

The untitled picture on screen title is from the contemporary American-Vietnamese artist An-My Lê (figure 1). Looking skyward, I see it in some way as analogy for photography. Blinding, disorienting, a mirage.

My paper explores photography's relationship with Vietnam across the 20th century. A small compendium of pictures from three discreet eras situate this terrain, and in turn aim to map an alternative history. Imagining (or the imagination of) Vietnam—as place and concept, war and history—is in question; and across each historical situation, I explore photography's discursive power as both optical stage and phantom witness to the past.

Diasporic, the photographs each in their own way *present* iterations of displacement and disjoint. Seen together in juxtaposition here, I suggest the photographs defamiliarize concepts of landscape and selfhood. Sovereignty and the body exposed in flux. In this way, I am considering photographs in a collaborative spirit of *thinking alongside with*: some phenomenological kind of dreamy, even meditative mood.

Following photographic theorist Eduardo Cadava and what he calls '*lapsus imaginis*,' *the image in ruin*, I read the pictures as able to both mark time and also reveal a pathos nested inside the past. Photography is an unveiling; a transient site of ruin imbued with radical indexicality. For Cadava, 'there can be no image that is not about destruction and survival.' I agree. (Fig. 2).

We begin in the 1920s, French Colonial Indochina outside of HN and the red river delta in N. Viet. Next (figure 3), we traverse time into the middle of the American-Vietnam War and the deepest parts of the Mekong delta (1954-75) to look at the ethereal war pictures from Võ An Khánh. We conclude by looking at a few photographs from the above mentioned, An My Lê (Figure 4) Her work is interested in the psychic domain—aftermath, precursors, and theatrics—of both landscape and conflict; she makes pictures of people and training exercises, war reenactments, and the excessive military preparation of empire.

First, Hải Phòng, an anonymous photograph from a meteorological/radio-telegraphy collection (Fig. 4). How do we speak of genre and its import here? Talk about subjugation or phantasmagoria? The man surrounded in an arcade of glass and casually opening a spaceship-like crystal box? Nominally mere French imperialist pictures; an Orientalist archive. Racist photographs replete with tools that both measure the sky and also doubly perform surveillance of laboring bodies.

But how strange. How ghostly. I think there is something more unsettling about these staged, 'civilizing' [the VN word] *văn minh* scenes. The pictures, in fact, manifest a robust sense of the uncanny. An alternative politics of otherness. Glass boxes, massive technical gadgets, and an almost illegible logic of inscription populate the frames. (Fig. 5). Like this immaculately rendered astrolabe—or star measuring/light device—the photographs evoke their own ghoulish opticality,. And in doing so, the precision, even compulsion in picturing these devices and civil servants, begins to equivocate.

I am reminded of An My Lê's reflections about memory: 'My attachment to the idea of landscape is a direct extension of a life in exile.' While neither traditional landscape nor portraiture, in my

view, these unauthored pictures project an akin life force of exile and cartographic disorientation. Objects and subjects blurring under the microscope.

Here (Fig. 6), a third picture shows the coastal scene outside the observatory postings. The frame widens.* Imagining the soon-to-be decline of the French empire in the 1920s (Indochina and elsewhere), it should come as no surprise that the *Gaze*—or lack thereof—is key for us to *disassemble* these frames. (Fig. 7)

Thinking through the 20th century, who better than Walter Benjamin to further orient us. Perhaps even summon the uncanny more fully into the fold. It is not his theorizing on the auratic, optical unconscious of photographs, but instead a simple gesture from the contemporaneous essay: ‘Paris, the Capital of the 19th C.’ Published first in 1935, the piece begins with a brief, cryptic, epigraph. A fragment itself of sorts. It reads: (Fig. 8)

‘The waters are blue...the plants pink, the evening’s appearance is delightful.

One strolls: ‘The great ladies walk together, followed by lesser ladies.’

Maybe it was the sense of motion, or urban fecundity that impressed Benjamin. Regardless, what’s most unusual is the lines come from Nguyễn Trọng Hiệp’s (Fig. 9). Hiệp, a little-known retired VN diplomat residing in HN, had lived in Paris and published a bilingual collection of poetry. Why would Benjamin choose this figure of ‘otherness?’ This subject as catalyst for the work? Hiệp’s voice as introductory verse to his momentous archiving project?

While marginal in the wider scheme of Benjamin’s project, Hiệp’s status as outsider, and his reflections of Paris as a gazing stranger (some version of the *flaneur*), *I posit* can be mobilized to illuminate these quixotic imperial pictures.

To conclude this first vignette then, one final picture (Fig. 10). A man with earphones sits at center. Ceremoniously festooned with machines, a clock, wires and ostentatious windows, the photograph is composed like a set of overlapping frames. The mathematical aesthetic schema purports to unveil some pathos, a logic of western perspectival space; however, what we see is calm estrangement. An affected site of repose. Sitting still at work, the man wears spectacles and traditional dress (VN áo dài). He appears encased; nearly levitating in a cosmos of invisibly nested boxes—the desk slit below frames his feet; an imposing iron-gadget behind looms like an emblematic shield; and a tall ladder in the corner bridges the two adjacently arching windows (Fig. 11). *Outsidedness* is, in fact, for Benjamin, Hiệp and the photographs alike, a vaunted place to be. Estrangement or alienation—this aloneness in thought—a kind of messianic forcefield, a Sebaldian wandering on its own terrain.

Võ An Khánh

Next, we move forward in chronological time. (Fig. 13) Throughout the 1960s-70s, photojournalist Võ An Khánh created a haunting collection of wartime photographs.

Like the masked woman dressed in disguise here, Khánh worked undercover in Vietnam’s southwestern Mekong Delta, and documented the daily life of combat. However, Khánh’s furtive visual reportage appears strikingly dissimilar to the prescriptive, and motivational aesthetics of socialist picture-making. In fact, as witness to the quotidian, the entirety of his oeuvre discloses an all-too-strange, dreamy worldscape of life inside the canopy of combat. Asymmetrical warfare pictured from within the hive. And again, the limits of *genre* witnessed as porous. (Fig. 14)

Born 1936 in Bạc Liêu from the north of Vietnam, Khánh's poetics emerge from an exquisite imagination. His photographs reimagine the dire stresses of everyday covert life through the opaque language of dreams. In Khánh's camera, local ensemble performances, improvised educational classrooms, and make-shift mesh medical sites transform into an attenuated somber dreamscape (Fig. 15).

Shooting with his trusted Yashica-Mat medium format lens camera, Khánh's reportage did of course catalogue the scope of struggle—delirium of a nascent Socialist state; Vietnamese clandestine Communist soldiers. At the same time, nonetheless, his pictures operated like works of art—trance objects straddling a fragile boundary space of meaning; life and death (Fig. 16). Photography's political potential is not only as record of material reality, but also as a medium able to interconnect psychic structures.

Consider this 1970's photograph captioned 'Southwestern Region Song and Dance Troupe in Rehearsal.' Paused in harmony, pirouette gestures compose this airy ballet. Vernacular portraiture, documentary landscape or revolutionary rally cries? Who is to say.

Quiet and whimsical, the virility of bodies in rhythm underneath a creamy sky offer stark contrast to the horrors of war above and around. Notice just behind the small ensemble stands a lone tree. Some ghostly pillar from beyond; a humble ecological watchman of midday sun looks on. In contrast to the sooty darkness of planes, bombs and bullets, Khánh's photographs are a dignified rest-bit amid the chaos of war. Their ambiguity was dangerous.

It makes sense then that most of Khánh's photographs in fact remained blank, undeveloped and concealed for the next three decades after 1975. He kept his negatives stored in old metal American ammunition boxes buried in his yard. Like a sacred family heirloom, the pictures lived perilously then, as they do now still today (Fig. 17).

Dreams, memory, and the often-debased term *Vernacular*, I think, is a helpful heuristic tool for us to orient this milieu of scenes. Tina Campt and others in *Imagining the Everyday* define the vernacular as 'All that is made, cultivated, or brought home.' *Home*, for me here ought to be understood in the broadest language of Vietnam, Vietnamese—land and language, people, customs and places. *Home* in Khánh's pictures is everywhere and nowhere, placeless and grounded. His rarely exhibited anti-bellucose military pictures are communal—albeit covert—relics; imagined versions of home, a collective family album. In sleep, photographs, like dreams, think their own strange way into the future.

An My Lê

(Fig. 18) So, last, we now come to three photographs from the contemporary artist An-My Lê. Born 1960 in Saigon, she fled VN in 1975. In some way an agential extension of Khánh's pictures, Lê's artistry deliberately situates landscape with pathos, ambiguity and universality. Allegorical, she calls it a stage. Her visions after-đổi mới 'the VN word for post-1986 economic renovations' (1986) conclude our story.

Lesson is from the aforementioned *Small Wars* series. Made with a 5x7 large format film camera, the picture is a hush-hush scene of instruction. Or note-taking, letter writing. What I find most compelling here, though, is not only the serene emmeshed quietude of the faux-war scene or its formal composition—boots, for example looking off stage to the right that rhyme aslope with the

sliver of sky at top left; but is the *transtemporal* summoning power of this picture. Absent apparitions arise. What do I mean? (Fig. 19). I see this picture, like many from her oeuvre, as in dialogue with distant photographs (and memories) from a violent, racialized US past; not only the wars of the 20th century, Iraq, Afghanistan, VN—but as formidably the American Civil War.

There is a foggy mental state of war/occupation/empire that Lê terms ‘Vietnam of the mind’—it coagulates in blurring of past, present and future. (Fig. 20) Ruins ruling and routing history. Lê’s universal sensibility reimagines the limits of community.

In accordance, her ongoing series *Silent General* draws inspiration from Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882). Whitman’s prose fragments and sketches of his time as Civil War nurse are kin forces to Lê’s *Silent General*—this fractured travelogue of oft-forgotten places and peoples across the US. An anti-narrative collection of loss; authenticity documented in affected shadows. The emblematic picture here shows Louisiana-land as *wounding* laced into the world. Embers scourge the sugar cane field below while a cyclone of smoke ripples upward to obfuscate the clear sky behind. Clarity is but a naivety; a dream in bad faith.

With psychic struggle in mind (Fig. 21), I read this final 1994 *Untitled Saigon* picture of landscape/portraiture as both adhesive and fragment—fragment akin to the diachronic pictures I have presented today; and sutured together—as to bind— Lê’s visions, like mine, working to glue, reorganize and *de-territorialize* stories of western hegemony, imperial conquest, and Vietnamese identity. Periphery and center in oscillation.

This nameless rice field kaleidoscopically shifts our vantage: at farthest right, a watery incision sculpts the earth; at center, bamboo flutters aflame above a congregation of fleeing ducks; and above, some cynosure of motion frames a family that gazes at us from across the other shore of silence. The haze of a dream; recollections of longing. A different *outsided* family photograph. There is mystery to the past; and photographs, like histories are animate repositories of memory, infinitely melancholic and regenerative alike.

Thank you.

A Century of Vietnam Photographs in Three Reels
Landscape, Shadows, and Exile



An My Lê. *Untitled*, Ho Chi Minh City. 1995



Photographer unknown. *Central Observatory: Instrument Room*, Hải Phòng, c. 1920-1929



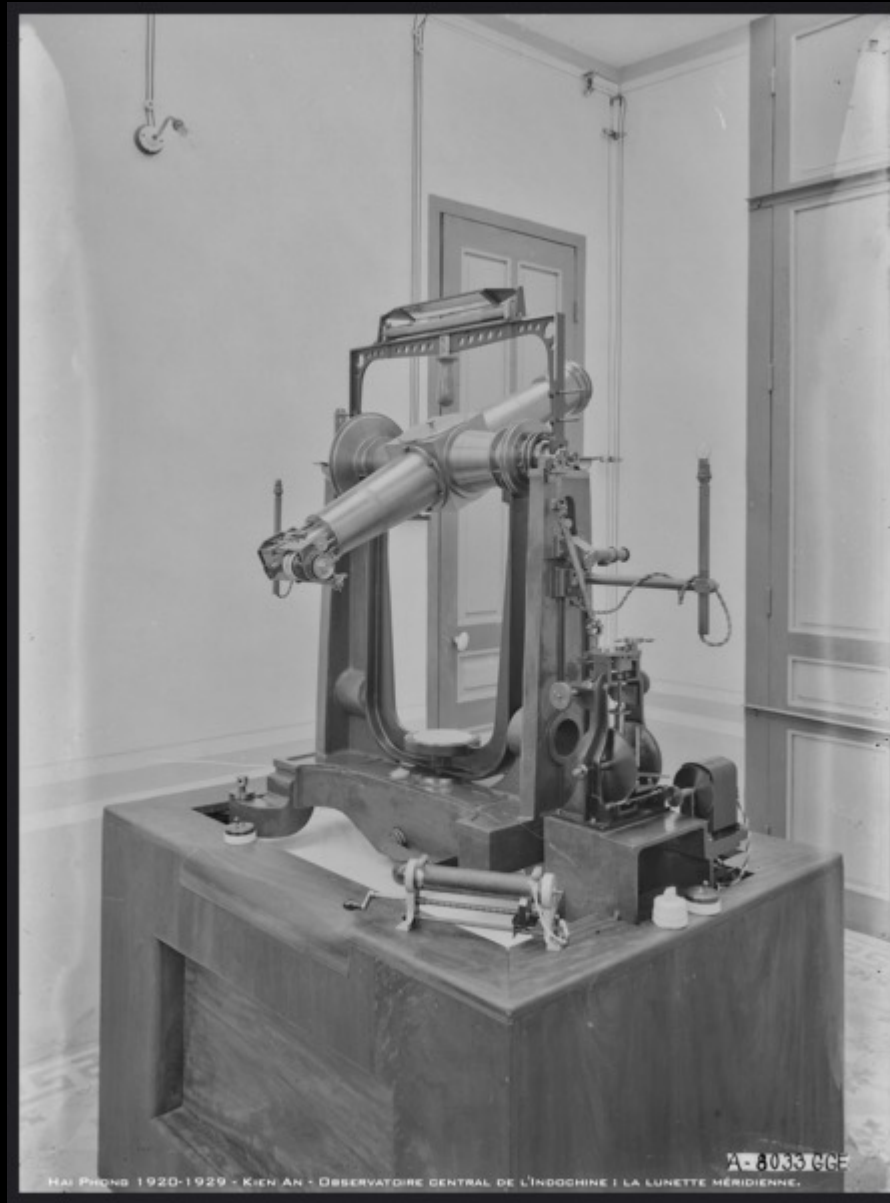
Võ An Khánh. *Southwestern Region Song and Dance Troupe in Rehearsal*. c. 1970.



HAI PHONG 1920-1929 - KIEN AN - OBSERVATOIRE CENTRAL DE L'INDOCHINE : SALLE DES INSTRUMENTS.



Photographer unknown. *Central Observatory: Instrument Room, Hải Phòng*, c. 1920-1929



HAI PHÒNG 1920-1929 - KIÊN AN - OBSERVATOIRE CENTRAL DE L'INDOCHINE I LA LUNETTE MÉRIDIENNE.

Photographer unknown.

Central Observatory: Meridian Telescope, Hải Phòng. c. 1920-1929

HAI PHONG 1920-1929 - POSTE RADIODÉLÉGRAPHIQUE DE KIEN AN.
POSTE RADIOGONIOMÉTRIQUE (VUE EXTÉRIEURE).



Photographer unknown. *Outside view: Radio Telegraphy Station, Hải Phòng, c. 1920-1929*

The waters are blue...the plants pink, the evening's appearance is delightful.

One strolls: 'The great ladies walk together, followed by lesser ladies.

-Nguyễn Trọng Hiệp



HAI PHONG 1920-1929 - KIEN AN - OBSERVATOIRE CENTRAL DE L'INDOCHINE : SALLE DES INSTRUMENTS.

Photographer unknown. *Central Observatory: Instrument Room, Hải Phòng*, c. 1920-1929



HAI PHONG 1920-1929 - POSTE RADIODÉLÉGRAPHIQUE DE KIEN AN.
POSTE RADIOGONIOMÉTRIQUE (VUE INTÉRIEURE).

Photographer unknown. *Radio Telegraphy Post*, Hải Phòng. c. 1920-1929



Võ An Khánh. *Untitled* (covert preparation for political education). c. 1972



Võ An Khánh. *M.A.S.H. unit*. c. 1970



Võ An Khánh. *Farewell my Enlisted Brother* (performance/play). c. 1971



Võ An Khánh. *Southwestern Region Song and Dance Troupe in Rehearsal*. c. 1970



Võ An Khánh. *Assembly Meeting, National Liberation Front.* 1970



An My Lê. *Lesson* (From the series *Small Wars*). Gelatin Silver Prints, 26 1/2 x 38" 1999-2002



An My Lê. *Lesson*. 1999-2002



Matthew Brady. *Camp Scene*. c. 1863



An My Lê. *Sugar Cane Field, November 5, Houma, Louisiana*, (from *Silent General*). 2016



An My Lê. *Untitled, Mekong Delta*. 1994.