

An Eye for an Eye: Art, Memory, and the American War in Viet Nam⁺

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I was delighted when Professor Guy Beauregard invited me to give a talk at National Taiwan University. I chose to lecture on how Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Vietnamese have remembered the Vietnam War through art and its display. During my lecture, I examined memorials, monuments, museums and the art exhibited in these sites. I discussed both dominant nationalist practices of commemoration and the minor antinationalism of some artists from both countries and the diaspora, who articulate an ethics of empathy that challenge audiences to remember the dead of all sides. I argued that American, Vietnamese, and diasporic societies not only fought the war differently, but also remember and represent it in radically incommensurate ways, extending to art and its display. These societies are each marked by their own contradictions, which

shape how art functions. Contemporary American art on the war is a small and sharp needle jutting through an increasingly smooth "texture of memory" about the wartime past, where the American War is no longer regarded as a misguided imperial adventure but as a failed noble endeavor. Unlike American art on the war, Vietnamese art work is major in the sense that it is state-sanctioned and expresses deeply nationalist impulses—pro-war, pro-revolution, pro-Communist Party. Vietnamese diasporic art is marked by the anxieties of being produced from a minority community, small and struggling to be heard, fearing that its history is being forgotten. I surveyed these different types of art and sampled from the wide and energetic range of what is visible: "high" and "low" art, fine art and kitsch, the original and the mass produced, the auteuristic and the propagandistic.

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For me, the greatest joy of presenting scholarship overseas is found not primarily in lecturing, but in engaging an audience with a significantly different background and set of assumptions than myself. In NTU's case, the undergraduates, graduate students, visiting scholars and faculty who attended the lecture asked keen questions of me afterwards, and it was a pleasure for me to answer them. I was particularly honored by the presence and response of Dr. Te-hsing Shan, the Director of the Institute of European and American Studies at Academia Sinica, who has also written about memorials, literature, and the American War in Viet Nam. My thanks go to the sponsors of this event as well as to Professor Beauregard and all of the audience for this rewarding opportunity.