**Phuong M. Do: The Puzzle of Photography, or What Fits and What Does Not**

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1. **Phuong M. Do, “hanoi, vietnam, 1998 (self in street),” 1998, Gelatin silver print. 19” x 15”. Courtesy of the artist.**

Last year, I embarked on a two-month research that sought to sketch a possible genealogy of “Vietnamese contemporary art” that foregrounds female art practitioners. Spanning two print issues of a magazine, roughly twenty-one pages, the final essay celebrates more than twenty figures of diverse practices, who were, and are, prominent to the local art scene.1 2 In retrospect, it was too ambitious to attempt to do justice to the topic, but during that process, I stumbled upon a seminal show: “Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women Artists from Vietnam,” a multi-media exhibition curated by Nora Annesley Taylor.3 Traveling across the United States in the mid-2000s, it brought together 10 female artists of Vietnamese heritage whose practices ranged from painting and photography to performance, installation, and mixed media.4 There were no explicit unifying themes, although in a brief discussion of the works, Taylor implied that gender, heritage, and war were among the artists’ shared “concerns.”5 6 She argued that the approach was not to reduce these artistic expressions to a singular style or genre, but to manifest a heterogeneity lying at the intersection of art, women, and Việt Nam—three intertwined domains to which these artists were subjected. While the show might have led to representative interpretations of art by women from Việt Nam and the diasporas, it left an enduring legacy regardless.

On the front cover of the exhibition catalogue was a photograph that moved me as it still does, which spoke to the proactive forces that “Changing Identity” and the artists’ practices possessed. It was here that I encountered the oeuvre of an artist underrepresented in the local discourse of contemporary photography: Phuong M. Do, or Đỗ Mỹ Phượng.7

Born in Laos, Phuong M. Do is a US-based leadership coach who has had a reparative relationship with photography for more than 20 years.8 Her humble body of work revolves around the self, place, memory, and most recently, archival documentation. Raised in the Laotian capital, she later immigrated to America with her immediate family, while some of her relatives stayed in Việt Nam, and some moved to France. In 1988, she earned a Bachelor’s degree in Colorado. In 1991, she landed a professional job in the non-profit sector in Washington, DC, helping war-impacted Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian communities with leadership development. She soon found herself in New York State with another job and eventually finished a Master’s program in Social Work. In 1998, after four years of working there, she felt that she needed a change. “I just felt like I wasn’t fulfilling,” says Do. And so she turned to photography.

**Family around the table, union in style**

To navigate society is to meander in between loci of social relations. The family, among other societal constituents, is such a site, where these relations are constantly laid bare, constructed and deconstructed. Familial member(-relation-)ship not only imitates external power relations but also presents itself as a framework for society at large. Thus, to place oneself in the family is to situate oneself in the world, and vice versa.

Transcending and conjoining identity, kinship, collective memory, and representation, the photographic series *self + family* is Do’s effort to make tangible her relationship with her intercontinentally dispersed extended family and her connection to Việt Nam. An array of black and white and colour analogue portraits, *self + family* goes beyond simple addition formulae, not as straightforward as 1 + 1 = 2. It is a site of struggle, between inclusion and exclusion, reconciliation and disconnection.

Do started the project in 1998, boarding a plane to Hà Nội for the first time. The experience was not without difficulties. In a Zoom call with me, she says that she felt “numb” sometimes while hesitating to contact her paternal relatives. Everything was a first to her. One day, she realised that the only way to “feel something was to be in the middle of [the] street.” For her, as for many in Việt Nam, crossing the traffic was stressful. “It’s like waiting, waiting. And then you just go in. And once you go in, it’s okay.” The artist gave two local kids some money to stand guard on both sides of the tripod, so that it would not be knocked over by passing vehicles. Standing on the line separating traffic lanes, she posed unwavering and resolute, holding the shutter release in one hand, despite all the bikes lurking behind. The black outfit set her in further contrast with the surroundings. In less than five minutes, Do initiated her first engagement with the land and its people through *self in street* (1998).

As she eventually joined her kin in the later images, she attempted to grasp what it meant to be in a nuclear family of Vietnamese ancestry. How is the family constructed through individuals and their relations? Where does the family locate? And how extended can kinship be?

Eating and clothing are two preeminent modes of collectivity, and consequently, belonging, in the Vietnamese family, as evident in this series. On the one hand, eating, as well as drinking, co-exists with gathering (greetings, celebrations, remembrance), talking (stories, gossiping, memories), watching TV (commenting, relaxing, debating). These activities often take place indoors, mostly at home—where people unite and (re)connect—so family is often equated with “home.” It is interesting to see here how home or precisely the concept of “family around the table” is trans-border, carried from one country to the next without losing its essence or identification.

On the other hand, clothing is a tool to blend in. Although it can play a divisive role in society, as proven by appearance-based racial/sexist/gender discrimination, what one wears has the potential to mitigate alienation as well. Whether intentional or not, Do’s choice of clothing mirrored and adapted to different contexts, as a means of self-initiated integration. Inclusion can lead to interpersonal reconciliation, although to which degree remains open for debate.

1. **Phuong M. Do, “la chu, vietnam, 2001 (self with relatives),” 2001, Chromogenic print. 10” x 8”. Courtesy of the artist.**

**Problematising the political construction of family**

Beyond the personal, the family is a socio-political construction. It is situated at the intersection of politics and history. With inclusion comes exclusion, and belonging, displacement. For instance, there is no guarantee that in the aforementioned interactions with family, a “crack” would never happen. One moment peaceful talk proceeds, and in the next, a dispute may erupt. On a macro level, the family bears witness to political turmoil and historical disruptions and is subject to a perpetual cycle of political intervention. What does it mean, then, to be a part of the family that is socially, culturally, and politically “dismembered” or always likely so?

23 years after that first visit back to Việt Nam, Do observes: “This whole disconnect of place, home, family, is like you drop a mirror and you’re trying to put it back together, so the reflection is sort of fragmented.”

Exile and immigration in the aftermath of political displacement directly contributes to this fragmentation. The process was never without pain, trauma, and loss. Reeducation, refugee, and military camps abounded. “Boat people.” Away from their motherland, immigrants became polarised, politicised entities and bore hyphenated identities: “Asian American,” “Vietnamese American,” “Việt Kiều.”9 As a teenager in America, Do endured discrimination at school; at home, traditional values confronted her. “So you’re no good inside, and you’re no good outside,” she describes.

The cultural gap between the artist and her kin left her feeling alienated, “always the outsider.” “There’s a sense of connection because of family. But culturally, you’re always not quite well,” she notes. At times, while doing the project in Việt Nam, Do tried to engage in deep conversations and form a truly “human relationship” with her relatives, but found it one-sided. As she recalled, they were initially curious about her camera and equipment, but did not seem interested in prolonged interaction. “They just ignore me […] They don’t even ask ‘so what do these pictures mean to you, mean to us?’” Meanwhile, relatives in France to whom she thought she was close did not connect with her, either. At this point, Do realised that it was beyond cultural boundaries. The issue lay deep inside the personal layer of herself—a sense of being uprooted.

“Taken away from where you are, and you’d never find that balance again,” she says.

Despite the best efforts, memory, identity, or family, once broken, displaced, or detached, remains scarred as such. Fixing might cause further breaking. There is the risk of getting hurt from the broken shatters one tries to touch or assemble. There is also uncertainty, numbness, and void. As time unfolds, history or the past is never the same as it used to be, as much as it will never be like it is. “Fragmented.” The (re)writing, transmitting, (un)learning of history is subjective, rendering “the past” not or never true.

But what is “true,” anyways? “Which truth?” and “why truth at all?”, as Trịnh T. Minh-Hà asks in *Woman, Native, Other*.10 Trịnh pushes against the “need for clarification” and entangles the relationship between truth and fact, story and history. “On the one hand, each society has its own politics of truth; on the other hand, being truthful is being in the in-between of all regimes of truth.”11

However, this does not deny the happenings of history. It is factual and truthful to say that the Vietnam War, as the English-speaking world knows it, or *Kháng chiến chống Mỹ (cướu nước) / Đế quốc Mỹ xâm lược / Chiến tranh Đông Dương lần 2*, a few often recited Vietnamese terms, resulted in high casualties and spanned across two decades.12 When the North and the South were reunited under one regime in 1975, the tragedy never simply ended. Its legacy, one prominent of which is political displacement, has left a permanent imprint on generations of pre-, intra-, and post-war periods.

Thus, the formula in *self + family* is more subtractive than additive. As the title hints at the aforementioned issue of cultural disconnection, the need to insert (“+”) her presence also means that she was, and still is, according to her, not a part of the family, which is now beyond kinship; she is other in her culture.

**Representation revisited through agency and intimacy**

Representation is often distorted, just like the histories that support or deny it. Seeing no humanity in the internet images that easily redirect a search for the nation to a search for the war, Do insisted on constructing her own narrative of Việt Nam through *self + family*, and later through *Found Photographs, Vietnam*. Discussing the inclusion of herself in the former project, she recollects:

“What became clear to me was that I want to be seen as someone who was making the photograph. […] I want the observer to know that I’m observing them looking at me in the photograph.”

She is not only there; she looks straight into the camera. Challenging the politics of looking, the gaze is such a provocative tool. It demands attention not only to the subject (the observer) but also to the issue it entails (the observed). Photography initially aided colonialism by documenting the “exoticism” of indigenous communities for exhibition, entertainment, and exploitation. Artists such as Do ultimately disrupts that chain of cultural production. This kind of subversive viewership transmits authoritarian status from one end to another. By interrupting the flow of daily life with her presence, she captures a slice of time that was previously erased among the abundance of violence-infused images of the war.

With such agency, the artist also took literal hold of the narrative by holding on to the shutter release. The cable extends from the edge of an image to her hand, as Taylor imagined, like “an umbilical cord between the camera and herself.”13 Beyond this feminist analogy, I argue that not only does it transport the imaginary viewer across temporal and spatial dimensions, but such an act also contributes to the problematisation of family and society as intertwined entities.

This sentiment of representation is echoed in *Found Photographs, Vietnam*. Including approximately a thousand black-and-white analogue prints, it is a digitised archive of snapshots, family portraits, studio and wedding shoots dated roughly between the 1940s and 1970s, abandoned by those who left the country in the aftermath of the Fall of Sài Gòn.14 This lively evidence of quotidian life, unbothered by bombastic propaganda, revealed to her a side of Việt Nam she could not have witnessed elsewhere. This was the Việt Nam of that period, or the representation of it, that the global media used to and still mostly miss.15

“It was the intimacy in these photographs that was left behind and displaced by war that I recognised and was moved by.”16

Although she did not have any criteria in mind while thrifting for these, the images are joyful and candid. We often hear trauma relived in the stories told by survivors of the war; nothing of the sort is explicitly present in these photographs. This is not to disregard the significance of survivors’ stories but to highlight joyful intimacy as a necessary, alternative, reparative approach to remembrance.

1. **Phuong M. Do, “cảnh sau nhà anh long (view from cousin long’s apartment),” 2005. 14″ x 19″. Courtesy of the artist.**

**Photography and its materiality and legacy**

Supported by the 2004-2005 Fulbright grant, lacquered photographs is a series of street photography taken in various cities such as Thái Nguyên, Hà Nội, and Hồ Chí Minh city, from 2000 to 2008. Captured are night and twilight sceneries of both quiet and dynamic corners of the urban life: apartment units with occupied rooms lit from within, a street vendor waiting for customers, a street of crowds flowing in different directions, etc.

It is in the still of the night, in contrast to the noise of the day, that Do found connection with Việt Nam. She was drawn to how vividly life emerged under the lights when the public and the private intertwine. She played a guessing game in her mind, wondering what people were thinking about as she wandered about the nightfall.

In this series, photography is complemented by lacquer. With the photographic print mounted onto a panel, then coated with ten layers of lacquer, the final product gleams with the protective shine.17

Do found material and artistic parallels between the two. With its resin, lacquer provides long-lasting preservation as much as photography preserves the memory of the captured moment. Dealing with lacquer paint proves harmful to the health of the artists; so is developing analogue photography with chemicals. Moreover, the former produces highly priced goods but also coats mundane objects of daily use such as utensils, while photography is sometimes highly regarded, in the case of fine art, but also easily dispensable, as in vernacular photography.

Exemplified by *Found Photographs, Vietnam*, the latter category of photography is more prone to dispossession. Albeit personally intimate, these images had long cried for exposure, she recalls. For a long time, the artist had called them “abandoned photographs”—in many senses, because they were physically and figuratively disowned and displaced from one hand to another. Then something switched. She started seeing the collection which had been sitting around for ages differently—as found photographs. Found by her, and to be found by the world. She says: “I’m being a channel, and these things are talking to me in some ways.”

As a whole, this long-term project is a bridge that connects the past with the present and future: people in distant times get subjected to contemporary viewership, while present generations and those to come get to relive histories and unearth stories. This is the preservative impulse of photography that transcends the temporality of its creators and material.

**Nature as Guidance of Peace**

In 2017, when Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States, Do started a diary-like project, *1460 days*. As the title suggests, this series spans across four years, compiling snapshots of everyday life, from wildlife, mountains, oceans, deserts, to crowded streets, festivals, buildings, tourist attractions, and family. There was seemingly nothing experimental or conceptual to this project, but a pure practice of composition and framing going back to the basics of photography. Each day, a single or a hoard of photos, sometimes videos, got uploaded to [an Instagram account](https://www.instagram.com/1460daysusa/) dedicated to the project.

What mattered was the consistency involved, a routine for her to find peace of mind amidst the political shift in America. “It was a traumatic moment,” she recalls. Documenting whatever intrigued her started out as a short-term activity to cope with her disappointment, eventually expanding into a daily habit as it became “nourishing.”

“It really was about being in the moment, and seeing things and living basically, day to day, and being there.”

Photography is not only the bridge Do attempts to cross in order to patch what has been torn—identity, family, culture—but also her meditation, like a “Buddhist practice.” This extends to her current philosophy about the medium in general: when doing photography, one has to be present because one only takes photographs of subjects to which one feels connected.

*1460 days* helped the artist reform her bond with nature, its underlying theme. Most of the photos are snippets of natural life performing their daily rituals in the wild, making small yet collectively grand impacts on humanity, which appear minuscule in comparison.

So are the storms one cannot contain. There are events in life that, for Do, are out of reach and beyond control. If all has been done, let it be.

**Life/Photography as a Puzzling Struggle**

“Most of my life is trying to put the pieces back together. The many different pieces. What I wanted to do with photography was to deal with that.”

The themes of displacement, intergenerational and intercultural issues, and connection recurred throughout our hours-long Zoom conversation. Today, the political and sociocultural issues elbowing for attention in the headlines—environmental crisis, political disorder, civil strife, global health disaster, to name but a few—are different from when Do started out. Global society seems as fragmented as ever since the pandemic.

And yet, torn apart as we are, we all have to make choices in our lives. And to find what fits and what does not is a lifelong learning process that requires one to constantly change, reflect, and grow.

Do refers to identity as a “jacket.” To be something, someone, from somewhere, is to put on a garment, whether by choice or by external influence.

“I just don’t feel like I can say I’m Vietnamese, or I’m Vietnamese American. […] I’m a citizen of the United States so just call me American. But you look at my face, and you’ve decided that I’m not American. [As] long as society wants to put you in certain boxes, that question is always up to someone else.”

Choosing your label(s) can be a process of growth. With the development of identity politics in the past decades, in many parts of the world people have agency to navigate who they are and how they want to be seen by the world. For Do, it is about letting go of confrontation and focusing on herself.

“I don’t care as much—whether I’m Vietnamese or not. I used to care that I need to know. I need to know if I have this connection to Việt Nam and that I am part of this thing. This identity. But now, it’s not so important. Because I think if it’s still so important, then I don’t think I have grown in terms of understanding who I am.”

Do uses photography as a thread to tie knots, a pair of scissors to cut ties, and a compass to seek peace of mind. With each project comes a new puzzle to solve. And Do moves around the board, to see what fits and what does not.

1. **Phuong M. Do, “Untitled, found photograph.” Part of ongoing project *Found Photographs, Vietnam: Looking Back, Remembering Forward*. Courtesy of the artist.**

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**Notes**

I would like to thank Phuong M. Do and Nora Taylor for their time, patience with, and wisdom in our long Zoom conversations. I would also like to express my earnest gratitude towards Nabilah Said for all the mentorship, patience, and help, as well as the ArtsEquator team and Goethe-Institut Singapore for facilitating this virtual residency. Writing this piece would be impossible if it had not been for these humans and this initiative.

This article continues my ongoing research on self-identified female art professionals in/from Việt Nam and the diasporas. As one thing I have come to realise during this residency, writing as well as research is a process of constant revisions. Thank you for reading. Please write to me at [donghanhuan@gmail.com](mailto:donghanhuan@gmail.com) if there are any inquiries and feedback regarding this article, or to connect.

1. View the Vietnamese version of the article here: <https://luxuo.vn/culture/luoc-khao-ve-nghe-thuat-duong-dai-viet-nam-qua-chan-dung-cua-hon-20-guong-mat-nu-tieu-bieu.html>. The bilingual version with English translation is currently available exclusively in Art Republik Vietnam’s issues 1 and 2.

2. The act of lumping together female artists to showcase their work collectively is contested. While some might argue for it, others criticise it for enhancing the male-dominant narrative or reducing them to mere gender. In retrospect, my article is introductory and targeted at the general public, hence its categorisation in terms of artistic practices and careers, including multimedia; photography and film; theatre, dance, music and sound art; curator and researcher; arts administrator and collector. I could have engaged in a more in-depth discussion of the figures’ practices, although I did not merely present a list but ordered the appearance of art practitioners in consecutive thematic flows. In that article as well as this one, I acknowledge that I take for granted some contested terminologies, including but not limited to, “Vietnamese,” “Vietnamese contemporary art,” and “female” or “women.”

3. [Nora Annesley Taylor](https://www.saic.edu/profiles/faculty/nora-annesley-taylor) is an established researcher of Southeast Asian art who has written extensively on the local art scene in Việt Nam. She is Alsdorf Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art History (2007) and currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, U.S.A. Her publications include Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art and co-edited monographs, Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, An Anthology, Le Vietnam au Feminin, Studies in Southeast Asian Art History: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. O’Connor. Her writing has appeared in Art Journal, Arts Asiatiques, Third Text, Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Ethnos, Michigan Quarterly Review, Crossroads, Flash Art, Asian Art News. She is also a curator, with exhibitions such as Breathing is Free: 12,756.3, Recent Work by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba (2009); Changing Identity: Recent Work by Women Artists from Vietnam (2005–2009, travelling); Blue Memory: Tran Trong Vu (2004); Post-War Vietnamese Art: Paintings from the Collection of Bruce Blowitz/Albert Goodman (2016); John David Mooney Foundation, Chicago, 2016. Some of her awards include the 2014–2015 John Solomon Guggenheim Fellowship, the Getty Collaborative Research Award in 2009, and a Fulbright Grant through which she met Phuong M. Do for the first time.

4. The artists are: Nguyễn Bạch Đàn (who unfortunately passed away in 2012), Đinh Thị Thắm Poong, Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang, Lý Trần Quỳnh Giang, Đinh Ý Nhi, Đặng Thị Khuê, Phượng M. Đỗ, Ly Hoàng Ly, An-My Lê, Vũ Thu Hiền.

5. Nora A. Taylor, “Themes and Concerns in the Works of Vietnamese Women Artists,” in *Changing Identity: Recent Works by Women from Vietnam* (Washington, DC: International Arts & Artists, 2007), 74-78.

6. Taylor admitted that she had received criticisms of the exhibition because of the all-women curatorial approach, although she insisted it was not her intention. As a precursor, she had come to realise in her field trips to Việt Nam in the ’90s that women artists often, at the time, either subconsciously or intentionally, took up an inferior space in the artists’ households and conversations. They would serve tea, then retrieve to a dedicated space “behind the curtains,” so to speak, as Taylor recalled; when asked, they would speak lightly of their own artistic practices as if only the men’s (their spouses’) were worth mentioning and discussing, not their own. “The art world was very masculine,” as the scholar noted in our conversation. Bringing together female artists, local and diasporic alike, meant challenging such a male-biased, male-dominant norm she had witnessed. See Nora A. Taylor, “Women Artists,” in *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 94-107.

7. Editor’s note: We have chosen to spell the artist’s name without diacritics and in English formatting to enable the article to be compatible with Google’s search functions. The initial intention of the writer, however, remains with the original Vietnamese diacritics and order.

8. According to my interview with the artist; Phuong M. Do, “Phuong Do: MA’ 02, Studio Art”, Featured Alumni Profiles, NYU Steinhardt, New York University. <https://as13x.es.its.nyu.edu/profiles/alumni/phuong_do>; the artist’s websites: <https://www.phuongmdo.com/> and <https://www.foundphotographsvietnam.com/>; and the artist’s LinkedIn profile. All quotes by Do in this article are cited from our conversation, unless otherwise noted.

9. About the issue of hyphenated identity of Asian communities in the US, see Henry Fuhrmann, “Drop the Hyphen in Asian American,” *Conscious Style Guide*, <https://consciousstyleguide.com/drop-hyphen-asian-american/>.

10. Trịnh T. Minh-Hà, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 119-21.

11. Ibid, 121.

12. It is widely accepted that the war occurred between 1954—the year that Điện Biên Phủ Battle, or Chiến dịch/Chiến thắng Điện Biên Phủ, put an end to the First Indochina War, or Kháng chiến chống Pháp / Chiến tranh Đông Dương (lần 1); the Geneva Accords divided Việt Nam into the North and the South at the 17th parallel; the ceasefire of France in Indochina—and 1975—the year of the Fall of Sài Gòn, or Giải phóng miền Nam, on April 30th; the withdrawal of American personnel and some South Vietnamese allies from Việt Nam; the national reunification of Việt Nam, or Thống nhất đất nước.

13. Nora A. Taylor, *Changing Identity*, 63.

14. In the early 2000s, while making the second part of *self + family*, which was never published, she encountered and fell in love with found photographs after seeing “Qua Bến Nước Xưa,” or “Crossing Waters of the Past,” a collaborative installation by Sue Hajdu and Đỉnh Q. Lê. See Phuong M. Do’s blog post “Afternoon Sun” on her project site “Found Photographs, Vietnam,” <https://www.foundphotographsvietnam.com/post/afternoon-sun>; “Qua Ben Nuoc Xua: An Installation by Sue Hajdu and Dinh Q. Le”, Collections, *Asia Art Archive*. <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/library/qua-ben-nuoc-xua-an-installation-by-sue-hajdu-and-dinh-q-le>.

15. As Do was dealing with SEO issues of her project site, what came up for a search of the site’s title was related to Vietnam War. “That’s how deep it is in terms of representation and what is understood, and how it gets into the narrative of a culture,” she notes.

16. Phuong M. Do, “Le Cong Kieu Street”, on her project site. <https://www.foundphotographsvietnam.com/post/le-cong-kieu-street>.

17. For more information, see “About the Exhibition” in *Made in Vietnam: Photography by Phuong M. Do* (New York: NYU Gallery Space of Wagner, 2009), 6-11.

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