Remembering Vietnam: Art As Therapy

Fifteen years after President Nixon achieved an ill-fated "peace with honor" and U.S. troops came home, the Vietnam War has re-emerged as grist for Hollywood (e.g., *Platoon*, *Full-Metal Jacket*), and as the subject of a flood of memoirs, novels, and exhibits of photographs. And there are retrospective conferences and multimedia "events" on Vietnam, many of them promoting psychotherapeutic themes ("healing," "reconciliation"); veterans are usually cast simply as victims. In much of all this, history and truth have been obscured, contends Henry Allen, a journalist and Vietnam veteran, by a patchy fog of bittersweet nostalgia, often solemnly applauded by the news media.

by Henry Allen

The Vietnam War was a long time ago, a whole generation past. The veterans who haunt Washington D.C.'s Vietnam memorial in their plaintive fatigues are getting middle-aged. The Marine landing at Danang is now more distant in time than Iwo Jima was for those Marines of 1965. The films and TV tape shot back then—the gritty chaos of combat, the flaccid grandeur of peace demonstrations—have the quality of history, something abstracted about them; even the color footage seems as if it were in black and white.

Nevertheless, Vietnam doesn't go away. There's a faction of Americans who keep worrying at it with a sort of gruesome tenderness, like a dog gnawing at the cast on a broken leg. It has become an industry and a Cause. Any work of art or journalism, any political gesture that arises from anger, bitterness, nostalgia, bewilderment, or pain of any kind over Vietnam is supposed to command our respect, whether it deserves it or not.

Behind all this lies the same promise that psychotherapy makes about an unhappy childhood—once Vietnam is remembered properly, it will stop nagging at us.

But it doesn't. Since the last of our troops pulled out in 1973, we've had art that has touched the whole country and thanked and remembered its soldiers—Washington's Vietnam Veterans Memorial designed by Maya Lin; the nearby statue of three servicemen by Frederick Hart; James Webb's novel *Fields of Fire*; Michael Herr's journalistic memoir *Dispatches*; Billy Joel's song "Goodnight, Saigon," to mention a few of the successes, aesthetic, popular, or both.

The art, media, memoirs, think-tank sessions, and therapy keep on coming, good and bad.

During the past year, Hollywood has turned Vietnam into a genre unto itself with movies such as *Platoon, Full-Metal Jacket,* and *Hamburger Hill.* An advertisement for television's new dramatic series "Tour of Duty" says that we have to "talk about it," as if we hadn't been doing just that.

The books are so many that there are at least two bibliographies on Vietnam. Amlin Gray's play *How I Got That Story* recently returned to Washington for another run.

The Vietnam Women's Memorial Project is campaigning to put a statue of a nurse near the Vietnam memorial.

And who knows what will come next from Sly Stallone, Gloria Emerson, Noam Chomsky, Myra McPherson, Clint Eastwood, Country Joe McDonald, and the journalist-veterans traveling back to Vietnam on their bleak nostalgia trips?

In keeping with the spirit of the Vietnam era, when Americans tended to blur the difference between passion and principle, remembering the war in the late 1980s has become a "moral" position.

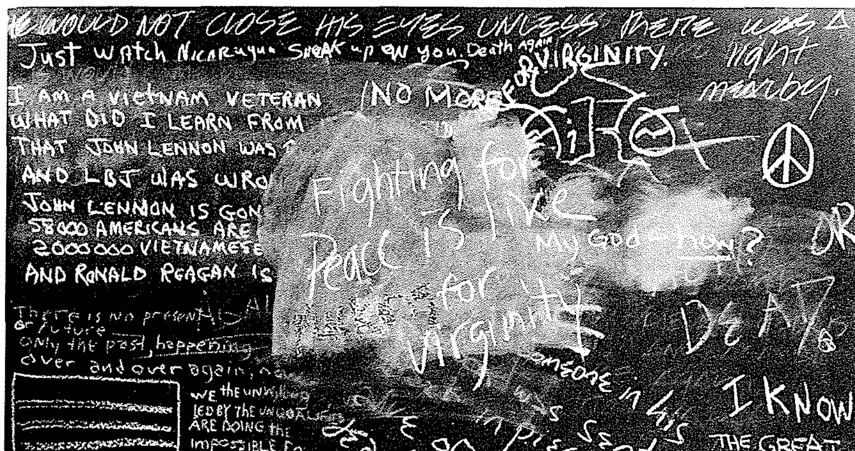
One of the most ambitious attempts to sum up what the word "Vietnam" is supposed to mean in the American psyche has been a three-month exhibit program organized by the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA), a nonprofit gallery and performance space not far from the Capitol. It is called "War and Memory in the Aftermath of Vietnam."

WPA describes the exhibit as a "multidisciplinary program of visual art, commissioned installations, photography, film, video, literature, theater, music, and public discussion."

Some of it is good, some of it is awful.

What is important is that all of it is utterly conventional—conventionally shocking, conventionally touching, conventionally moral. It does as good a job as we're apt to get of telling us how we're supposed to feel about Vietnam.

It is by turns heavy-handed, penetrating, nostalgic, ironic, decadent, and self-righteous, with occasional unmediated glints of recognition, especially in the



snapshots brought home by veterans of the war. These are simple, clumsy pictures of helicopters and rice paddies, of young men holding rifles and squinting into the sun, and they have the power of near-artless fact.

But most of the show generates the smog of unreality that hung over the whole Vietnam era—the fathomless layering of media, slogans, self-dramatization, and illusion.

For example, consider the installation called "Hotel Co Hon," meaning "Hotel Wandering Ghosts." It's a big room where everything is black, white, or gray: two white French colonial tombs; stone furniture; dozens of black-and-white photographs of Vietnam; blackboards where writing covers writing in layers of chalked quotations: "He would not close his eyes unless there was light nearby . . . alive or dead . . . and then we were breathing him . . . ."

There are scrolls, a map of Vietnam, and a silhouette of the famous 1968 photograph of the Saigon police chief blowing out a Viet Cong's brains. There are lots of words, including big black letters misted over by a scrim of white: "LOST IN A ROMAN WILDERNESS OF PAIN."

The artist, a Californian named Richard Turner, was asked recently: Why "Roman"?

"That's the last line from the Doors' song 'The End,'" he said. "That was in *Apocalypse Now*."

That layering of imagery goes on and on. In a two-wall exhibit titled "Sorry About That" (our troops' great ironic catch phrase), artist Cynthia Carlson has made monotype prints derived from her photographs taken of objects left at the Vietnam memorial. There are three different exhibits of photographs taken there. And a Vietnamese photographer named Hanh Thi Pham offers a picture of an actor in a North Vietnamese uni-

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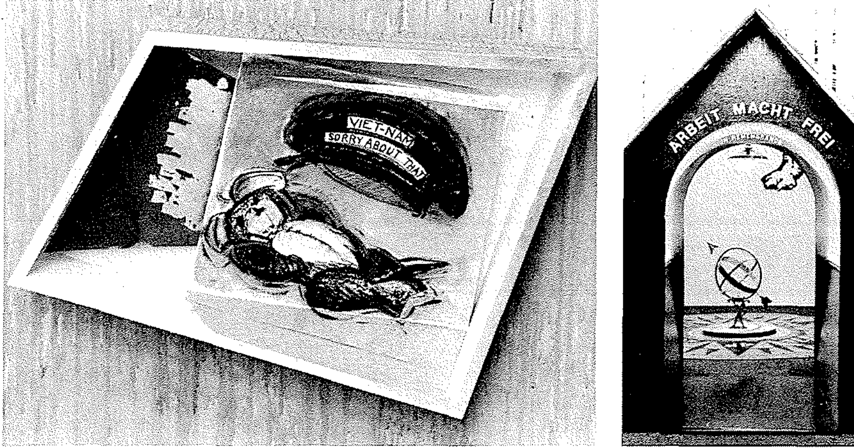


form who flogs an actor playing a civilian, while a print of a black-and-white photograph of Ho Chi Minh lolls in a hammock.

The WPA has issued a 448-page collection of prose and poetry about Vietnam, and there are another 10,000 words on the walls to explain the art.

This doesn't count the catalogue, critical brochures, documents, photocopies of magazine articles, five shelves of books, and all the words being spoken by narrators, authors, and politicians in films and videos played on TV screens scattered throughout this show. Nor does it count three words over the door to the corrosively smug installation by Richard Posner. This room of pictures, slogans, and symbolic knicknacks (the compass rose on the floor is a "moral compass") is based on the 16 months that Posner spent as a conscientious objector, washing dishes in a hospital.

The three words are *Arbeit macht frei*, meaning "work makes you free." They were also over the gate at Auschwitz. Perhaps Posner can contribute a dishwashing exhibit to the new Holocaust museum across the Mall.

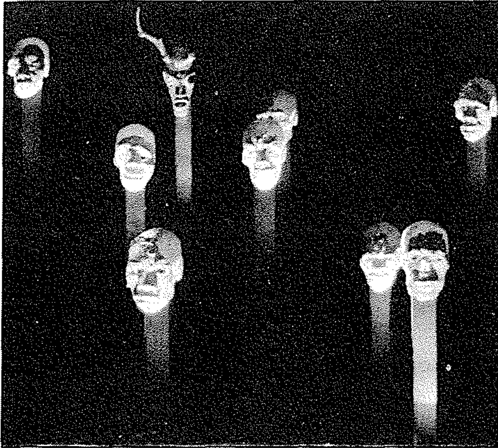
Words, words, words. Images, images, images.

Vietnam happened during a time when American intellectuals still thought that art could change America and save us from ourselves. The approved tone of that art was one of irony, therapy, alienation, and nostalgia. That is the tone of this show.

The ironies range from the snapshot of a soldier posing like a muscle man in the middle of a combat zone to the ham-handed use of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic"in a movie called *Mills of the Gods: Vietnam*. Irony ruins a Terry Allen installation called "Tables and Angels," which consists of cafe booths inside cages lit with red light bulbs. It has something of the frantic bleakness of the bars on Saigon's Tu Do Street until the sound track of helicopter noise (which sounds more like a railroad train) shifts to a harmonium playing a wheezy "My Country Tis of Thee," and then it just seems sophomoric.

The artist has invited visitors to add to the exhibit. In one booth there's a contribution of an empty bottle of vitamins with a napkin reading: "The illness has spread in and out of the immune system . . . we have no vitamins to heal the wounds . . . we have expression . . . and thank God(ess) for that."

There it is: Vietnam, not to mention all of American life, as a disease, with



the only cure being expressing oneself.

Alienation shows up in, say, Lloyd Wolf's photographs of people at the Vietnam memorial. In the tradition of Diane Arbus or Lee Friedlander, he shows us frightened, puzzled, freakish people. Alienation even appears in a backhanded sort of way in the dye-transfer color photographs by Larry Burrows, a *Life* photographer who found a terrible beauty in Vietnam, as in a stunning photograph of soldiers carrying the wounded through wind-blown grass. But that beauty puts you at one remove from the combat he portrays. It makes Vietnam static and final, kind of like the America you used to imagine when you finished reading an issue of *Life* during the 1950s.

More immediate, by comparison, are those veterans' snapshots, such as Nancy Floyd's memorial to her brother James M. Floyd, or the photographs taken by an ABC television journalist named Don North. He lacks Burrows' finesse, but that lack puts him closer to his subjects—a picture of a man giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a wounded comrade is enough to make you cry.

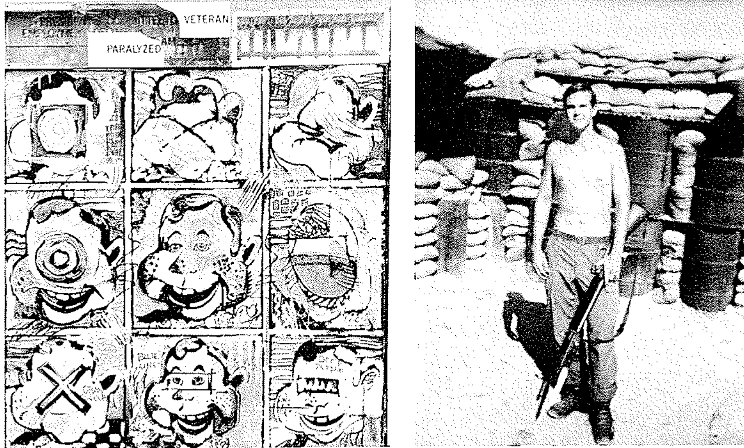
The Vietnam era was a decadent one, and decadence prompts nostalgia—the Lost Generation in the Paris of the '20s, the Beat Generation of the '50s, Berlin during the Weimar Republic, turn-of-the-century Vienna.

In America during the war, the decadence on both sides of the issue was more than the violence, intellectual arrogance, situation ethics, self-righteous hating, and cookie-cutter "love" of the kind that was always trying to sell something. (Remember all the horrible smiling—by Lyndon Johnson when he wound up his speeches, by protesters when they inserted flowers into National Guard rifle muzzles?)

What was decadent was believing that abandoning law and custom and embracing outrage and cultural anarchy would lead us all to some higher good.

Everybody marched to different drummers, and all the drummers were taking nonstop apocalyptic solos.

We could hardly wait for the world to end: the college students reciting Yeats' "A Second Coming"; the John Birchers waiting for the Commies to land in California; the marijuana Buddhists keeping their bathtubs full of drinking water in case the revolution happened *that very night*; and the men in Vietnam who played so many variations on the romance of despair: "It don't mean a thing"; "Better him than me"; "No



more boom-boom for that mama-san."

There was a hellish glamour to it, not to mention the glow of moral certainty, and a soundtrack courtesy of the golden age of rock 'n' roll. No wonder a generation can't let it go.

This nostalgia and romance may account for the heaviness of so much Vietnam-era art, both good and bad—a sodden, drugged quality.

Think of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, or movies that exploit our notions of Vietnam, such as *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now*.

Look at an absolutely silly movie in the WPA program called *Aspects of a Certain History*, in which, among other things, the camera gives us the outside of an American barn for minutes on end while Vietnamese words appear on the screen, untranslated. It's like the worst possible combination of a Noh play and a slide show from the Dairy Council.

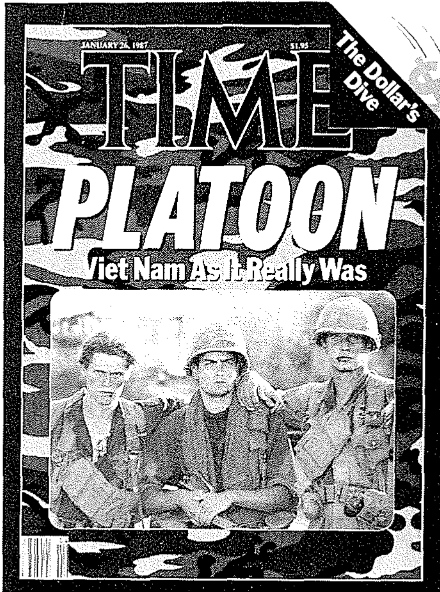
Look at the 16 skull-sculptures on sticks in the powerful Joe Shannon installation in the basement at WPA. (They recall the movie *Apocalypse Now*, which took the images from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.) It is called "Leroy's Tour." There are slides from Vietnam, there are slides of a black man, painted with spots, dancing around naked. There's a soundtrack on which a woman sings, in the kind of music that gets played when the credits come up after a long, exhausting, weeper of a movie: "There is sensation . . . somewhere within the nation . . . ."

There was indeed. The Vietnam era was the Age of Feelings, a sort of secular Sacred Heart movement that exalted on ecstasy and suffering, and Shannon captures it.

What has been left out of the show is just as important as what's in it.

There are the conventional omissions. There is little hint of the bravery, loyalty, and skill with which American troops fought a pathologically warlike regime; Communist Vietnam today, 15 years after our troops left, has a larger army than we do.

The WPA program almost revels in our defeat but largely ignores the Communists' victory. This is perhaps because Hanoi's leaders failed utterly to live up to their American admirers' pipe dreams of democracy and the New Man. Also, recognizing a victory would go against the piety that "in war there are no victors." Tell this to the boat people who fled Vietnam in 1975. The only hints of Communist cruelty and corruption on WPA's walls come from quilts made by



Hmong tribesmen and from photographs by Hanh Thi Pham.

There's little in this show about the satisfactions and pleasures of war. This would be heresy. But pleasures there are in slaughter (or in brotherly survival), which is one reason wars get fought, and a very big reason they get won. One film from 1968, Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig,* shows Col. George S. Patton III talking about attending a memorial service the night before. He says his soldiers were "determined" and "reverent," and then his face stretches out in a ghastly grin as he calls them "a bloody good bunch of killers." Is it the British slang that's troubling? Is it the grin? A Canadian documentary called *Mills of the Gods: Vietnam* shows an American pilot strafing and bombing. Moments afterward, in the cockpit of his A1A Skyraider, he says: "That's great fun. I really like to do that. We really hosed 'em down."

In the air-conditioned hush of a movie theater, these statements are grotesque. There is no way they couldn't be, wrenched out of a context the uninitiated find as impossible to imagine as combat.

The Department of Defense didn't do any better with a propaganda film from 1965 called *Why Vietnam?* It provokes the same suspicion that somebody is blowing smoke at somebody; it even contains some of the same footage as the antiwar films, such as shots of the French being overrun at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. (These shots were, of course, staged for the cameras by the Communists after their victory.) WPA says *Why Vietnam?* was shown to troops embarking for Vietnam. This is hard to imagine. How could anybody hit the beaches running after watching endless minutes of Secretary of State Dean Rusk discussing the finer points of peace negotiations?

There was so much pathetic hooey from leaders and intellectuals on all sides during Vietnam.

Consider Lyndon Johnson mouthing the platitudes of internationalism and asking our soldiers to fight for peace, not victories, which is a little like asking football players to play a Super Bowl for

the exercise.

Consider a left-wing film called *The People's War,* which shows the North Vietnamese people planting rice, sawing wood, building boats, and generally working like the sort of cheery beavers that can be believed only by people who themselves have never done manual labor, except as part of some politically correct getaway, such as flying down to Cuba to help cut sugar cane. It also has a North Vietnamese saying: "We want to remember everything, not only our suffering but our hatred and our victories."

Most Americans see no virtue in remembering hatred, but it would be useful to remember the victories along with our suffering. We fought well. We should remember that.

Film had a lot more power to persuade during the 1960s and early 1970s, when we were still fascinated with the medium. Now, it seems clumsier. A look at half a dozen or so of the score of films in the WPA program demonstrates that it isn't the images that have the power, it's the soundtrack. *The People's War* begins with shots taken from a vehicle moving quickly down a narrow road. Add the sound of explosions, and the film evokes the horrors of the bombing of North Vietnam. Take the explosions away and all you've got is a travelogue.

The WPA's book is called *Unwinding the Vietnam War*. It's an anthology published by the Real Comet Press in Seattle. What good writing there is gets asphyxiated by the whining and clichés. There's poetry that you could retype as prose, and no one would know the difference. There's the claim that a deserter who died of a drug overdose was as much a "victim" of "the '60s and that war as anybody."

And here is the pervasive, insistent, absurd, nonstop therapy: "A larger national healing depends first upon hearing the anger and pain of the veterans." Here is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, in the announcement that this book supports "the shift from a mechanistic to a holistic conception of the world." And don't forget, folks, war is bad for your sex life, too: "The Soldier is virtually incapacitated when he meets women. We reduced our sexuality to an organ requiring periodic discharge. But . . . women do not want to be targets in some sexual shooting range."

It wasn't much of a war, but it was the only war we had, as a staff sergeant or two used to say. Now the alumni of the antiwar movement seem to be saying the same thing. Once it looked as if Americans would forget all about it, as they forgot about Korea. Now we can't stop remembering.

Maybe it's all culminating this year, maybe Americans will feel either satisfied or fed up, and Vietnam will be left in peace. Maybe it will turn into bad box office, and Hollywood will lose interest. Maybe we'll learn to make art about it without all the conspicuous irony, leaden sanctimony, and chronic victimhood—would it even be possible to do comedies that could be to Vietnam what *Mr. Roberts* or *Catch 22* were to World War II? In any case, it's hard to imagine that Vietnam won't be good for years more fellowships, foundation funding, and graduate design projects.

So far it has been like a tapestry that some national Penelope keeps weaving every day and unweaving every night while she waits for her Ulysses to come home a hero. Will she recognize him when he does? Will she be glad?