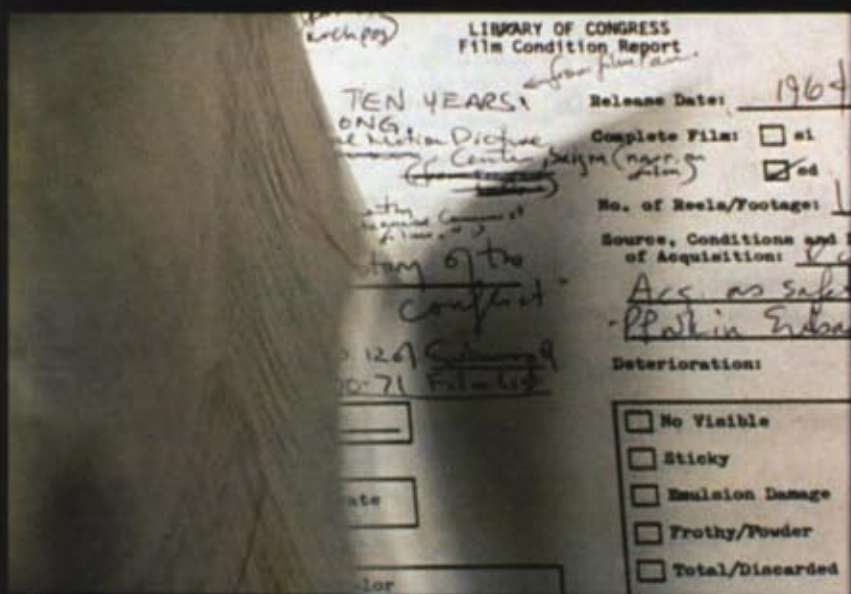
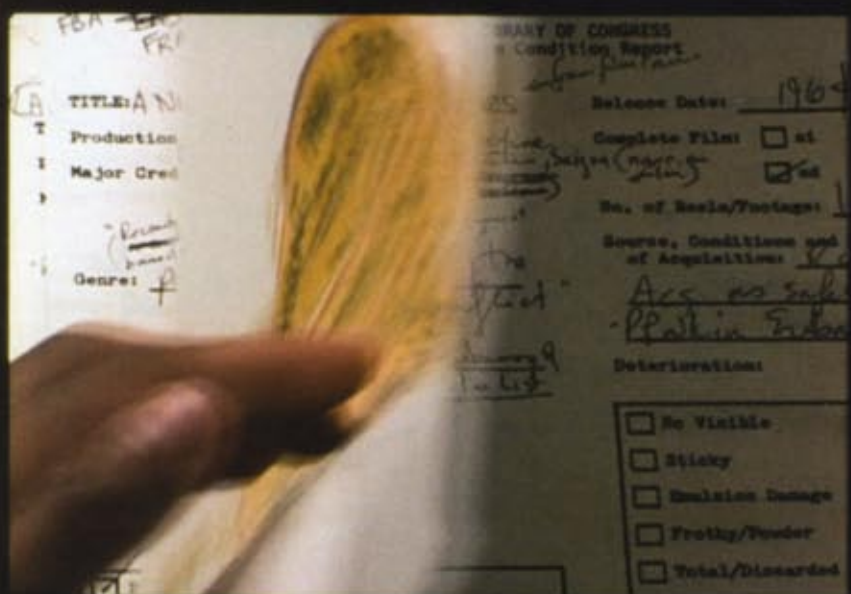


J-VK 3383



WINTER 2007

art journal

CAA

Una Chung

What. Comes. After.: An Introduction to Lin + Lam's *Unidentified Vietnam*

Unidentified Vietnam, the umbrella project by the artist team Lin + Lam (Lana Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam), consists of an installation and a thirty-minute film, and works with a displaced archive as its primary material: the Embassy of South Vietnam Collection, transported to the Library of Congress in Washington DC in 1975 following the fall of Saigon. The archive contains 527 propaganda films made with substantial US aid, using American equipment and often processed in the Philippines. Seventeen of these films are marked "unidentified" and numbered from 1 to 17. Lin + Lam's film is what comes after: *Unidentified Vietnam* No. 18.

At first glance, we see that Lin + Lam offer a personalized recollection of history, a democratization of information that resists conventional structuring and refuses the institutionalization of history. A second, more probing look finds Lin + Lam's project of a critical counterarchive moving toward a creative reworking of the archival impulse itself—the archival impulse as raw affectivity. State propaganda is not simply redeployed as the artists' critical statement (nor, certainly, reviewed nostalgically as kitsch) but used as a way to re-apprehend its affective force. Thus, their work is at once critical and creative, archival and affective, a genealogical project de rigueur.

In this fashion, Lin + Lam offer a deeper engagement with the persistent challenge of postcolonialism: how to get to the "what comes after" of colonialism and imperialism, as Achille Mbembe puts it. In his critical exploration of the postcolony, Mbembe points out that the search for what comes after the colony often involves the production of a "postcolonized subject," rather than an end to processes of racialization.¹ He suggests that the complexity of postcolonial time is linked to a question about life, "raw life," as the place, body, or ontological site for the temporal articulation of the postcolonial. In *Unidentified Vietnam*, Lin + Lam draw out the affective volatility, the raw life, if you will, lying within the archival impulse.

If a pedagogical drive moves through *Unidentified Vietnam*, it is not one that aims to do the work of identifying remains or of recovering and reconstructing what is missing from the fragmentary, literally crumbling remnants of history's materials found in the Madison Building of the Library of Congress. The adjectival "unidentified" is not a provocation to identify. Instead, *Unidentified Vietnam* engages in an experimentation with modes of unidentifying. The artists do not simply embody the position of critically aware ethnographers, who emphasize the limitations and special insights of their own personal experience. Rather, *Unidentified Vietnam* shifts our attention away from self-reflexivity toward modes of moving and living that unidentify the subject. The empty-fullness of propaganda is not countered with images of violence or abjection that would provoke self-recognition on the part of liberal, protesting Americans, conferring on them their identity vis-à-vis Vietnam and war. "Unidentified" is, then, a mode of challenging a politics based on identity and working to identify its participants. *Unidentified Vietnam* poses anew the impossibly simple proposal of Michel Foucault: "We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality."² What are the modalities of such a refusal?

On the one hand, there is the suspension produced by the state: "South Vietnam Embassy Continues to Carry On in Diplomatic Limbo."³ The limbo of

1. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 196.

2. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, vol. 3 of *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 2000), 336.

3. William Delaney, *Washington Star Times*, May 7, 1975, featured as a part of the installation of *Unidentified Vietnam* at Gallery 456, Chinese-American Arts Council, New York City, September 14–October 12, 2006.

the abruptly former South Vietnamese government, with the imminent arrival of a reunified Vietnam, is given a half-life by the United States in order to handle the sudden crisis of refugees: "The State Department announced last week that although the United States will not recognize any Saigon government-in-exile, it will continue temporarily to afford diplomatic status to the embassy here for assistance in dealing with refugees."⁴ The transfer of films is associated with a political transition that remains in the limbo of "dealing with refugees," which takes the place of actual engagement with what comes after war.

On the other hand, there is the suspension taken up and reworked by Lin + Lam through their installation and film. Rather than the deferrals of the state, the belatedness of trauma, or the allochronic techniques of anthropology, we have here postcolonial suspension.⁵ If a critical and political impasse seems paradoxically to follow in the aftermath of the hyperproductivity of discourses on ethnic bodies and subjects, *Unidentified Vietnam* interrupts it with a different kind of movement in art. The tropes of *Unidentified Vietnam*—wipe, mop, type, flip—get at this entangled existence of life, time, and politics by posing, visualizing, and mobilizing for us the pernicious postcolonial problematic of what comes after. *Wiping* suggests ideological indoctrinating; *mopping* the clearing away, the infrastructure; *typing* the composing, educating; *flipping* the viewing, handling, reconstructing. The archival impulse is set into new motion; stilled time itself moves; are we *post* yet?

The archival tools appear quite differently when understood as affective performances. A series of film stills spatialize the movement of wiping, a film transition frozen into abstract still images. The twenty-four framed photographs index the twenty-four frames per second of motion-picture "real time," composing spatially an interval of one second of film. It is not the movement of transferring (between nation-states, between media, between images) that is stopped: it is abstraction that suspends the world.

Library of Congress Cleaning Crew, a silent video component of the installation, shows one man mopping the corridor of the Library of Congress. He works at the heart of the archive, at its institutional location; he is in the infrastructure of the library, in the in-between of the hallway. He both facilitates and blocks access to the rooms in which archives are located. *Library of Congress Cleaning Crew* is four minutes and forty-four seconds long, and in the middle the segment seamlessly begins to play in reverse, looping forward and backward in a continuous stream. The labor of mopping up that follows the end of a war is suspended by the endless switching of the backward and forward direction of the video, the incessant movement of its suspension of action.

The sculptural configuration, *Pupils of Democracy*, constructs an assemblage of schoolroom technologies. A 16mm film loop is projected from a Kodak Pageant 16mm film projector, with a looper attachment, onto a portable projection screen. The film projector sits atop a stack of books on a kindergarten table; beside the projector lies an open paperback book, *The Ten Thousand Day War*, with a magnifying glass positioned above the exposed pages. The selection of text highlighted in an intense circle of magnified light reads: "It is 105 degrees and rising."⁶ One segment of the projected film zooms in on the section of a manual typewriter where we can see keys striking the paper: "How do you feel the American effort here is being conducted? ..." A film composition that makes use of the serial motions of a manual typewriter is relying on the moving image to construct a

4. Ibid.

5. For allochronic techniques of anthropology, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Other* (1983; New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

6. This phrase, broadcast on US Armed Forces Radio, was used as a coded message initiating evacuation of all US military and civilians from Vietnam. The code for "Operation Frequent Wind," including the song "White Christmas," was repeated every fifteen minutes. Author interview with the artists, November 22, 2006, New York City. In the installation, Lin + Lam mimic this with the sound of Bing Crosby's performance of the song emitted from a speaker every fifteen minutes.

manuscript; however, the film composition itself is not a manuscript. Here we are shown how to type, how to write, how to compose the aforementioned question, rather than to read or respond to the sense of the question. Such questions concerning the American persistence in or withdrawal from Vietnam are presented as the construction of the mechanics of English composition.

H. Lan Thao Lam's performances of the popular images of President Ngo Dinh Diem and the "First Lady" Madame Nhu do not dramatize them or bring them to life.⁷ Lam's performances are austere, psychologically minimal, composed only of intense details, bare gestures: the terse tug on the edges of a jacket, the elegant uplift of sculpted hair.

The film, *Unidentified Vietnam No. 18*, gives us series after series of flipping images—sheets of paper, photographs, images of film canisters, colored hallways. The flipping motion of still images makes us question the opposition of stillness and movement and consider these modalities of movement on a single plane.

The un of unidentify is then neither negation nor subversion, but a type of motility that inheres in suspension itself, a suspension connected to new political potentialities. As Lana Lin puts it, "We wanted to create a space of suspension and in that suspension to activate thought."⁸ If identity, identifying, and identification involve a movement of subjectivity that turns back on itself before there is a subject to be turned to (what Judith Butler calls the "paradox of referentiality"), then the *unidentified* is a trope of a suspended movement that does not turn back, does not reach forward, but rather remains in the approach to what comes after.⁹

Una Chung is an assistant professor in the global studies group at Sarah Lawrence College. Her areas of primary research are Asian American cultural studies and modalities of ethnic identity in media studies. Her 2007 dissertation, "Contagion of Living: East-West Experimentations with Affectivity, Subjectivity, and Political Embodiment," considered late twentieth-century travel writing by Asian Americans in East and Southeast Asia. Her essay "The Ethnological Temptation of Vietnam" will appear in a forthcoming anthology edited by Patricia T. Clough and Craig Willse (Duke).

Since 2001, Lin + Lam (Lin plus Lam) has produced interdisciplinary projects that examine the ramifications of the past for the current sociopolitical moment. A New York-based artist, Lana Lin has received awards from the Civitella Ranieri Foundation and the Fulbright Foundation, among others. In March 2007 she was the Distinguished Visiting Graduate Professor in Photography and Film at Virginia Commonwealth University. Currently she is visiting faculty at Vermont College of Fine Arts. H. Lan Thao Lam lives and works in New York and Toronto. A recipient of the Canada Council for the Arts grant, Lam holds an MFA from California Institute of the Arts, and was an assistant professor at Middle State Tennessee University and faculty of Goddard College, MFA program.

7. Madame Nhu was not actually the wife of President Diem, who remained unmarried. She was the wife of General Nhu, Diem's brother, and was by most accounts the most powerful female political figure in South Vietnam at that time.

8. Author interview with the artists, November 22, 2006.

9. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4.

Lin + Lam

Unidentified Vietnam



Lin + Lam, *Unidentified Vietnam*, 2006, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable (artwork © Lin + Lam)

above:
partial installation view at entrance, 24 framed digital C-prints, signage stand with newspaper clipping, video projection

page 26 top:
partial installation view, "Library of Congress Cleaning Crew," video projection, and "24 frames = 1 second," 24 framed digital C-prints, each 12 x 15 in. (30.5 x 38.1 cm)

page 26 bottom:
partial installation view, "Pupils of Democracy," 16mm film projector and film looper, projection screen, kindergarten table, magnifying glass, and books

page 27 top:
installation detail, viewer and card catalogue, wood face plates and drawers, card catalogue cards, CD player, and parabolic speaker

page 27 bottom:
installation detail, wood drawer for the letter 'A'







Lin + Lam, *Unidentified Vietnam*, 2006, installation details, "24 frames = 1 second," frames 1 and 2, digital C-prints, each 12 x 15 in. (30.5 x 38.1 cm) (artwork © Lin + Lam)





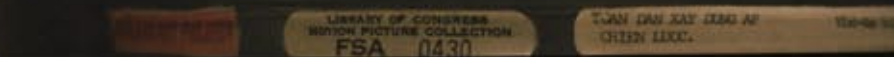


pages 30–35:
Lin + Lam, production stills and film stills
from *Unidentified Vietnam No. 18*, 2007, 16mm
film, 30 min. (artwork © Lin + Lam)

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Caution: May
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tape splices



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Mr. [Name] speaking at the [Event]



How much democracy can

How much democracy can a nation

How much democracy can a nation have now?

KODAK

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