

history of the Indonesian people, but also helped to reconcile the Dutch and the Indonesian governments at the time. Phacharaphorn Phanomvan in chapter 10 shows the importance of social media and websites that serve as tools to expand local understanding of regional and local history. Social media have helped to make the Plai Bat Avalokitesvara statue and the Prakhon Chai sculptures a regional pride and promoted local heritage in the Northeastern region of Thailand. In chapter 11, Galloway traces important historical Burmese repatriation objects such as Pagan Buddha images and the Lion Throne, which were taken from Myanmar to British India in 1902 and returned in 1948. Interestingly, she points out that Buddhism and the worship of Nats spirits discourage an attachment to objects that are linked to bad luck, which is why repatriation never became an important issue in Myanmar.

*Returning Southeast Asia's Past: Objects, Museums, and Restitution* provides important case studies on the subjects of repatriation, the law of provenance, object ownership and related political issues. It also has important bibliographic sources for Southeast Asian studies, art history, history and museum studies.

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*Return Engagements: Contemporary Art's Traumas of Modernity and History in Sài Gòn and Phnom Penh.* By Việt Lê. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2021. xxi+315pp.

In this elegantly produced study of contemporary art in Cambodia and Vietnam, Việt Lê explores the multiple valences of return—as a yield that is more than financial, a journey that is deeply personal and a recurrence of history that is multi-temporal. His lyrical and immersive preface reflects on past journeys and unhealed wounds. In this jewel of an essay, Lê invites the reader to share the visceral

nightmare of his struggle against drowning: time and space dissolve in the fear of memory and the memory of fear. In the introduction, Lê gestures to the expressive power of emotion and the imperative of motion. Critiquing art history's traditional focus on fine art objects, biography and national narrative as inadequate to the "affective dimensions" of social and political change, new media technologies, and memory (p. 26) and resisting the "anthropologization" of the artist as tied to a place, community and nation, Lê views the concept of return as shuttling through various areas and eras. This interpretive frame that renders artist cohorts as "the living archive of memory and modernity", and views historical trauma "not as a fixed event but as an event that gets reinterpreted and reinvented with each recollection" (pp. 27–29), demands a departure from conventional methodology. Fusing the "patchwork ethnography" of anthropologists Anna Tsing and Christina Schwenkel (p. 39) with visual anthropology and the social history of art, Lê's multi-temporal site of inquiry is the trajectory of artists, ideas, artworks, and curated and lived memories. These bold moves strike an author's pact. The gauntlet is thrown, the journey launched.

Researched in a series of "intensive and sporadic" "return engagements" to Cambodia and to Vietnam, where Lê was born, *Return Engagements* resists the hyper-visible trope of the refugee as defined by arrival and derailed by trauma. Despite this disavowal, it is trauma, examined from multiple angles, from casualty to commodity, that functions as a recurring theme and unifying thread across the book's many detours.

The spirit of return echoes in multiple questions posed throughout the book. How do Southeast Asians remember and represent regional conflicts (p. 18)? What happens when one cannot fight back, speak back or look back? What happens when return is foreclosed (p. 53) or when there is no response from the individual or institution (p. 67)? After relaying Viet Thanh Nguyen's call for an "ethics of representation" and critiquing Western media and academia for exoticizing and fetishizing creatives from Southeast Asia and Asian American diaspora in chapter 1, Lê continues to lace his narrative

with questions. Yet, Lê does not always return to these questions before we are onto the next. Fashioned through a quilting and layering of visits and viewings, speech and spectatorship, conversations and conjecture, the book unfolds with a sense of urgency almost like a travelling exhibition. But there are times when I would have liked to have stayed in the moment and sat quietly with an artwork or to have had more time with the artists, whose own stories are sometimes derailed by theory.

His analysis of Cambodian artist Leng Seckon's often sumptuously produced work is thought-provoking: "To speak about damage, Seckon uses splendor in his art as a strategy and as a subterfuge" (p. 167). But elsewhere, Lê leans heavily on the academic canon, moving too swiftly from the reflections of artists to the pondering of theorists. Given the emphasis on journey as fieldwork, this reliance on regnant paradigms is puzzling. The bibliography counts eighteen works by Jacques Derrida and a heavy dose of Foucault, Freud and Jung, with a dash of Adorno. Appadurai, Ong and Spivak are all in the mix. Newer interventions in visual culture and trauma studies such as Boreth Ly's *Traces of Trauma*, and Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps Score*, are absent. Engagement with Ly's thoughtful study might have tempered Lê's critique of contemporary artists who have lived and worked in Cambodia and Vietnam for decades, including Hồng-Ân Trương and Dinh Q. Lê. Reference to the findings of van der Kolk might have fostered a more generous recognition of the role that inherited, intergenerational and referred trauma may play in driving creative processes.

It is one thing to observe that the "claim of danger" through association with Agent Orange "increases the market value of Dinh Q. Lê's work 'Damaged Gene'" (1989) (p. 231) and another to speculate that Dinh Q. Lê is manipulating these horrors for personal gain (p. 235). Exacerbating the demand for such artistic production, as Lê has posited in chapter 1, citing literary scholar Patricia Yaeger, is the "academic consumption of trauma" that enmeshes scholars in a duet of pleasure and pain (p. 101). Lê's verdict is unclear, but at times his analysis risks painting the contemporary artists around whose

work he builds his book as trauma profiteers, and their output as the visual equivalent of Thanotourism. Artists like Dinh Q. Lê, we are told, “do not make overtly emotional work” but instead manipulate their subject positions as artists of global renown to “engage in a different kind of exploitation” (p. 234). By centring the spectre of the market, and minimizing the affective dimensions of artistic expression, this analysis risks reducing complex creative processes in Cambodia, Vietnam and diaspora to transactional strategies keyed to market returns.

The book’s final destination is an evocative epilogue that mirrors the watery menace of Lê’s preface. Returning from field visits to Phnom Penh in November 2010, Le witnesses, through secondary images and text messages, the unfolding of a mass stampede at the Water Festival, when a suspension bridge to the lucrative Diamond Island resort collapses, leaving hundreds dead. Cambodia’s premier Hun Sen locates the tragedy in an arc of history as a reminder of the massive death toll of the Khmer Rouge regime. Arguing for “a new ethics and poetics of return” (p. 242), Lê reminds us that memory is uneven, unstable, episodic and spectral, and ends the book on a note of fresh departure. Beyond the rebuilt bridge, “on the horizon, is justice, an impossible, returning spectre” (p. 244).

It is a poetic ending. *Return Engagements* challenges and complicates ways of writing about art in Southeast Asia. This disruption is a welcome intervention.

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