

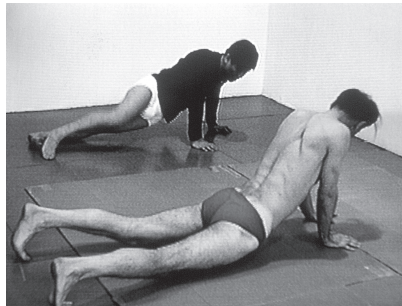
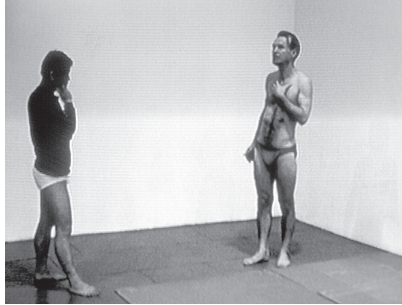
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## Displaced Bodies in Residual Spaces

*Simon Leung and Marita Sturken*

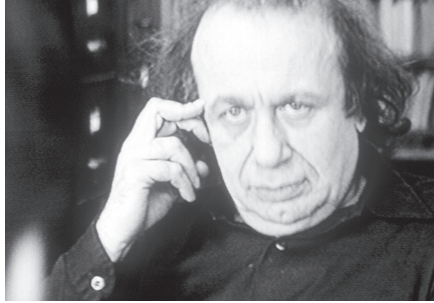
Between 1992 and 1998, Simon Leung made three works that engage, in his words, “the residual space of the Vietnam War.” Involving installation, performance, and a variety of media, these three projects explore the residual effects of the violence of the U.S. war through an examination of identities forged through violence and the subsequent movements of people—as veterans, deserters, refugees, and immigrants—produced by the war. These three works reflect on the ways in which identity is conveyed through the body and through such unexpected practices as squatting and surfing.

The first of these projects, *Warren Piece (in the '70s)*, was presented in early 1993 at the exhibition space P.S. 1 in New York. *Warren Piece* was simultaneously a portrait of Warren Niesluchowski, then assistant to the director of P.S. 1, and a meditation on the history of P.S. 1, which opened in 1976 with *Rooms*, an exhibition that would become a cornerstone in the theorization of site-specificity and 1970s art. The work articulates a parallel between Niesluchowski's biography—as a deserter from the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War who lived in exile in France from 1968 to 1975—and the aesthetics of late 1960s/early 1970s postminimalist art practices such as site-specificity, the aesthetic terrain of which *Rooms* was a part. Although predominantly abstract in form, postminimalist work from this period was often rhetorically situated by advocates within its contemporary political frame as being implicitly in opposition to the American military intervention in Vietnam. *Warren Piece* was comprised of three videos and various carbon copies of photos and texts that refer in various ways to P.S. 1,



Details from "How Far is Far  
from Vietnam?" from *Warren  
Piece (in the '70s)*, 1993





Top, "Under History Lessons  
1993"

Center, installation view

Bottom, "Father/Son"

All images from *Warren Piece*  
(in the '70s), 1993

Warren, and the Vietnam War. The three videos included *Under History Lessons 1993*, an interview Leung conducted with the artist Vito Acconci, who participated in Rooms; *Songs 1968–1975*, a video showing Niesluchowski working in P.S. 1 overlaid with a sound track of a conversation in which he recounted his life in exile and intercut with Niesluchowski singing songs associated with the Left in their original languages, among them the “Internationale,” “Avanti Popolo,” and “The East Is Red”; and *How Far is Far from Vietnam?*, a video of Leung and Niesluchowski doing a series of movements from director Jerzy Grotowski’s physical exercises for actors, overlaid with a sound track on which Leung repeats the question “How far is far from Vietnam?” The three looped videos, played simultaneously, underscored the interrelation between history and biography, past and present, politics and art.

Leung completed the second project, *Squatting Project/Berlin*, in 1994, at the invitation of the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst in Berlin for the exhibition GEWALT/Geschäfte (The Business of Violence), which addressed the xenophobic violence manifesting in the newly unified Germany, in the Balkan states upon the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere in Europe. For this project, Leung made a thousand posters that were wheat-pasted on the sides of buildings, bus shelters, and other freestanding structures around the city of Berlin, depicting a nearly life-size Asian figure squatting with his back to the viewer. Five hundred of the posters included this text (in German):

Proposal:

1. Imagine a city of squatters, an entire city in which everyone created their own chairs with their own bodies.
2. When you are tired, or when you need to wait, participate in this position.
3. Observe the city again from this squatting position.

During the decades after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, East Germany contracted Vietnamese guest workers to work undesirable menial jobs. After the reunification of Germany in the early 1990s, however, the restructured labor market in Germany no longer accommodated the Vietnamese immigrants, and Germany forcibly repatriated fifty thousand of the sixty thousand Vietnamese “guest workers” in 1992–93. Lacking official legal status, many of these Vietnamese residents of Germany survived in cities like Berlin via an informal underground economy, trading in black market goods such as cigarettes. In 1998 Leung made a related project for the Generali Foundation in Vienna called *Squatting Project/Wien*, in which he had himself photographed squatting in front of all the real

estate holdings of the Generali Corporation (the foundation's corporate parent) throughout the city of Vienna. In these squatting projects, Leung depicts the displaced body as one whose posture is removed from a context in which it is common practice and inserted into a context in which it is strange, out of place, alien. In addition, this obstinate, low-to-the-ground quality evokes another meaning of "squatting" in English—taking that which is not one's own—squatting a building, for instance.

The final work of the series, *Surf Vietnam* (1992–98), was exhibited in proposal form for several years before it was completed as a site-specific project in 1998 at the Huntington Beach Art Center in Orange County, California. Huntington Beach, which officially promotes itself as "Surf City," is site of the largest surfing competition in the world, the U.S. Open of Surfing. Situated directly inland from Huntington Beach is Little Saigon, the largest Vietnamese community outside Vietnam. Leung took as his point of departure for *Surf Vietnam* a 1992 story from the Style section of the *New York Times*, entitled "Surf's Up at China Beach," about the return of Americans (a team of teenage surfers on a goodwill surfing tour) to China Beach earlier that year. *Surf Vietnam* was a continually evolving, seven-week project that took place simultaneously inside and outside the exhibition space in various off-site venues throughout Orange County. Nineteen identical surfboards were printed with an enlarged reproduction of the newspaper article and arranged into six different installations, each providing an interpretation of the language of the newspaper article: "Apocalypse Now," "The Vietnamese are waiting for us to come," and "The kids really enjoyed getting up on the board." Leung also produced three additional installations in collaboration with members from three groups in Orange County: the Huntington Beach High School surfing team, a Vietnam veterans group from the Anaheim Vet Center, and Vietnamese immigrants who were formerly refugees interned at the nearby Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base. A video triptych comprising three videos, *China Beach*, *thrownness*, and *Surf's Up!*, played continuously during the course of the exhibition.

**Marita Sturken:** You have described *Surf Vietnam* as a work about the "residual space" of the Vietnam War. Let's talk about the concept of a residual space. What does it mean exactly? A space in which there is a residue that cannot be erased or ignored or wiped away? A residue that is haunting, irritating, a smudge, a stain? Is a residue a memory?

**Simon Leung:** The term *residual space* came to me when I began to mull over how to talk about the texture of the three pieces I conceived around



*Squatting Project/Berlin, 1994, public project of one thousand posters on the streets of Berlin*

the aftermath of the Vietnam War—works that address a relationship to the Vietnam War from what I think of as an almost uncanny, parallel perspective. I was thinking of the way in which the trauma of this historical event returns in fragments, in innocuous, slight, but emotionally undigested forms. When you take a detail of a lived scenario like a squatting Asian body in a European city or the discovery that someone you know was a deserter during the Vietnam War, it can easily pass you by. But if we shift the focus a bit, an entirely parallel story comes into focus—one that retells these details as mirrors of historical trauma.

I am interested in how these moments gnaw at you psychically and how you cannot ever give an uncomplicated read of these details because they lie on a psychic border between fiction and history. So what I call “the residual space of the Vietnam War” (which is not a term that I lay an authorial claim to) is something that I have noticed again and again in relation to representations of the war. For example—and this is of course an old insight—one can contend that many Hollywood films that were peopled with substantial numbers of Asians, between, say, 1975 to the late 1980s (and probably beyond), were tied to an unresolved self-conception the United States had of itself vis-à-vis the Vietnam War. In this sense, the *Rambo* films obviously exist in a residual space of the Vietnam War, but then so does a film like *Year of the Dragon*.

**MS:** *Year of the Dragon* is an interesting way to think about residue. One way that I have been thinking about this in relation to other events that have been marked as “traumatic” to U.S. national identity is in terms of repetition and reenactment—how can we look at the repetition of history as a kind of traumatic compulsion to repeat? So, in a recent example, have the events of September 11 produced repetitive forms in media, photographs, and architecture, indeed in a final design that is all about repeating the traumatic moment itself. In a sense, your work responds to the constant replay of Vietnam narrative in relation to more residual forms of its effect.

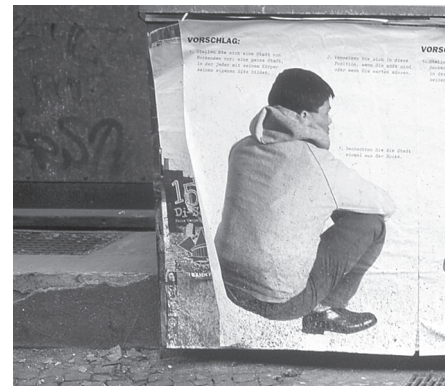
**SL:** Yes, we live in the residual space of September 11 now. The repetition of trauma is a key feature of the manipulation of mourning—we know that from September 11, from Vietnam, from the rise of Nazism. Memory is built up, like a residue, through repeating the same stories. “Residual space” evokes a sense of the remainder—the psychically repressed that is bound to return. In terms of the Vietnam War, repetition is obviously related to two dynamics: First, the war was fought as a moral struggle in the American psyche, so in this sense the Vietnamese term for this war—“the American War”—is apt. Second, the United States withdrew shortly before the end of an unwinnable war; and since the North Vietnamese ultimately did win,

the residual in the American context is tied to losing, to loss. Rick Berg and Kelly Dennis have both cited Walter Benjamin in writing about this: in losing the Vietnam War, the United States loses the right to represent it. The Vietnam War always needs to be remade, refought, because it forever places the U.S. in the place of a lack.

**MS:** You present yourself as a person with a diasporic identity shaped by a particular trajectory—Hong Kong, northern California, New York, Los Angeles—one that is marked by travel, movement, attention to location, and a complex relationship to the notion of home. In your work, however, you are looking at the identities of those whose trajectories have been quite different—in particular, to varying degrees, Vietnamese immigrants and Vietnam War veterans have factored strongly in these works. How do you see the negotiation of identity in these projects in relation to ethnic identity? How is it that Vietnam is a trope for you and not, say, something about your own Chinese American identity? To what degree have you had to negotiate what we might call vulgar identity politics in relation to this work—where people have asked you if you are trying to speak for the Vietnamese?

**SL:** Well, *home* is an uncomfortable word for some of us. Where I live never feels like home to me, but just because the word doesn't feel real, it doesn't mean that I don't use it—all words, when pushed enough, are catachrestic. Now that I live in California, I consider New York home. When I lived in New York, I used to imagine the drive between northern and southern California on Highway 5 to be a working definition of the word *home*. The landscape you get from driving on the 5 is mostly farmland, and the highway is at times so straight for so long that you can end up driving 100 mph without really being completely cognizant—its experience is tied to forgetting, it lends itself to an abstraction like *home*.

*Squatting Project/Berlin, 1994, public project of one thousand posters on the streets of Berlin*

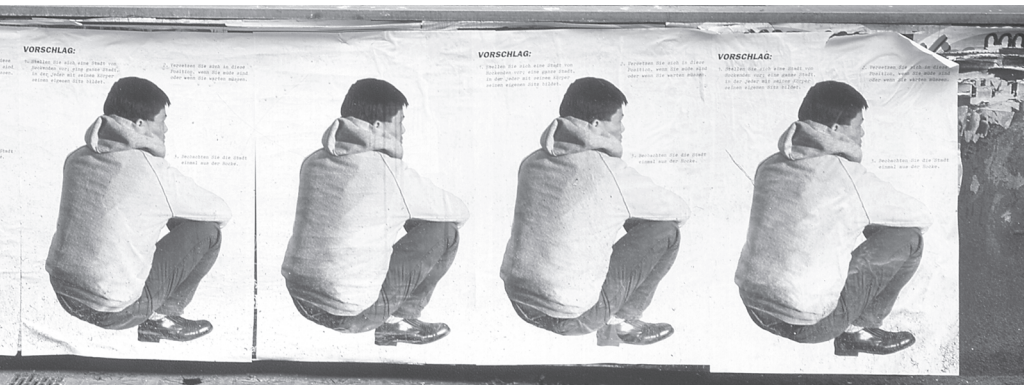




**MS:** For those who live in Los Angeles or the Bay Area, that stretch of highway is usually marked as a nonplace, an in-between space that is defined by being driven past and through.

**SL:** Yes, the overriding feeling I got was that I was in it but that I had no relationship to it; and more specifically, that I had no *right* to it—although it's the landscape I am most familiar with. This idea of having a right to the land is something I think about often—how a sense of belonging to a nation is so tied to the rhetoric of the land. Is this diasporic subjectivity? I don't know. Personally, I never felt a right to “land.” Growing up in Hong Kong, a refugee city, there was always an anxiety about belonging because the status of the place itself was always unclear—its sovereignty was nebulous, its future uncertain.

In regard to identity politics, these were familiar battles for anyone who lived through the 1990s—negotiating between identities, essentialisms, positions through which to speak, strategies through which to act—all that was at the heart of how I went about these projects. What I was compelled to think through was how each identity, once we name it as such, already gives us a narrative in the collective imagination. In the art world of the late 1980s and 1990s, identity politics based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., were at the fore. In practice, that often meant a demand to “perform” identity, a naturalization of community. I was interested in how a feeling of certitude and resentment about identity pervaded much of the discourse in art. Assumptions were routinely made about who is allowed to speak for whom or how people of color were always assumed to be speaking autobiographically. In a sense, I negotiated “vulgar identity politics responses” before I made the work—I anticipated these questions by incorporating misrecognition—say, in the manner that Lacan talks about the construction of identity



THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1992

# Surf's Up at China Beach

By The Associated Press

**T**WO decades after the Marines left China Beach in Vietnam, Americans will surf again at the spot that was a popular recreational area during the war.

China Beach became well known to the public because of an ABC television series and a scene in the movie "Apocalypse Now," which showed a

soldier surfing as a village was strafed behind him.

In December, the beach is to be the site of an international surfing tournament. Vietnamese officials have invited members of the surfing team at San Clemente (Calif.) High School to represent the United States.

"The Vietnamese are waiting for us to come," said Bruce Hopping of Laguna Beach, Calif., a patron of the International Surfing Association. He and a delegation of surfers from Orange County, Calif., visited Vietnam

in August, scouting tournament sites. Mr. Hopping runs the Kalos Kagathos Foundation, a Laguna Beach organization that will sponsor the tournament. The foundation will also pay for the 12-member American team to go to Vietnam Dec. 14 to 31.

Mr. Hopping said that after looking over various locations, the surfers and their Vietnamese hosts chose China Beach, which is on the South China Sea. The waves were only a couple of feet high during his visit last month, he said. But typhoon season,

which begins in September and runs through December, should raise them to about 15 feet.

Josh Vesque, 16 years old, a junior at San Clemente High School, said his Vietnamese hosts were interested in learning to surf, rather than talking about the war.

"The kids really enjoyed getting up on the board," he added.

The China Beach tournament will feature amateur teams from Japan, Réunion (an island near Madagascar), South Africa, Indonesia and the United States, Mr. Hopping said. If it's a success, the Association of Surfing Professionals could add Vietnam to the 1993 pro tour.

as a primary misrecognition in "the mirror stage"—into the operational process of making the work. This questioning of certitude—that what one sees is never irreducible, authentic, original, etc.—was a primary part of my art education. So for me it seemed logical that misrecognition can literally be a theoretical support of my work. In fact, part of the reason I undertook these projects was to elicit the common response that "I must be Vietnamese" because I occupy a body that can be read as such and then allow that misreading to be a part of the discourse of the work. In this sense, I take to heart what I propose to be a Duchampian premise: that a discourse around the work of art can be thought of as the medium of the work, because it is a performative operation—the discourse is not secondary, it's the support.

It's true that I seem to set up identities based on terms like *veterans* or *immigrants* or even *squatters* and *deserters*. But they are in fact ciphers through which I interrogate the stringency of such identities. This is played out in each of the three works: In *Warren Piece* I shuffle between an art discourse (site-specificity), a building (P.S. 1), a person (Warren), an identity (deserter), and an event (the Vietnam War) to create indexical relationships that somehow cohere into a story. In *Squatting Project/Berlin* I used a misreading, what Žižek calls "the indivisible remainder"—the squatting Asian body—to reframe subjectivity in the city. The squatting body in and of itself means nothing, but through a gaze in the metropolitan West situated within a historical framework, it can be read as an alien body.

In *Surf Vietnam*, my thinking was really more toward situating the enunciation of an identity or community such as "surfer" or "veteran" or "Vietnamese" as a kind of speech act and in doing so to outline the borders around these categories. Most groups I approached for collaboration were uninterested, hostile even: they questioned why anyone should dredge up



v 5



China Beach, where a scene in "Apocalypse Now," above, was filmed.

this painful moment in their lives, and they questioned my right to represent this historical moment exactly because I was not Vietnamese, not a veteran, not a surfer.

I wanted *Surf Vietnam* to play out how an identity speaks an individual, how identities become sites of rhetorical selves and others, psychological placeholders of emotional lives and historical violence, and yet, ultimately, how they are forms of enunciation that one must take up. Central to my mode of operation was to frame community as a kind of procedure. This is why I emphasize language as a model in *Surf Vietnam*—I made nineteen boards that had to be rechoreographed each week, but each week they speak again an interpretation of the newspaper article, framed by a category that speaks the speakers themselves. This plays out identity against a field of contingencies—the same nineteen words can be rechoreographed to produce difference—*différance*, if you will. This is why I prefer the term *politics of difference* to *identity politics*.

**MS:** It is interesting to think about squatting and surfing as two particular kinds of activities/practices that frame your work. In the U.S. and Europe, as you describe, squatting indicates the diaspora as an “un(der)assimilated” practice. When you squat, metaphorically or in a building, you don’t belong. It is quite striking in the squatting photographs that you look so “out of place” squatting in Vienna; you look cold and uncomfortable, not at home. The practice of squatting is physically demanding—it is a kind of discipline. For someone for whom squatting is a daily practice, it is a comfortable position. For others, who work to squat through practices like yoga, squatting is painful, uncomfortable, something to achieve—it is about the achievement of “flexibility,” that goal of postindustrial capitalism.

Squatting is a kind of waiting—especially in the story you tell about it.



So is surfing. Waiting for the wave. I have often driven up the Pacific Coast Highway early in the morning, and I am struck always by the number of surfers who sit out on the water on mornings when there clearly will be no waves. Yet they stay there, as the water rises and falls, in a rhythm that seems, strangely, like the whole point. You call surfing a “Heideggerian sport,” which seems a little like overkill—why?

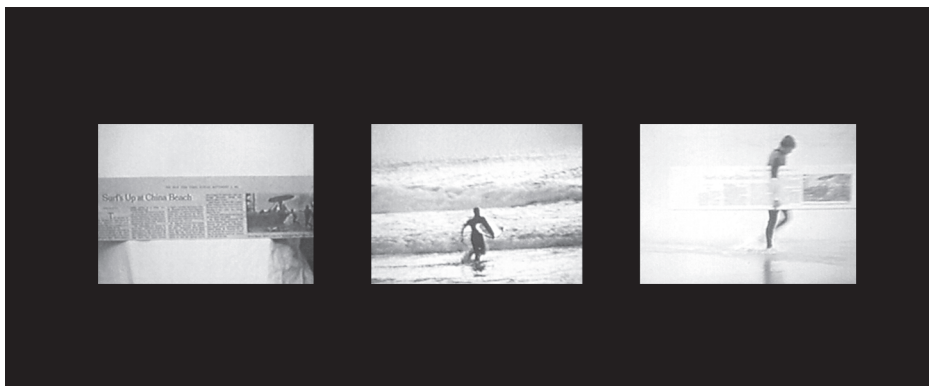
**SL:** When I began working on these projects in the early 1990s, there was no official recognition of Vietnam. The American economic embargo on Vietnam was still in place, so a great deal of the discourse around Vietnam in this country was tied to waiting, perhaps the waiting for a more concluding sentence from history. Yes, in my writing I’ve theorized squatting as a depiction of the subject in a metaphysics of waiting—the fact that this physical position has racial, ethnic overtones in the West allows for it to be read in particular ways. For example: not belonging, or servitude, or abjec-



Left to right, *China Beach*, *thrownness*, and *Surf’s Up!* from *Surf Vietnam*, 1998

tion under Capital. I was interested in how squatting conjugates the body in a field of violence—the racialized squatting body is seen to squat a country the way illegal occupants of real estate are seen to squat a building.

Although *Surf Vietnam* was the last project to be completed, it was the first one conceived. From the very beginning I thought about surfing in a multitude of ways—as theme, trope, aesthetic model, perhaps even an ethical ideal. For example, surfing gives us a romantic idealization of the self, the spirit. To say that someone is like a surfer suggests a whole mythic worldview—evoking an image of a silent, athletic, sensitive, childlike free-thinker standing apart from the contamination of culture. One can argue



that in the film *Apocalypse Now*, surfing was portrayed as the other to soldiering.

Ironically, this mythic notion of the surfer had to confront some ugly contemporary manifestations: Due to the coastal overpopulation of California, by the 1990s there were too few spots for too many surfers. Instead of embodying the free spirit, in some places surfers were becoming more aligned with skinheads—enforcing a “locals only” code. Surfing spots became sites of xenophobic turf wars—the opposite of *Endless Summer*! When you look at surfing historically, you get a story of colonialism, the real-estate development of southern California, the rise of the military industries (fiberglass and foam, what surfboards are made of, came from military technology), not to mention the beautiful, golden California child—which is largely how the story “Surf’s Up at China Beach” came to me.

For me, waiting is at the center of the aesthetics of surfing. The image of surfers waiting for waves was what led me to think about it as a “Heideggerian sport.” I tell this to people half in jest, but what I was drawn to



*Surf Vietnam*, 1998, first installation view, "Apocalypse Now"



*Surf Vietnam*, 1998, second installation view, “The Vietnamese are waiting for us to come”



*Surf Vietnam*, 1998, third installation view, “The kids really enjoyed getting up on the board”





*Surf Vietnam*, 1998, fourth installation view, in collaboration with Huntington Beach High School surfing team



*Surf Vietnam*, 1998, fifth installation view, in collaboration with Monday Evening Veterans Group, Anaheim Vet Center





*Surf Vietnam*, 1998, sixth installation view, in collaboration with Mai Cong

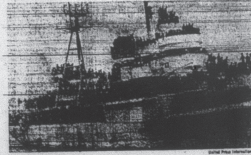
# The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2, 1975

## SOUTH VIETNAMESE YIELD QUI NHON AND REPORTEDLY QUIT NHA TRANG; COMMUNISTS PUSH NEARER SAIGON



A man described as a U.S. official assisting a man trying to board an overbooked plane yesterday in Nha Trang.



Pioneer Commander, U.S. ship carrying South Vietnamese marines, arrives at Cam Ranh.

### *For Those Who Flee, Life Is 'Hell on Earth'*

The following dispatch is from Le Kim Dinh, a member of the Saigon Bureau of The New York Times, who returned yesterday from two days at Cam Ranh.

#### At Cam Ranh

SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 1.—Cam Ranh Bay, one of the most strategically important ports on the South China Sea, has become a hell on earth for the hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese who have arrived here from the North and are being held in a state of limbo, part of the country.

Today, they are strictly kept apart from what they are carrying and giving them little.

Cam Ranh Bay, one of the

*Surf Vietnam*, 1998, sixth installation view, in collaboration with Le Kim Dinh. Le Kim Dinh collaborated with Leung to make a twentieth board. He was the *New York Times* reporter who in 1974 wrote the front-page article that appears on this twentieth board.

was exactly the idea of a solitary figure in front of the vast ocean, an image of “thrownness” if you will, looking at the very figure of the limit—the horizon, and waiting, waiting. . . . In *thrownness*, another of the videos from *Surf Vietnam*, I show surfers paddling out to the ocean, waiting for waves. Each scene fades out with the surfer waiting in the water, not surfing, just waiting. Heidegger talks about the present as “waiting toward” (*gegenwart*), and it seemed to me that the lone surfer is always confronting the division and unity of two things—the self and the ocean—much like how the subject in Heidegger confronts Being, awaiting being “called into Being.” This “being called” is poignantly enacted in the transition between waiting and surfing: when a wave comes, one must turn one’s back on the horizon, forget all meditation and try to become a part of it, sit one’s body on top of it—or get swallowed by it. And of course, Heidegger isolates three key images that are tied to thinking the event of the killing of God—the sun, the horizon, and the sea.

**MS:** You describe *Surf Vietnam* as an “attempt to bring forth a discursive screen of cultural memory by reworking the politics of media debris from the recent past.” Let’s take, for instance, the way that the “place” of China Beach allows you to look at this. China Beach is an abstract concept of a place—first, a place named for another place, so a literal kind of displacement. There is a long tradition of this in U.S. military culture—naming a place for another place in code—Omaha Beach, Nebraska Beach. Beaches in particular have been the sites of such military renamings. How are actual places reconfigured by these abstract renamings and fantasies of location?

It seems to me that this could be looked at as a kind of tourism of history. By this, I don’t actually mean those contexts in which sites of history have become tourist sites but rather what it means to live history through the paradigm of tourism, to experience historical events via the media, via a text, through commodities and souvenirs or through someone else’s memory. The subjectivity of the tourism of history is a kind of experience once or twice removed yet an experience nevertheless. To go to China Beach with a surfboard is to experience the place as a fiction, the China Beach of the GI’s imagination, of the television show, of a scene from a movie, of the fantasy held by young American men that they could escape the hell that was the war. Tourists and surfers return, and in so doing, they have an experience of a place, a beach, filtered through their understandings of those representations of history.

Couldn’t we also say that you are struggling with this very same question—the engagement that you have with histories that are not your own but that are filtering through the media and cultural objects? So, the tourism of history that you are delving into is about residue, cultural memory, one

could even say postmemory (the process of experiencing the memories of one's parent), and it is enacted in part through practices of tourism—resort hotels, surfing—and practices of travel that are not touristic (squatting) but out of place.

**SL:** I shot the third video for *Surf Vietnam* at the China Beach in San Francisco. It's a simple 360° pan where I make it very clear that it's San Francisco, because I include a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge, a prototypical tourist background. San Francisco's China Beach is related to *the* China Beach only in name. China Beach in the video is a simulacrum, but then so is China Beach in Vietnam.

The name China Beach was, as you say, given by American soldiers to a recreational site that offered respite from war; the Vietnamese never called it China Beach. Thus from the moment of its naming, the displacement that China Beach enacts was already tied to a genre of tourism—R & R. Furthermore, the very location of China Beach was open to touristic reinvention. By 1997, a \$35 million luxury resort opened in China Beach in Vietnam, and China Beach was designated a resort area. The Vietnamese government's official reappropriation of a name given by what it saw as an imperialistic invader is both ironic and practical—the success of this resort depends on the historical tourism—they count on the tourism of former American soldiers returning to China Beach. For years after the war, the Vietnamese avoided using the name because of its association with the American occupation, but China Beach is the name Americans know, so from a marketing perspective it's a good brand. This irony is furthered by the geographical fact that what is called China Beach isn't even the same China Beach from the war. That China Beach, where airplane hangers stood, is visible from the resort, but it's not where the resort is built. In this sense, China Beach was always already bound up with the rhetoric of a ready-made “escape” from history.

You are right in suggesting that my work struggles with histories that are not my own, but I think that's exactly the use of history as public memories. History is too difficult a word to belong to anyone comfortably—some find it useful to dispense with the term and refer to *genealogy*, a much broader term that relies less on conventional narratives and biographical facts than on discourses. But I like the term *history*—it's catachrestic, it signifies something you can write against. It's a contentious word. What do we mean by history? Is American history mine, now that I live in the United States? Is the Vietnam War a part of American history? What, exactly, constitutes a relationship to a historical event?

**MS:** The question of owning history is also related to the contested issue of experience. Our culture defines one's relationship to history in relation to

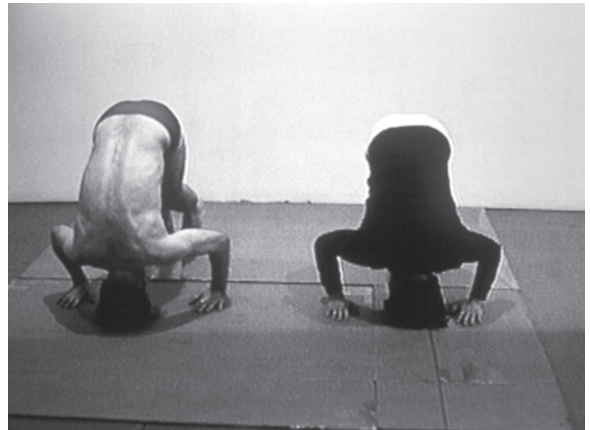
hierarchies of experience, with the survivor being at the top. Yet, we could also argue that we experience the *effect* of particular historical events in equally powerful ways—not in a postmodern sense of surface but in the residual terms you present—through media, through our parents, through tourist practices.

**SL:** Yes, what I call the residual space of the Vietnam War is never discrete but is always reimplicating the subject back into a historical framework. How, for example, does an artist born and raised in Hong Kong, which for more than a decade was the site of Vietnamese refugee camps, renegotiate his subjectivity from being Asian to being American? If Hollywood continues to fight imaginary Vietnams through Asian bodies on the screen, what is the relationship between any Asian American body and the imaginary Vietnam that's kept alive in representation? This goes toward a thinking of the discourse of history as a social space where the meaning and unity of the social (events, relationships, legacies, memory) are at once constituted and questioned.

**MS:** I am curious about the degree to which you have operated as a commentator, if not a critic, on your own work—theorizing it while producing it and responding to it with theory. It's refreshing that you are willing to talk about the work, yet at the same time, it also seems that you are standing outside it and viewing it like an art critic. How do you feel about these different modes of production?

**SL:** Well, the artist is always a receiver as well as a producer. After Duchamp, after poststructuralism, after TV, it's too tough-going to try to maintain a pose of singular originator. The production of art is never separate from its theorization, each work of art theorizes. Art is always in discourse, always proposing a theory, though not always in words.

The reality of an artist working in a project-based mode—that is, one not bound to a specific medium like photography or painting—is that one is always responsible for how one is framed, and one often needs to reinvent the context of reception because the audience is not a given but needs to be developed. On a practical level, one needs to coordinate the fabricators; contract a crew; learn skills as needed to produce the work; write the grants and press releases; explain the work to the curator (because the work is never finished before it's shown); do the interviews with the press. . . .



By the time the work is shown, a whole parallel discourse besides the work itself runs through the artist's head. In short, one must dispense with a privileged notion of authorial withdrawal just to make the work. In a way, one is often already performing the skills needed for "different modes of production" as an artist.

**MS:** I am struck in your work by the strategy of empathy. Most artists hate that term—it seems too touchy-feely, too uncool. Yet we could also argue that empathy forms a kind of radical politics and that, if nothing else, we are at a moment of political contestation that is profoundly and disturbingly unempathetic. Can you talk about empathy as a concept or strategy in general?

**SL:** Empathy is not only putting oneself in the place of the other but implicitly also the capacity to occupy more than one subject position at once. What can be more useful during a time when the powers that be act from a position of absolutely self-centered, unambivalent certainty? To think empathetically is to submit to a threshold effect, to the possibility of a radical interrogation of subjectivity. So yes, empathy, or compassion, can be a political strategy, because without this interrogation of the certitude of self, how can there be change? Ironically, as the political climate grows more oppressive, I actually feel better and better about being an artist. Empathy may be one of the ways we can, as Richard Foreman says, "RESIST THE PRESENT!"

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