

Dreams, War, and Photography: Võ An Khánh's Shadow Pictures

“It was a matter of turning a poem into a scarf...”¹

Conor Lauesen, Ph. D.
School of the Art Institute
SAIC Lecturer
Art History & Theory
Summer 2023

Abstract

Throughout the 1960s-70s, photojournalist Võ An Khánh created a haunting collection of wartime photographs. Working undercover the young Vietnamese photographer documented the daily life of combat. This article offers an essayistic interpretation of Khánh's visual project suggesting finally that his photographs reimagine the dire stresses combat through the opaque language of dreams. Photographs, like dreams, are oneiric events that often contain psychological material exceeding any singular subject. In this way, as if delivered to us from some unknowable place of otherness, Khánh's wartime pictures reveal a different and untold history of trauma and tragedy.

Keywords: Photography, Dreams, War Reportage, Psychoanalysis, Trauma, Memory Studies

Throughout the 1960s-70s, photojournalist Võ An Khánh created a haunting collection of wartime photographs. Working undercover in the U Minh mangrove forests of Vietnam's southwestern Mekong Delta, the young Vietnamese photographer 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.² 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. In this way, Khánh's poetically envisioned opus emerges from an exquisite imagination, his own liquid cauldron of fantasy and distress. As if delivered to us from some place of unknowability—a foggy space of otherness and lost and time—his wartime pictures reveal a different story of trauma and tragedy.

Throughout this article, I offer an essayistic interpretation of Khánh's visual project and suggest his pictures reimagine the dire stresses of everyday covert life through the opaque language of dreams. Photographs, like dreams, are oneiric events ‘containing information that exceeds the dimension of the singular subject.’³ In Khánh's camera, local ensemble performances, leisurely dance routines, improvised educational classrooms, and make-shift mesh medical sites transform into an attenuated somber dreamscape. In this way, reading the ethereal pictures as traditional war journalism misses the target. Estranged and alone, his archive instead negotiates an ulterior sphere of *the real*: photography tiptoeing a thin line of wounds and memory, images and experience amidst the catastrophe of wartime.

Shooting with a his trusted Yashica-Mat medium format lens camera, the photojournalist's reportage deliriously catalogued the evanescent pictorial terrain of struggle. A nascent Socialist state, Vietnamese Communist regime, and nationalist program were documented in single frames, a cosmos of cinematic flux. At the same time, nonetheless, Khánh's imagistic archive presents pictures that operate also like works of art. Straddling this

fragile boundary space, I propose his photographs be read as dreamy trance objects: pliable aesthetic signs constitutive of an oeuvre that reveals Khánh to be not only a comrade documenting life inside the jungle but as importantly an artist making revolutionary work in solidarity.

Most specifically, Khánh's photographs depict a rendezvous with his own fantastical interior world, what Svetlana Boym describes in *The Future of Nostalgia* as a 'romance with one's own fantasy.'⁴ Khánh's phantasmatic pictures, nonetheless, often evoke a more nightmarish sense of time; a hallucinatory mirage of memory looking inward and forward, a somnambulist sphere of life's vulnerability reconfiguring itself within the camera.

Throughout, I consider Khánh's photographic work with an analogous collaborative spirit of '*thinking with*, beyond only *writing about* images.'⁵ With this phenomenological attitude and Heideggerian spirit in mind—an act of dwelling in and around photographic images—I approximate the war-time pictures as an opening to the past, aesthetic objects sculpting history and creating memory. I frame the following discourse along this kind of attenuated relational platform—an empathetic and receptively ongoing continuum.⁶ Folding lived reality into photographs, Khánh's lyrical oeuvre observed the everyday sorrows of war: his pictures both show and tell this singular story of dreaming through battle.

Reading Khánh's pictures through the vernacular of dreams also has significant historical symbolism. There is an antiquated (quasi-mythological) precedent of Vietnamese struggle and imperialist resistance embedded in the life of dreams. For example, at war with China during the Lý dynasty (1st century), Emperor Lý Công Uẩn presciently had a dream. In slumber he dreamed of a lotus in the lake; the following morning and soon thereafter he was encouraged by one master monk Thiền Tuệ and eventually built the famous One Pillar Pagoda (Chùa Một Cột) in Hanoi to symbolize his dream.⁷ Revery and struggle intertwined to build the temple; dreams mad manifest in spiritual materiality. The Emperor's preternatural dreams and their everyday resonance envisaged an imagined Vietnamese community, a deep past founded first in a private nightscape.

Three visionary terms guide the essay: dreams as *Cast*, dreams as *Conjured*, and finally dreams as a *Channeled*. In other words, we commence with the spellbinding nature of Khánh as dreamcatcher and world-maker, *to cast*. Next, a kindred kind of necromantic act ensues as his photographic subjects seize the stage, performers *conjured* and *conjuring* an acoustic landscape. Here the aquatic drippy life of photographic negatives—belatedly developed pictures—anchor the story. Finally, the pathos of dreams is explored within the clandestine cosmos of classrooms. Eco-gothic and fluid in their untouchability, the fantasy of collective learning is channeled across Khánh's blank, pedagogic spaces. The state-sponsored *channeling* of revolutionary (re: Socialist, Communist) information, and the conductive current of Khánh's photography dovetail to create a mode of edifying transference—lessons exchanged beneath a bleak milieu inside Vietnam's tropical forests.

As importantly, I argue that the apparitional cosmos of Khánh's photography engenders a mode of belated revelation. Beautifully stunning yet trenchantly uncanny, the chronological exhibition history of these covert pictures augurs their vertiginous nature. After the war's end—and for the ensuing four decades—the carefully stored spools of film slept lifeless. Many of Võ An Khánh's images remained blank, undeveloped and concealed. “[Khánh] meticulously kept his negatives in glassine sleeves inside old metal American ammunition boxes buried in his yard. Inside with the film were small bags of roasted rice that acted as a desiccant [to preserve the reels].”⁸ Buried underground in US ammunition boxes—and only first exhibited to western

audiences in the early 2000s—Khánh’s archive awaited an audience or seer, a future historian of the blank.

Dreams too—like photographs and memories—are activities followed by revelation: first as dreamt, and only later as image—a form of text, archive, and substitution.⁹ “Dreaming is an intersubjective event that requires animation—a special orchestration of voice and breath.”¹⁰ Requiring an audience—a future transmission, narration, and circulation—images, like nocturnal reverie, yearn for an ear. An absent ephemeral thread. And in being heard, an awakening process arouses: the mind enlivened once again after a pause, the materialized afterquiet of some hazy slumber.¹¹ Khánh’s pictures coalesce (formed and manifested) in an akin process of suspension and deferred exposé, some temporal drag bespeaking the belated nature of dreamlife.¹² A macabre fermentation of life in chemical waiting.

Similarly, interpreting dreams and their unconscious content is a fractured process—an ongoing event and phantasmal activity this perhaps eventually followed by some form of disclosure and communication. Sliwinski reminds us that “in narrating these thought-events, moreover, a dream becomes a particular kind of communication, a gossamer transport for the expression of difficult desires, ideas, and conflicts.”¹³ The photographic medium offer an askance paradigm to communicate ‘difficult desires,’ pictures sculpting the contours of their own mesmeric gossamer language.

A Personal History: Two Primal Scenes

Born in 1936, Võ An Khánh was raised primarily in Bắc Liêu—a watery region deep inside southern Việt Nam—and first began experimenting with photography during the 1950s. Living in Sài Gòn as a young man he worked for Việt Long Photo Lab and in 1961 a family tragedy of war implored the young Khánh to join the North Vietnamese resistance—NLF (National Liberation Front) cause. He was selected Secretary for the Printing Office ‘Văn Công’ entertainment team.

It makes sense also that the eager revolutionary’s first job was, in fact, designing propaganda posters inside the jungle’s cavernous fecundity. Soon thereafter Khánh began managing the photography department for local revolutionary causes. He maintained this position for the entire durée of the conflict. Throughout the remaining decade-plus (1961-75) Khánh lived and operated in various camouflaged units (Khu Nam Bộ) primarily across southern and central Việt Nam, all-the-while still making pictures.

Effusively bright yet opaque, the 1970’s photograph captioned ‘Southwestern Region Song and Dance Troupe in Rehearsal’ begins our flight into the uncanny dreamland of battle (fig. 1). Visually paused in harmony, symmetrical pirouette gestures compose this ballet. Quiet and whimsical, their stasis refutes the ecological devastation behind. A picture of war. Or is it?

Dressed in matching revolutionary attire (khiêu như chiếc áo bà ba) atop a sparsely forested jungle clearing, the modest female dance troupe appears to rehearse for some surreptitious recital. Vernacular portraiture, documentary landscape or revolutionary rally cries? Recall at this juncture, Khánh had lived for ten-plus years hidden in the presence of combat. “The threat of death was real for these photographers. In total, 72 photographers who worked for the North, including a few women, perished during the First Indochina War and American War.”¹⁴ With total life-and-death risk ubiquitously present, the sober serenity of Khánh’s pictures chimes a still thicker chord.

Let us pause to decelerate our vision and look closely at the five passengers in ‘Dance Troupe.’ Synchronized in lockstep the women pose steady. Outstretched legs and arms reach

both forward and back—a single left-arm at furthest right is the only abrasion to wholeness. Youthful virility and stoic focus blanket the lower half of the training picture, each statuesque underneath a creamy ether sky. The dignified virility of bodies in rhythm offers stark contrast to the horrors of war above and around. Strangely too, these unusual postures similarly call to mind a visual lexicon of historical of images: prescribed exercises from the 1934 journal *Phong Hóa* offer an uncanny match to Khánh’s figuration and chosen model. Photography’s political potential is not only in its ‘ability to document material reality, but in its profound link to psychic structures.’¹⁵

Just behind the small ensemble on sodden terrain stands a lone tree. Faintly atilt and in rhyme with the outstretched horizontal arms of the dancers, this arboreal sapling topographically orients the scene of practice. Its crown of leaves distancing too the low horizon line below. Lurking anti-monumental along the ridge of the swamp, this last-standing beast from the past is also a token of a landscape obliterated. The humble watchman of midday sun a ghostly pillar from beyond our clattering earth.

The details of this bucolic tapestry are indeed diametrically juxtaposed to the stated VNA photographic mission. “The VNA established training programs for journalists and photographers who went on to produce images and stories that would promote the cause, recruit volunteers, and foster sympathy with antiwar organizations and other decolonizing movements.”¹⁶ On the contrary, Khánh’s singular photos destabilize the political terrain of propaganda, pictures as trite ideology or clichéd vernacular vehicles are upended. “Pictures to be taken were to deal with crimes committed by the enemy in local areas and were to serve as documents to denounce the enemy at home and abroad, as well as for propaganda among the masses,” notes a 1968 RAND report of salient ‘captured’ documents.¹⁷ The artist’s photographs operate in some of liminal dream space between the cause and life’s reality.

In contrast to the sooty darkness of planes, bombs and bullets casting shadowy concentric spheres, Khánh’s photograph offer a dignified rest-bit: a kind of cohort of holy, solemn objects fluttering in blank chemical waiting amid the chaos of war. In repose, photographs, like dreams, think. “The imagination sometimes gathers images of increasing sensuality. It is nourished first with distant images, dreams before a huge panorama; it isolates a secret place where more human images are assembled.”¹⁸

Khánh’s black and white dream (fig. 2) here takes mobile form as a bricolage of sinewy wreckage. Here, an uncanny 1968 group portrait of boys are shown walking adrift inside a verdant jungle wall. Late-adolescent factory workers on their lunchbreak, it seems this team’s printing press labors are absent from the picture’s purview: however, just below and at far left, a smoky grisaille smudge percolates with life. Only a mere blemish reminder, the gas wound lingers upward. This liquid scar is an illegible hieroglyph, an otherworldly mud dream of archival damage, a flotsam thought-bubble from beneath seen here as a pool of darkness. As Walter Benjamin posited, the camera’s optical unconscious makes manifest the unseeable: Khánh’s invert fantasy of feet-words are a tar script of photogravure imprecision.¹⁹

Throughout the durée of imperial conflict, the printing press and fruits of its labor were essential tools for combat. Circulation of news, clandestine communion, and promotion of the revolution was paramount. Curator Quyên Nguyễn of the Sàn Art exhibition *Tác Lực Ngầm* (Masked Force) writes, “They will go on assembling propagandist pages in a printing house named after Trần Ngọc Hy, a patriotic newspaper editor-in-chief and martyr who in 1957 had been executed by firing squad in Cà Mau.”²⁰ Subversive acts are seen in a void through Khánh’s camera lens, and his subjects are revolutionary actors paused in a clearing of chemical darkness.

Like a dream, local memory of organizational resistance and the pragmatic assemblage of written pamphlets represent a form of subterranean teamwork. A mood of solidarity unconsciously informs the atmospheric terrain of Khánh's's photographic maze.

Again, now let us look closer beside Khánh's extraordinary vision. First, see the crew's right feet stepping in weaponized unison—each tiptoes this precarious bamboo plank. The leader of the pack appears to smirk. He stares past the camera unfazed, a saturation of lived experience sculpts his interior space.²¹ Dendritic branches and cobweb horrors of the night bud out of his mind, as his rustic black pants rhyme with three thin plumb tree stalks above. Environmental historian David Biggs reminds us of the historical salience of politics in paper when he writes that early as 1941 "...members of [these] cells organized weapons workshops and a printing press inside the forest."²²

Viaducts and crossing tree limbs, old growth trunks and arboreal dust below further sculpt the covert cadre's swaggering. "In the depths of matter there grows an obscure vegetation; black flowers bloom in matter's darkness..." writes the contemporaneous French psychoanalyst Gaston Bachelard.²³ Soldiers like flowers blossom in the shadows, fecundity accumulating in the dark. In step across this precarious 'monkey bridge' of chiaroscuro light, the interwoven young cadres embody a thicket of human life. The dream of resistance and entrapment of death trespass from afar inside the camera. Fluids and photographs, landscapes and dreamwork continue to establish the enigma contours of this art historical study.

Mangrove Cast: Rehearsal and Training in the Bog

"Queen Mab is a bit like an auteur director, and we are her helpless audience, subject to her mercurial mood and unpredictable delivery schedule."²⁴

Evacuated of the mangrove swampy terrain, a troupe of young performers bid their comrade farewell in this 1971 photograph (fig. 3). Such Armed Propaganda Teams—originally coined *Đội Tuyên Truyền* was established from within Indochinese Communist Party during the early 1950s by the mythologized general Võ Nguyễn Giáp—traversed the countryside throughout the war. Edifying forces of politic aphorisms and instrumental voices of the state, these instructive teams performed skits, provided entertainment, sang songs, projected films, and boosted morale.²⁵

A 1970 RAND document highlights the gravitas in this performative valence—momentous vernacular politics imbued in theatrical sketches and mental training. "[Goals] reorganize psychological warfare entertainment teams, including three musical teams and three dance teams. As far as stage shows are concerned, smaller and shorter skits are more suitable for the situation." Regardless of state-sponsored agendas or real-politic platitudes, Khánh's peculiar photographs routinely appear to defamiliarize these quotidian encounters. Obdurate to instrumentalization and difficult to decode, the photographer's painterly representations eschew the malaise of meaning.

Sliwinski reminds us that interpreting dreams and their unconscious content is a fractured process—an ongoing event and phantasmal activity this perhaps eventually followed by some form of disclosure and communication. "In narrating these thought-events, moreover, a dream becomes a particular kind of communication, a gossamer transport for the expression of difficult desires, ideas, and conflicts."²⁶ Theatre and photography each and together offer an askance paradigm to communicate 'difficult desires,' their own mesmeric gossamer language.

Made subject of—or subjected to—the photographic conduction of Võ An Khánh was to be cast (subjunctively so) under a spell of *otherness*. Subjects whirled into an ethereal terrain where stage and set, actor and act diverged from any rote script. Numbingly drenched in the incessant hallucination of distortion and or jingoist doldrum, a dreamy boredom of mind arises:

Khánh's theatrical opus as dream-stealer or dream-weaver, dream-taker or dream-keeper crystalizes to flight in the contentious haze of reverie amid conflict.

While this staged photograph earnestly projects a noble scene of theatrical enactment and gestural adolescent comradery, the purported innocence resides within a thinly veiled troposphere of perpetual local catastrophe. In this way, 'Farewell my Enlisted Brother' is a story of prospective freedom amid some melodramatic group farewell. Imbued with Khánh's ulterior disposition—imaginative, yet steadfastly un-voyeuristic—it is as if these photographs and their maker could enact the future, able 'Queen Mab-like' to sculpt a panorama of wanderlust and 'refracted vision' even within the fright of war.. Life cast and dreams scattered into the wind.

The ensemble pauses their joint gesticulations in front of a repurposed, embroidered mosquito net of sorts. Stilled to stone signifiers, the picture is an annunciation. Amidst the choreography of this remote improvised stage, we observe the young revolutionary at far left is the sole subject looking away from the camera's forward lens. With back turned and his hands clasping to heart a leafy bouquet, the anonymity of this covert NLF fighter remains intact. Arms raised against the rippled and billowing curtain, this communal exchange of goodbyes is a signal—a charged, psychosomatic gesture.

Notice as well, the three young female actors: intrepid and mask-less, they kneel and salute. Undisguised, their naked bravery also implies a form of dynamic wish-fulfillment: 'Go now, young friend, return later to us safe,' they seem to say, their stoic glances and smiling faces affirming the reality of the soldier's imminent departure. Behind these three Macbethian sorceresses, two young men correspondingly bracket the backstage of the frame. Wearing white improvised twin ghost masks with camouflage eye holes, the gendered concealment begins to clarify this uncanny perceptual tale.

In Khánh's dreamland pictures, a robust pathos of secrecy and silence infiltrates consciousness at every recess. Boys distinguished from girls, actors estranged from civilian combatants, nevertheless the fog of war creeps along the picture's skin. Khánh's cast dreams—with their poesis and make-believe transcendence—are nearly indecipherable; exposed, his pictures unravel in time forward then back again.

From dark to light: in this next photo, the converted military parachute and hackneyed nylon background stage of Khánh's circus vanishes underneath the noontime sky of dancers in flight (fig. 4). *Xanh da trời*—a certain kind of sky-blue hue and Vietnamese word translated literally as skin of the sky, blue air—is rendered in the camera not as sapphire but rather some dusty halo white. The waking life of war vibrates in stillness within this black and white neon dream.

In this marshy clearing a familiar tree frames the furthest back edge, a second return to the first site of rehearsal—albeit the focal point, perspectival vantage, and depth of field have shifted. Eduardo Cadava writes the photographic index 'interrupts the presence of the image...[indicating] that the image only exists in relation to a time that, signaling the explosion that marks both its birth and destruction, prevents it from ever being simply itself.'²⁷ Inside the topos of pictures is a dreamt kaleidoscope, wherein the tactility of the past forms a healing adhesive; in photography, deformation and alterity are our central truth-tellers.

Các cậu ơi—two young kinfolks—ascend into flight. Anchored in place yet free through future chronological time, it is as if suspended midair these sportsmen outlive in buoyant stride their simulacra selves: he, with eyes fixated on the ground glides, eternally unaware of his pristinely neat white buttons or wispy hair; she—oblivious too to the translucent fluttering of her

lost left-foot or scratchily vandalized face—soars nonchalant. In tandem, locks of hair adrift in the wind.

Behind, and yet somehow mesmerically in step, their band of allied brothers (and sister) look determinedly on. The young lady at far right mentally prepares for her own imminent liftoff, arms graciously lifted and gesturally intact. A poetic performance of life's drama in the drenched screen of photography. Cast, this joint ring of fellow dancers along the back edge of the foreground scene are the couple's nest made manifest—a hive anthropomorphized and stationary in form. The photograph, like its two voiceless heroes, quakes with a spirited presence of slowness and concentration. There is a sense of complete obstinance, at times even an ingenious kind of *stupidity* (i.e., Prince Mishkin in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*) dazzle in Khánh's pictures. Their gentle ghostliness refutes any masculine diatribes or blithe political codifications.

Instead, like a pair of doves infinitely suspended in balance, this harmonious couple seem to activate a kind of sublime affectation. "If sublimation were a simple matter of concepts, it would come to an end as soon as the image was enclosed within its conceptual limits," writes Bachelard. "But color overflows...matter abounds, images develop; dreams continue their growth despite the poems [*or pictures*] that express them."²⁸ In Khánh's exuberant picture, the company of revolutionaries resolutely believe their own choreographed aerial dream, their imagined progeny living far beyond the scope of any simple ersatz performance.

Perhaps most so, this pathos of pure aesthetic devotion blossoms at center: along the backdrop and betwixt the two lithe protagonists a young man in reverie is neatly framed. With this absent oval he intensely gazes to a nowhere place. Exemplary of focused action and teamwork, the troupe's attention is an absorptive *otherness*. Tropes of nation-building and solidarity, heroism or one-off soldierly duties transform inside the earthen architectonics of this once-upon-a-time ballet—a dance in the wind unveiled by Khánh's artistry.

Khánh's training photograph does not, however, disavow the insidious tragedy of warfare all around. Rather, his poetic imagining of the scene imbues the cooperative artistry with a ritualistic quietude honoring the nameless sufferings and losses of war. The doubling of site itself attests to this revival—haunting its own horizonless self in double exposure. More too, the ensemble's commitment to dialect dance and meditative postures evokes some akin preparatory training, analogous commitments to artistry and resistance.

Whereas in these first ensemble photographs, actors and purported entertainers alike compose the scene—the first, a community in separation; the next, a balletic band of training in flight—this picture shows an ulterior, terrestrial bound event: swimming in air, afloat on the edge (fig. 5). One of Khánh's earliest dream pictures, this 1961 photograph reveals the sensuous province of boyhood.

During a morning break from the mechanization of monotonous printing work a group of agile bodies stand, their leaning chests patterned together in synchronicity. Here we go again, Khánh's ethereal carousel of backdrops shift from black to white and now reverse again back; black, or rather a messy grey some 'meshes of the afternoon' blend is the kind of porous wilderness wall of space behind.²⁹ The squad's bare feet dot the grass terrain while wisps of shrubbery demarcate earthen soil from the glassy bubbling cauldron below.

In the mid-foreground parabolic split and just atop the marsh, the pubescent team stand shirtless and free. "I always experience the same melancholy in the presence of dormant water," muses our central interlocutor Bachelard, "a very special melancholy whose color is that of a stagnant pond in a rain-soaked forest, a melancholy not oppressive but dreamy, slow, and calm."³⁰ Dancing in sync together along the earth's sloping surface, this planar crew of children-

soldiers-to-be unveil the photographer's slowly cast dream of the calm: 'Magician of slumber, hurl us into unending life... remember us onward.'

A quiet photographic scene of practice, rest, and rebirth, both the brazen stances and dagger postures of each boy express seeds of Khánh's sublimated homoeroticism. In this playful cohort of yogic warriors, the photographer's athletic affinities for acrobatic gymnastics are amplified: the picture is a lush panorama of romantic comradeship.

At center, with a singular front leg exposed, stands a young boy. Appearing to be the youngest member of the troop, the gleam of his knee, thigh, and shin matches his earnest smile—a *punctum* of sorts. Just above and whimsically afloat, a creased lightning rod of archival damage appears to likewise crown his place in the troupe. In this symbolic jubilee of life's desire, lightness reaches out even within the lurking cloud of death. "The true eye of the earth is water. In our eyes it is water that dreams" (31).³¹ Photography dreamt in water is a type of destiny.

Conjuring The Stage: Voice and Water Transmissions

"Like the puppeteers, I have vivified what is an otherwise inanimate object."³²

In sleep the mind sings, dreaming. With singular voice and presence our own strange songs and sirens, hums and chants rise inside this chamber of rest. Asleep inside this private photographic reel of darkness a quiet world of vapor pictures emerges. But what happens when silence is void, rest null? How do dreams learn to breathe within a cacophony of unrest, a cemetery of screams amidst unbridled sleep? "Dreams, even more than clear ideas and conscious images, are dependent on the four fundamental elements...to disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a far horizon, to become a part of depth or infinity, such is the destiny of man that finds its image in the destiny of water."³³ Dreams are both romance and nightmare. The disquietude of shimmering life underground and a photographer in ceaseless trance of *voice* are a tale jointly rehearsed on stage. (fig. 6).

In Fall 1970, Khánh began comprehensively documenting the 'Southwest Regions Song and Dance Class.' For more than a year's time he recorded performances, dance skits, and local festivities—a timeline unduly postponed until the final ceremonies sometime in late 1971, early '72. "The most important thing is to saturate the weak areas with revolutionary songs," states the aforementioned RAND document.³⁴ Songs—like delta dream states and ocean sine waves—swim amidst their own insular concentric circles: photographs and history conjured kin in a spellbound pool of vibration. As we will see, ballads and folkloric hymns uniformly transfixed audiences and the photographer himself in a deluge of revolutionary sound.

Pictured here as undeveloped photographs, the strangeness of Khánh's shadowy negatives only further embolden the body of work's ghostly dimension. Absorbed in the original flip side of analogue photography, Khánh's conjured dream—in tune with the ephemeral reverb of voice—summons to life these theatrical pictures.³⁵ The enduring, parallel existence of negatives—scenes unlit, remote, and asleep in perpetuity—yearn for even further life in light, picture-dreams twinly searching for day bright and chemical air. Conjured in sync, I uncover Khánh's deep penchant for enshrining the lone, solitary actor. In a 'secret place' of 'increased sensuality' and beneath a 'huge panorama,' photography bathes in the sway of a songstress.³⁶

The esteemed photography scholar Geoffrey Batchen posits "the negative is an indexical trace of light, with any tonal variations a chemical, and thus directly physical, response to that light."³⁷ The elemental scaffolding of photographs is vulnerable, naked to the bone, a liquescent world of surface sensitivities. It is apropos too that the great American landscape photographer Ansel Adams equated the initial process of isolating 'appropriate information on the *negative* 'to

the writing of a musical score,' leading to his description of the printing process as a type of performance of this score."³⁸ During wartime, imaginative visions and unrequited desire would similarly conjure photographic memories. I suggest that Khánh's vision offers a form of communal eros and fluid hopefulness, unforeseen or seeable, an imagistic melody living within the opaque side of darkness and silent music.

'In my dreams I can smell the flowers too...'³⁹

Ms. Da Vân stands solitary beneath a Khmer scripted banner. Deputy Head of the Khmer Performance Ensemble, her long hair and Áo dài (traditional Việt dress) bleed into the curtain stage behind. Fading inward, it is as if Ms. Vân's introductory remarks are eternally entombed in the silence of her cocoon-self. Above, the darkened hue of an ornamental band twirls anchorless, ruffles halted just before the frame's edge. The captivating middle-aged woman is an otherworldly figure visually awash and alone. Her phantom presence might as well have emerged from the cinema of David Lynch or Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a choreographed enigma of mind.

Presenting the entertainment group for us today, western (read American) viewers may puzzle at the even more unusual lettering across the upper frame: Cambodian, Khmer, Cham... What do we call this font type? In the jungles of Khu Tây Nam Bộ (the Southwest Region), ethnicity, dialect and non-state allegiances mix in Heraclitan flux. Vietnamese revolutionaries and their neighboring Cambodian, Khmer Krom, comrades often joined forces in the remote, transgressive borderlands of the Mekong.

A kindred vision of haze acts as intoxicating tonic in Khánh's pictures of performance, lyric, and songs: music and entertainment function like circuits of transmission. Tender portraits, this archive of liminal photographs quietly too denounce any encircling catastrophe, the outside world of aggressions imaginatively held at bay—mental agency preserved in the wake of a song. Instead, the defiance of Khánh's close-up pictures herald in a serenity where the traumas of bodily intrusion are shielded. Art—an intimate vehicle for life-preservation—is an augmented reality, a fluid causeway of reprieve protecting audiences and photographer alike.

The levity and song of Khánh's picture heroes—their quietude and performance in sly—were a dream of normalcy, spaces of societal joy amidst the decay of war. Subject pictured straight-on, alone yet together in a kind of effluvium of airless dialogue, build a horizontally-oriented hallway of comrades (fig. 7).

The acclaimed wartime singer Quốc Hương was an archetypal muse for many. In Khánh's negative, like Ms. Da Vn's portrait above, the singer is positioned within a dripping swell of aquatic curtains. Hương's voice was a ventriloquizing tool—a mesmerizing undulating wave of force—one and the same with the photographer's vibrational stage. Centrifugal rings of passion are made to live in this picture of reverie.

Born Nguyễn Quốc Hương in 1920 at Ninh Bình, the artist's abridged stage name, Quốc one of many abbreviated words for nation, a name associated with country (Quốc gia), statehood (Quốc tịch) and citizenship to name a few compound associations. The second-part of his appellate Hương is also often part of a twinned rejoinder for homeland, as in Quê Hương—native identification with one's own ancestral land, site of birth.

At 17, the performer Quốc Hương first left home and the Red River Delta area of Khu Miền Bắc for travel to central Vietnam. By 1954 and the apotheosis of military combat with the French Quốc Hương had transformed in a formidable platoon leader (*tiểu đội trưởng*) for the nationalist revolution, and that same year the singer traveled abroad as a member of the

international socialist movement. He returned to South Việt Nam in the winter and was then stationed more regularly as the Bông Sen ensemble director in Saigon.⁴⁰

Singing songs to commune and commemorate it makes sense the intrepid Hương thereafter transformed into an artistic force. Nhạc đỏ, red music or songs for the revolution, were his specialty. On the cover of his ‘Volume 1’ collected tunes, a young picture of the singer—with arms identically extended and hands opened—reveals the man’s attractive charisma (fig. 8). His ballads, hypnotic voice, and gestural stage presence seemed to send an invitation to listeners: ‘Come away with me, and dream.’

The nostalgia of music a collective trance for all.

Both broadcast news and the leisure of song transformed into integral platforms for Vietnamese resistance with the popularization of radio transmission. Music became a vehicle to imagine community.⁴¹ As a kind of wartime counterpoint, recall too how in 1972 the American singer Sammy Davis Jr. would make a trip to Việt Nam. At the behest of U.S. President Nixon, the entertainer performed the American ‘Song Book,’ his token presence likewise intended to act as a booster for morale. While undoubtedly not the first concert or gig of American flag-waving, the state-sponsored rallying call bespeaks the twinned energies and media savvy of each warring side.

In the southern most places of Vietnam, nonetheless, local forces and ethnic people from across the region—north and south, hills and wet lowlands—collectively congregated. Social bonds and myth building in the shape of tunes and dances (fig. 9). Consider the hypnotic ballad Vàm Cỏ Đông, one of the most recognizable renditions performed by Quốc Hương.

The title itself is place, Vàm Cỏ Đông a river branch of the southern Mekong. Fluid aquatic terrain, the river is too geographical memory present in *absence* across much of Khánh’s photographic archive. Originally written by Hoài Vũ, Vàm Cỏ Đông is a ballad (often overly sentimental, sappy even) of hopeful longing. The lyrics summon communal memory of home and a mythic version of Vietnamese history. From the Red River Delta down to reservoir basement of the Mekong—‘Ở tận sông Hồng em có biết’—the river’s bloodline is effusively pictured as nostalgia: the homeland, Quê Hương defended with revolutionary ships and veiled forces—‘Diệt tan tàu giặc giữ gìn quê hương.’

Comprised of poetic imagery and repetitive melodic chants—‘Vàm Cỏ Đông đây... Vàm Cỏ Đông đây...!’ it is also a narrative of resistant guerillas (anh du kích dũng cảm) and brave nationalist (read NLF) soldiers expelling American and French imperialists alike: ‘Đuổi Pháp đi rồi nay đuổi Mỹ xâm lăng.’ In the most compelling phrase: Lẫn ánh trăng vàng băng lửa đạn qua sông’ (along the river a golden mixture of moonlight and yellow bullet fire), an ekphrastic interfolding of topos and battle, sparks and stars join along the water’s brackish rim

How could Khánh envision the ubiquitous acoustic fright of battle with such an unusually dissimilar soundscape of levity and repose (fig. 10). A clandestine call to arms in pictures was his own private quiet hush.

Enveloped in the brush, three soldiers (a half-missing fourth chopped, or cropped, at right) crouch to balance some heavy phallic artillery: hands and hats, leaves and buds balance their own dreams. In the black and white canopy’s collective quietude, Khánh’s actors and plants pause, their life spirit transforming a nightmarish vista of warfare into a mysterious photograph at rest, of peace. Perceptually salient mental records as much as mere optical documents, in Khánh’s best pictures primal scenes percolate with this singular kind of ceremonial grace. “The forest became an important meeting place where

thousands of people—farmers, artists, doctors, political leaders, arm smugglers, women, children, and thousands of troops—passed through.”⁴²

Amidst this fragile scene of melancholic participants, these forgotten soldiers live on as a silent armada of unthought known: images, memories and peoples made re-animate through art historical forgetting and archival erasure. Like the soulful eyes of these three soldiers stationed discreetly undercover, in pictures and war, time’s shadow of collapse is always near at hand. Unyielding. The estranged necropolis of the negative is a sonic-dream announcement. Its dormant status is a catacomb picture of sounds. Unconscious wishes inside an over ground well.

“Pieced together out of the physical environment and carved from nature itself,” let us imagine the resourcefulness of darkroom photography in war. The ingenuity of subversion and covert production “these camouflaged darkrooms were portable, mobile, and adaptable.”⁴³ As in the waking life of dreams, photography’s alchemy blossomed underground. Similarly daft and furtive, life giving and adversarial, nationalist and local. Chemical immersion in war both inherited and invented otherworldly dreams.

“Their photographs were developed and printed under the night sky and in underground dark rooms, with the sun as an enlarging light.”⁴⁴ In a way then self-referential and meta-conscious images, the vertiginous nature of photography is reified (hauntingly) *ad infinitum* from within these supernatural (air water human) kaleidoscope landscapes. The blank life of pictures invents its own liquid cosmos of knowledge in darkness—a starred camera astrology underwater and ground alike (fig. 11). This obscured transmission of pictorial information is a sly ritual of mobilized action parallel to the covert communication of comrades unfolding inside the green canopy walls.

Let us last then imaginatively juxtapose quiet photographic cohort to a radically ulterior sphere of sound. Not music. But instead, shrieks and screams. Blasted and blaring noise. The US defense department’s psychological warfare mission entitled ‘Operation Wandering Souls’ projected an all-encompassing sensorium of fright. In this deeply deranged (almost psycho-subverting) political maneuver, American planes transmitted unseen (invisible, apparitional) terror-noises from the sky.

Coined ‘Ghost recordings,’ non-site speakers would fuse a motley mix of blaring sounds: demonic ancestral prayers, Buddhists mantras, funereal chants, and ghostly drone noises.⁴⁵ Terror all-around. In this bombastic assault to the senses, tomb-sound stones and gashing metals thrashed: minerals and debris sharpened rocks, metallic and grating aurality, ceaseless ancestral cries triangulated in a ring of Saturn ablaze.

More too, this auditory ruse broadcast facsimile voices of dead relatives, ancestral spirits, and electrified apparitional ghosts of missing brethren. Disseminating ghosts of the past and future in tandem, the dreadful noisecape manifested into sonic shape as if out of the air’s nothingness.⁴⁶ Overhead always was a horror show of sounds with no end. Nefarious sounds, dreams, and imagery—a radically ulterior valence than Khánh’s underwater pictures. Submerged in an infinitely illegible soundscape of violence, the ability for one to imagine self-cohesion was traumatized.⁴⁷ Inconspicuous and blank, the reverb of Death’s scream was actualized within. In this phantasmatic vertical leveling of equilibrium, one’s sense of wholeness teetered in obliteration. Overly receptive and porous from all spaces and angles, the unified body auto-demolished. The exit only comes inward.

Today, Vietnamese sonic artist Luong Hue Trinh reappropriates these lost voices to create an original pastiche of noise. Her phenomenological work in sound and vibration instrumentalizes a violent historical past to form novel soundscapes—a romance with the dead

and forgotten.⁴⁸ In a similar spirit, multi-media artist of Nguyen Trinh Thi's creates moving images replete with dissonant noise (fig. 12). In Trinh Thi's own words, "The act of making the work is in itself an act of listening."⁴⁹ Phenomenological edges of sound and bodies drape themselves afresh in the artist's mind. Through an astute act of artistic *care*—empathy and attention, hearing and witness—these two contemporary artists evoke unhealed traumas of a fractured audible past. Trees and buds, bricks and mortar listen alike through these two singular voices.

Like Julia Kristeva's intertextual abjections and introjected wounds—cavernous, gothic and wet—the uncanny anonymity of the ghost-recordings was auditory suffocation. A vibrational form of horrorism, diabolic audibility. The empty sky above and liquid ground below quaked in illegible echoes. Whereas Khánh's photographic archive (of negatives and developed pictures alike) was a muted form of theatrics, the covert psyops mission was a howling nightmare projected from the sky.

Channeling: Cadres and Nightmares, Classrooms Exteriorized

"The jungle offered an array of resources: cover for the transport of supplies, shelter for soldiers' camps, amenities for the construction of darkrooms, and a venue for photo exhibitions."⁵⁰

Channeling archetypal fears and anxieties of the local Năm Căn mangrove community, Võ An Khánh's educational archive shows us photography's dream in subterfuge. Like the cadres themselves walking the bamboo plank, the urgent *presence-ing* of photography is unveiled here in its aggregate otherness—an otherworldly masking ritual and lesson in nation-building. Undercover and camouflaged, the photographs announce their own nocturnal pedagogy. A grave sensibility from an unknowable precipice on the other side of silence (fig. 13).

In this transformed version of Khánh's introductory printing press image, the alien fright of photography swells in an open-air lesson plan. While on the surface the terror of this outdoor classroom photograph feels palpable, the image is, in fact, not some crystallization of American traumas and nightmares. More presciently, the picture channels a sensibility of comradeship in subversion. During the later stages of aerial war and covert operations in the delta, secrecy was the penultimate priority. Indeed, the ghoulish white masks illustrate a simple covert tactic of revolutionary fighters: hiding devices were a method of concealing facial identities. Silence and protection from oneself and others were paramount. Possible future interrogation and the prospective chance of enemy duplicity imbues the picture with this doubly introjected sense of local politics. The photograph likewise lives and projects a paradigm of unknowability: the terror of dreams misunderstood; the aspirational longings of an imagined community. In short, Khánh's lens here is a stoic edification picture—a form of extracurriculaire learnedness and a subterranean affaire in *déguisement*. Didactic instruction transpired in trees and classrooms alike, an interconnectedness in eco-spaces of refuge and respite, fear and trembling.

Amidst the horrors of the night above ground, instructive knowledge here is envisioned as a haunting swarm of floating masks (fig. 14). Just above and within the dividing curtain's screen, furtive missions and anonymous voices converse: identity withheld; information covertly exchanged. A sinewy string fist knotted at left feels as relatable as the lifeless scarecrow faces and eye-socket hives that adorn the makeshift site. Sliwinski writes, "Dreams are vehicles for otherwise unthinkable thoughts and a species of psychological work that can fold and transfigure the force of a harsh reality."⁵¹ At once both masticating and undigested, absorbed and internalized, dreaming life photography percolates in this chamber of socialist reportage.

While in some sense only a brief visual encounter with concealment, the edification pictures attest to the mind's shield in war. "Dream-work's transfigurations attempt to work

through [these] forms of aggression. The symbolic transformations aim to preserve our mental agency, in part by generating what Didier Anzieu describes as a “psychic envelope, a secondary, protective skin for thought.”⁵² Under bamboo posts and banana leaf thatch roofs these nameless encounters gradually build a ‘second protective skin.’ An army of solidarity in the night comes to fruition inside a ‘psychic envelope’—guerilla fighters and nocturnal campaigns in flesh even more palpable than Khánh’s archival record of the everyday soldiers.

They built extensive networks of secret bases, organized village schools to educate children born there, and they produced floating, traveling performances staged on sampans joined together with planks. Besides enduring disease, poisonous snakes, and other natural dangers, they had to escape frequent barrages of bombs, artillery, and occasional assaults from South Vietnamese and U.S. troops.⁵³

Beginning in 1965, the American military instigated Operation Ranch Hand. The exorbitant aerial onslaught annually dropped more than 4 million tons of chemical defoliants (most-oft labeled Agent Orange for short) across the wetland southern delta. Under the specter of incessant warfare above, jungle cover in the twilight of night offered civilians and soldiers, cadres and photographers the bleak possibility of intermittent reprieve. Describing ‘the *unreality* of the bombings’ Sliwinski evokes the remote territory of dreams as ‘[giving] expression to the emotional needs and desires of a civilian population.’⁵⁴ As kindred talisman, photography’s internalized secrecy and danger reverberate like the mirage of a dream.

With this kind of engaged historical knowledge and vernacular culture of war images at hand, we can begin to more fully account for the traumatic potential and actualized destruction of one’s homeland. The nightmare of living in wartime.

“The destruction of someone’s native land is as one with that person’s destruction. Separation becomes *déchirure* [a rending], and there can be no new homeland. “Home is the land of one’s childhood and youth. Whoever has lost it remains lost himself, even if he has learned not to stumble about in the foreign country as if her were drunk.”⁵⁵

The mental violation of personhood and vulgar separation from a home—an imagined place of safe repose and cohesive selfhood (homeland, quê hương)—infiltrate Khánh’s frames. Photography is a living realm for the exiled.

Curiously, however, during the extended conflict in southern Vietnam Khánh and other photographers (Kim Dang) continually put-up covert photo exhibitions. Hanging images on twine or along makeshift river sites, these ephemeral displays were an intrepid cosmos of Khánh’s innermost pictorial convictions.⁵⁶ Here, a briefly passing cascade into the wartime arena of visual display and conspicuous consumption discloses a world of moving-pictures *ra mắt* appearing underground.⁵⁷ While an elaborate discussion of films projected on the walls of in-ground caves is not possible, it is worth keeping in mind that clandestine cinema—akin to exhibition photography and musical performance—was a fruitful tool for resistance and community, entertainment and affection.

One particular scene (and still) from the 1972-73 sentimental propaganda film *Bài ca ra trận* (Vietnam Feature Film Studio) anchors this claim (fig. 15). In the beginning third (14:50) of the haunted love story a wounded young cadre lays afloat on a military cot with his eyes wrapped in gauze: like a bolt of lightning, a stealth flashback from the hum of a lover’s long forgotten voice ignites his memory. The next scene returns to the imagined couples nostalgic past: they gaze skyward, impressed and awestruck. Both persons whole and unharmed—learning in dreams and love.

Transfixed on the moving star object in the sky, the main protagonist Nam (Dũng Nhi) quickly begins then to traverse the forest. He bounces along, glides lightly in darkness. From this wistful dream, or nightmare of peace, however, he is urgently woken. The spell of quiet is broken. It was this kind of genre picture—romantic tales in war and maudlin parables of

courage—that were luminously projected along pitch-black grotto walls. Photographic wounds, underground cinema, and the divinity of sleeping-pictures find precarious twinned ground in the shared motifs of closed-eye soldiers and head-wrapped bandages.

Dissimilarly, all eyes are open wide in this inaugural committee meeting photographed by Khánh. Farmers and peasants, proletariat workers and revolutionaries gather here at a first revolutionary meeting. Their forward-looking faces hold us in trance. To *see* and *be seen* in Khánh's inside-out camera focus (fig. 16): the 1961 platoon of revolutionary faces flip forward, camouflaged cadres transforming to daily life in reverse. Within this pop-up interior domicile, translucence and opacity double their inscrutable flames. Somewhat akin to the ancient oracles, “the information that dreams provide requires a significant amount of psychological labor to decipher...Dreams animate human life; that is their work.”⁵⁸ Photographs often summon this same kind of profound psychosomatic work.

Belatedly we as historians witnesses the delicate past picture—a psychological world infinitely inaccessible yet made animate once again like the ephemeral strike of a match. Dressed in all white, we encounter the forgotten stare of one particular old man: *Bác tóc già*. Hands gently folded at center the gentleman, *Đẹp Lão*, bathes in a cocoon of white light. A tilt and a daze, his head and eyes respectively channel this picture mirage: a visionary, the man is at once both an inward conduit and exterior conductor. A medium and a message.⁵⁹

Overhead, horizontal banners announce edicts and project photographs: pictures draped within pictures festoon the signage and decorate the revolutionary's furtive meeting. Khánh's picture-imagination not only discloses the hierarchical top-down dream from the state but also presents a safe interior space for collective dialogical dreaming. The cacophonous nightmare of combat drowns in the voiceless quietude of Khánh's photograph. Photography plunges into the womb of channeled dreams as excavation followed perhaps by a long-delayed threnody of visual oration.

Juxtaposed to the heroic and monumental photography of party nominations—ceremonious scenes of edification, mainlined politics, and honorific decrees—Khánh's quiet scene of anonymity and collective education is subdued, even recalcitrant. In this way, the relentless pensiveness of photography continues to polish the surface. “Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks,” writes Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*.⁶⁰

In the echo of war's incessant shadow, this NLF committee of locals are learning to learn, thinking to think. Khánh's photograph—akin to the listening audience pictured—is a murky interior landscape of dreamwork that stares back at us today. The fight against imperial invasion and the truculent mission of covert warfare is a story (-his and -her) transmitted at once in lectern and picture—the dream of community, the dream of solidarity, the dream of a nation.

Across this liquid wire of analog data, the fantastical nature of photography is palimpsest ribbon. Emotionally undigested and psychically barred from consciousness, the photographic subjects are a commune of silent seers. Political violence “attacks the *mental life* of the citizenry” writes Sebald (my italics). In this way, the imaginary topos of committee meetings were active psychological battlefield: potent sites of resistance, the gatherings contested the nefarious aim to “destroy the subject's capacity to think.”⁶¹ An *a-synchronized* phantasma of unconscious social knowledge is conveyed in alienated form, Khánh's educational pictures invoking a sensuous sort of communal necromancy—an army in the night and unmaking the darkness.

A Trembling Bog of Dream Life

“Only a military hospital can really show you what war is.”⁶²

And so, this young boy fighter—a guerilla Việt-Khmer soldier called Dan Son Huol—dreams mordantly (fig. 17). Splayed horizontal and asleep on a stretcher just above the water’s rim in September 1970, his child-size head is wrapped in gauze. The white bandage for a deadly wound is his crown token into the clinic, the grotesque halo motif in unity with the attending physician’s garb and nurse’s headgear behind. Regardless of photographic authenticity, authorial stages and the often-glib academic discourse of fabrication, the pathos of Khánh’s picture is lasting.

Below the male envoys (pall-bearers) right wrist, the fluidity of violence coagulates in a helicopter pool of light rings at center: dissolved tears of the sun are a cure forever stilled in Khánh’s refuge camera. The catastrophe of aerial bombardments was historically unprecedented in warfare. ‘During a single night in November 1969’ for example, ‘B52 strikes killed 2,073 people and injured 1,194 more.’⁶³ Planes that rescue and planes that destroy—wings of aerial machines nonetheless hover above and haunt all the same. This make-do medical site with thick animus and a phantom sensibility was geographically situated deep in the blasted-out mangroves forest of Cà Mau.⁶⁴ One of many epicenters of ruin from the sky.

As we reorient the artillery scene above with the two infirmary portraits here, I imagine Khánh’s photography as kindred ‘guardians of sleep,’ reversely engineered with a 21st century version of Benjaminian optical unconscious, the psychically-charged collective fleet is made manifest only in camera dreams. Seen through the photographer’s acute lens then, this temporary medical tent emerges as an empowering transient site of solace, a place sentient only in glancing liquid vision. Emblems of the night revealed in the camera’s light of day. Khánh’s military hospital shows ‘what war is,’ a place of loss where dreams and life merge.

Death’s watery dream is more infinitely longing, writes Bachelard. Within the hush of Khánh’s hospital picture, the cyclonic vantage of pain and flux doubly embedded in water seems eerily animate. More strangely even, the U Minh cajuput forest—a dense vortex of waterways and fenlands—was once too thinking itself too to life. Named at first with a Khmer word denoting ‘clear honey,’ the swampy terrain has often also colloquially been referred to as ‘wax land.’ Wax and the uncanny, photographs and dreams: the topaz surface of Mekong honey tributaries were an imagined eco-chemical version of a darkroom fantasy bubbling in flux.

This hospital scene continues. The photographer’s sensitively muted content comprises the entire frame (fig. 18). Trapped within the gossamer curtain of a dream’s nest, nurses and doctors fastidiously work exchanging tools and sideward glances alike. It is only the shard of sunlight at top left and the lyrically stitched vegetative stalk of vine at center-right that reveal the sheen drapery parachuting across the scene: photography teaches us that life most perceptive happens inside a filmic patina of unseeing. History’s drunken memory of a solemn wilderness past and the melancholy of trauma drift across Khánh’s fragmented picture windows.

From theatre skits to singers on stage and cadres in classroom dreams, the infirmary photographs tremble most with horizontal slumber. Outdoors, and even though presented vertically, the sensibility of Khánh’s hospital pictures is plush with the planarity of landscape. In learning to horizontally visualize the world, contemporary photographer An My Lê is instructive: “My attachment to the idea of landscape is a direct extension of a life in exile.”⁶⁵ Channeled—transmitted, introjected, scarred—the watery furrows of battles dream in the width of setting. A mirage of mise-en-scene is horizontally asleep in photographic repose.

Khánh’s transcendent pictures sculpt this indigenous and wide worldscape of agency: sites of regeneration; transgressive privacy in the communal. The variegated branches of dialect life transpire under the blanket of the sky—a subterfuge of channeled dreams.

Perhaps then in some figment picture version of Đặng Thùy Trâm *Last Night I Dreamt of Peace*—the posthumously published diary of a young field physician operating in the delta—Khánh’s mobile medic scene unveil a second dream within a dream. “Perhaps I will meet the enemy, and perhaps I will fall, but I hold my medical bag firmly regardless, and people will feel sorry for this girl who was sacrificed for the revolution when she was still young and full of verdant dreams” (146).⁶⁶ Perhaps. Replete with verdant dreams, the lifeline of too many in war unconditionally resolve in death—medical bags clasped firm, regardless.

Shot dead in Quảng Ngãi province by an American soldier soon thereafter (June 22, 1970), Thùy’s first-person inventory of losses and nightmares would disappear for the next forty years. Seized by U.S. forces, the diary, however, miraculously survived only to emerge as literary ally to Khánh’s ghostly photographs in the early 2000s. Defying command and ordered to burn the memoir, Fred Whitehurst—a former U.S. military intelligence specialist—kept *Last Night I Dreamt of Peace* safe and asleep for 35-years; in 2005, Whitehurst returned Thùy Trâm’s diary to her family. No hero and no savior, his act surely also no story of redemption. However, there is great kindness, a goodness in small acts of private care. Photographs and dreams alike too survive only in brief, tiny doses of light in the dark.

Uncanny yet, the world of catastrophe and urgency of this September 1970 doctor-drama continue to interfold across space and time, a forgotten nonsite of grief sculpted clear. And amid the photographer’s sensuousness the image continues to sharpen further still, a reservoir of memory under the dreamt blade of Dr. Đặng Thùy Trâm’s scalpel.

Unlike other acutely staged photographs, a sense of ethereal pressure—perhaps an amalgam of abstracted trauma of combat and some mutual penetrative formal content—dovetail in Khánh’s penultimate hospital scene. The gravitas of History swarms. Death, even if ensconced within a symbolic mood of optical reverie, is already all too present for pretense. Rugged and pregnant, singular photographs hold the power to dispel illusions in a flashing instant.

One would not be amiss at first to see the lone sentinel just beneath the NLF flag at far left positioned with rifle at guard and wearing a floppy military cap as mere silhouette, an apparition etched into the white-washed building behind (fig. 19). Only further complicating any sense of reality in Khánh’s final isolate picture are the striated tiers of bastion worn brick, inky ribbon of foliage along the foreground, and the blockish pastiche of ivory shapes that juxtapose the swimming grey sky.

Further undermining coherency of the scene, it appears in some way as if the upward sloped trajectory of the tripartite blown out structures could too, quasi-nautically, drift starboard across the picture frame—photographic life swept up and away from stable ground. A dream at bay, shipwreck pictures in the wake of war’s sanity. In this way, the perched soldier becomes an anonymous figurine, a sooty angel of the ecosphere. Defending the hitherto nameless place, it is only the solitary star lingering above that offers viewers any narrative legibility. Khánh’s filmic record of victory is an ocean swept memory of what is and never was. Dreams of nations and heroes, winners in the underground and losers from the clouds.

The 1974 tableau ‘On the Night of June 3, 1974, Our Troops Obliterate Cái Rắn Station and take control of the Region Phú Hưng Commune’ is a culminate stony affront. The attenuated title itself a wordy wish, albeit also too a historical reality bookending this tale. Captions, melodrama, and the anesthetized past remind us that they were (and always are) mere tardy participants to the eddying life of photographs. The dream of war—a last soldier and a lone flag—nimble stare forward into an implacable horizon, shadow’s lost on us and our world today.

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin and Gretel Adorno, *Correspondence: 1930-1940* (Polity Press, 2008). Walter Benjamin in his dream recounting to Gretel Adorno (12.10.1939). Date of her exact notation and recollection unknown.

² See Julian Stallabrass, *Killing for Show: Photography, War, and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 79. NLF and NVA picture-making process “From the late 1950s, North Vietnamese photographers had been sent for training to Moscow and Leipzig, where they became familiar with Socialist Realist photography, particularly Soviet work.” See [book p. 80 google scholar](#).

³ Sharon Sliwinski, *Dreaming Dark Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 35.

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (Basic Books, 2002), 4.

⁵ Jean Ma, *At the Edges of Sleep* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 17.

⁶ Ibid, 17. Here she cites the work of Erin Manning and offers a photographic interpretation of *intercession* as some alternative “ethos of [historical] engagement”—wherein the highest task of the writer is understood as ‘an endeavor to be activated by the work [Kánh’s photography].”

⁷ Thy Phu, *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022) 64. See also Quang Mich Thich’s *Vietnamese Buddhism in America*, a dissertation from Florida State University Libraries. p. 22.

⁸ Doug Niven and Chris Riley, eds., *Another Vietnam: Pictures of the War from the Other Side* (National Geographic, 2002). Forward by Henry Allen.

⁹ See Ulrich Baer’s photographic treatise *Spectral Evidence*. “The photographs I discuss result from the conflict and cooperation between the photographer’s intentions, the photographed person’s lived experience, the viewer’s perspective, and the technical effects of the camera. They show experiences that, although immemorial, outside of memory, directly shape memory, because they are not owned by the people undergoing them (14).”

¹⁰ Sliwinski, 24.

¹¹ This kind of thinking can be generally traced back through Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and other phenomenologists theorizing about space and containers—the vessel and just most attributed to Heidegger

¹² Today still many of the pictures (both their reproductions and negatives alike) continue to remain unseen.

¹³ Sliwinski, 10.

¹⁴ Zhuang Wubin, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (Singapore: National University NUS Press), 276.

¹⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, eds., *Photography and the Optical Unconscious* Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 9.

¹⁶ Phu, 21-22.

¹⁷ A RAND Corp document from 1968. Thy Phu reminds us as well of this implicit and latent pictorial friction. She writes, ‘In short, socialist photography had to renounce aesthetics—in a manner that parallels the triumph of the Soviet documentarians over their rival avant-garde modernists—so that it could adhere faithfully to ideological principles,’ 57.

¹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and dreams: An essay on the imagination of matter* (Pegasus Foundation, 1983), 36.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Schocken Books, 1969).

²⁰ Quỳên Nguyễn essay for exhibition, <https://san-art.org/vi/publications/sach-tac-luc-ngam/>. In addition, see also https://www.randian-online.com/np_feature/vo-an-khanh-when-documentary-photographs-are-no-longer-mementos/

²¹ Bachelard, 44.

²² David Biggs, ‘Managing a Rebel Landscape,’ *Environmental History* 10 (July 2005), 459.

²³ Bachelard, 2.

²⁴ Sliwinski, 22.

²⁵ Nguyễn Bá Khoản, *Những Khoảnh Khắc Lịch Sử Qua Ống Kính* (NXB Quân Đội 1997).

Also see David Hunt *Propaganda and the Public* (2016).

²⁶ Sliwinski, 10.

²⁷ Eduardo Cadava, “‘*Lapsus Imaginis*’: The Image in Ruins,” *October*, Vo. 96 (Spring, 2001), p. 39.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/779116>

²⁸ Bachelard, 18.

²⁹ Maya Deren is the implicit reference here. Her own understanding of light and images, choreography and pathos a kindred atmosphere of affect.

³⁰ Bachelard, 7.

³¹ *Ibid*, 31.

³² Sliwinski continues: “I invite you to lend your ear and your imagination to this process, to allow these unconscious testimonies to resonate,” p. 30.

³³ Bachelard 4, 123.

³⁴ RAND <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD0672746.pdf>

³⁵ Geoffrey Batchen: *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (Routledge Press, 2001).

³⁶ Bachelard, 36.

³⁷ Geoffrey Batchen, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 111.

³⁹ Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015) film.

⁴⁰ Nhạc Đổ; YouTube record <https://cand.com.vn/Nhan-vat/Ca-si-Quoc-Huong-Dang-cay-trong-huyen-thoai-i312704/>.

⁴¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso; Revised edition, 2016).

⁴² Biggs, 455.

⁴³ Phu, 44.

⁴⁴ Stallabrass, 79 Interview, https://direct.mit.edu/octo/article/doi/10.1162/octo_a_00430/107286/Killing-for-Show-A-Conversation-with-Julian

⁴⁵ I am thinking here of theorizing on sound from and the spirit world from both Jonathan Sterne and Arnika Fuhrmann. See both Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* (Duke Press, 2003) and Arnika Fuhrmann, *Teardrops of Time* (State University of New York Press, 2021).

⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry and her superb book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* makes most plain the catastrophe of pain and its intractable will. Pain as one of the only experiences, an affect or pathos, that often may presage language.

⁴⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Bao Ninh, *Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*, *The Sorrow of War*. The novel infamously sculpts a similar scene of corpses and terror in the jungle after battle. While surely not a direct referent or even definitely suggested as a psyops scene, Ninh’s remarkable novel positions local Vietnamese experience—soldiers and loss, epistle communication and fallen love—as central themes.

⁴⁸ <http://www.luonghuettrinh.com>, see also <http://undecided-productions.com/luong-hue-trinh/>.

⁴⁹ <https://bfmaf.org/essay/foraging-in-the-ruins-nguyen-trinh-this-mycological-moving-image-practice/>;
<https://universes.art/en/documenta/2022/first-photos/nguyen-trinh-thi>

⁵⁰ Phu, 44.

⁵¹ Sliwinski, 11.

⁵² Sliwinski, 42. Here she cites from Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*.

⁵³ Biggs, 447.

⁵⁴ Sliwinski, 125. Albeit this vignette comes from within the context of WWII and Lee Miller’s deathcamp pictures,

⁵⁵ W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (Modern Library Press, 2004), 160. This quote is attributed to Jean Amery—poet, writer, and young man who lived through internments at both Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

⁵⁶ Phu, 45

⁵⁷ While in the western imagination the tunnels of Cu Chi and others from central Vietnam are historically plush, the capacious life inside the earth and water of the southern delta was home to myriad revolutionary communities. This kind of wet clay life also raw reality for many—families, women and children alike.

⁵⁸ Sliwinski, 44.

⁵⁹ Of course, the nod here to Marshall McLuhan (*The Medium is the Message*) is explicit. “Print technology created the public. Electric technology created the masses, writes McLuhan.” McLuhan’s contemporaneous media savvy—an intellectually rigorous project of disentangling information and techne—are fundamental pillars to any serious study or media discourse of the 1960s-70s milieu.

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang Press), 38, 55.

⁶¹ Sebald, 125.

⁶² Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Epithet p. 91 Chapter Three, Wilfred Owens and WWI nightmares.

⁶³ Biggs, [fn. 71].

⁶⁴ An article with Khánh’s pictures appeared first to western audiences in the N.Y. Times, March 1, 2002.

⁶⁵ An-My Lê, *On Contested Terrain* a Hilton Als interview. p. 53-54.

⁶⁶ Đặng Thùy Trâm, *Last night I dreamt of Peace: The Diary of Đặng Thùy Trâm* (Crown, 2008). See associated material at <https://www.rejectedprincesses.com/blog/modern-worthies/dang-thuy-tram> .

Dreams, War, and Photography: Võ An Khánh's Shadow Pictures

Conor Lauesen, Ph. D.
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Lecturer, Art History & Theory
Summer 2023

Figure 1

Đoàn ca múa nhạc Khu Tây Nam Bộ đang luyện tập
Southwestern Region Song and Dance Troupe in Rehearsal



Figure 2

Công nhân nhà in Trần Ngọc Hy trong giờ nghỉ trưa—rừng đước Năm Căn
Workers from Trần Ngọc Hy printing house during lunch break—Năm Căn mangrove forest



Figure 3

Tiền anh tòng quân—tiết mục múa của trường ca múa nhạc được biểu diễn báo cáo trong buổi lễ bế giảng
Farewell my enlisted brother—a dance piece by students at the song and dance school's commencement ceremony



Figure 4

Lớp ca múa nhạc do Ban Tuyên Huấn khu Tây Nam Bộ tổ chức trong rừng U Minh
Song and Dance class organized by the Southwestern Region's Propaganda Department in U Minh forest



Figure 5

Công nhân xí nghiệp in tỉnh Cà Mau rèn luyện thân thể buổi sáng tại cơ quan
Workers from the printing factory of Cà Mau Province doing morning exercises



Figure 6
Cố Đa Văn Phó Trưởng đoàn Văn nghệ Kho-me
Khu Tây Nam Bộ đang giới thiệu chương trình



Figure 7
Ca sĩ Quốc Hương diễn viên đoàn nghệ thuật Bông Sen
Singer Quốc Hương, a member of the Bông Sen troupe



Figure 8
Album cover Tiếng Hát Quốc Hương Vol. 1



Figure 9
Untitled



Figure 10
Các đơn vị pháo binh của tỉnh Cà Mau luôn có mặt và lập nhiều thành tích trong cuộc Tổng tấn công 1968
Ca Mau Artillery Units Stationed and Preparing for Attack 1968



Figure 11
See above, Fig. 10



Figure 12

Nguyễn Trinh Thi, *Tale Told in the Year 2000*. 2022



Figure 13

Lớp học tập chính trị nghiệp vụ cho 50 cán bộ đang công tác hợp pháp trong lòng địch— rừng đước Năm Căn
Extra-curriculum politics class for 50 officers working undercover in enemy territory—Năm Căn mangrove forest



Figure 14

Lớp bồi dưỡng Chính trị 7/1972
Extra-curriculum Political Science Class 7/1972



Figure 15

Bài ca ra trận (Vietnam Feature Film Studio)



Figure 16

Đại hội thành lập Ủy ban Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng tỉnh Cà Mau – Ngã tư giáp nước

Founding assembly/meeting of the Cà Mau Committee of the National Liberation Front – Giáp Nước crossroads



Figure 17

Trạm Quân Y Da Chiến 9/1970

Mobile Military Medical Clinic 9/1970



Figure 18
Untitled



Figure 19

On the Night of June 3, 1974, Our Troops Obliterate Cái Rắn Station and take control of the Region Phú Hưng Commune, 1974

