

Cultural Agents Orange (Vietnam)

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Advanced Studio VI

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Vietnam Image Machines

For America—and for the rest of the planet that has viewed *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, or the endless photographs and newsreels of student protests of the 1960s and 1970s—the Vietnam war has been not only a site of painful and costly defeat, or a generation-defining struggle, but also a relentless image machine. For Vietnam, this perpetual return to battle is its own national preoccupation. The Independence Palace in Ho Chi Minh City—the site from which the southern forces conducted the war— is preserved in perfect luxurious detail. An array of pastel colored telephones, some connecting directly to the White House, sit among the war maps, lounge chairs, and games rooms. The entire building, and the careful maintenance of the bizarre and jarring proximity of war communications and details of decadent daily life, serve as a perfectly orchestrated image and pristine indictment of South Vietnam, and of America's role in the war and the fight for independence.

Blast Proof Meditation

The most significant detail in this spatial narrative is the meditation pavilion atop the building, protected by blast-proof glass. The assertion of a space for meditative contemplation while war was raging, coupled with an architectural insistence on transparency, suggests a vain hope for the possibility of simultaneous containment and visual control. The pavilion is the architectural crystallization of atomterrorist strategy and the attempt to separate livable air from non-livable air. It is also the primary reference point for this studio that seeks to find, analyze, deploy, and reconceive the relationship between cultural objects, spaces, and environments.

Collections

This studio returns to and extends the research initiative *Collecting Architecture Territories*. At the heart of the initiative is a hypothesis that collecting is a term, practice, or condition that allows us to glimpse something of the emerging cultural logic of the early 21st century. The project studies the mutation of the contemporary museum into a space of private collection and ownership in order to ask what new conditions of collection and organization beyond its walls the transformation of the contemporary museum signals. It suggests that collecting processes draw together cultural artifacts, finances, resources, bodies, military controls, and new technologies within active spaces of accumulation and exchange.

Concentrations

In Vietnam—with the war and its legacies as inescapable reference, in light of new antagonisms with China and other neighbors, and with the intertwining of culture and environment at stake—this studio replaces collection with concentration. Through the idea of concentration, we will study, reconceive, redesign, cultural institutions, such as the Independence Palace, other arts organizations, archives, or cultural processes that bring together artifacts, objects, and bodies. But we will also be looking at and repositioning the long legacy of ecocide and contamination from Agent Orange, carpet bombing, and other elements of the chemical war that so drastically altered the Vietnamese environment, and that continue to communicate their histories and effects. Hence, concentration will serve as a marker of environmentally altered sites, political histories, cultural institutions, and contemporary markets and circuits.

Cultural Agents

To link these different modes and types of concentration we will rely on a strategy suggested by a recent intelligence think tank. Their paper, "Collecting Cultural Intelligence: The Tactical Value of Cultural Property," suggests that because cultural institutions and art markets are impenetrable by outsiders, training agents in a branch of "cultural intelligence" would make inroads into black markets and other networks to which only cultural agents have access. This form of intelligence would bridge the "licit-illicit boundary in the art market" to connect to other major illicit markets, such as "...narcotics, weapons, and humans—which share trade routes with smuggled antiquities"

Chemical Agents

The speculation is that reading cultural clues and tracking cultural circuits will show what cannot be otherwise revealed. Cultural agents will be trained to penetrate the art world to decipher its ambiguities and its mystification of value and exchange. For this advanced studio cultural agency is tied less directly to questions of value, than it is to concentration as a device that will allow a complex and perhaps unobserved relation between architecture, environment, chemicals, and artifacts to appear.

Concentration Design

Hence, the studio will consider architecture both as an agent that organizes, supports, and informs a range of concentration, and as a type of concentration in its own right. With this double role in mind, the studio will probe various forms of concentration to speculate on architecture's relationship to cultural representation, cultures of contamination and purification, historical frictions, and the contemporary forces that impact bodies, atmospheres, and artifacts. Within the general framework of the studio, students will identify and research their own topics and sites in Vietnam, develop their own forms of description and analysis, and design new models, sites, spaces, institutions, or environments of concentration, and their distribution.

Logistics

Students will have the option of working alone or in pairs.

Mark and Jarrett will be in studio every day.

The studio will travel to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in Vietnam during Kinne week.

Review dates, studio structure, and primary references, will be posted on Canvas following the lottery.