

# The Vietnamese Accent Marks, More Than Ink-Deep.

In conversation with  
Viet Thanh Nguyen to understand  
the ideology that is Vietnam.



*'Borrowing is never an ultimate solution. If you love something so much, create your own. This holds true for the Vietnamese language. Long gone were the days when Vietnamese people had to use Chinese characters to write their spoken language. Modern Vietnamese has been in wide use since 1919. Evolved from a history that reflects a mixture of foreign influences that dominated the course of the nation since the earliest days, written Vietnamese uses the Latin alphabet of abc intersected with diaCRITICS (or the accent marks). Without a doubt, the uniqueness of the Vietnamese language lies, among*

*other things, in its diaCRITICS. As a Viêt Nam-freak, (i.e., I jealously guard anything Vietnamese) I even think that without diaCRITICS, Vietnamese is not Vietnamese.'* – Excerpt from the post 'Dilemma of a Vietnamese Name?!' by Anvi Hoàng, published in diaCRITICS.

There is a beautiful line in an essay by Huy Đức translated by Phạm Vũ Lửa Hạ in diaCRITICS, 'Nobody can secure a path to the future without a truthful understanding of the past, especially a past which we played a part in and were collectively responsible

*for'.* The rendition of Vietnam, a country whose past and present have been overshadowed by the war, has historically been stuck in a loop. diaCRITICS, an online initiative, offers a voice to the new Vietnam, the changing Vietnam. It reveals an impassioned perspective of the diasporic culture and the politics of the country. The blog breaks conventional stereotypes of the country and provides cross-cultural encounters that are invaluable to understanding Vietnam. We spoke to Viet Thanh Nguyen, the editor of diaCRITICS.



DINH Q. LÊ. DOI MOI (NAPALMED GIRL) 2006. C-PRINT AND LINEN TAPE. 48-1/4 X 70 INCHES.

*Dinh Q. Lê's signature aesthetic device is weaving black and white images of Vietnamese people, usually anonymous, with colour images of American movies. The effect is startling and beautiful, even as the work is often about the horrors of war.*

Artists (including actors, writers, performers) have at times taken on the role of not merely chronicling the times but gone a step ahead to take a stand, voice their opinion and call for action. In your role as a writer, a professor, a cultural observer you must encounter similar sentiments and even understand the need to not just be a receptacle but a voice amidst the chaos. Your comments ...

The question of voice is tricky. Finding a voice, claiming a voice and using a voice are crucial to all artists, writers and critics, but especially so for those who come from under-represented or marginalised communities. For these populations, there can be a strong sense that finding one's voice is important not just for an individual but a community; often this means that the individual artist, writer or critic may feel that finding her or his own voice allows her or him to advocate for that community or tell its story. But advocating or telling that story is tricky because sometimes the community doesn't want its story told, or doesn't want its story told by this particular person, or doesn't like this person's story or finds it a betrayal; or because other communities will seize on this person as a representative for her or his community, a position for which he or she is not elected or chosen. And sometimes it may be the case that having one's voice be aligned with the community, while empowering, can also be stifling for the artist, writer or critic. He or she might eventually want to speak about something else besides that community, but may find herself or himself so identified with that community that opportunities to speak about anything else are limited.

**Naming wars is almost always a problem. Names for wars always seem to me to be insufficient, because they take something very complicated and messy and put them in a neat box.**

*An-My Lê is a photographer whose current work is on the US military. She evokes genres of landscape photography and war photography, dealing, in this case, with the awesome and terrifying power of the American war machine.*



AN-MY LÊ. SMALL WARS (SNIPER 1), 1999-2002  
GELATIN SILVER PRINT, 26 1/2 X 38 INCHES/ 67.5 X 96.5 CM.  
© AN-MY LÊ COURTESY MURRAY GUY.

**How has your personal journey been thus far? How did diaCRITICS and your writings emerge through the years?**

I started writing fiction in college with the idea that it was important to tell stories about Vietnamese Americans, since there were not that many stories by or about Vietnamese Americans at that time. Now the situation is different. There are quite a few well-known Vietnamese American writers writing about the Vietnam War, Vietnamese American life and Vietnam.

While writing about all those things is important, I think that there can be an exhaustion in writing about those topics too, the sense that a Vietnamese American writer is expected to write about them. Is it possible to write about other things? Is it possible to write about those things but complicate the telling? Those are the issues that concern me now, and other Vietnamese American writers, too. There's a diversity of voices, ideas and approaches under this category of 'Vietnamese

American writing' that no one writer can encapsulate, and that is one of the reasons why I started diaCRITICS. As a collective effort, it showcases many different voices, rather than just mine. The paradox is that diaCRITICS and 'Vietnamese American writing' are unified under the Vietnamese American label, but that label does not tell us anything definitive about Vietnamese American identity, or people, or concerns or themes.

**In your writing you speak of how the Vietnam War is called the Vietnam War, not the American war. Could you please elaborate on that point?**

Naming wars is almost always a problem. Names for wars always seem to me to be insufficient, because they take something very complicated and messy and put them in a neat box. The trouble with these neat boxes is that they are passed on to people who understand only one part of that war, or who were born later and depend on that neat box to tell them something efficient about that war. Those neat boxes prevent subsequent generations from understanding the complications and messiness of war. So in the case of the Vietnam War, the name is something conjured by Americans, and remembered by them as an event that mostly concerned Americans, with Vietnamese people in the background. That's obviously problematic, but it is a problem mirrored by how the Vietnamese call the war the American war. Some people like to use the American war because it de-centres the American point of view, but I don't think that's accurate. All it does is emphasise the Vietnamese point of view, which is not an innocent one. Neither name is all that accurate because of what they foreclose, how the war was fought not just in Vietnam but also in Laos and Cambodia, and how many nations were involved besides just Vietnam and the United States. The war was really a condensation of many global and regional interests, and killed many people besides Americans and Vietnamese, both of whom were implicated in how the war spilled outside of Vietnam. In the end, we have to use some kind of name for the war, but I think it's important to keep drawing attention to the fact that names for war are often created by vested interests who want to control that war's meaning.

**The world has shifted, flattened, fused; people try to understand or even find their own identity, and one finds that art is always within arm's reach of such dilemmas. Through your online space diaCRITICS, how have you tackled this evolving realm of identity and arts?**

diaCRITICS has a couple of advantages in dealing with the relationship of art to identity. One is that it's a collective project with many writers from different backgrounds. This is crucial because 'identity' is always fluid, flexible and multiply defined. Anyone who tries to say that any given identity is clearly X or clearly Y is wrong, and the way to prove it is to have forums where many voices can speak about this identity. They will show that there are always disagreements about defining identity, and about how to use art in relationship to identity. So what's important is not agreement but argument, not consensus but conversation. The second advantage is that diaCRITICS, being online, can be global. The readership comes from many different countries, and so do the writers. This type of global reach was much harder in the analog, print past. We have been able to find writers in Canada, France, Germany, Australia, Norway and Vietnam, writing mostly in English but also in French, German and Vietnamese. That global reach is exciting.

**Much of the work is terrible or routine, but enough of it is extraordinary. This gives me hope, that there are enough risk-taking artists with great ideas who can lead Vietnamese art to exciting places,...**



AN-MY LÊ. 29 PALMS, NIGHT OPERATIONS III.  
GELATIN SILVER PRINT, 26 1/2 X 38 INCHES/ 67.5 X 96.5 CM.  
© AN-MY LÊ COURTESY MURRAY GUY.

**As artists who are part of the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network, how has the narrative or the imagery been this far, how has it adapted itself, or does it still echo the past shadows?**

The memory of colonisation and war in Vietnam is strong in both France and the United States, where the largest diasporic Vietnamese communities are found. As a result, Vietnamese artists in these countries have opportunities and limitations. If they

speak about colonisation and war, they speak about topics their nations know something about, and [they] can find audiences. This opportunity to speak is obviously important, and can produce great work. But it is also limiting, because it is circular – Vietnamese artists and writers are defined by being Vietnamese, which is defined by colonisation and war, and if Vietnamese artists and writers work on those topics, they further cement those

topics with Vietnamese identity. Some Vietnamese artists and writers are working on other topics altogether, and some are succeeding in getting their work out. They may be hard to identify as Vietnamese because they do not work on so-called Vietnamese topics, but, at the same time, they are also redefining what a Vietnamese topic is, or the relevance of the label 'Vietnamese' to themselves or what they do.

**How would you describe the contemporary Vietnamese arts scene?**

Diverse, energetic, contradictory and fragmented. It's hard to describe this scene because there are many scenes. Some artists deal with the memory of war, others with quotidian life, still others with abstraction. Some work with the legitimisation of state approval, others rebel. Some sell works for enormous sums, others live marginally. The scenes differ depending on whether we are looking at the United States or Vietnam or other countries. In these places, some artists aspire to make their mark in metropolitan art galleries, First World museums, and global art events. Other artists serve their vision of local communities. Still more think of their work as commodities for First World consumers. Much of the work is terrible or routine, but enough of it is extraordinary. This gives me hope, that there are enough risk-taking artists with great ideas who can lead Vietnamese art to exciting places, regardless of the mundane work of many. In this respect, Vietnamese art is not that much different than any other category of art. But Vietnamese art is recovering from decades of isolation, in Vietnam, or the burdens of belonging to a minority, overseas, and both of those historical factors shape the formal properties of the art and its pace of change.



BINH DANH. ANCESTRAL ALTERS.



BINH DANH. AMBUSH IN THE LEAF #4'  
CHLOROPHYLL PRINT AND RESIN. 17.5 X 13.5 INCHES. IMAGE © BINH DANH

*Binh Danh prints photographs of soldiers and terrified civilians on leaves, using chlorophyll.*