

REMEMBERING FROM A CROSSROADS: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHY,
MEMORY AND VISION IN THE ART OF DINH Q. LÊ¹

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In an essay titled, "Looking at War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death," Susan Sontag wrote: "The memory of war, however, like all memory, is mostly local. Armenians, the majority in diaspora, keep alive the memory of the Armenian genocide of 1915; Greeks don't forget the sanguinary civil war in Greece that raged through most of the second half of the nineteen-forties" (Sontag 2003: 88). Likewise, Cambodians and other Southeast Asians living as part of diasporas in Europe and the United States have been attempting persistently to sustain and to keep alive the memory of the tragic Khmer Rouge genocide that took place in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. However, despite their great efforts, visual narrative recollecting this traumatic history has been slow to emerge in the post Khmer Rouge period. Why were filmmakers and artists so slow to respond to the tragic and traumatic events that happened in their respective homelands in Southeast Asia, and why did so many respond from afar?² The insightful words of the English novelist, A.S. Byatt suggest one reason for the emergence of stories that narrate the experience of trauma and memory:

The relationship between individual memories and history is complex and shifts over time. Immediately after the war [i.e., World War II] there were those who were compelled to bear witness – most of all about the death camps. But there were all sorts of people who were silent for all sorts of reasons. Men who held office under Vichy France, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany still held office. Ordinary people wanted to rebuild, to live, not to remember. It takes time for memory to become possible and longer for it to be narrated (Byatt 2002: 50).³

Similarly, in the Cambodian context, the visual arts have recently begun to draw on the very deep well of experience and memory created by the Khmer Rouge genocide. Perhaps, there was a natural need for sufficient time to pass so that artists and writers would have enough time and distance for retrospection.

¹ I use the term archaeology throughout this essay to signify the roots or sources of trauma that require deep psychological excavation. Moreover, the word archaeology also suggests the discussion of ideas and art from the classical period of Cambodian culture and an ability to invent a language for discussing material and visual traditions.

² A case in point is the recently published collected volume of essays edited by Frank Stewart and Sharon May, *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writing from Cambodia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. Most of the authors who contributed to this tome are Cambodians living in the diaspora (France and the United States).

³ It is not surprising then, that François Bizot's memoir, which narrates his experience of being captured and interrogated by members of Khmer Rouge leadership was only published very recently in French and then translated into English by Euen Cameron. See François Bizot, *The Gate*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Central to these artists' concerns was how the Khmer Rouge genocide had affected (and continue to affect) new generations of Cambodians living at home and in the diaspora. More importantly, one might ask how contemporary Southeast Asian artists living at home or in the diaspora have chosen to commemorate and to memorialize these tragic and traumatic events of genocide in contemporary arts. One might argue that the emergence of a visual narrative of events related to the Khmer Rouge genocide did not emerge until the late 1990s.⁴ Prior to that there was a series of descriptive paintings by Vann Nath, one of the few survivors of the Tuol Sleng prison ordeal who witnessed the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge first hand. He was one among a few artists to treat the genocide in his visual terms. In a series of descriptive paintings titled, "Scenes of Life at S-21" and dating to 1980, Vann Nath presented an eye-witness account of the brutality that transpired inside Tuol Sleng Prison (Nath 1998).

An exhibition titled "The Legacy of Absence," held at Reyum Gallery in 2000, initially raised the question of why contemporary Cambodian art contains very few representations of the Khmer Rouge genocide and its social and psychological implications (Muan and Ly 2001: 11-12). Subsequently, French-Cambodian filmmaker, Rithy Panh, and contemporary Cambodian painter, Svay Ken, presented visual narratives of lives under the Khmer Rouge and the psychological fallout of the genocide during the post Khmer Rouge period (Ken 2001).

In this essay I will focus on yet another contemporary artist to emerge in recent years, Dinh Q. Lê, whose art profoundly addresses issues of memory and trauma in the post Khmer Rouge period. What is most ironic about Dinh Q. Lê is that he is of Vietnamese ancestry, the same ethnic group which invaded Cambodia in 1979 and was purported to have "liberated" Cambodians from the oppressive Khmer Rouge regime. Considering these ethnic and political tensions between Cambodians and Vietnamese, one is inclined to ask what motivates a Vietnamese-born American artist to create works that question the violent and traumatic effect on the lives of Cambodians in the post Khmer Rouge period. Moreover, what gives Lê the artistic license to produce works focusing on the issue of Khmer Rouge genocide? I will argue in this essay that what makes Lê's perspective and works so compelling is that he offers us his view from his place on the borderline and his diasporic experience. In effect, he presents a perspective from a crossroads (Miles and Roth 2003). Furthermore, Lê makes no pretense of being a "savior" of Cambodia. Thus his works do not attempt to offer viewers any psychological closure to the trauma that resulted from the violence and abuse of the Khmer Rouge genocide; instead, his works raise questions about war, violence, and the consequences of unethical action. Furthermore, Lê's works help to sustain and to keep alive the memory and history of this tragic event.

Born at the Border between Vietnam and Cambodia

Dinh Q. Lê was born in 1968 in Ha-Tien, a town located on the border between Cambodia and South Vietnam. In 1977 the Khmer Rouge invaded his hometown and thus, like many Cambodians, he lived under the Khmer Rouge regime. He and his family escaped to Thailand in September 1978, and in December 1978 Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Subsequently, Lê and his family emigrated to the United States,

⁴ Admittedly, there are mural paintings found at Buddhist temples and films addressing the issue of genocide from the immediate post-war (Heng Samrin) period. In addition, there are memorial stupa such as that built at Choeng Ek, one of the many killing fields located near Phnom Penh. But there have been very few works of art in the Western-inspired style of contemporary art, such as conceptual installations and abstract paintings.

when he was eleven years old. In 1992, Lê received his M.F.A. in photography and related media from the School of Visual Arts, New York, and he now works in multi-media, photo weavings, textile, and installations (Miles and Roth 2003: 46). He now divides his time between Vietnam and the United States; he has a studio located in Ho Chi Minh City where he creates his arts and his work is represented by three galleries in the United States; in Santa Monica, California, New York City, and Portland, Oregon.⁵ Hence, Lê's intellectual, interpretive, and creative point of view stems from his particular perspective at multiple crossroads between cultures, a perspective that is very characteristic of many postmodern and nomadic artists living and working in the age of transnationalism and globalism (Kwon 2000: 33-44).

The Archaeology of Self, Dream, and Memory

Dinh Q. Lê's traumatic memories of the harsh life that he experienced under the Khmer Rouge regime as a child were evoked while he was working on an art project with children from Southeast Asia at the Bronx Museum in New York in 1994. Lê recounts:

In 1994 I did a workshop for Southeast Asian kids at the Bronx Museum in New York, and many of them were Cambodian-Americans. Some of the parents also attended the workshop, and we started talking about my work and their experiences in Cambodia. One woman asked me to incorporate more images of the Buddha in my work, because Buddhism helped her to cope with what happened to her in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. I started thinking back to my own experience when the Khmer Rouge invaded my hometown, and the horror that they created. I had avoided thinking about any of that for years. A couple of months after the workshop, I quit my job and went back to Ha-Tien, my hometown. That really created a strong awakening of all these memories of the Khmer Rouge invasion (Spalding 2003: 69).⁶

In 1994 Lê went to Cambodia for the first time and his trip included a visit to the Tuol Sleng Prison (also known by its code name "S-21," situated in the heart of Phnom Penh). Tuol Sleng had been a high school until 1975, when the Khmer Rouge came to power and converted it into a "re-education camp." Roughly, 14,000 Cambodians, mostly intellectuals and members of the elite, were interrogated and eventually tortured to death there (Ledgerwood 1997: 85).⁷ At the Tuol Sleng Museum, Lê saw many black and white photographs of Khmer Rouge victims taken before they were executed (Figure 1). The Khmer Rouge used photography to document the faces of their victims before they were executed, and this horrific photographic archive left an indelible and haunting psychological impression on Lê. In fact, he has shared a poignant recurring dream (nightmare?) that he had about photography:

I used to have a recurring nightmare that might explain why I make art and for whom. I dreamt that my family was evacuating from the Khmer Rouge invasion with thousands of other families.

⁵ Dinh Q. Lê's works are represented by the PPOW Gallery in New York, The Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica, California, and the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland, Oregon.

⁶ In 1992 Lê returned to Vietnam for the first time since childhood: "I remember the first time I came back...to Ha Tien, which is where my family came from. My uncle took me to our family burial ground and it was such an amazing experience. Five or six generations of my family are buried there, and suddenly it was as if I was literally taking root." See David Spalding, "Looming History: Interview with Dinh Q. Lê," in *Art Asia Pacific* no. 28 (Fall 2003): 69.

⁷ See David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.

In the dream, I am about nine-years-old. All the belongings we could take were stacked on a pushcart. We were heading toward the river to cross on the ferry. When we reached the dock, I realized that I had left my camera at home. (My family never owned a camera when we were in Vietnam.) I wanted to go back to get the camera so I could record what was happening. I asked my mom for permission to go back to the house and she refused. It was too dangerous. I always woke up from this dream so upset that I was not able to record what was happening (Roth 2001: 49).

Lê has also expressed his impression of and his reaction to his first visit to the Tuol Sleng Prison and the ancient monuments of Angkor:

I went to Phnom Penh to see the prison [i.e., the Tuol Sleng Prison]. It was an overwhelming experience. I will never forget the rows of photographs of the victims staring out from the wall, the crudely made tiny little cells, and the knowledge of what happened in that place. Throughout the trip – visiting temple after temple... (Roth 2001: 50-51).

Clearly, the interrogation photographs that Lê saw at the Tuol Sleng Prison in 1994 dwell in the artist's mind and would preoccupy him for years to come. Not surprisingly, Lê's work has returned again and again to the issue of history and memory in Cambodia and to the interrogation photographs from Tuol Sleng Prison. As I stated above, the power of Lê's works lies in his remarkable vision and ability to reinterpret and to transform these raw prison photographs into works of art – a process that calls for intellectual and artistic mediation.

Since their discovery in 1979, the interrogation photographs from the Tuol Sleng Prison have been a subject of great contention among scholars and journalists. The site of contention has to do with the lack of a verbal narrative accompanying the photographs, which has been thought to lead to many presumptuous interpretations about the state of mind of these victims. For example, Lindsay French, an anthropologist, soundly critiqued the unethical way in which these unmediated prison photographs from Tuol Sleng were exhibited as "Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1997 (French 2002: 1-15).⁸

So far only one Khmer Rouge photographer, Nhem En has come forward. Nhem En worked as one of the photographers at S-21 prison when he was 15 years old (Decherd 2001: A10). In his works, Lê probes the truth behind these interrogation photographs. However, he is not merely interested in excavating the historical truth; he also wants to reveal the intentional truth. By intentional truth, I mean the artist's own personal and subjective interpretation of these images. This is the interpretive process which requires the artist to take into account the historical, political, and cultural context under which these prison photographs were produced before he incorporates these raw images into his creative field of inquiry and representation – that is before he makes of them a work of art. For instance, one sees Lê's attempts to understand the political, and to a certain extent, the cultural context of the Tuol Sleng prison photographs in a series of works titled *Splendor and Darkness* (1994-1999) which is comprised of approximately thirty photo weavings. Lê began making this particular series in 1994 in response to the tension he felt between the horrific and violent imagery found at the Tuol Sleng Prison and the sublime beauty of

⁸ A comparable case is the recent joint exhibition of the Abu Ghraib Prison Photographs at the International Center of Photography and the Warhol Museum in Pittsburg. Similarly these prison photographs were put into the category of "Art" which generated much criticism from Art critics. See Michael Kimmelman, "Abu Ghraib Photos Return, This Time as Art" in *The New York Times* (Sunday, October 10, 2004): 29.

Angkorian temples. Lê concluded in an e-mail exchange with Moira Roth:

I realized that violence is also rooted deeply in Cambodia's culture, as in so many other cultures. Much of its violence is carved on the walls of the Angkor Wat and Bayon Temples, temples built as monuments to the victories of kings. Our culture has a tendency to build monuments only. I wanted to include faces of the victims in these monuments and turn monuments into memorials.

I see Angkor and Cambodia's genocide as connected with each other. That is why I started to weave together images of victims of Pol Pot and the wall carvings of Angkor Wat and other temples (Roth 2001: 51).

At the risk of cultural essentialism, it is in part fair to say that military power was a great concern of ancient Cambodian or other Southeast Asian cultures. One sees detailed images of battles from two Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, rendered on the walls lining the galleries at the twelfth-century temple of Angkor Wat. In addition, one also sees historical battles at the galleries of the late twelfth-century temple of the Bayon. Moreover, ancient Khmer monuments were built, at least in part, as memorials to deceased kings, so these representations of violent epic battles reflect the military prowess of Khmer Kings and their respective patron Hindu and Buddhist deities. The question is: how does one memorialize violence without having to repeat and thus create more violent images? I think that the didactic role that narrative art often plays may make this paradoxical conundrum inevitable.

A comparable rhetoric is found in both the Buddhist and Hindu religions. For example, Buddhism is a philosophy and religion that advocates peace and non-violence but ironically, one often sees *jatakas*, stories from the previous lives of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, narrated with violent acts, just as found on ancient monuments in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, out of the 549 *jatakas*, the ones that were chosen to be narrated most frequently, would seem to involve acts of violence. A case in point is the story of the altruistic king Sibi who gorged out his own eyes for a blind Brahmin. He went to the extent of cutting off his own flesh to save a dove (Cummings 1982: 74-83).⁹ Likewise one can find similarly graphic images of torture rendered on a bas relief situated in the south gallery at Angkor Wat, where scenes of violence in a Hindu hell are represented (Figure 2). In brief, due to didactic reasons the repetition of violent images is perhaps unavoidable.

A similar paradox is addressed in Lê's multimedia installations and in his photo weaving series, *Splendor* and *Darkness*. For example, he juxtaposes the horrific interrogation photographs from S-21 with images of bas-reliefs that depict Hindu and Buddhist pictorial narratives of battles, torture, and hell from the gallery walls of Angkor Wat and the Bayon temple. Thus, Lê weaves images of Angkorian narrative reliefs capturing the theater of war and memory with the violent interrogation photographs from S-21. (Figures 3 and 4) The artist insists over and over again on the interconnectedness between the horrific photographs produced under the Khmer Rouge regime and the archaeology of violence rooted in the ancient Cambodian pictorial tradition. The visual language of photo weaving furthers this concept. This technique involves the cutting up of two or more photos into strips, one image placed horizontally, the other one vertically; the horizontal strips are then woven into the vertical strips to form a complete image. This artistic technique has lent itself metaphorically to Lê's desire to intersect and merge a series of opposing

⁹ See images of these two stories reproduced in Mary Cummings, *The Lives of the Buddha in the Art and Literature of Asia* (Ann Arbor, 1982): 74 and 78. Also see a depiction of the weighing of King Sibi's flesh in an image reproduced in Louis Frédéric, *Borobudur* (Paris, 1996): 241, figure, Ib 56.

ideas and concepts together into one single image. The weaving together of these series of photographs produces an illusion of one photograph superimposed upon another. Moreover, the rich patterns resulting from the visual effect of the intersecting horizontal and vertical stripes resembles the texture on the surface of intricately woven grass mats that are used for walls in village houses throughout Southeast Asia. Interestingly, Lê learnt this technique of photo weaving as a child from his aunt in Vietnam who used to weave grass mats for a living. Thus, Lê's knowledge of a traditional Southeast Asian craft and his combining of this indigenous art-making technique with Western inspired photography and multi-media installations have created a rich formal language with which Lê can express his ideas. In Lê's works the complex history and memory of Cambodia is woven from different visual sources; this construction is comparable to the Khmer Rouge idea of social revolution, which was derived from both traditional and imported modern intellectual ideas (i.e., Marxism, Maoism, and Communism).

Lê's use of rich metaphorical visual language to explore the dynamic oscillation between the new /old self and diaspora/homeland is also evident in a powerful multimedia installation, *The Headless Buddha*, that he created in 1998. *The Headless Buddha* was first installed at the Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery at the University of Santa Cruz, California¹⁰ (Figure 5). This particular installation is composed of a light box projecting a slide that Lê took of a headless Buddha found in one of the galleries at Angkor Wat. Facing this projected image of a headless Buddha is a concrete replica of the missing head perched on top of a museum-style pedestal.

As in Lê's other works, there are multiple layers of meanings embedded in this installation. First, Lê's placement of the headless body of the Buddha facing the missing head creates a dialogue between the two objects and, more significantly, makes evident Lê's criticism of Western museums' purchasing of looted antique objects from Asia. This criticism rings especially true for Cambodia when Angkorian statues continue to be stolen and sold, in Thailand, to eventually end up in museums in Europe and the United States. The most extreme case is the looting of the bas-reliefs from the late twelfth-century Buddhist temple of Banteay Chmar (Jacques and Freeman 1999: 42-43). Lê's criticism of the problems in the looting of religious art from Cambodia is echoed in a dialogue between an anonymous native and an explorer (played by Guy Pierce) in Jean-Jacques Annaud's recently released film, "Two Brothers." The native man says "This statue worth big money but it is too big and too heavy" and the explorer replies, "Cut off the head and we take the head home" (Annaud 2004). Indeed, scholars of religions, anthropologists, and some art historians lament the loss of the ritual power of religious images that are on display in museums in the West. This loss of religious efficacy and aura embedded in icons is, in part, due to the transformation of religious images into "high" art in a museum setting (Flood 2002: 641-659).

Second, Lê's reuniting of the Buddha body and the head also reference the artist's return to his birthplace, Vietnam, to look for his former self, an experience that is often deeply internalized by those who are living and writing in exile. Edward Said wrote very eloquently about this estranged experience of living in exile:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted...The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever (Said 2002: 173).

¹⁰ I would like to thank Shelby Graham, director and curator of the Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for providing me with a slide of *The Headless Buddha* installation.

The loss of the former self, a self that perhaps can only be recaptured through poetic reverie and remembrance, is a trauma central to Lê's work.

The Archaeology of Blindness and Vision

As mentioned above, the interrogation photographs from the Tuol Sleng Prison left an indelible impression on Dinh Q. Lê, and it is to these horrific and highly complex photographs that he returns again and again to excavate and to reveal the poetic truth behind them. Since their discovery in 1979 the interrogation photographs from S-21 have perplexed both scholars and artists. Both Lindsay French, an American anthropologist, and Catherine Filloux, a New York based playwright, have respectively attempted to provide cultural and historical context for the interpretation of these violent and intriguing photographs. In her short play, *Photographs from S-21*, Catherine Filloux resuscitates the lives of two Khmer Rouge victims by literally having them step out of their prison portraits. By resuscitating and reinscribing the subjects of these two photographs Filloux not only restores theatrically their voices but also their visions. For instance, at one point in the play, the young woman character comments on the intrusive gaze into her eyes:

Sometimes the people come like a parade. They walk in and out. Like a stream, staring into my eyes. Their eyes are all different colors. Blue. Green. Yellow. Like lights (Filloux 2001: 4).¹¹

The different colors of eyes suggest that the audiences are foreigners and not Cambodians. Moreover, the executed victim is expressing her discomfort and discontentment at being the subject of foreign gazes. Filloux attempts rather successfully to provide cultural and historical context for the display of these interrogation photographs by setting them into a play. Filloux's efforts to rectify and to provide dramatic context for the S-21 photographs was inspired by a powerful critique put forward by anthropologist Lindsay French in an article titled "Exhibiting Terror." In her article, French rightly criticizes the Museum of Modern Art in New York for exhibiting these interrogation photographs in 1997 as pure "Art" and thus misleading the museum audience insofar as they did not provide any narrative context (French 2002: 1-15).¹²

French and Filloux contribute to our understanding of the interrogation photographs from S-21 by attempting to provide a historical and biographical narrative for them, and thus, giving them context. As a visual artist, Dinh Q. Lê, on the other hand, interprets these horrific photographs very differently. Lê is not interested in merely providing us with a straight-forward biographical narrative or cultural context because he finds these photographs to be overwhelmingly complex. Instead, he challenges both himself and the viewers by questioning the psychological relationship between these executed victims and contemporary viewers. He incorporates these interrogation photographs into his conceptual ideas and, in effect, transforms these raw black and white photographs into works of art that raise very profound and interesting questions about violence, ethic and trauma in the post-Khmer Rouge period. This artistic transformation and rhetorical power of Lê's ideas are evident in his two powerful works, *The Quality of*

¹¹ I would like to thank Catherine Filloux for sharing the script and videotape of her play with me.

¹² Much information concerning the S-21 prison photographs has been written since the MoMA exhibition in 1997. See Rithy Panh's film, "Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy" (1996). Frank Stewart has published an English translation (from the French) of the film script in Frank Stewart and Sharon May, eds., *In the Shadow of the Angkor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004: 108-126). Also see Rithy Panh's most profound film, "S-21, the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine" (2004).

Mercy (1998) and *The Texture of Memory* series (2001). In these two works Lê criticizes and challenges interpretations written about the S-21 photographs. A case in point is the installation titled *The Quality of Mercy*, a title referencing William Shawcross' book of the same title and which addresses issues of ethics in foreign intervention foregrounding the Khmer Rouge genocide. In this particular installation, Lê challenges a statement put forward in a coffee table book, *The Killing Fields* (1997), positing that the interrogation photographs from Tuol Sleng Prison captured the victims' state of mind: "If you look in these people's eyes, you could try to see or relive what had happened" (Colm et al. 1996: 94). In *The Quality of Mercy* installation Lê re-shot only the eyes of the victims from the interrogation photographs (Figure 6).¹³ He then lined the strip of eyes on the wall of a rather dark room, with only a hint of light from the single light bulb hanging from the ceiling above the room (Figure 7). Placed at the center of the room is an overturned chair that the artist consciously shaped to mimic a person crouched in a fetal position. The interior of the installation room conjures up the spare and cruel ambiance of one of the rooms in the Tuol Sleng Museum. In an interview with Allan De Souza, Lê made clear his intention behind this installation:

My point is that these people [victims captured in the photographs] didn't know what was happening. A lot of them were children. Most didn't know why they were being arrested, why they were there. So I rephotographed just their eyes and put the images in a black room so this slit of their eyes looked back at the viewer. In the middle of the room was a chair on its side, like a body lying down. I wanted the viewer to become the object of the gaze, as if we are being asked what happened (De Souza 1998: 5).

Clearly, Lê's deliberate reversal of the gaze between the objects and intrusive viewers creates a form of visual rhetoric that he uses to provoke viewers to think and to ask themselves questions about the fate of each individual victim. The artist does not however offer viewers any conclusive answers, but simply raises the questions of power, ethics, and violence and asks viewers to imagine the role they play as viewers of such a violent and devastating experience. Moreover, the violence within the space of Lê's installation reinforces one of the points I have made earlier: for didactic purposes, artists are compelled to repeat the experience of psychic and physical violence in their installations. In this case, Lê needs to repeat the violence in order to make his viewers empathize with the violence and trauma that the executed victims must have undergone.

Another one of Lê's works, *The Texture of Memory*, takes up the issue of the Tuol Sleng photographs from a different angle. Alec Wilkinson, in an essay published in the *New Yorker* in 1994, reports that in 1982 physicians found that a group of Cambodian women survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide who had immigrated to the United States were victims of "hysterical blindness." Apparently, these women had lost their eyesight after witnessing the brutality of the Khmer Rouge (Wilkinson 1994: 52-68). Between 1982 and 1986, roughly 150 Cambodian women were interviewed by doctors; these women reported that their symptoms ranged from blurred vision to complete blindness.¹⁴ All the women were middle-aged and had witnessed violent acts, such as seeing their daughters beaten to death by Khmer Rouge soldiers or witnessing their husbands' and sons' executions.

¹³ In an e-mail message dated April 25, 2003, Lê informed me that *The Quality of Mercy* was installed at the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art, CEPA, Buffalo, New York, in 1996.

¹⁴ See Tran T. Kim-Trang, "Ekleipsis," (Video, 1998) and Irene V. Small, "Blind Spot: The Video Art of Tran T. Kim-Trang," in *Art Asia Pacific* no. 30 (Sydney, Australia, 2001): 52-67.

In the Fall of 2000 Lê took up the phenomenon of hysterical blindness in *The Texture of Memory*, a title he borrowed from James E. Young's book, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorial and Meaning* (1993). Lê's *Texture of Memory* consists of more than twenty framed white cotton cloths embroidered in white thread with portraits of Khmer Rouge victims, taken from interrogation photographs. For each work, Lê drew a sketch of a photograph onto one of the cloths and then commissioned a group of women in Ho Chi Minh City to embroider the outlines of the sketch (Figure 8).

In January 2001, I met Lê in Phnom Penh, where we visited Tuol Sleng Prison together. As we walked through the haunted chambers, we spoke about *the Texture of Memory*:

Ly: What is the significance of the color white?

Lê: White is a color of mourning in Asian tradition, and hence it is appropriate because *The Texture of Memory* is a memorial to the dead victims (Lefferts Jr. 1996: 37-50).

Ly: The white embroidery on the white background is difficult to see. How will the works be legible to viewers?

Lê: I want viewers to read the portraits like Braille. When the series is exhibited, viewers will be invited to touch the embroidered parts, and the oil from their hands will darken the white threads. The images will become more articulated and visible over time, comparable to the shiny textures found on bas-reliefs at Angkor Vat.

Ly: Is there a connection between the fact that the victims of hysterical blindness are women and that the embroidering of the images of the photographs was done by women?

Lê: Embroidery is traditionally done by women, so I commissioned women to thread the images (Ly 2003: 75-76).

Another reason why Lê chose textile and embroidery as a medium for *The Texture of Memory* series has to do with his critique at how undervalued the textile medium is in the history of Western art. On the contrary, textiles are highly valued in Southeast Asian cultures. Again, comparable to the hybrid media employed in his photo weaving series, we see here another fusion of an indigenously valued medium (i.e., textile) superimposed with Braille's idea and method of visual reading for the blind.¹⁵ One of the works from *The Texture of Memory* series that captures the essence of Lê's project presents us with three overlapping embroidered portraits of one victim creating a disorienting image of three faces with four eyes (Figures 9 and 10). The image invites viewers to seek to clarify it by touching the embroidered white lines -- an act of coming to vision for the viewers (Figures 11 and 12).

Thus the reconstruction of vision traumatized and devastated by the Khmer Rouge depends on the will of the living. *Remembering equals seeing equals remembering*. The reassembling and sharing of a series of fragmented images from the minds of survivors contributes to the collective memory of the massacre and violence that took place during the Khmer Rouge period. *The Texture of Memory* series serves as the site (sight) metaphorically and symbolically where Lê engages the viewers/audience individually and collectively to make visible the invisible, the forgotten into remembrance. It is this physical participation of the viewers in the ritual of war and memory that makes Lê's *The Texture of Memory* series so powerful. Moreover, in *The Texture of Memory* series Lê argues visually that the issues of trauma, blindness and

¹⁵ E-mail exchange with the artist, July 5, 2004.

memory are not specifically a legacy of the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia but that similar atrocities and their traumatic legacies manifest themselves elsewhere in different parts of the world. Indeed, a painful parallel genocide that comes to my mind is in South Africa under Apartheid. Antjie Krog has written a poetic documentation of the truth and reconciliation commission in South African context in her book, *Country of My Skull* (1999).¹⁶ However, unlike Krog who is a writer and therefore naturally employs verbal language to weave a poetic truth, Lê uses visual language as a means of argument; he is not interested in recapturing a historical and eyewitness account of what happened because that approach is inevitably presumptuous and limited. Instead, he would like to offer viewers his own rhetorical and poetic perspective of the Khmer Rouge legacy through the transformation of the much-reproduced "documentary" photographs from S-21 prison into works of art.

These intentions and motivations behind Lê's works are clearly expressed in the artist's own words:

We can talk about the show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York [Photographs room S-21: 1975-1979], for example. I think the show was poorly organized and didn't provide any context for the photographs. The images hadn't been mediated, so we're talking about prison photographs, not artworks. Prison photos had been blown up and displaced in an art context, and it was confusing. I think if they are contextualized well, then those images are very powerful. Within my work, I've mediated the original image. And, in some ways, I feel like I am keeping these people alive by using them in my work. Sometimes I worry about using them so many times, but I keep finding more stories to tell (Spalding 2003: 4).

It is precisely this "mediated" process and the transformation of the raw Tuol Sleng prison photographs into a rhetorically challenging and meaningful work of art that distinguishes Lê's works from the ethically and morally disturbing ways in which they were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. There, the prison photographs were put into the category of "Art" without any verbal or visual mediation and interpretation. More importantly, Lê's works help to sustain and to keep the histories and memories of these individuals alive, a much-needed effort in contemporary Cambodia where there is a prevailing culture of impunity. In brief, Lê's works are sustaining political signifiers, visual voices calling our attention to issues of ethics, accountability, and grief in the post-Khmer Rouge period.

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¹⁶ For comparative perspective and anthropological approach to the study of genocide world-wide see Alexander L. Hinton, ed., *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.



Figure 1: Interrogation Photograph from The Tuol Sleng Prison. (Photo by Boreth Ly.)



Figure 2: Scene of Hell, from South Gallery of Angkor Wat, 12th century. (Photo by Boreth Ly.)



Figure 3: Dinh Q. Lê, Untitled (Splendor and Darkness Series # 3) Photo weaving, 63 x 48 inches. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)

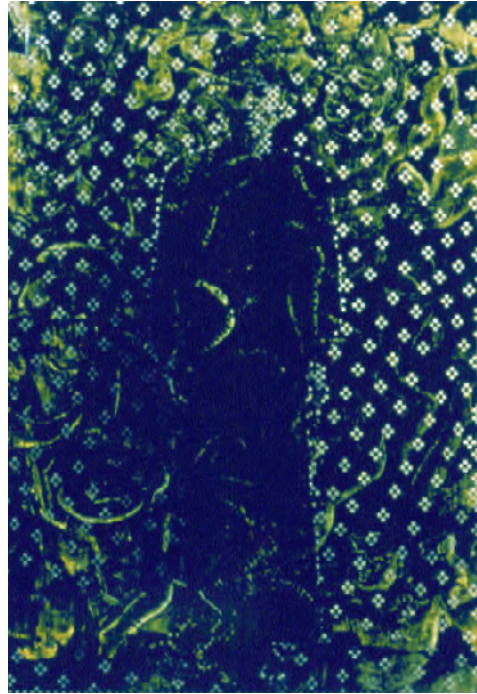


Figure 4: Dinh Q. Lê, Untitled (Splendor and Darkness Series # 2) Photo weaving, 63 x 48 inches. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)

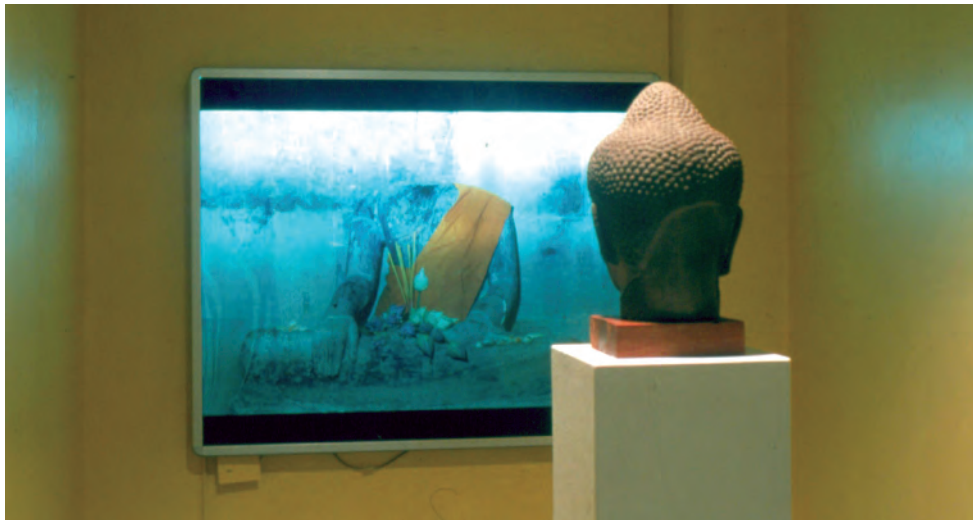


Figure 5: Dinh Q. Lê, The Headless Buddha, Installation at the Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery, University Of California, Santa Cruz, 1996. Mixed Media. (Photo courtesy of the artist and the Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery, University of California, Santa Cruz.)

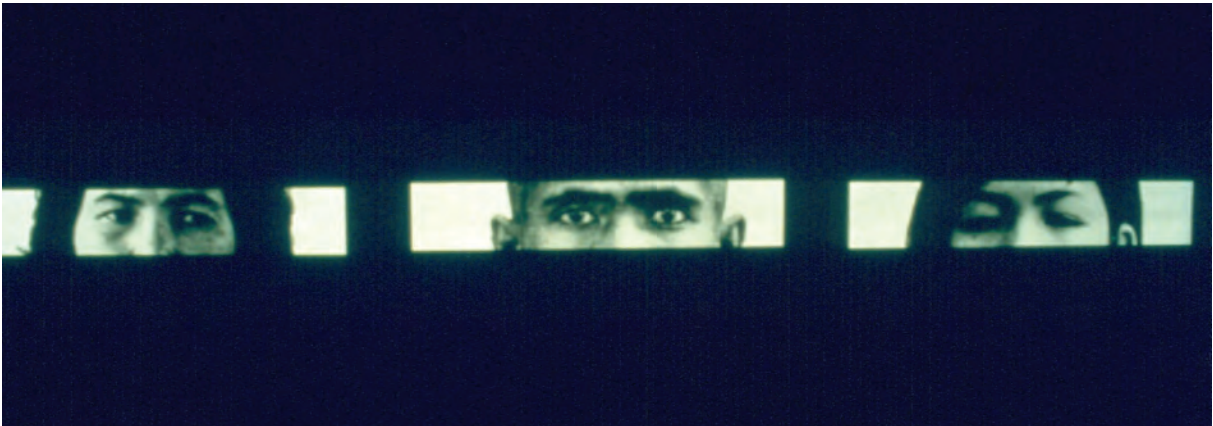


Figure 6: Dinh Q. Lê, 'The Quality of Mercy.' Installation at the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art, CEPA, Buffalo, New York, 1996. Mixed Media. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)



Figure 7: The Quality of Mercy Installation, 1998. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)



Figure 8: Making 'The Texture of Memory' at Mrs. Tuyet's house in Tay Ninh City, Vietnam, 2001. (Photo courtesy of the artist.)



Figure 9: Dinh Q. Lê, 'The Texture of Memory', 2000-2001. Hand Embroidery on cloth, 60 x 40 in (152.4 x 101.6 cm, unframed) (Photo courtesy of the artist.)



Figure 10: Detail of Figure 9.



Figure 11: Dinh Q. Lê, 'The Texture of Memory', 2000-2001. Hand Embroidery on cloth. 60 x 40 (152.4 x 101.6 cm, stretched and framed) (Photo courtesy of the artist.)

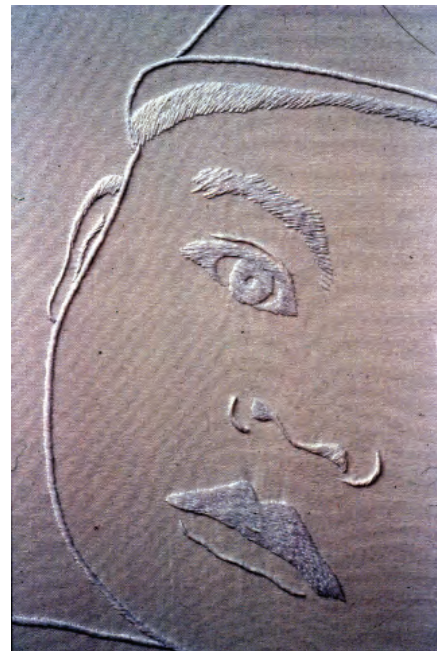


Figure 12: Detail of Figure 11.

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