persona:

More than most people, we admire honesty and courage, because we know how rare those qualities are. If we sneer at the hyperbole and mawkish sentiment that permeates most forms of communication, it is because journalists, more than many other people, spend their lives boiling in the caustic bleach of reality.<sup>xxv</sup>

"Caustic bleach of reality" may be hyperbolic, but it is true that Browne's commitment to accuracy utterly excluded blasé platitudes or bromides. He was dedicated to uncovering *the real*, a task he tackled with great depth of feeling and a sincere faith in exposing truth. In his memoir he recalls being instructed by a group of cable desk veterans, "When you get to Indochina, we want news, not art reviews"—advice he emphatically recounted as some of the worst he ever received about journalism, or Southeast Asia.<sup>xxvi</sup> On the contrary, Browne intrinsically knew that "readers and listeners care a great deal about the setting of a story, often more than the story itself. . . . There's a lot more to news than 'what-when-where-why-and how.' . . . A reader is entitled to know something about the look, feel, smell of a scene, even if only through a few deft phrases."<sup>xxvii</sup> He respected the human element to covering war and the value of honest personal expression when discussing remote events and distant

geographies. Like an artist adept at handling paint, a first-class reporter should deftly sculpt a world with precise yet nimble prose. Browne had a profound awareness that life informs news, pictures inform life, and living informs art. Articulations in print and immersion in daily living were inseparable.

Browne remained mindful as well of the limited time readers are willing to devote to news of faraway foreign conflicts: “The flow of news from the event to the reader, listener, or viewer is essentially a two-way street. It depends not only on the news itself but on the demands of the news consumer”:

Readers and editors demand their news in the simplest capsules available, sometimes limiting their consumption to mere headlines. . . . But, unfortunately, Vietnam does not lend itself well to numerical reporting, or even to the kind of simple, narrative statement required of the average newspaper lead. There are too many uncertainties, too many shades of gray, too many dangers of applying English-language clichés to a situation that cannot be described in clichés.<sup>xxviii</sup>

This fanaticism for facts, a compulsive desire for streamlined newscasting, was in Browne’s view not only misguided, but a betrayal of journalism’s commitment to narrative authenticity.<sup>xxix</sup> He had deep respect for quasi-archaeological accountability in storytelling. A prudent sieving of gossip, and the resultant representations of what was discovered, were fundamental to a reporter’s job.

### A Chemical Mind

Browne’s first passion was chemistry. Born in 1931, he came of age during a period of economic depression, growing nationalism, then international warfare. A deleterious spirit of biochemical compounds likewise permeated the ether. In the opening pages of his memoir he recalled, “I never wanted to be a ball player or fireman, but during that summer of 1945 I wanted very much to become a nuclear physicist.” Of his response to the atomic devastation in Hiroshima, he noted that “like most Americans, I was nonplussed but excited. A year earlier my science teacher at Friends Seminary in New York City had described uranium fission, but nothing he said prepared us for the spectacle of a city obliterated by a few pounds of nuclear fuel.”<sup>xxx</sup> Even as a youth Browne liked chemical pyrotechnics—detonations, odorous molecules—a proclivity that greatly influenced his future efforts in journalism and photographic documentation:

My chemistry classes at Friends Seminary and my fondness for explosions converged in the study of rapid oxidation reactions. . . The science teacher, whose lungs and vocal chords had been severely scarred by mustard gas during the closing months of World War I, encouraged some of my louder experiments, a few of which had mildly destructive consequences. I discovered how to make (and detonate) nitroglycerine, mercuric fulminate and other noisemakers.<sup>xxxii</sup>

He admits that along the way, he also began to learn chemistry. Like his teacher's war wound scars, chemical experiments left an indelible mark on Browne. Even his earliest memories of summer break involve explosive spectacles and burning insects:

The high point of summer at the stone house was always the Fourth of July. . . We exploded our crackers [fireworks] frugally, stripping them away from their braided strings and setting them off one at a time. The best part came with night, when the pinwheels, sparklers, Roman candles and rockets were lighted up. Even the fireflies in the lilac bushes seemed to join in the displays, and I still feel twinges of nostalgia when I smell the pungent smoke of fireworks.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Browne's lifelong affinity for clandestine exploration and discovery also began early. During the summer months in Manhattan, his family would vacation at the abovementioned stone house in Long Island. One evening he stumbled into his grandmother's attic and discovered an otherworldly land of dusty antiques and artifacts: abandoned objects, locked chests, historical images of the past. "There were bushels of old magazines and newspaper rotogravure sections—printed in beautiful sepia ink—saved by someone as kindling for the fireplaces but brimming over with contemporary history I found fascinating: the rise of Mussolini, the Lindbergh kidnapping, the bombing of Madrid by Franco's air force, national cat shows and other great events."<sup>xxxiiii</sup> The carnivalesque sphere of feline enchantment, the rise of European fascism, aeronautic daring, and fiendish heists comprised his early secret universe.

"Another abandoned chest," he wrote, the "property of a long dead geologist beau of my grandmother's, was locked, and it therefore consumed me with interest." Of note here is the defiant mindset—a disregard of authorial parameters and the strictures of rulebooks in the face of enticing missions into off-limits, perhaps hazardous areas. From the beginning, there were rarely any guidelines or navigational tools for this; flying blind, he was nonetheless often rewarded. "To my delight, it [the locked chest] contained some surveying instruments, laboratory glassware, rock specimens and mechanical gadgets. But best of all, it held a crumbling, toothless human skull, complete with two jawbones!"<sup>xxxv</sup> It was as if a long-lost chemical workshop replete with phantasmagoric icons had been shipwrecked in the

spidery corners of the summer home. The locked box was like a prismatic crystal ball that transported the imaginative young boy. “The skull in my room became a kind of *memento mori* that started trains of thought for me probably familiar to the medieval monks who also kept skulls in their cells.”<sup>xxxv</sup> Like Felipe Gil de Mena’s seventeenth-century picture of Saint Francis meditating on death (fig. 3), Browne was quietly transfixed and immersed, his chemical fantasies and youthful death drive gliding untethered across a muddled magic carpet of graveyard gems, rusty tools, and petrified bone.

We cannot discuss Browne’s young life without touching on his Quaker upbringing. His mother was a devout practitioner and believed strongly in leading a conservative life of humility, piousness, and benevolent community engagement. She was also an ardent pacifist. Believing it imperative that her son receive a Quaker education, she enrolled him in the local Friends Seminary, and from kindergarten through twelfth grade Quaker values were integral to both his home and his school life. Friends Seminary, established in 1786, is the oldest continuously operating coeducational school in New York, and has consistently been at the forefront of liberal educational reform and progressive social praxis. For example, in 1947, during Browne’s sophomore year of high school, the Quakers received the Nobel Peace Prize for their three-hundred-year-long commitment to ending violence and healing the scars of war. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Philadelphia accepted the honor on behalf of Quaker communities worldwide. Nobel committee chair Gunnar Jahn remarked in his presentation speech:

The Quakers have shown us that it is possible to carry into action something which is deeply rooted in the minds of many: sympathy with others; the desire to help others . . . without regard to nationality or race; feelings which, when carried into deeds, must provide the foundations of a lasting peace. For this reason, they are today worthy of receiving Nobel’s Peace Prize.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Peace, honor, sacrifice, love, duty: mindful of these age-old Quaker ethics, Browne’s adolescent years matured in a paradigm of globally aware consciousness.

After high school he attended Swarthmore College, a historically Quaker school, and graduated with a degree in chemistry. He returned to New York and from 1952 to 1956 worked as a laboratory chemist for Foster D. Snell Inc. He loved the work, but part of him was restless and quickly bored. The day-to-day tasks of mixing chemicals and the staid laboratory environment were missing something. Then in 1956, at age 25, his life changed forever: he was drafted into the US armed forces at the tail end of the Korean War.

At first, Browne was driving tanks in but for unknown reasons he was soon transferred and assigned to write for *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, a US Army publication. It was his first job as a professional reporter, and at this crucial life juncture, military routine and reportage converged: “Korea introduced me to journalism and Asia, both of which dominated my life ever after. It was in Korea that I learned the basic craft of journalism, at least in terms of its crude fundamentals.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The monotony of military life and attenuated periods of unoccupied time were the original impetus for Browne’s first experiments in picture making. “I bought a serviceable Japanese camera at the PX for \$15, and my GI colleagues taught me primitive darkroom techniques enforced by our frontier existence.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> The photographs weren’t exploding, but they did offer a fresh outlet for his affinity for chemical reactions. Upon returning from Korea in 1953, Browne began his first job as a reporter and night editor at the *Daily Record* in Middletown, New York. In 1960 he joined the Associated Press as a reporter based in Baltimore.<sup>xxxix</sup> Then in 1961 he got an unexpected call about a possible position abroad. Elated, he seized the opportunity, and on November 11, 1961, he took up residence as the AP’s bureau chief in Saigon as the first US news correspondent permanently based in Southeast Asia.

### First Impressions, Strange Spirit

He died about ten minutes later. The woman [his wife] remained seated, one hand over her husband’s eyes. Slowly, she looked around at the troops, and then she spotted me. Her eyes fixed on me in an expression that still haunts me sometimes. She was not weeping, and her face showed neither grief nor fury; it was unfathomably blank.  
—Malcolm Browne<sup>xl</sup>

The epigraph draws from “Paddy War: Guerrilla War in the Mekong Delta, December 1961,” Browne’s report from one of his earliest missions to the delta. It was his first meeting with death. The aforementioned Richard Pile remembers this about Browne: “He was always known as a kind of eccentric character, kind of spooky in a way. He was a brilliant, intellectual type fellow. It’s like he always had some mysterious secrets that nobody else could know.”<sup>xxli</sup> Spooky secrets and mysterious knowledge. Already an idiosyncratic personality, in Saigon Browne became, by some accounts, completely unknowable, an enigmatic introvert with a camera.

Consider figure 4, a smiling, intimate portrait of Browne in a Saigon apartment with his future wife, Le Lieu (they married in 1966). The photograph appears innocuous enough at first, but looking closer, we notice a cranium on a table in back. Recall Browne's early stories of summers on Long Island: "The old skull, the first I ever held in my hands, was a thing of wonder; it was a tangible embodiment of mortality—a condition of life that until then had seemed more or less an abstraction."<sup>xliii</sup> Apparently skulls—those classic signifiers of impermanence, melancholy, haunting, and loss—were always near at hand. Browne's 1963 photograph showing Thích Quảng Đức in flames—the portrait its own kind of death mask or memento mori—would become yet another, far more spectacular relic in his thick reliquary of death.<sup>xliii</sup>

A concurrent photograph shows an impeccably dressed Browne at work in the Saigon AP office (fig. 5). In a looming manner that seems almost Frankenstein-like, he leans over a Teletype machine. This 1960s communications instrument was essential for the rapid dissemination of news. The photograph, like his suit, is crisp; the clock behind his shoulder and the Associated Press plaque anchor him to his work and his employer. The immaculate lines of the suit find a strange parallel in the clock hands and the gridded ceiling tiles above, suggesting a sort of rigidity, coldness, precision. Time reigns supreme in the world of news reportage, and reporters racing to break a story must watch the clock, gauge the beat, and work rapidly.

Browne was always intrinsically aware that history unfolds in the blink of an eye, and that life happens in a litany of unexceptional non-sites. Stories from Vietnam were no different: fleeting human encounters created a reality that was often misunderstood and unseen, trapped somewhere near, but not necessarily in, war's dirt and blood, grime and mud. "The farther south we traveled the more tropical the countryside began to look. Tall flamboyant trees lined stretches of the road, their great boughs and flaming red blossoms forming a majestic archway."<sup>xliiv</sup> Browne regarded the discovery of forgotten jungle spaces and little-known incidents as elemental to a journalist's sleuthing work. An example is this mysteriously discordant piece of reporting from December 1961 on an early mission in the Mekong Delta:

Progress was slow. The mud dykes were slippery as grease, and every time a soldier toppled into the muddy paddy, the whole column halted as he was pulled out. I was reminded somehow of the White Knight in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.<sup>xlv</sup>

The compassionate White Knight is Alice's naive guide and childhood friend. Perhaps Browne here had in mind the British satirical artist John Tenniel's 1871 drawing of Lewis Carroll's trickster sage: the Quixotic horse, draped with chimes, gadgets, and root vegetables, trots beside a hallucinatory wood into which the inquisitive escort-knight peeps (fig. 6). At far right, Alice looks fawningly up at her protector. While of course we cannot know if Browne most identified with the knight, the stallion, or Alice, the image does effectively convey the idea of a portal into an otherworldly, forested domain of nightmares and specters. The perceptive young Quaker, immersed in war, mesmerized by the delta landscapes with their exotic vegetation, would soon become an astute voice and vision relating the loss and tragedy in Vietnam to readers back home.

Soon after arriving in Saigon, Browne was assigned two assistants: reporter Peter Arnett from New Zealand and photographer Horst Faas from Germany. Both arrived on the same day in 1962. Faas was a novice reporter but a well-trained photographer who possessed the technical skills needed for mixing chemicals, deftly developing film, and drying contact sheets. His picture-making knowledge and visual sophistication added a new dimension to the AP bureau's reporting possibilities. Faas's "first taste of war had been as one of Germany's child soldiers in the suicidal 1945 defense of Berlin."<sup>xvi</sup> The trauma of his own personal narrative would greatly inform his role as a photographer in wartime Vietnam.

Figure 7 shows the two young correspondents. Faas, whose white shirt resembles a lab coat, holds up a reel of developed film. The orthogonal ribbon neatly divides the two, and both appear hypnotized by the frames of miniature images. The coiling spool suggests a kind of translucent snakeskin; its sinuous tail dangles beneath Faas's black watch and his right-hand pinches the illusory head: this gossamer ghost-snake has cast a spell over the two journalists. It is as if in shedding its photographic skin, the aquatic world of pictures and tropical ecosphere in Vietnam could ephemerally appear, electrifyingly uncanny and forensically clean, in even the most unassuming of places.

On January 25, 1963, Browne decided to draft a memo: the dispatch was unprecedented and would come to be called the AP Bureau Handbook. It included indispensable details of protocol for inexperienced correspondents arriving in Vietnam. Browne emphasized the importance of embracing local vernacular culture and described the kind of sensitive affect required for effective field reportage around Saigon: converse softly

and in private (observe the quietude of Vietnamese interactions); avoid crowds; notice the pervasive surveillance culture; never be the first to walk into a hut; watch out for squirrels and rats; and avoid the second round of bullets.<sup>xlvii</sup> The text was remarkable for its attentiveness to the shadow underside of conflict, the unheard moments between bullets and bombs when a good reporter can take the pulse of the situation. This first “edition” of the AP Handbook established Browne as a kind of sage-guide for novice newsmen in Vietnam. It made the tall, lanky, and unusual New Yorker with a camera someone the—often haughty, bombastic, and under-experienced—junior reporters could look up to and trust.

Browne’s memo concluded with a small drawing, its only visual element (fig. 8).<sup>xlviii</sup> It shows silhouettes of six different military warplanes, labeled H34, H21, UH1, T28, AD6, and B26, and Browne’s simple lines give the armored flying vehicles a sort of creaturely appearance. At left, three stacked helicopters biomorphically tilt their fuselages toward the snouts of the jet planes at right. The rear rotors of both the H34 and UH1, colloquially known as Hueys, are condensed to biomorphic circular shapes. Up top, precise descriptions detail common weapons and artillery. To explain Browne’s decision to include this token diagram, let’s consider a memory from his travels aboard an H21 in South Vietnam.

On a daybreak mission outside of Saigon, Browne was flying “a thousand feet higher than the main helicopter group.” The early morning sun was rising over a distant green horizon, its faint rays of light illuminating the rice paddies below. “The helicopters’ spinning rotors looked pure white as the sun caught them. Mirrored by the flooded paddies just below them, the choppers looked like a flight of cranes in a Chinese scroll.”<sup>xlix</sup> In the AP illustration, the two columns of warbirds likewise hover together—not as a flock of birds along a cerulean waterway in some dream of Chinese scroll painting, but rather as a fleet of predatory iron insects. On the final page of Browne’s report, we see the ghostly romance of war inscribed in the air. Although the chatter and chomping of the helicopters is necessarily absent, his thick journalistic prose fills in the gaps. And in fact, Browne’s notes from the delta clouds often highlighted the visual and the sonorous spectacle of war helicopters.

In a kind of rapturous, poetic rant Browne explained the cacophonous H21 and its intimidating tandem, three-bladed counter-rotating rotors: “A long line of H-21s on the ramp looked in the darkness like a parade of carnival floats, their red and white running lights blinking festively, and their cranky gasoline engines barking blue and yellow flame.”<sup>1</sup> Browne’s handbook sketch of six shadowless planes augured the violence that would soon

rain down from above in Vietnam. Not much longer could a reporter in Saigon temporarily forget about real aerial destruction. In this same window of 1963 time, Larry Burrows' psychedelic aerial photography from *Life* Magazine began to permeate visual news outlets. Susan Sontag's insight is helpful: "Burrows was the first important photographer to do a whole war in color—another gain in verisimilitude, that is, shock... (*Life*, to the dismay of many who, like me, had grown up with and been educated by its revelatory pictures of war and art, closed in 1972)."ii Burrows' images placed US spectators of warfare in the cockpit of in-flight terror.iii

Remember that the first journalists in Vietnam were predominantly young and zealous, fiercely ambitious and competitive.iii "No less than the generals, male correspondents in Vietnam perceived war as a man's game."iv War reportage—more so than other prose writing, and especially exaggerated during foreign conflicts in the early 1960s—was attracting adrenaline junkies brimming with hubris, megalomania, and an intense attraction to risk.lv The Ngo Dinh Diem regime's ironclad control over the press in South Vietnam seemed particularly designed to imbue Western journalists with weighty yet unforeseen responsibilities (as well as reckless arrogance). AP correspondent Roy Essoyan, a veteran reporter who had previously operated in Moscow, warned that "Western newsmen are the only source of independent information out of this country, and, to a certain extent, within it, too. Many local residents tune in to the voice of America, the British Broadcasting company and other radio stations abroad to keep abreast of the news from south Vietnam."vi In Southeast Asia, reporters had to learn quickly how best to balance ego, editorial competition, and succinct journalism. Perhaps the wisest warnings came from Browne himself. He presciently cautioned that "war reporting in itself is technically fairly simple. . . By an adroit use of verbs, the writer can create an impact that comes close to reproducing reality. But in Vietnam, the actual clashes are probably less important than the subtle thinking of people and the social upheaval of the nation. These are difficult to capture in words, and for a reader to digest."vii

At ease in the chaos, Browne and his colleagues made a home at the AP headquarters in Saigon in 1963. He later recalled:

Sheehan, Halberstam and I, along with our colleagues from the TV networks and other news organizations were friends at heart, but we were also determined adversaries in a rough and tough competitive game. . . We were friendly colleagues

in the same spirit that a prosecutor and a defense lawyer may sit down after hours for a beer together.<sup>lviii</sup>

The image (unpictured) is a quintessential visual record of the newly established AP bureau: four white men tightly packed into a small space, but seemingly relaxed. A framed blackboard for brainstorming curtains the back wall, and an array of documents are pinned to the cork bulletin board at right. Browne, nearest the camera and sitting in front of a barely visible typewriter, turns his left shoulder and greets the photographer—his look is also a direct eyeline match with ours, as viewers decades later. A large map of “Indochina” hangs behind him on the wall. His desk, obscured by a puzzle of press materials, is in pictorial harmony with the scattered news-detritus everywhere else: binders, booklets, and notes completely cover most of the visible writing surfaces. Like the heaps of daily news consuming the social minutiae of reporters, paper rubble covered the bureau headquarters.

### Buddhist Attention, Revolutionary Calling

I was having a flyspecked dinner with a major named Hoang at the time. Two listless sentries with the dark, round faces of Cambodians stood at the gate outside. A few schoolgirls in their ankle length *ao dai*—graceful, high-necked dresses slit to the waist, and worn over loose, white silk trousers—still stood chatting in the dusk, twirling their conical hats, fluffing their long black hair, and giggling. A steady stream of bicycles hurried people home to their dinners. Somewhere in the distance, a street vendor was yelling for customers for *pho*, a savory noodle soup favored by South Vietnamese. On the front porch, a squad of tough Civil Guards, their skin tanned almost black and all carrying Tommy guns, was settling down for the night, stringing mosquito nets from the railing. But apart from these cutthroats, the scene was one of complete peace.

—Malcolm Browne<sup>lix</sup>

In 1963 there were still relatively few Western reporters fully immersed in the culture of South Vietnam, and Browne was one of only two paying attention to the Buddhist revolutionary crisis. A photograph from that summer shows Browne with a group of monks in a temple setting, most likely Xa Loi pagoda, the Buddhist headquarters in Saigon (fig. 9). His briefcase and a tea set rest on the table. The recently formed Buddhist Youth Family Movement had become one of the best-organized associations in the country. Browne again: “In time, some of the monks at the four main pagodas I was watching came to trust me, although I made no pretense of sharing their religious or political beliefs. It was this trust that made me the sole foreign photo-journalist to witness a fiery suicide that would shock

the world.”<sup>lx</sup> Perhaps Browne’s attention to local sensibilities was heightened due to his private relations with Le Lieu, the well-educated, multilingual Saigonese local whom he would later marry. Regardless, the initial sparks of a soon-to-be conflagration were beginning to simmer, as Browne astutely observed:

One day in 1963 I learned that Vu Van Mau, South Viet Nam’s foreign minister, had resigned his post to protest the Saigon government’s actions against the Buddhists, and had shaved his head in the fashion of the dissident monks. The censor prohibited the transmission of all news stories from Viet Nam at that point, but the authorities permitted limited transmission of radiophotos from the government radio station.<sup>lxi</sup>

In the spring, political tensions continued to escalate between Diem’s autocratic Catholic regime and Buddhist congregations in the south. At first this unrest was most specifically pronounced in Hue. The imperial city was home to myriad Vietnamese cultural identities and ethnic formations. At the time it was also the third largest city in South Vietnam. In Browne’s collected papers, a timeline drafted in fall 1963 recounts various Buddhist marches and protests from earlier that year. Ultimately, mass demonstrations would centrifugally spread from Hue.<sup>lxii</sup>

In 1963 Hue, flammable destruction also spread through the air, slowly enveloping the atmosphere. Historian Robert Neer also marks this year (1963, accounts vary) as the initial use of liquid fire, also known as napalm, the US-made Dow Chemical product of immediate agony and visceral torture<sup>lxiii</sup> As military operations intensified the incendiary chemical would become a weapon of choice for the US political war machine throughout the next decade of aerial ambush in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, on April 17, the city officially established the Chieu Hoi initiative, a politically motivated US rehabilitation program and one of the earliest examples of psychological warfare in Vietnam. The purportedly successful implementation of this ill-advised program was celebrated by local authorities, at least those factions nominally in support of The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnamese troops involved with the US armed forces), Western political influencers, and the provisional Diem government. The nature of the first major covert program in Vietnam went something like this:

Based on the ideal of Personalism and the spirit of Brotherhood and Justice, the policy of Chieu Hoi sets forth the measures and methods to be applied to these elements who have been tricked, terrorized, exploited by the communist bandits, and who, becoming enlightened, [seek of their own volition to] come back to present themselves [to the authorities] to serve the National Government.<sup>lxiv</sup>

By coincidence, the Chieu Hoi insignia closely resembled familiar Buddhist icons, with its three-part flame and soaring bird of peace (fig. 10). Both symbols held great sociocultural signification across the broader landscape of 1963 Vietnam.

Throughout April the Buddhist crisis continued to escalate as practitioners prepared for the upcoming Phat Dan festivities, a day of celebration also called Vesak, on May 8, to honor the 2507th anniversary of the Buddha's birth.<sup>lxv</sup> Across Hue, families hand-crafted objects of faith, from woven silk versions of the Buddhist flag to ornate paper candle lanterns. Finely sculpted altars were offered as symbols of protection and faith, placed in front courtyards and homes along the Perfume River. Throughout the month, colorful sacred objects began to adorn the city and Hue became a cosmos of flickering ephemera, a palimpsest of incandescent religious iconography.

Figure 11 is an AP photo showing a small, handcrafted Buddhist altar on a street in Hue with tanks in the background. The four-legged icon is draped in a pastiche of Buddhist flags, and bundles of incense protrude from its edges. The picture was taken in 1966, much later in the Buddhist conflict than the moment under discussion here, but it is nevertheless resonant. How so? The AP picture offers an example of sacred emblems boldly sited in the public, political domain. Buddhists across the city placed shrines and talismans—religious objects traditionally situated beside the home or in proximate, interconnected spaces of shared landscape—along sidewalks and main boulevards.

While this twinned praxis of civic engagement and spiritual autonomy did not begin 1963—and indeed has ancient ontological roots—the activated reliquaries were novel site to both western military forces and a removed American public. In this picture the boxy votive on the roadside is intended as a kind of protective force field, a deterrent in the face of the ARVN militia advance. In Hue, Buddhist ingenuity transformed historically spiritual icons into contemporary sociopolitical tools of resistance. This communal gesture and collective act of remembering was informed by the earlier Buddhist conflicts from 1963. The details of that story follow.

In late April the Diem government “ordered provincial officials to enforce a long-standing but generally ignored ban on the public display of religious flags.”<sup>lxvi</sup> For the local community, the edict was particularly infuriating because of the paradoxical stance taken toward Catholic religious worship and display of Vatican flags. “The archbishop of Hue, Diem’s older brother [Ngo Dinh Thuc], was especially militant in this propagation of

Catholicism, [and] had just flown Vatican flags to celebrate the anniversary of his reign.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Inhabitants of Hue were obliged to recognize Thuc’s twenty-fifth year as ordained bishop and were strongly encouraged to donate funds for the Catholic jubilee.<sup>lxviii</sup> A collection from *The Pentagon Papers* titled “The Buddhist Crisis of 1963: The View from Washington” states: “Among South Vietnam’s 3–4 million practicing Buddhists and the 80% who were nominal Buddhists, the regime’s favoritism, authoritarianism, and discrimination created a smoldering resentment.”<sup>lxix</sup> This inconsistency in law enforcement and perverse allocation of resources, coupled with Diem’s Catholic edicts and continued religious persecution of the Buddhist faithful, created a tense environment. Hue was ripe for conflict.<sup>lxx</sup>

In early May, chaos commenced when the government ordered a wave of raids across the city. Diem’s military forces decimated any Buddhist relic or object of ancestral devotion on display outside of homes, in gardens, or in courtyards. Vietnamese religious historian Dao Van Binh laments the destruction and suffering: “*Buddhist icons and lanterns hanging in homes and front gateways everywhere were all completely destroyed. Everyone in the city was beyond upset, many furiously enraged.*”<sup>lxxi</sup> And the turmoil continued, reaching a boiling point as local Buddhist practitioners made final preparations for the upcoming celebratory Phat Dan day of rites and ritual. First, however, on May 5, a second formal order—decree 9195 arriving from Saigon—further mandated that Buddhist flags could only be hung in religious spaces: pagodas, temples, churches.<sup>lxxii</sup> In other words, just days prior to Vesak, Diem’s regime implemented formal laws prohibiting public display of Buddhist flags, in effect forbidding the communal religious parade from passing through the city streets.

Later that same afternoon, Thich Tri Quang—in many ways the spiritual leader of the demonstration—sent a set of peaceful messages to the community, his letters a last plea in hopes of mitigating the conflict. One was addressed to the International Buddhist Association, another to the Vietnamese Buddhist Association, and the third, most important note was to Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon. Unfortunately, the answer from Diem and his regime was silence. The small cohort of senior monks chose to not waver in their faith to the Buddhist flag: their courageous decision proved to be a final, decisive stance of resistance.<sup>lxxiii</sup> A brief visual description of this contentious emblem follows.

The worldwide Buddhist flag has six vertical stripes (fig. 12). This iteration is archived as a relic at Thích Quảng Đức’s final temple site. The first five are solid bands of color—blue, yellow, red, white, orange—said to represent the auratic light emanating from

Buddha's energetic field during enlightenment. The sixth and final stripe is composed of five adjoining rectangular boxes, a rainbow collage referencing a radiant void, an irrepresentable wave of divine light, a cosmic vibrational realm. It makes sense that the transcendent, galactic energy of the Buddhist flag would be so intimidating for Diem and his Catholic power structure.

On May 8, the Buddhist flag was widely displayed in direct insubordination of Diem's decree.<sup>lxxiv</sup> In Browne's words, "It all started May 8—the birthday of Buddha—in the quiet, little city of Hue. Hue is a beautiful town bisected by the picturesque Perfume River, and dotted with grandiose tombs of some of Vietnam's great kings."<sup>lxxv</sup> That afternoon, a group of more than three thousand practitioners congregated.<sup>lxxvi</sup> The religious community participated in nonviolent protests, a forceful display of political collectivity and social solidarity that continued through the early evening. It was precisely the kind of visible confrontation that the Diem government, and the surveillance state, most feared. In the evening, monks and students marched toward a local radio station, where they intended to listen to a prerecorded speech by Thich Tri Quang. Often criticized as a political monk, Thich Tri Quang was, in fact, a vital figure in the ongoing revolutionary movement in South Vietnam. And the city of Hue had special resonance for him: just a few years prior, in 1957, he had "established the first Buddhist Association of Central Vietnam based at Tu Dam pagoda in Hue."<sup>lxxvii</sup>

As night progressed, the day of Buddhist protest and praxis concluded terribly: Between "2200 hours local and 2330 hours," Diem's soldiers shot into a crowd of religious marchers. At some point grenades were fired into the air and an explosive device was ignited.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Many were injured, and at least nine novice monks were killed outside the radio station. Deputy Governor Dang Sy was eventually held responsible for the nine deaths. Malcom Browne would soon reflect on the scene.

It was over quickly. Eight were dead and scores injured. Three more died later of wounds. Hospitals were jammed. And the people set their jaws for revenge. News from Hue spread like bushfire, and the Buddhist insurrection grew like an avalanche. Now, besides the flag issue, Buddhists had been injured, killed, and arrested. Overnight, the Buddhist flag became a rallying point for every faction opposing the harsh Diem regime over the past eight years. Men and women who had not attended pagoda services in years began to chant long forgotten prayers.<sup>lxxix</sup>

Today the massacre is referred to as the Hue Phat Dan conflict. A rarely reproduced Buddhist memorial poster shows the victims: children, novice monks (fig. 13).<sup>lxxx</sup> Like

embryonic lotus wreathes, the budding portrait of each young devotee buoyantly hangs across a rising orthogonal band. Following this public debacle, the international community began paying more attention to the seriousness of the Buddhist struggle and burgeoning civil war in Vietnam. A small Buddhist meeting between Diem and his political cronies on May 10 did little to ameliorate the tension. Vu Van Mau's personal recollections in *Sáu Tháng Pháp Nạn* is an eye-witness account of the situation and turmoil.<sup>lxxxix</sup> An acute and sensitive version of local reportage—in the tradition of Michihiko Hachiya's *Hiroshima Diary*, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, or John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World*—Mau intimately understood the gravitas of the Buddhist community's suffering and imminent religious plea.

Throughout May the crisis intensified: hunger strikes, massive Buddhist protests, and acts of nonviolent civil disobedience dominated the social landscape.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Browne kept his finger on the pulse of the unfolding events, warning prophetically: "My own feel for Viet Nam led me to believe that the Buddhist revolt would become a national revolution. But this feeling was not shared by other foreign newsmen at the time, so I was on my own when I interviewed monks at the pagodas where the foment centered."<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The once serene scene of quiet protest was on the cusp of cataclysmic transformation. Browne's on-the-ground training and unusual personal biography would soon culminate in his unanticipated attendance at Quảng Đức's religious crossroads in Saigon.

### Spark of Flame

In the summer of 1963 Saigon was in turmoil, and events were moving toward a crisis. . . The picturesque rush-hour crowds began to include clusters of angry monks, carrying flags and banners instead of their traditional begging bowls. . . Monks would converge at key parks around the city with such perfect timing that formations of three or four hundred saffron-robos appeared to materialize from thin air. —Malcolm Browne<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Following one of the many fasting protests in May, Thích Quảng Đức sent a letter to the head executive council of the recently unified Vietnamese Buddhist Association at the Xa Loi pagoda asking for permission to carry out a plan of self-immolation. He was alerting the religious community to his willingness to sacrifice his body's earthly existence for a higher program of consciousness and a political cause. This letter was purportedly the first of at least three Quảng Đức sent to the pagoda. Local organizer and English-speaking Buddhist practitioner Thich Duc Nghiep, a prominent monk often in dialogue with Browne,

remembers the letter was handwritten on a small piece of paper so as to evade the government's strict security measures. Fellow activist monk Thich Giac Duc likewise recalls that the life-sacrifice initiative came from Thích Quảng Đức himself as a "donation to the struggle."<sup>lxxxv</sup> At the moment of the first letter, however, this kind of ritual action seemed unthinkable. The Head Executive Council still considered a public Buddhist sacrifice overly radical and dramatic.

On May 30, more than 350 monks and nuns in Saigon began a forty-eight-hour hunger strike in response to a May 28 letter from monk superior Thich Tinh Khiet calling for this action. At that moment, it was the most dramatic act of Buddhist solidarity yet.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Browne described the state of pandemonium in the southern capital: "Monks and nuns leapt from taxis and buses onto a mall in front of the national assembly building in downtown Saigon. They stood and sat in military ranks for four hours, protest banners hoisted. It was the first public challenge the Diem regime had ever encountered in Saigon streets."<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Figure 14 shows the interior of a Saigon temple, a cluster of devotees synchronously asleep on hand-stitched bamboo mats like a grove of harmoniously enrobed, cocooned bodies. In stillness, an ultrasonic hum from this embryonic whisper of moths stirs, with the casing of the city likewise engulfed in some kaleidoscopic trance of disequilibrium.

On June 4 in Hue, Diem's security forces responded with force. Police attempted to dispel a crowd of at least fifteen hundred protestors by emptying glass vials of brownish-mud-red liquid chemicals on the heads of praying Buddhists. At least sixty-seven of them were treated at the hospital for lacerations, blisters, and/or respiratory complications.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Biochemical formulas and corrosive liquids continued to stain the streets and scar the atmosphere, as the brutal attack amplified the already-anxious political terrain. A maelstrom of chaos—tragedies upon tragedies—shaped the complex setting leading up to Thích Quảng Đức's death on June 11.

AP photographer Horst Faas would later remember the day a senior monk who routinely visited Browne in the AP office availed himself of Browne's chemistry knowledge. The conversation as Faas recalled it involved a discussion of the speed with which certain gas mixtures would ignite; Browne also remembers the monk's departing words: "We found that by mixing equal parts of gasoline and diesel fuel we could produce a fire that was both intense and sufficiently long-lasting."<sup>lxxxix</sup> At the time, the gravity of the exchange words was

not fully understood; the two reporters did not imagine how the Buddhist faithful would use this information.

Details regarding Quảng Đức's movements in spring 1963 are almost completely absent from the historical record—either official documentation or personal accounts. Yet perhaps this is appropriate; maybe the *absent* minutiae of Thích Quảng Đức's final experiences with the Buddhist situation in South Vietnam reveal more than they ever could in detail and fact. We do know that on June 3 Quảng Đức was in Saigon. On that day, he began to fervently draft a collection of personal notes, including poems, two separate wills, and various private correspondence. Figure 15 shows him writing one of his many letters. Two contemplative verses especially resonate in his soon-to-be death. In one of the most moving passages from a poem dated June 3, he writes of his impending demise with a poetic configuration of alchemical metaphors:

White ash of my body permeates the air  
 Flames of my death a projection of light  
 Some sweet, divine fragrance up in smoke<sup>xc</sup>

Quảng Đức's eternally missing shadow-self from his final month of life would become a portentous augury.

### Total Fire

In the early evening of June 10, strife across South Vietnam reached a new high point, and previous opinions of Buddhist leadership in Saigon were changing rapidly. A radio broadcast from Hue described the increasing violence of the Diem regime. A tangentially punishable broadcast, the discreet communication between pagodas was treated as a flagrant offense by the Catholic political apparatus in Saigon. Diem ordered a blockade at the four main temples in the old city: power was cut from various pagodas, communication lines severed. This alarming information spurred the head executive council of monks to determine that hunger strikes, other ongoing planned protests, and nonviolent civil disobedience in general were failing to impact the Catholic regime's anti-Buddhist agenda. Now, on June 10, they were seriously reconsidering Quảng Đức's request to self-immolate.

Late that same evening Thích Quảng Đức penned his final written message. It begins humbly and earnestly and is addressed to the leaders of the Buddhist community as well as a wider civic audience: the sangha, the resistance movement, and the greater

association of Buddhist practitioners. First, as per custom and political necessity, Quảng Đức recites his birth name, the place of his vows, and his life's work in devotion to the dharma. Reading the correspondence in the original, one is struck by the formalities, gracious honorifics, and tenor of modesty. Gradually, however, Quảng Đức adjusts his tone and rhetoric. He begins to broaden the context of the polemic; this is where he begins to summon an imagined collective of devoted practitioners.<sup>xcii</sup> He invokes the fundamental role that religion—as both a spiritual platform and pragmatic tool of communal identity—ought to play in constructing a world of moral values with benevolent justice and an ethic of righteousness.

Thích Quảng Đức suggests that the universal struggle for peace and justice is not about taking sides—in this case Diem and the Catholic contingent versus local Vietnamese and Buddhism. A dualistic paradigm, he observes, reflects bad faith and is thus destined to fail. Specifically, for Buddhists this kind of crude Manichean thinking requires pitting religions against one another. Quảng Đức thus also emphasizes the danger posed by any religious faction's disingenuous motives or antagonistic intentions. He notes the precarious subterfuge that ignoble motives or dishonest actions may incite. In this passage Diem and his persecutory regime are within shouting range of the monk's sagacious microphone, the president and his advisory board of rogue members implicitly present in the subtext of his letter.

Thích Quảng Đức's rhetoric then segues into a historical narrative of Buddhism's resistance and sustained humility in suffering:

Phật giáo đã gắn liền với tinh thần quốc gia dân tộc: Phật giáo thịnh thì quốc gia thịnh, Phật giáo suy thì quốc gia suy. Điều này lịch sử đã minh nhận.

Buddhism is in touch with our ethnic national spirit. As the dharma grows and Buddhism thrives then so too do the Vietnamese. When the dharma sinks and Buddha is abandoned, then we ethnic Vietnamese do also. This is a history: a lesson true.<sup>xciii</sup>

Quảng Đức advocates that an intangible spirit of both national Vietnamese identity and civic liberty is intimately bound with Buddhist principles and cosmology.<sup>xciiii</sup> Thích Quảng Đức acknowledges the long history of Buddhist persecution in Vietnam and emphasizes the more-than-a-century-long struggle against injustice, imperialism, and colonial subjugation. He continues to the potent ramifications of his final surrendering gesture in flames: "If at

last after my time expires, I fall on my back, the Dharma lives on.” Religious liberation and redemption will survive through suffering. However, “If I expire and land on my belly, the spiritual projects of mankind will soon fail; meaningless eternal pain in turmoil. No center will hold.”

Early the next morning, a large cohort of monks prayed in unison.<sup>xciiv</sup> Browne’s pictures retell parts of the story and remain the only visual record of the event. They are both a primary historical document and a mesmerizing camera account of images on the verge of catastrophe. Photographs on this disruptive catastrophic edge ‘exist on the surface,’ writes Azoulay. “To photograph or to look at what exists on the verge of catastrophe is to assume or to manufacture the position of enunciating.” As a visual act, this process of photographing suspends ‘logic of newsworthiness’ and potentiality envelops the scene.

Here I want to further incorporate Azoulay’s interventions, specifically her conceptual framing of the photographic event as a political configuration, an encounter. In *The Civil Contract of Philosophy* (2008), Azoulay begins to dislocate any authorial singularity of camera and picture alike. Instead, the relationality of photographs is delineated in process and upends stable notions of citizenship.<sup>xciv</sup> For Azoulay, some inexorable capacity is latent in all pictorial documents: in other words, photography is an *event*. Her motivated stance implicitly evokes an ulterior valence of images and postcolonial politic (pictures often unseen, uncirculated, or never even captured). Potentiality and contingency are analog terms and doubly imbued with combustibility. The politics inside Browne’s kaleidoscopic oeuvre of pictures is fragile, and Azoulay’s encounter helps to reveal the political stakes of both citizenship and communal engagement on the street. While I incorporate the material phenomenology of Azoulay into the fabric of June 11, 1963, I simultaneously apply pressure to the polemical tenor of her insight.

As we will see, when imagining the centrifugal scope of Browne and Quảng Đức—as well as the massive cohort of Buddhist practitioners and lay civilians—indeed most stable photographic parameters dissipate. Nevertheless, the *thereness*—what has been—and melancholic testimony of pictures remains paramount (Barthes). Liminality and the unseen are situated in relational dialogue with the central act of Quảng Đức’s death. In doing so, legible representations and blithe pictorial newscasts are likewise revealed to be unstable fictions. In brief, within the cosmos of June 11, 1963, the philosophical stakes of pictorial unknowability reverberate. Browne’s reel of photographs continues our history.

Communal prayers first commenced inside Quảng Đức's final temple. At this time, around eight o'clock in the morning, it still seemed that not all of the Buddhist monks, if any, knew of the impending actions. A processional then began, moving first into an outdoor courtyard area still inside the walls of the pagoda. A picture by Browne shows a small cohort of monks (fig. 16). Each appears immersed in their own world of somber contemplation, barely noticing him or his camera. The peaceful group thereafter entered the public domain. The subsequent photographs were taken between 9:10 a.m. and 9:20 a.m. The 1957 Austin Westminster Sedan leading the march had just picked up Thích Quảng Đức and was purportedly only helping to lead a commemorative funeral procession for the eight monks slaughtered earlier in May. On this hallowed journey, the four attendant practitioners traveling in the car with Quảng Đức held grave responsibilities: each was to perform a particular function in the ensuing spectacle of his death. They would soon become assistant holy actors in the staged drama of public immolation. Browne summarized what transpired:

Street marches, especially on Tuesdays, became so frequent they appeared to be losing their impact. Tuesday was the day of choice, because the ascension of the spirits of the dead from the Hue incident was said to be marked by seven-day intervals, and the victims had died on a Tuesday.<sup>xvii</sup>

The monks marched in unison, hands clasped in prayer, in rhythmic harmony, their robes forming some kind of impenetrable wall of peace. In the immediate foreground of one picture are children in pajamas and a woman with a bicycle (Fig. 17). A young boy scrunches his brow, gazing quizzically at the camera. Across the entirety of Browne's pictures, the boy's stare is the only instance of direct visual engagement. Was this commanding gaze a rupture—a tear, an incision, a breach—that the cameraman anticipated? A prophesy? Could a chance encounter with a child's troubled eyes complicate the story of death that follows? While the boy's look is similar to Barthes' *punctum*, the political gravitas of the tense situation in Saigon engenders for the viewer today a variant of spectatorship—the boy and us alike participants in the 'civil contract' of photography.<sup>xviii</sup> Then:

At precisely the center of the intersection, the Buddhist car stopped, apparently stalled. The police jeep was already halfway down the next block. The marchers began to move past the car, and then abruptly turned left quickly forming a circle about thirty feet in diameter, of which the car formed a link. It was now nearly 9:20 A.M.<sup>xviii</sup>

Quảng Đức stepped out of the car. One of the attendant monks popped the hood, feigning engine trouble. A translucent five-gallon plastic jug filled with a gasoline mixture was removed from inside the car. In figure 18, we see one of the attendant monks standing behind him and gently pouring the potent formula over his head and body. Next, Quảng Đức sits in the lotus position, dripping in chemical poison, his head gently bowed. A reflective puddle surrounds him. The two monks in the foreground cordon off the area.

In front of the Cambodian Embassy, within shouting range of the US Consulate, and fully on display in the center of Saigon, Thích Quảng Đức set himself on fire. His immolation was a culmination of a lifelong spiritual practice and faithful commitment to the dharma. His death was an emancipatory gesture of enlightenment, a divine act of bodily transfiguration made public. In perpetual process, the event was a ceremonial threnody—a sensuous encounter between all actors witness to the scene. Fortuitously (or not), Browne was one of the only Western witnesses present and captured the death on camera. The photographs disclose Quảng Đức as an *eternally dissolving monument*. His solemn, monastic death was epiphanic: trace and wound, index and signifier together disintegrated to a single site, a mystically pre-marked memorial space of tears.<sup>xcix</sup> As he contemplated grace in fire Quảng Đức’s earthly self crystalized into a holographic orb of benevolence; body and spirit in harmony were transformed into an unknowable liquid state of holy mummification. The electricity and fright were palpable. Browne’s words describe the thick atmosphere:

The overwhelming smell of joss sticks. They do make a very strong smell and it’s meant to appease the ancestors. . . That was the overwhelming smell except for the smell of burning gasoline and diesel and the smell of burning flesh. . . . The main sound was the wailing and misery of the monks. . . Then there was shouting over loudspeakers.<sup>c</sup>

Thích Quảng Đức sat completely still, composed even in what must have been utter agony as fire suffocated his body.<sup>ci</sup> A wall of flames branching out into a circle of heat and the bottommost scar of fire almost exactly fades into the robes of the monk standing farthest right (fig. 19). The plastic gas can rests just behind. Thích Quảng Đức’s eyes are shut, his cheeks ablaze. “From time to time, a light breeze pulled the flames away from Quảng Đức’s face. . . The reek of gasoline smoke and burning flesh hung over the intersection like a pall.”<sup>cii</sup> In the background, yet on a parallel plane, the sedan is stalled, its hood open as if visually bracketing the scene; its axial gape visually rhymes with the hole of

smoke and vortex of fire. To the left and in front of the car, a monk inconspicuously carries a camera and walks away. Browne again:

It is the most hypnotic kind of chant I have ever heard, and on that hot June morning, clouds of incense in the air, I found even myself affected. All the monks and nuns joined that chant, quietly at first, then with rising, hammering volume, as the verses were repeated over and over, the tempo speeding up slightly.<sup>ciii</sup>

The picture reproduced as figure 20 was eventually awarded World Press Photo of the year for 1963. In it, Quảng Đức's entire body has turned black. The gasoline can has tipped, and an opaque cloud of grisaille smoke emerges from the tips of the flames. Fully illuminated, Quảng Đức seems to have transcended the earthly plane of suffering. Momentarily, he appears as an upright tombstone within the rotating spire of flames. The usual hustle and bustle of this urban intersection is quiet. Suddenly the setting of a funeral, the crossroads for both a religious ceremony and communal space of mourning. In an act of grace, Quảng Đức's spirit is memorialized in this transmutation. In Browne's photographic malaise, the sublime eyes of Quảng Đức absorbed in meditation forever introject some beguiling sense of calm, a shield of enlightenment. Juxtaposed to the infinitely malleable politics of Azoulay's photographic discourse, here the porous bookends of camera and frame are closed, quiet. The event is a stillness; a visual grief howled inward and projected outward into material form—an image erupting somewhere in the gap between Browne and Quảng Đức, sight and trembling, community and prayer. On the morning of June 11, 1963, transcendent devotion and communal suffering conjoined to shockingly renew the photographic medium. Photography's ribbon beams of light are both a murky secret and sacred token.

Soon enough, all that remained was a horizontal sheet of light. The plurality of electrical shards and optical voltage amplified this quasi-crucifixion scene to a heightened helix spiral. In that final ring of fire, a thicket of absolute flame suffocated even the ground. A curling funnel of heavy black smoke emerged from the blanket of heat. The gas jug absorbed in the fire. Nearly all of the monks are kneeling, many hold their hands at heart center. Quảng Đức's vanishing was a final expiration and collectively observed ending. His body toppled, and as portended, his scorched corpse fell backward. Arms in the air, continuing to open his heart to the world, he lay on his back at rest. In death, Thích Quảng Đức would consecrate this spot as a sacred site. A pathos of planar spectrality resounds. In

situ and on the street, Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' folded earthward.

With the disintegration of his material self, Quảng Đức was at once preserved within the photographic medium. In some sense, his monastic death has been reenacted—reproduced and repeated ad infinitum—in the ongoing life of the photograph. Susan Sontag writes of the camera's inimitable ability to 'catch a death actually happening and embalm it.'<sup>civ</sup> For Sontag, our belated gaze and the ongoing 'co-spectatorship' of Quảng Đức's real-time death only further deepened 'the mystery, and the indecency' of photography's wounding pathos. More too, the quixotic seriality of Browne's final dying photographs on June 11, 1963—and his many unpublished pictures—further texture the muteness of any singular picture or the catastrophic exclusivity of a solitary frame, challenging what Rosalind Krauss calls the 'trauma of signification' inscribed in ruinous images. Yet still, the images remain. In spite of all. And the lacerations of this picture-event propel forward. Solitary icons and collectively dissolving monuments alike.<sup>cv</sup> They are elegiac. They are unknowable. And the complicated nature of the site reveals what fellow US journalist David Halberstam—the only other American present—would later call a "medieval scene of horror."<sup>cvi</sup> Quảng Đức's suffering endures through the horror and past any chronological lens or cartographic space: medieval metaphors, atomic sensibilities, and present times converge into a flame's absent hiss. The monk's peaceful grief resounds, and his humble devotion lives on. A dissolving monument, call this also a divine act of righteousness in a 20<sup>th</sup> century landscape void of God.

### Light, Lightning

Later, the charred body lay still and sprawled. Monks could not fit it into the coffin they had secretly brought along, and many shed their yellow outer robes for use in making a sling. They marched for several blocks carrying the body in the sling to Xa Loi Pagoda—the Buddhists' national headquarters.  
—Malcolm Browne<sup>cvi</sup>

Soon enough Malcolm Browne would accept his World Press Photo award in New York. In one picture (fig. 21) the silver trophy looks uncannily like some kind of wireless ignition device. His now-iconic picture covers the background.<sup>cvi</sup> Strangely, the body engulfed in flames seems almost still able to witness the unfolding pageantry. Browne returns his stare, looks back. In 1964 Browne was received a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting, and in 1965 he published the provocative *The New Face of War*. The book was lambasted by the US

political machine for disregarding national security concerns and acting to subterfuge the governmental mission in Vietnam. In his later life Browne would lament: “That Saigon should have been the scene of some of my most revolting memories seems strange, because Saigon is a beautiful place that enchanted me from the first moment I saw it.”<sup>cxix</sup>

Quảng Đức’s life would also revive. His holy yellow robes were cut into swatches and distributed to Buddhists everywhere. “Pinned to shirts and dresses, these bits of cloth were thought to have miraculous healing properties, and also were symbols of the Buddhist uprising against the government.”<sup>cx</sup> The sacred textile scraps were also believed to have healing properties. “Some said each fleck of yellow cloth provided miraculous protection to its wearer, and dots of yellow appeared on dresses and lapels everywhere. . . . At one point, police tried to crack down on wearers of the yellow cloth, but there were too many of them.”<sup>cx</sup> Quảng Đức’s ashes were circulated to pagodas throughout the country in containers like a bronze votive lamp pictured in figure 22. Most inexplicably, Thích Quảng Đức’s heart also became a sacred vestige. After his death, his body was cremated again; in fact, it was burned twice in observance of ancient Buddhist custom. It is said that even in the second process, his heart continued to absorb fire: it wouldn’t burn. Today it remains a holy relic.

Malcom Browne’s work as the reporter who photographed Thích Quảng Đức’s death catapulted him into a global discourse of war news from South Vietnam. His close relationship to the Buddhists, and other self-immolations in Vietnam, would both escalate that summer. According to historian Howard Jones, “John Mecklin from the U.S. embassy next door [in Saigon] declared that Browne’s photograph ‘had a shock effect of incalculable value to the Buddhist cause,’ becoming a symbol of the state of things in Vietnam.”<sup>cxii</sup> Pictures and accompanying articles from three weeks later testify to this shock and haunting. Browne writes, “As the monks emerged through an alleyway from their pagoda to the main street, combat police blocked their march. Newsmen moved up to take pictures. Within seconds, plainclothesmen had slammed some cameras to the ground and smashed others with rocks. . . . For once, the newsmen were the target, not the monks.”<sup>cxiii</sup> Shattered rings of glass made an announcement, and the blood of foreign correspondents were a secular trace of calamity to come.

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- <sup>i</sup> Richard Pile Interview with Audie Cornish, ‘Malcolm Browne, Journalist Who Took the ‘Burning Monk’ Photo, Dies’ NPR, August 28, 2012.
- <sup>ii</sup> Malcolm Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks: A Reporter’s Life* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 4.
- <sup>iii</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), 130. This telegram from the consulate at Hue, May 9, 1963, June 11, 167, 1207. In our judgment the Buddhist situation is dangerously near the breaking point.
- <sup>iv</sup> Maria H. Loh, *Still Lives: Death, Desire, and the Portrait of the Old Master* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), xv.
- <sup>v</sup> Malcolm Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 62.
- <sup>vi</sup> Hoang Ngo, “From Death to Birth: Biography, Religious Context, and Remembering of Thích Quảng Đức and his Self-Immolation,” *Kyoto Review Southeast Asia* Vol. 35 (2023). Although the recent article is a quite cursory, I do find Ngo’s discovery of the monk’s visage on the cover of Thích Ca Lược Sử (The Life of the Buddha, 1966) evocative. This unusual image reproduced in color is likewise also now incorporated into the fifth chapter of my manuscript.
- <sup>vii</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012); Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Boston: MIT Press, 2005); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), and Eduardo Cadava “‘Lapsus Imaginis’: The Image in Ruins,” *October* Vol. 96 (2001): 35–60.
- <sup>viii</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 26
- <sup>ix</sup> Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- <sup>x</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 101
- <sup>xi</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1969), 253-265.
- <sup>xii</sup> Malcolm Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 4.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 63.
- <sup>xiv</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making*, 5, 9.
- <sup>xv</sup> Halberstam, *The Making*, 5.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Halberstam, *The Making*, 3.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 185.

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<sup>xviii</sup> When Browne died in 2012, Pile noted: “He’s one of those who showed how it should be done. And how to get around obfuscation, how to get around bureaucracy that tries to prevent things from being said and done.”

<sup>xix</sup> Richard Pile, Interview, 2012.

<sup>xx</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 24.

<sup>xxi</sup> Barbara Zelizer’s *Uncovering the Body* exhaustively traces the media, journalistic record, and historic trauma of November 22, 1963, in Dallas; furthermore, her genealogical discussion positions journalism’s significance, image dissemination, and larger media developments in the landscape of the 1960s as central sociocultural shifting factors: “Television journalism grew up in Dallas . . . television had come of age as the preferred medium of news . . . [and] the press become inextricably linked with television in the public mind.” Barbara Zelizer’s *Uncovering the Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 29.

<sup>xxii</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8, 12.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Nora M. Alter, *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The television War on Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xii–xiii. Alter imports both Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle and Raymond Williams’s conceptual thinking-through of “dramatized society,” political ramifications in a society dominated by “surface effects,” and the perceptual consequences of war reporting to create a “culture of distance,” are fundamental to keep in mind when imagining the hyperbolic birthing of media circuits in 1960s televised war in Vietnam. Although Alter’s study focuses on theater’s response to the impacts of television, her philosophical excursus is a helpful platform when imagining the residual implications of visual media. Implicit in her critique of television’s deleterious communicative powers are the stakes of societal alienation—severing of the connective, embodied human experience. For perhaps the most comprehensive account of media, television, and war in Vietnam consult Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>xxiv</sup> 2016 film released documenting reported in Vietnam <https://vimeo.com/172631863>.

<sup>xxv</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, xiv.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 81.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 82.

<sup>xxviii</sup> “Viet Nam Reporting: Three Years of Crisis,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 3, no. 3 (1964): 7–8, Malcolm W. Browne Papers, box 2, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

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<sup>xxix</sup> This thinking was epitomized most by “body count,” an unhelpful token barometer of success. Journalist would help to eventually expose the multifarious institutional failures of this analytic measurement tool.

<sup>xxx</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 31.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>i</sub> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 35

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>ii</sub> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 35.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>iii</sub> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 27.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>iv</sub> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 28.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>v</sub> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 28.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>vi</sub> Find access to resources associated with the Quakers at the link, there is a also a history of awards related to the community <https://www.afsc.org/nobel-peace-prize>.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>vii</sub> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 48.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>viii</sub> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 52.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>ix</sub> “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” p. 17, Malcolm W. Browne Papers, box 1, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up”).

<sup>xl</sup> Malcolm Browne in *Reporting Vietnam, Part One: American Journalism 1959–1969*, ed. Milton J. Bates, Lawrence Lichty, and Paul Miles (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998), 23.

<sup>xli</sup> Find Richard Pile’s interview at the site, 2012, following Browne’s death,

<https://www.knxx.org/post/malcolm-browne-journalist-who-took-burning-monk-photo-dies>

<sup>xlii</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 110.

<sup>xliii</sup> “Agencies and Radios Out,” The kind of death drive reporting and riotously masculine energy news outlets were searching for is epitomized by the content of a January 30, 1963 article Malcolm Browne drafted for the AP General Office in New York (the cover story recalled Gunner Dickinson, a rogue soldier from the US Armed Forces.

<sup>xliv</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 111.

<sup>xlv</sup> Malcolm Browne in *Reporting Vietnam, Part One: American Journalism 1959–1969*, ed. Milton J. Bates, Lawrence Lichty, and Paul Miles (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998), 38.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 7.

<sup>xlvii</sup> *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>xlviii</sup> “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” p.34.

<sup>xlix</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 115.

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<sup>i</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 113.

<sup>ii</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 31.

<sup>iii</sup> On February 10, 1971, Henri Huet and Larry Burrows, along with two other reporters (Kent Potter and Keizaburo Shimamoto) died together flying in a UH-1 Huey. They were shot down somewhere over the mountains in Laos.

<sup>liii</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 61. Browne and Hunter S. Thompson briefly crossed paths in 1959–60 at the *Daily Record* in Middletown, New York. Discussing overzealous, dangerous loving male journalists, Browne writes: “One of our alumni, Hunter Thompson, really hit his stride after *The Record* fired him, and his books about Hell’s Angels and other notorious types made him a celebrity. [His] problems at *The Record* were consequences of his volatile temper, not his writing... Journalists keep running into each other and the next time I met Hunter was in Saigon, where he was working up an article by haranguing the Viet Cong delegation at Saigon airport.” In early 1960s Saigon, volatile and overly confrontational Hunter S. Thompson types were not tolerated, and usually quickly relieved of their journalistic duties.

<sup>liv</sup> Joyce Hoffman. “On Their Own: Female Correspondents in Vietnam,” (August 3, 2005) Old Dominion University on the <http://www.odu.edu/ao/instdv/quest/femalecorrespondents.html>.

<sup>lv</sup> Natalia J. Haller, *Female War Correspondents In Vietnam: A Turning Point for Women in American Journalism* (MA thesis, Humboldt State, 2006). Haller cites Joyce Hoffman, *On Their Own: Female Correspondents in Vietnam*: “No less than the generals, male correspondents in Vietnam perceived war as a man’s game,” 25. <http://humboldt-dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/2148/98/HallerFinalDraft.pdf>

<sup>lvi</sup> Browne, “Viet Nam Reporting,” 15.

<sup>lvii</sup> Browne, “Viet Nam Reporting,” 8.

<sup>lviii</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 184.

<sup>lix</sup> Browne, *Reporting Vietnam Part One*, 37.

<sup>lx</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 8..

<sup>lxi</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 211.

<sup>lxii</sup> For an in-depth account see also Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954–75* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

<sup>lxiii</sup> See Robert M. Neer, *Napalm An American Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 195. <http://apjif.org/2014/12/3/Mark-Selden/4065/article.html>

<sup>lxiv</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), 130.

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This telegram from the consulate at Hue, May 9, 1963, describes the May 8 tragedies and precariousness of the situation.

<sup>lxv</sup> For a detailed and comprehensive account of the days and weeks leading up the momentous events in Hue see Huong Thi Diu Nguyen, “Eve of Destruction: A Social History of Vietnam’s Royal City, 1957–1967” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2017).

[https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/40207/Nguyen\\_washington\\_0250E\\_17578.pdf?sequence=1](https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/40207/Nguyen_washington_0250E_17578.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>lxvi</sup> Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 1995), 217.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Nguyen Quang Hung, “The Buddhist Crisis in the summer of 1963 in South Vietnam seen from a cultural-religious aspect,” *Religious Studies Review* Vol. 3 N 1&2 (2009): 21-37.

<sup>lxviii</sup> For a complete account of Diem, Thuc, and the entire Ngo mandarin family see Seth Jacobs, The convoluted filial politics of both Diem and Thuc ostensibly added another level of nepotism to the contentious social landscape; however, it has been suggested that the politics of two were in fact more complicated than the surface accountings. Two vital details are in dispute: Diem may have been upset about the tax edict passed to fund Thuc’s celebratory Catholic festivities; and flags, in this case a battle between the Southern Republic and the Vatican, was an area of passionate disagreement. Recently Edward Jarvis published an apocryphal story of Thuc, Catholicism, and the evacuated of ‘sedevacantism’ position in the papal order. Edward Jarvis, *Sede Vacante: The Life and Legacy of Archbishop Thuc* (Apocryphal Press, 2018).

<sup>lxix</sup> Marvin E. Gettleman et al., *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1995), 217.

<sup>lxx</sup> Edward Miller, “Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 ‘Buddhist Crisis’ in South Vietnam.” *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 6 (2015): 1903–62.

<sup>lxxi</sup> *Phap nan Phat Giao 1963: Nguyen nhan, ban chat va tien trinh* [Defending Buddhism 1963: Reasons, Essence and Process] (Nha Xuat Ban Hong Duc, 2013), 467–77.

<http://chuaphuclam.vn/index.php/?lich-su/pht-giao-tranh-u-cun-sach-b-b-quen.html>

<sup>lxxii</sup> The bad-faith reporting of figures such as Margaret Higgins, for example, a kind of propaganda-like conservative mouthpiece and pugnacious reporter working often in bad faith.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), 130. This telegram from the consulate at Hue, May 9, 1963 describes the May 8 tragedies and precariousness of the situation.

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lxxivA helpful site about the process of Buddhist development and meaning in May 1963.

<https://phatgiao.org.vn/anh-duoc-quang-duc-va-mot-vai-dieu-chua-noi-ve-phat-dan-1963-d10105.html>. Recall that the founder of the Nguyen dynasty, Emperor Gia Long, intentionally began construction on the Imperial Palace on the auspicious ninth day of May 1804. Don Luce and John Sommer, *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 24.

lxxv “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” 29.

lxxvi George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), chapters 2.

lxxvii Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War*, 85 n11.

lxxviii Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), 130. This telegram from the consulate at Hue, May 9, 1963, describes the May 8 tragedies and precariousness of the situation.

lxxix “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” p. 11.

lxxx Figures 12 and 13 each come from a private Buddhist archive in Saigon. A collection of documents related to Quảng Đức and his immolation reside here at *To Dinh Quan The Am*, a small temple and Quảng Đức’s final Dharma site of reconstruction. In spring 2019, I was fortunate to travel into the delta and meet with Thuong Toa Thich Giac Tri, the elder priest who now watches over the sacred place and holy land.

lxxxi Vu Van Mau’s *Sáu Tháng Pháp Nạn 1963*, Giao Diem, Garden Grove, California, 2003.

<https://thuvienhoasen.org/a17268/diem-sach-sau-thang-phap-nan-1963-cua-minh-khong-vu-van-mau>

lxxxii Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), 130. This telegram from the consulate at Hue, May 9, 1963, describes the May 8 tragedies and precariousness of the situation. Furthermore, these types of protest pictures would soon find revolutionary analogues in the May protests across the American South, for instance in Birmingham, Alabama, and Jackson, Mississippi.

lxxxiii “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” 8.

lxxxiv Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 5.

lxxxv Charles A. Joiner, “South Vietnam’s Buddhist Crisis: Organization for Charity, Dissidence, and Unity,” *Asian Survey* 4, no. 7 (1964): 915–28.

lxxxvi Joiner, “South Vietnam’s Buddhist Crisis,” 916.

lxxxvii “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” 19.

lxxxviii Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington: Government Printing Office,

2010), 130. This telegram from the consulate at Hue is dated June 3 and was the beginning of tear gas.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> Browne, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks*, 9.

<sup>xc</sup> Nguyen Tri An, *Bo Tat Thich* (trong văn thơ đề ngày 18-1-1962, về thầy Quảng Đức) [in Quảng Đức's letters], 40.

<sup>xc</sup>i Republicanism

<sup>xcii</sup> Nguyen Tri An, *Bo Tat Thich* (trong văn thơ đề ngày 18-1-1962, về thầy Quảng Đức) [in Quảng Đức's letters], 55.

<sup>xciii</sup> Lopez, *The Lotus Sutra*, 124.

<sup>xciv</sup> Joiner, "South Vietnam's Buddhist Crisis," 917–18. Consider too, the American reporter Browne also notes that it was actually Faas (German born camera aficionado) who insisted he take a camera to the fateful Buddhist demonstration on June 11.

<sup>xcv</sup> Azoulay, 291.

<sup>xcvi</sup> "Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up," 9-10.

<sup>xcvii</sup> Azoulay, 160.

<sup>xcviii</sup> Browne, *Reporting Vietnam*, 32.

<sup>xcix</sup> Arnika Fuhrmann, *Teardrops of Time: Buddhist Aesthetics in the Poetry of Angkarn Kallayanapong*, (New York: Suny Press, 2020). My own concept of dissolving monuments and this connection to tears, time and Buddhism is explored more thoroughly in chapter two of the manuscript.

<sup>c</sup> "Browne, *Reporting Vietnam*," 79.

<sup>ci</sup> Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 11.

<sup>cii</sup> Browne, *Reporting Vietnam*, 82

<sup>ciii</sup> "Browne, *Reporting Vietnam*," 79.

<sup>civ</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), 59.

<sup>cv</sup> Cadava uses the phrase trauma of signification ('Lapsus Imaginis,' 52n29) as it relates to memory, disaster and experience within disastrous photographs. He cites Rosalind Krauss and the phrase as reference to Marcel Duchamp's "With My Tongue in My Cheek." Consult "Notes on the Index: Part I," p. 206. I am thinking also here of Georges Didi-Huberman and his startling text *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>cvi</sup> While 'medieval' seems misguided in Halberstam's statement, I mostly read his comments as a kind of proximate visceral retelling; and thus, less as an exotic, orientalizing, or simply brash reflection. Halberstam and his life's commitment to journalism, writing and uncovering truth deserve this 'pass' in his slightly abrasive language.

<sup>cvi</sup> "Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,"

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cviii “Awards: World Press Photo 1964,” Malcolm W. Browne Papers, box 2, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

cix “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” 8.

cx “Browne, Reporting Vietnam,” 35.

cxii “Browne, Reporting Vietnam,” 85.

cxiii Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 270.

cxiiii “Vietnam Crisis Wrap-up,” 16.



Fig. 1  
View of gardens in Hue, ca. 1930.



Fig. 2  
Malcolm Browne pictures beside two fellow newsmen, 1963.



Fig. 3 Felipe Gil de Mena *Study for Saint Francis of Assisi in Prayer* ca. mid-17<sup>th</sup> century



Fig. 4 Malcolm Browne and his soon-to-be-wife, Le Lieu, ca. 1962



Fig. 5 Malcolm Browne in AP office, Saigon 1962



Fig. 6 John Tenniel Drawing, *Alice*, 1871



Fig. 7 Horst Faas and Malcolm Browne, ca. 1963

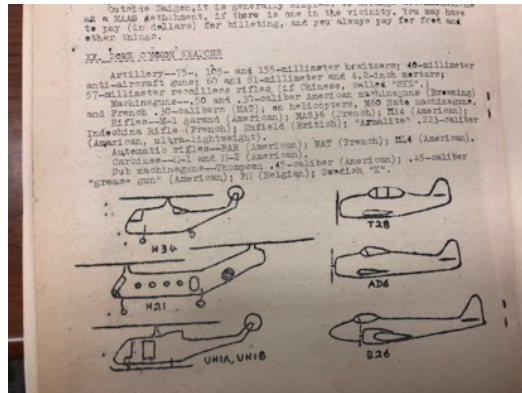


Fig. 8 Malcolm Browne drawing, Collected Papers, 1963



Fig. 9. Malcolm Browne with Saigon Monks, Xa Loi Pagoda, 1963



Fig. 10 Chieu Hoi Program Symbol, 1963



(NY:2-June 20).-BUDDHIST ALTARS BLOCK U. S. TANKS-Buddhist altars draped with multicolored Buddhist flags blocked a U. S. Marine tank column returning to Hue in South Viet Nam last week. A Marine captain conferred with Hue Buddhist leaders and the altars were withdrawn, allowing the column to pass. The altars were set up in a gesture of defiance against the central government.(APWirephoto)(s2120stf/ze)1966

Fig. 11 Buddhist Altars Block US Tanks, AP Wire photo, June 1966.



Fig. 12 Buddhist Flag, local Hue Magazine, May 1963 (author photo)



Fig. 13 Memorial poster showing victims from Hue Massacre, 'Phat Dan,' May 1963 (author photo)



Fig. 14 William Ryan, 'Advance for Spotlight,' monks at rest in early June, south Vietnam 1963



Fig. 15 Thich Quang Duc penning letter, anonymous photographer, ca. 1963



Fig. 16 Malcolm Browne, AP photo, Duc Self-Immolation Event, June 11, 1963



Fig. 17 Malcolm Browne, AP photo, Duc Self-Immolation Event, June 11, 1963



Fig. 18 Malcolm Browne, AP photo, Duc Self-Immolation Event, June 11, 1963



Fig. 19 Malcolm Browne, AP photo, Duc Self-Immolation Event, June 11, 1963



Fig. 20 Malcolm Browne, AP photo, Duc Self-Immolation Event, June 11, 1963



Fig. 21 Malcolm Browne accepting international award for picture



Fig. 22 Tiny votive candle and ash of Duc's body, ca. 1990s