

# **Embodied Remembrances of Vietnam**

Nostalgia and Archive-Bodies in Ea Sola's *Drought and Rain*  
(1995)

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## Abstract

Nick Ut's famous photograph, *The Napalm Girl*, has shaped the Western world's collective memory of the Vietnamese-American War. When we only see war, violence and pain through widely distributed photographs, such as *The Napalm Girl*, our understanding of the pain of others become generic and limited. What such generic images fail to capture is the bodily experience of war that only individuals can give us access to. In this thesis, I will explore a performance piece created by the Vietnamese-French artist Ea Sola. By reading Ea Sola's artistic praxis as the work of a Vietnamese refugee, themes such as loss, longing, nostalgia and archives emerge as important themes. Taking Ea Sola's oeuvre as my starting point, I critically examine how particular memories of war become prevailing historical truths and Ea Sola's attempt to challenge these. The main question that I seek to address is: How does Ea Sola's work provide us with new perspectives regarding pain, loss and longing by establishing the body as a living archive? To answer this question, I draw on Svetlana Boym's notion of *restorative* and *reflective nostalgia*, and Rebecca Schneider's porous approach to time in performance art. Furthermore, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the traditional archive becomes my entrance into what Ea Sola names the *archive-body*. Through a close reading of the performing bodies in *Drought and Rain* (1995) and Trinh T. Minh-ha's conception of the archive, I understand the archive-body as a network of knowledge, stories and memories transmitted from body to body, and between generations.



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# 1 Embodied Remembrances of Vietnam

## 1.1 Introduction

“Migratory experience exemplifies the presence of the past within the presence.”<sup>1</sup>

Mieke Bal (“Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement”)

The Dutch art historian and visual artist, Mieke Bal, articulates in an article for the magazine, *Exit*, the complex issue of temporality that characterizes a migrant’s state of being. In the article, she states that a migrant’s condition is rooted in the past through the act of remembrance that occurs in the *now*.<sup>2</sup> The experience of escaping a home or a homeland, are memories that dwell in the diasporic subject as unsettling and rootless sensations of loss. The diasporic subject’s longing for a homeland is thus characterized by nostalgia. However, to understand a diasporic subject’s complex state of being through generic denotations of nostalgia, enables certain issues regarding temporal stagnation. *Nostalgia* is discussed in multi-artist and professor at Harvard University, Svetlana Boym. In her celebrated publication, *The Future of Nostalgia*, she launches two different notions on the term; namely, *restorative nostalgia* and *reflective nostalgia*. While restorative nostalgia strives to return to a romanticized vision of a lost homeland to decrease the temporal distance to the past, reflective nostalgia dares to acknowledge the state of displacement in the present time without losing its connection with the past. For a reflective nostalgist, the past, present and the future is a complex amalgam of temporalities. Thus, my thesis’ core will be situated in the issues regarding nostalgia that occurs once sensations of longing for a lost home becomes an omnipresent element in the diasporic subject’s state of being.

The Vietnamese-French dance-artist and choreographer, Ea Sola, and her performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), thematize Mieke Bal’s notion of the temporal complexity that occurs once migration and loss of a homeland characterize a displaced subject’s state of being. By looking at Ea Sola’s history as a refugee who fled her homeland during the Vietnamese-American War, I will explore how her sensations of displacement and longing for a time before war and migration led her to create *Drought and Rain* (1995). As the Vietnamese-American

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<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal, “Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement” in *Exit*, No. 32 (Winter 2008): pp. 150 – 161. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Bal, “Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement”, 157.

War forms the backdrop to my exploration of Ea Sola's performance, I will commence my thesis with a discussion of the well-known photograph, *The Napalm Girl*, taken by Nick Ut in 1972. How has this image shaped the Western world's collective memory of the Vietnamese-American War? And more importantly, how do we understand the pain of others through this widely distributed photograph? By discussing how we remember and conceptualize war and the pain of others through mass media's selective distribution of war photographs – but also through Hollywood-movies' obscure depictions of the American war hero – I will argue that our collective memory of the Vietnamese-American war is constructed by “privileged slices of time”. With “privileged slices of time”, I refer to how Susan Sontag views photographs as privileged moments that have been turned into (slim) objects that we can return to, repetitively, to look at and keep forever.<sup>3</sup> In this train of thought, I follow Sontag's argument that mass media's distribution of documentations of war have shaped our collective memory into what we consider historical “truth”.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore crucial to ask the following questions: Whose memories of war have shaped our understanding of Vietnam, the Vietnamese-American War and the pain of the Vietnamese civilians whose lives was brutally destroyed by the violence of warfare – both during and in the aftermath of the Vietnamese-American War? How “true” is our collective memory if this archive of knowledge is constituted by “privileged slices of time”?

In my exploration of these question, I will enter the performing bodies of Ea Sola's performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), as the artist herself manifests her artistic praxis as a ‘memory work’. In Ea Sola's performance, we will therefore witness how memories of the war are mediated through the bodies of the Vietnamese peasant women who perform in her performance. Thus, it is namely the performing body as a medium for remembrance that will be at heart of my thesis, in which follows Ea Sola's own vision of the body as an *archive*. How do the individual bodies of Vietnamese civilians – whose memories of war and violence have never reached the public eye before – provide us with new understandings for the Vietnamese-American War? And how does the body itself become an archive of knowledge? These are themes that I will approach through Jacques Derrida's “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, where the French post-structuralist deconstructs the Ancient Greek notion of the archive as a site where elements from the past are conserved through “the archival drive”; an urge to gather together elements from the past into a synchronized body that constitutes historical “truth”.<sup>5</sup> With Derrida's deconstruction of the archive in mind, I will explore *Drought and Rain* (1995)

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, “In Plato's Cave” in *On Photography*, pp. 1 – 19. New York: RosettaBooks LLC, 2005. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression” in *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1995): pp. 9-63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>. 10.

through an “aesthetics of absence” that embodies untold memories and stories of the Vietnamese-American War.

Throughout my thesis, I strive to explore how the body can work as a material location where memories unfold in an archive that does not adhere to a historical “truth” or order, which both Sontag and Derrida oppose. By exploring the performance and the performing bodies as archives, new perspectives on the Vietnamese-American War arise once the past collide with the present. Moreover, I will show that the body as an archive reveals itself as a relational affair: As the archive-bodies mediate untold memories of the past through the temporal medium of performance art, they confront the present generation – the audience – with their unique stories. This process, named “the chain of transmission”, is a concept derived from film artist and professor at UC Berkeley, Trinh T. Minh-ha. Through the act of storytelling, undocumented and undistributed stories and memories of Vietnamese civilians *remain*, as they are transmitted from one generation to another.

My thesis, “Embodied Remembrances of Vietnam: Nostalgia and Archive-Bodies in Ea Sola’s *Drought and Rain* (1995)”, is thus an exploration of how collective memories of war reflect hegemonic historical “truths”, but also how these “truths” diverge from the individual Vietnamese body’s experiences of war and violence. Through a deconstruction of the “truth” about the Vietnamese-American War, I wish to stress the importance of listening, carefully, to the archive-bodies. If we listen, we will understand. And by understanding, we may develop new knowledge of the pain of others.

## **1.2 On Ea Sola’s *Drought and Rain* (1995)**

The thesis’ research material will be based on Ea Sola’s performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), that is part of the artist’s *Drought and Rain*-trilogy. The trilogy consists of the performances: *Drought and Rain* (1995), *Drought and Rain Vol. 2* (that also goes by the title, *The Memory*) that premiered in 2005, and lastly, *Drought and Rain (re-creation 2011)*. The three performances that constitute the *Drought and Rain*-trilogy can all be read as embodied remembrances of Vietnam in different ways despite their common starting point, that is the performing bodies’ own memories of the Vietnamese-American War. Exploring all three performances in concert with one another would have been an interesting project in its own right. However, the limited visual documentation of the second and the latter performance delimited my research to the 1995-performance. This proved to be an advantage in my research, as *Drought and Rain* (1995) alone poses complex questions regarding the loss of a homeland,

nostalgia, returns to the past, temporal multiplicity, and how the body as an archive becomes a material location where memories unfold.

*Drought and Rain* (1995) is the first performance in the trilogy and lays the foundation for the two following performances that premiered in 2005 and 2011. While the 1995-performance is directly connected to Ea Sola's longing and return to Vietnam in the late 1980s, the second performance deals with the transgenerational traumas of the descendants of Vietnamese refugees. Thus, the *Vol. 2*-performance can be read as a critique of the present generation's complex relation of the Vietnamese-American War, as they did not experience it with their own bodies, but rather through the preceding generation's memories. In contrast to the 1995-performance and the 2011-performance – that is a re-creation of the first one, *Drought and Rain Vol. 2* is performed by trained Vietnamese contemporary dancers from a younger generation. In *Drought and Rain* (1995) and *Drought and Rain (re-creation 2011)* we witness peasant women from the Red River Delta in Northern Vietnam, whose bodies had never performed professionally before. Moreover, the nostalgic and folkloric elements that constitute the 1995-performance and the 2011-performance are in *Drought and Rain Vol. 2* replaced by a rather minimal stage setting that mainly consists of a performance space draped in white, and several framed photographs that depict portraits of lost ancestors. Despite the fact that the 2011-performance is a re-creation of *Drought and Rain* (1995), we should not read it as an exact copy. *Drought and Rain (re-creation 2011)* captures the complexity of re-performances; namely their ability to repeat without being exact copies. In this sense, each individual re-creation of an original performance retains their authenticity through the new elements and experiences that come with each repetition.<sup>6</sup>

The trilogy deals with issues regarding the present generation's abilities to remember the past of the centuries – an issue articulated in the prologue of the first and third performance of the trilogy. How does the Vietnamese present generation understand the pain of their ancestors if their knowledge of the Vietnamese-American War is rooted in a collective memory shaped by “privileged slices of time”? Dealing with this question, Ea Sola manifests *Drought and Rain* (1995) as a “memory work” rooted in the body's abilities to mediate memories through its movements, which provides us with untold stories of Vietnam. And it is namely in the act of performance art that “... the present and past invigorate and co-create each other”<sup>7</sup> – a temporal complexity that I will reveal as highly prominent in *Drought and Rain* (1995). In

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<sup>6</sup> Rivka Syd Eisner, “Drought and Rain: re-creations in Vietnamese, cross-border heritage” in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 7-8 (2014): 798 – 817. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2013.818567>. 802.

<sup>7</sup> Eisner, “Drought and Rain: re-creations in Vietnamese, cross-border heritage”, 799.

my thesis, I will therefore focus on the movements of the performing bodies that alternate between a formalism that takes shape once the performers place themselves in stilted grouped formations, and chaos that juxtaposes this nearly military-like expression. However, the most prominent feature of the performance is the intricate, yet abstract hand movements that re-occurs in different ways throughout the chosen parts of *Drought and Rain* (1995) that I will look into.

To come closer to Ea Sola's own words and ideas on her process towards the creation of *Drought and Rain* (1995), I have been fortunate to get hold of a documentary film created by multidisciplinary artist, Janica Draisma. Her generous sharing of this documentary film has provided my work with rare footage of *Drought and Rain* (1995) on its' last tour in 1998, exclusive backstage-material, as well as Ea Sola's own contemplations on her artistic praxis and memories of Vietnam. Thus, Janica Draisma's documentary film has been crucial to my project as it has provided me with both visual material and Ea Sola's own words on her work. Moreover, as documentation of performance art in the form of digital video is rarely archived and accessible to the public, I consider myself lucky. Throughout my thesis, I will explore the performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), through Janica Draisma's documentary. I have chosen specific parts from the performance piece that, in their different ways, embody the issues that will be raised and scrutinized through my chosen theoretical framework.

### **1.3 Theoretical Framework**

The research question that I consider to be at the heart of my project is the following: How does Ea Sola's *Drought and Rain* (1995) provide us with new perspectives regarding pain, loss and longing by establishing the body as a living archive? Through a discussion on how we remember war, I will present different perspectives on this issue. Among them are Susan Sontag's statement on how war photographs shape our collective memory and stipulate it into an archive of what we assume to be historical "truth", and Viet Thanh Nguyen's conception on how we remember war by their names, e.g. "The Vietnam War", "The Indochina War" or "The American War". Moreover, ethical dilemmas regarding exercise of violence will be discussed through Judith Butler's notion of *grievability* and *self-defense*. To fortify Butler's critique of how exercise of violence is justified by *self-defense*, I will turn to Hollywood-movies such as *Apocalypse Now*. These movies have obscured our collective memory *of* – and sense of answerability *to* – the Vietnamese civilians, whose lives were brutally disrupted by the war and the political unrest that followed.

With this discussion as the backdrop to my exploration of Ea Sola's *Drought and Rain* (1995), I will enter the artist's own story of migration and displacement through theories regarding diaspora, exile and the longing for a homeland. These themes will be discussed through the conception of *que huong* – a dual Vietnamese word that signifies both village and scent. Furthermore, I will explore Edward Said's notion of the displaced subject's state of being as *discontinuous* due to the 'unhealable rift' that occurs once a subject is displaced from its homeland. These discussions will eventually lead me to the theoretical starting points for my exploration of how Ea Sola's *Drought and Rain* (1995) provides us with another type of archive that might broaden our knowledge and understanding of the pain of others. Thus, the theories that will be key in my thesis are the following: Svetlana Boym's two different conceptions on nostalgia, that is *restorative nostalgia* and *reflective nostalgia*, Rebecca Schneider's perspective on *re-enactment* and how performance art *remains*, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the Ancient Greek notion of the *archive*, and Trinh T. Minh-ha's account of how the body itself is an archive by its ability to transmit stories, memories and knowledge through storytelling.

To gain a deeper understanding of Ea Sola's longing for a home and urge to return to the beginning of Vietnam, I turn to the term, *nostalgia*. In her publication, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym establishes nostalgia as a displaced subject's yearning for a time before war, violence, migration and displacement. Nostalgia must therefore not be misunderstood as a longing for a place. Rather, it is the return to one's fantasies and dreams of a lost time.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Boym introduces the notion of *restorative nostalgia* as a safeguarding of the past through a romanticized vision of a lost time. A nostalgist of the restorative kind is selective in its way of remembering the past. Thus, conservation and restoration of a lost time's most glorious aspects becomes paramount to consciousness for our present time.<sup>9</sup> By this, restorative nostalgia can be perceived as a "normative" understanding of nostalgia, in which involves a limited awareness for the present time – a stagnation in the past, if you will. As an antipode to this, Boym introduces *reflective nostalgia* – a concept inspired by Sigmund Freud's notion of *mourning* and *melancholia*. As reflective nostalgia constitutes both mourning and melancholia, its *temporal multiplicity* is enabled – a phenomenon that will be discovered in *Drought and Rain* (1995).

The temporal multiplicity of Ea Sola's work will be discussed through professor in performance studies, Rebecca Schneider's perspective on *re-enactment* and how performance art *remains*. In her publication, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical*

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<sup>8</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. London: Hachette, 2008. [VitalSource Bookshelf]. Retrieved from <https://akademika.vitalsource.com/#/books/9780786724871/>. Unnumbered e-book, I will therefore refer to the book's parts and their chapters. "Introduction: Taboo on Nostalgia?".

<sup>9</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Part 1, Ch. 4: "Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins".

*Reenactment*, Schneider challenges the rather rigid vision of feminist scholar, Peggy Phelan; namely, that as performance art happens in the *now*, it also disappears.<sup>10</sup> This uniform view on the temporality of performance art must be reconsidered in my exploration of *Drought and Rain* (1995), as it will be discovered that the past invigorates with the present, as the performers' memories are mediated through their bodies in the very act of performance art. By establishing *Drought and Rain* (1995) as a complex amalgam of past, present and future, its ability to continue to exist is enabled.

As the stories and memories of the performing bodies remain rather than disappear, the bodies in *Drought and Rain* (1995) become material locations where memories of the past are re-enacted and repeated. The body as a site where memories unfold can be understood as a *living archive*, that deconstructs the static archive of knowledge that has shaped our collective memory, that is limited to generic depictions of the Vietnamese-American War and the pain of others. To obtain a profound understanding of Ea Sola's vision of the *archive-body*, to use her own words, I will explore Derrida's deconstruction of the archive. In his publication, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression", Derrida deconstructs "the archival drive" that strives to gather together elements from the past into a synchronized system of order that aspires to construct historical "truth".<sup>11</sup> However, Derrida states that this is an impossibility as the archive is a clashing of forces between order and chaos, which draws on Sigmund Freud's notion of the death drive and pleasure principle.<sup>12</sup> While the pleasure principle strives for harmony and balance, the death drive is in the possession of an aggression that auto-destructs, erases and destroys. The archive is therefore a site for memories as well as amnesia.<sup>13</sup> Through my analysis of *Drought and Rain* (1995), I will explore how this juxtaposition arise.

To delve further into how the body itself becomes an archive, I will turn to Trinh T. Minh-ha's publication, *Woman Native Other*, where she states that "The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand."<sup>14</sup> With this statement in mind, Minh-ha reinforces Ea Sola's vision of the body as a material location where memories unfold through the act of storytelling. This is what Minh-ha names "the chain of transmission"; a process that occurs between bodies and between generations. Once a story – or a memory – is transmitted and thus repeated, from one

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<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London & New York: Routledge, 2011. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression" in *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer 1995): pp. 9 – 63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression", 14.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression". 14.

<sup>14</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. 121.



body to another, it also remains. This is how the body itself becomes an archive, but also how each Vietnamese individual body becomes one fragment of a diverse network of knowledge.

## 1.4 Purpose of the Thesis and Previous Research

In 1975, my mother and her family left their home in Saigon and escaped Vietnam by boat. After some time on the open sea in a packed fishing boat, they eventually got picked up by the Norwegian engine ship named “Hermelin”. Throughout my life, my mother’s stories about migration, escapism and resettlement in a new country have deeply impacted the way I see and relate to the world. However, I have not felt war or violence on my own body, and thus, I cannot claim that I am capable to feel, or accurately understand, the pain that my family went through during and after the war. This thesis is thus an exploration of how we understand the pain of others accordingly to our collective memory of war. But whose memories of war are this purportedly universal archive of knowledge (that is our collective memory) built upon? This question can be considered as the foundation for the purpose of my thesis, in which can be articulated as an exploration of how we can expand our knowledge and understanding for the pain of others through an exploration of the body as an archive. By acknowledging the incurable wounds of a body that remain after experiences of war and violence, I believe that this thesis’ exploration of how the body itself is an archive can challenge our generic visions of the pain of others. Thus, I seek to broaden our archive of knowledge, going beyond the purportedly universal “truth” of the Vietnamese-American War and how the civilians experienced it.

There has not been done much research on Ea Sola and her artistic work throughout the times, besides the research of Dr. Rivka Syd Eisner. I consider Eisner’s research material (and the conversation I had with her) crucial to my work, as I have not been able to talk to Ea Sola myself. I believe this is due to the artist’s safeguarding of how her work is being distributed, which is understandable as she works with Vietnamese civilians who must submit to the Communist Party of Vietnam’s artistic censorship.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, Eisner has managed to delve deep into Ea Sola’s work through different theoretical approaches. Eisner has already employed the terms, *archive*, *re-enactment* and *answerability* as entry points into the memory work of Ea Sola. While the term, ‘archive’, has been connected to the artist’s installation/performance

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<sup>15</sup> Rivka Syd Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability” in *Contemporary Southeast Asian Performance: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Laura Noszlopy and Matthew Isaac Cohen, pp. 133 – 161. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. 140.

piece, *Forgotten Fields*, the term, ‘re-enactment’, has been applied to *Drought and Rain (re-creation 2011)*. And moreover, the term, ‘answerability’, is connected to Ea Sola’s engagement in social questions that is visible in her artistic praxis. In my exploration of *Drought and Rain* (1995), I will mainly be drawing upon the terms *archive* and *nostalgia*, which I believe will be a fresh contribution to the already existing research on Ea Sola’s vision of the body as a living archive. As my exploration is rooted in the displaced subject’s sensations of longing, its drive to return to a lost homeland, and how the body can be a material place where new understandings for pain unfold, my research will contribute to a variety of research fields. According to my chosen theoretical framework and the purpose of the project, this thesis is firstly affiliated to the fields of performance studies, art history and visual studies. However, it also contributes to the fields of diaspora studies, poststructuralism and postcolonialism.

## 1.5 Self-reflexivity and *Aesthesis* as Methodology

Professor Tone Pernille Østern seeks in the article, “*Å forske med kunsten som metodologisk praksis med aesthesis som mandat*”, stable frames for artistic research and art-based research as art, aesthetic practices and research methodologies are in constant change.<sup>16</sup> In her article, Østern establishes *aesthesis* as the mandate of her new methodology, named *Å forske med kunsten*.<sup>17</sup> The term, *aesthesis*, is derived from the Greek word, ‘aisthetikos’, which means *to sense* or *to feel*.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Østern’s methodology is a matter of bodily engagement that strives to sense – or to feel – the research material (also to be known as the art work/the aesthetic practice), which involves a certain degree of proximity between the researcher and the material of study.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, to research with close proximity demands a high sense of *self-reflexivity* as the distance between the art work/aesthetic practice and the researcher’s own experiences of its body, life, society etc. decreases with this closeness. In the article, ‘reflexivity’ is read through Anthony Giddens’s notion of the term, which implies that one must “take notice of what one notices”.<sup>20</sup> More specifically, this implies that a reflexive researcher is actively engaged in its search for critical connections between aesthetic experiences,

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<sup>16</sup> Tone Pernille Østern, “Å forske med kunsten som metodologisk praksis med aesthetis som mandat” in *Journal for Research in Arts and Sports Education*, Special Issue: “Å forske med kunsten”, Vol. 1 (2007): pp. 7 – 27. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.23865/jased.v1.982>. 7.

<sup>17</sup> A direct English translation of this title could be: *To research with the arts*.

<sup>18</sup> Østern, “Å forske med kunsten som metodologisk praksis med aesthetis som mandat”, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Østern, “Å forske med kunsten som metodologisk praksis med aesthetis som mandat”, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Østern, “Å forske med kunsten som metodologisk praksis med aesthetis som mandat”, 17.

understanding and interpretation.<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, I believe that Østern's methodology, *Å forske med kunsten*, establishes stable frames for a tactile approach to the praxis of researching art and aesthetic processes, due to its demands for a researcher's self-reflexivity for its close engagement with its research material – both intellectually and bodily. In this way, a researcher is not situated outside of the art work/aesthetic process while researching. Rather, I believe that a researcher is situated *with* the research material as their entrance into an understanding of the art work/artistic process is to truly sense it.

In my research of *Drought and Rain* (1995), self-reflexivity and aesthesis will be key in my approach to the theoretical framework, the performance piece itself and Ea Sola's artistic praxis, as I am highly influenced by my family's history of Vietnam, the war and their escape to the open sea that finally took them to Norway. When I first chose to write my thesis on *Drought and Rain* (1995), it was firstly a curiosity for the nostalgic aspects of the performance piece that drove me to explore Ea Sola's artistic work and praxis on an in-depth level. However, as I delved deeper into the material, it became clear to me that the questions that came to the fore throughout the research process was rooted in my own experiences of my mother's storytelling of her life in Vietnam, the overcrowded fishing boat she and my family escaped in, and her alienated sensations of resettling in Norway. Thus, to approach my research material with a complete objective distance proved to be impossible because my reading of the theoretical framework, Ea Sola's artistic praxis and *Drought and Rain* (1995) is already colored by my own experiences as the daughter of a boat refugee from Vietnam. Moreover, it will eventually become evident that self-reflexivity is a key aspect in Ea Sola's memory work as well.

Throughout my thesis, I will therefore incorporate my own experiences of my mother's transmission of stories and memories, one particular story that depicts the complexity of being in exile, and a photograph of my grandfather when he first came to Norway. This personal engagement with my research material, research questions and theoretical framework provides my thesis with autobiographical aspects that could be viewed as troublesome in terms of academic writing. However, I view this bodily – and intellectual – engagement as an approach that strengthens my theoretical reading of the body as an archive, and how archive-bodies exists through transmission of stories and memories. Through *aesthesis*, I keep a close proximity to *Drought and Rain* (1995) as I sense this piece through my own experiences of storytelling, as I am part of my mother's and her ancestors' chain of transmission. With self-reflexivity, I become aware of this sensory approach to my research material, which enables its

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<sup>21</sup> Østern, "Å forske med kunsten som metodologisk praksis med aesthetis som mandat", 17.

personal *and* social oriented aspects – making it expand beyond a dwelling in my own sensations.

## 2 War, Migration and Displacement

### 2.1 Remembering the Vietnamese-American War

Throughout the country's history, Vietnam has been subjected to both imperial and colonial powers. For as long as two thousand years before the war in 1955 took place and the American troops intervened, Vietnam had already been an object for both Chinese imperialism and French colonialism.<sup>22</sup> A complicated relationship (that still persists) with China came to rise in the wake of China's exercise of imperial power that lasted from 111 BC until 1427, which resulted in a Vietnamese culture highly influenced by Chinese religion, technology, art and architecture, language and food.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese domination over Vietnam is divided into four periods, interrupted by periods of autonomy: The first period lasted from 111 BC – 40 AD, the second period from 43 AD – 544 AD, the third period from 602 AD – 905, and the fourth from 1407 – 1427. During all these four periods of Chinese domination, Vietnam fought back with nationalist spirit – characteristic to the nation – to periodically gain independence. Despite Vietnam's willingness to fight the Chinese imperial powers, the country's independence was repeatedly taken away. Nevertheless, after the last period of Chinese domination, some hundred years of autonomy followed. But in 1858, the colonial forces of France took control over the country and Vietnam's colonial subordination became a reality.<sup>24</sup> Despite the industrial and economic growth that came with the French colonial period, the Vietnamese people were again exposed to cultural reversal. The French colonization of Vietnam gave rise to a Westernized way of life. European goods such as wine, western clothing and French schools were available for only a small group of privileged Vietnamese people, whereas the peasants situated in the countryside suffered from reconstruction of the infrastructure that caused damage to their agriculture; namely, their source to independent economy.<sup>25</sup> In the wake of the French deprivation of Vietnamese independence, nationalist movements slowly advanced. The most prominent and influential of the movements, led by Ho Chi Minh and his affiliation to Leninism, was to change world history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The horror that lasted from 1961 to 1975, with the United States and the Communist Party of Vietnam as the principal conflicting

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 15.

parties, was to be named the second Indochina War (as the violence also struck Cambodia and Laos, as well as Vietnam<sup>26</sup>), the American War, or the Vietnam War. The history of Vietnam is shaped by the imperial and colonial dominations that, alternately, took power over the country in terms of its geographical area but also its culture and its people.

Popular conceptions of Vietnam are highly influenced by the many political conflicts that have struck the country throughout the last two thousand years, while the collective memory of the war that unfolded in Vietnam has been characterized by specific portrayals of the war through the lens of, for example, a journalist's camera or a director's vision of the sufferings of an American war hero. However, the costs of war do not always reach the public eye. And more specifically, the suffering of a body exposed to warfare is rarely communicated through mass media – and thus, not always understood. Accordingly, this question comes to rise: Whose stories and memories of war are allowed to take part in the shaping of a country's history? In the coming pages, I will discuss how a country is remembered according to the many political conflicts throughout the times, the visual images distributed in mass media that Susan Sontag refers to as “privileged slices of history”, and more importantly, through the many Vietnamese bodies whose sufferings are untold, yet still highly present regardless of the time that passes by.

### **Memory of War**

Naming wars can be difficult as they are dependent on people's memories of them. Whose pain and experiences of violence do you face when speaking of the Vietnam War, the American war or the Indochina war? Whose memories of war have been prioritized and emphasized in mass media? In Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author addresses the identity crisis that the war in Vietnam suffers from; namely, an issue rooted in memory. How should the war in Vietnam be known and how should it be remembered?<sup>27</sup>

To name the war ‘the Indochina War’, prolongs the validation of Indochina – the colonial name of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia – as well as it validates the French colonial empire that deprived several countries from their own cultures and freedom. Furthermore, by conserving this name one also refuses Vietnam's battle against – and liberation from – imperial and colonial occupations throughout the country's history. In contrary, ‘the American War’ was created by the opposition groups that fought against the French colonial powers and the

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<sup>26</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 4.

American intervention during the war in Vietnam. This naming of the war directly addresses the foreign forces that caused damage to a country, but it also addresses American intervention in a global perspective: 'The American War' indicates a long period of time when the US's warfare unfolded in other countries than solely Vietnam, to expand its dominion and power.<sup>28</sup> However, this naming of the war dismisses the Communist Party of Vietnam's answerability for the violence and terror they exposed their own people to, both during the war and after its ending.

The American invention of 'the Vietnam War' can be understood as a way to renounce their interference that caused pain and suffering to the Vietnamese people in both the Southern and the Northern part of the country. By addressing the war as a Vietnamese issue, it becomes evident that the American memory on the war suffers from amnesia: Firstly, the American exercise of violence is obscured by the naming of the war as Vietnamese, as this name indicates the US's position as a victim for Vietnamese warfare. Secondly, the name also denies the US forces' responsibility for the loss of numerous Vietnamese lives. And thirdly, which is also the most important argument in this line of reasoning, 'the Vietnam War' deprives the Vietnamese memory of its integrity and plausibility, despite the fact that the horror experienced by the Vietnamese civilians was the most severe consequence of the war. Furthermore, the American naming of different wars, such as the War in Afghanistan, obscures the reality of warfare; that there must be more than one country involved to cause conflict.

'The Vietnam War' is the most utilized title of the war that unfolded in Vietnam, but the war can be recognized solely by the country's name too, which emphasizes the identity crisis discussed in Viet Thanh Nguyen's book. Through repetition of 'Vietnam' in conversations about war, this naming has intersected with the country's identity. Thus, the universal understanding of 'Vietnam' means war, and the universal image of war is Vietnam.<sup>29</sup> Throughout my thesis, I will therefore consequently address the war in Vietnam as the Vietnamese-American War, to acknowledge both parties' responsibility for the civil population's suffering. It is also an attempt to maintain a certain distance, or neutrality, to the different political perspectives on the war as my thesis will be anchored in an exploration of the performing bodies' embodiment of memories of war in artist and choreographer, Ea Sola's performance piece, *Drought and Rain* (1995). Thus, this thesis is not a critique of the political powers that caused suffering and damage across Vietnam, which eventually forced thousands of Vietnamese civilians to migrate their country.

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<sup>28</sup> Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 6.

### **American Amnesia and Issues of Grievability**

Popular culture based on the American war hero has laid the foundation for a manufactured truth about the Vietnamese-American War, where exercise of violence in Vietnam is justified by the concept of *self-defense*. This manufactured truth maintains the normative conception that the American forces intervened in the war with the pure purpose to protect the Vietnamese population. However, one must remember that the US's intervention in Vietnam was part of a bigger conflict, namely, the Cold War that commenced by the end of World War II.<sup>30</sup> As the Cold War was a tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, it was also a conflict between their allies: The Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc. As the oppositional forces mainly consisted of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, led by the communist revolution group, Viet Cong, and the leadership in Hanoi, the United States decided to intervene in the war to prevent the proliferation of communism in the world.<sup>31</sup> For Americans and their allies, the United States' intervention in the Vietnamese-American War may be perceived as a defense against the domino-effect of communism, or moreover, as an act of *self-defense*. Hence, these questions arise: Whose lives were protected by the American defense? Or put more precisely, whose lives were worthy the protection of American defense?

Movies such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, contributes to obscure the Vietnamese peoples' own memories of war, caused by the director's materialization of the defeated American war hero that fought in the jungle of Vietnam, in defense of his country. Professor Raya Morag defines these movies as *post-traumatic cinema*. By following her notion of post-traumatic cinema, movies like these will reveal themselves as intertwinements of historical events and the personal memories of the American war hero. These memories are characterized by traumas which provokes an incoherent narrative of the Vietnamese-American War.<sup>32</sup> In *Apocalypse Now*, the soundtrack of the film, 'The End' by The Doors (written by the band's vocalist, Jim Morrison, in 1967 right before the emergence of the anti-war protests in 1968), transports the audience to the jungles of Vietnam and Coppola's choreographic depiction of a deadly napalm attack. What follows are images of burning palm trees and a soldier's bloody face. When these images take place, they intersect one another while the voice of Jim Morrison proclaims that "the end" has occurred. Morag states that "It is impossible to represent both trauma and history at the same time, using the same image, in terms of the perception of time

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<sup>30</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Raya Morag, "Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War" in *The Communication Review*, Vol. 9, Issue 3 (2006): pp. 189-219. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420600814806>. 189.



as an exclusive factor in shaping the memory of the event.”<sup>33</sup> Post-traumatic cinema is therefore in the possession of a complex intertwinement where the personal takes place in the historical, and vice versa. In the creation of post-traumatic cinema, the inability to separate historical events from personal experiences becomes evident. The wounded soldier’s subjective traumas merge with historical events into what Morag defines as post-traumatic images. Moreover, the post-traumatic images’ distance to time and history enables the a-historical and a-referential aspects of post traumatic cinema.<sup>34</sup> With this in mind, it is inevitable that post-traumatic cinema fails to construct dependable memories of the Vietnamese-American War. Thus, one must understand post-traumatic cinema – that is founded upon the trauma of the manufactured American war hero – as imagined outcomes of the Vietnamese-American War that continuously are in the search for a victory that never takes place.<sup>35</sup> The intersecting images of the lethal napalm attack, the burning palm trees and Jim Morrison’s voice over an otherwise silent war scene, blur the lines between the wounded soldier’s traumas and the historical events that occurred during the Vietnamese-American War. Movies like *Apocalypse Now* are more than just entertaining contributions to American popular culture. The American soldier that appears as a defender of his country mirrors the American amnesia for the many people that were killed and injured during the war. The distribution of popular culture that presents imagined victory and heroism as historical “truth”, obscures the American answerability to the Vietnamese civilians’ chronic sufferings caused by the Vietnamese-American War.

The unreliable yet believable American memory of the Vietnamese-American War raises the issue of *grievability* that Judith Butler addresses in her book, *The Force of Nonviolence*. Whose lives matter when we speak about ‘the Vietnam War’ or ‘the American War’? “[...] a life has to be grievable”<sup>36</sup> is stated when the American philosopher contemplates upon the idea of *grievability*, a term she defines as something “... already operative in life, and that it is a characteristic attributed to living creatures, marking their value within a differential scheme of values and bearing directly on the question of whether or not they are treated equally.”<sup>37</sup> In an ideal and equal world, all lives that can be lost should be grieved upon with the same amount of weight, as all lives matter. But if all lives are equally worthy, how is then exercise of violence justified? To remember the war that unfolded in Vietnam as ‘The Vietnam War’ enables an amnesia for the exercise of violence that the US forces executed against the Vietnamese civilians, in which justifies the obscure victimization of the American war hero and

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<sup>33</sup> Morag, “Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War”, 189.

<sup>34</sup> Morag, “Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War”, 197.

<sup>35</sup> Morag, “Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of the Vietnam War”, 195.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*. London and New York: Verso Books, 2020. 58.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 59.

the concept of *self-defense*. In *The Force of Nonviolence*, Judith Butler clarifies the tight connection between *self-defense* and *exception*, namely, that exercise of violence can be justified if this action is rooted in the protection of the *self*.<sup>38</sup> According to Butler, the *self* is not necessary a subjective one, but moreover a relational and collective concept that is constructed by groups of people that share the same ethnicity, religion, geographical area, tribe, skin color, etc. Thus, to take part in a collective *self* also entails that there are people that do not fit in – that stays on the outside of the collective *self* and becomes the *Other*. Once a group – a *self* – is threatened by the *Other*, *self-defense* becomes a morally accepted reason to exercise power. The Vietnamese opposition groups' naming of the war as 'The American War' also encounter this moral issue: By remembering the war as solely an American interference affair, one also diffuses the fact that many Vietnamese civilian lives (and especially those who lived in the countryside) were ruined and killed by the armed revolution, as a consequence of the Vietnamese opposition groups' self-defense against foreign forces. Whose lives matter if the truth about the Vietnamese-American War is dominated by amnesia for the pain of the Vietnamese civilians? The grievability for the Vietnamese lives that got lost during the war, and for those who were forced to leave their motherland, is nearly non-represented in the public eye, as the Vietnamese civilians' memories of the war solely circulates internally within the Vietnamese subject, or, within Vietnamese societies. How do Vietnamese people remember the war that unfolded in their own country? And how do they separate their own subjective memories from universal images of 'Vietnam' as an immortal warzone?

### **The Pain of the *Other***

After more than a decade of waging war that was closely documented by press from all over the world, demonstrations for peace and critique of the US government's interference in the war came to the fore. Nick Ut's *The Napalm Girl* (Fig. 1), photographed in the Southern village Trang Bang in 1972, is one the most distributed war photographs of all time. The girl who runs towards the camera was later identified as Phan Thi Kim Phuc. Her naked body had just been exposed for a napalm attack; a chemical liquid that sticks to everything it lands on and burns it. The lethal consequences of a napalm attack are indeed a bodily matter as the burning chemical liquid does not let go once it lands on your skin. Thus, to flee from an attack as such is an impossibility as the injuries of a napalm bomb will cause lifelong pain and traumas. Larger parts of Phan Thi Kim Phuc's skin were destroyed as a result of the terror that struck her

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<sup>38</sup> Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 53.

motherland, the village where she lived, and her body. Furthermore, the violence of the Vietnamese-American War has been perpetuated by the screaming faces of the children in Nick Ut's photograph. *The Napalm Girl* is widely known as the universal trauma caused by the horror and cruelty of the napalm attacks that forced thousands of Vietnamese families to renounce their geographical belonging to their motherland and leave Vietnamese ground.

As a young girl I was convinced that *The Napalm Girl* was a photograph of my mother. Evidently, it is not. But why was I not able to distinguish them? Throughout the last couple of years, I have questioned this intertwinement of a historical document and my mother's personal stories: The breakfast markets that started before sunrise, warm noodle soups and espresso dripping over sweet condensed milk, her school uniform that consisted of a white shirt and a navy skirt, the French lullabies that my grandmother sung to her children, the loud sounds of bombings – and finally, the risky escape to the open sea with hopes for peace and possibilities for a new beginning. The stories that have shaped the image of my mother are rooted in her personal memories of Vietnam and the violent war that made a brutal end to it all. Nick Ut's photograph of Phan Thi Kim Phuc has become a universal and generic symbol of the pain of all the Vietnamese bodies that experienced the violence of the Vietnamese-American War. However, to recognize the pain of my mother as the same pain depicted in *The Napalm Girl* is not a viable understanding of her experiences of war, and nor is it her truth. Despite the fact that this specific image of war depicts the bodily pain of a girl that shared the same age as my mother when she left Vietnam, it must be considered as a grainy silhouette of the past. In *The Napalm Girl*, Phan Thi Kim Phuc's identity appears to be unrecognizable as her body and pain have become universal symbols of the horror that struck Vietnam during and after the war. Her own experiences of war fade with each distribution of *The Napalm Girl*. Nick Ut's famous photograph captures the story of a generalized trauma that has established itself as the "truth" of pain within a cultural body. As my mother takes part in this body, so do I. Nonetheless, the connections that I draw between my mother and this particular photograph creates a socio-political image of her that deprives her from her subjective memories of war. I understand my mother's experiences of the Vietnamese-American War through a generic vision of what pain entails, and it is indeed a troublesome image.

In her collection of essays, *On Photography*, that was originally published as separate essays in *The New York Review of Books* between 1973 and 1977, Susan Sontag reflected upon the signification of photography in the capitalist society of the 1970s. In the first essay of the collection, "In Plato's Cave", Sontag utilized Nick Ut's photograph as an example of how photographs are affective. Or moreover, how they touch upon the viewers feelings and attitudes regarding certain events or themes such as the napalm attack in the Vietnamese village, Trang

Bang, that dominated the front pages of the world news in 1972. Sontag stated that “One’s first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany.”<sup>39</sup> Phan Thi Kim Phuc’s desperate scream caused shock, and eventually, an epiphany throughout the world community came to rise as the horror of the war was publicly revealed. Despite the explicit depiction of war this photography provides to the public eye, the spectators of *The Napalm Girl* will never be able to feel the painful sensations of Phan Thi Kim Phuc’s body that, at the very moment when Nick Ut captured the motive that later awarded him a Pulitzer Prize, just had been attacked by an American napalm bomb. There is a crucial difference between suffering and to live with documentation of suffering, Sontag writes.<sup>40</sup> Hence, we will never be able to feel or understand the pain of others through photography, but images of war might help us *imagine* the reality we are removed from. Visual documentation of war plays an important role in the distribution of information when war and violence are exercised – and especially when war crimes are denied by dictators who claim their right to invade countries, destroy cities and villages, and kill civilians as recently reported from the Russian war in Ukraine. As certain photographs possess a force that never abates, such as Nick Ut’s *The Napalm Girl*, they inhabit our cultural body and become immortalized as universal images of the Vietnamese-American War. However, these images that have shaped our collective memory of Vietnam and the war are also static and unchangeable, as they are products of a capitalistic culture that strives to collect, archive and conserve documents as a way to “[...] hold the whole world in our heads [...]”<sup>41</sup> Despite the importance of war photography that serve justice for the civilian victims of war, these photographs nevertheless limit our understanding of the bodily pain and trauma of a civilian, due to their static character.

Despite this limitation, war photographs are indeed important to convey the terror that occurs in war zones. But as war photographs, such as *The Napalm Girl*, have shaped the Western collective memory of the Vietnamese-American War, they have also created meager understandings for the pain and suffering that the bodies of the Vietnamese civilian population experienced. I will therefore turn to Susan Sontag’s questioning of the camera’s intervention with time, which insists that time is constituted by interesting events worth immortalizing, creating privileged moments that stand out as more important than non-photographed events.<sup>42</sup> According to Sontag, then, photographs are solely privileged slices of time and cannot alone constitute a comprehensive image of war and its consequences. Collective memory is, in

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<sup>39</sup> Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave”, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave”, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave”, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave”, 13.

Sontag's point of view, animated by ideological archives of photographs that prioritize certain moments over other.<sup>43</sup> To see my mother as *The Napalm Girl*, or more specifically, to inflict the pain of Phan Thi Kim Phuc upon her, is not doing justice to my mother's own personal memories of war. I force a universal pain upon her being that generalize her subjective experiences of war to a photograph that depicts another body's pain. Our understanding of the Vietnamese-American War and the pain of others have been shaped – curated – by the Western mass media's distribution of privileged slices of time, which limits our knowledge and understanding for those private, intimate and individual stories and experiences. As *The Napalm Girl* has become a generic image of the pain of others, I am truthfully wondering how the distribution of this particular photograph has shaped Phan Thi Kim Phuc's own memories of the napalm bomb that hit her body and scarred her skin severely.

The universal image of the Vietnamese-American War is troublesome as I cannot *not* see my mother as *The Napalm Girl*, because this image has become inherent within me and the cultural body that I take part of. This photograph has given shape to the apparent truth about the Vietnamese-American War – an apparent truth that obscures and diffuses the many individual bodies' untold stories of war, pain, loss and sorrow. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag states that “collective memory is not a remembering, but a stipulating.”<sup>44</sup> As visual documents of the violence of war constitute the foundation of our collective memory of the Vietnamese-American War, the normative understanding of the pain of others become static and unchangeable, and thus, a stipulation of the Vietnamese civilians' experiences of war. This is troublesome as these photographs were captured and distributed by an outsider's gaze – the Western media – which not only prolongs the colonial idea of *Otherness*, or, *the Other*. This way of manufacturing a stipulated truth about *the Other's* pain is also a reduction of the Vietnamese civilians' bodies and their experiences, to solely generic images of the costs of war.

As these generalizing and universal images of war are scarce and unjust to the bodies that lived through – and still lives with – the Vietnamese-American War, we must direct our attention towards those who have not publicly exposed their subjective memoirs of war that has inherited their bodies. In Ea Sola's performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), we are invited into unfamiliar realms of memories of war and violence, mediated through the bodies of a group of peasant women that the artist met during a stay in the Red River Delta in Northern Vietnam. How does her work provide us with new understandings for the pain, loss and suffering of the Vietnamese civilians? And moreover, how does her own history that involves experiences of

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<sup>43</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 86.

<sup>44</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 86.

war, migration, displacement, return and nostalgia, affect her work that is rooted in the moving body's remembrances of Vietnam?

## 2.2 Leaving a Motherland

Sontag states in *On Photography* that even though photographs cannot constitute a person's (or a community's) moral position, they indeed have a profound impact on the nascent attitudes regarding war.<sup>45</sup> Together with the numerous demonstrations against the Vietnamese-American War, the overwhelming distribution of photographs of violence created ripple effects, which enlightened the global society about the cruel warfare that unfolded in Vietnam. This epiphany led to the Paris Peace Accord (bearing the title *Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam*) which was signed in Paris in 1973.<sup>46</sup> In retrospective, the Paris Peace Accord bears no honor or victory. Neither the Northern part, nor the Southern part, of Vietnam retreated from the war and the accord resolved nothing else than that the US forces returned home.<sup>47</sup> As the Southern part of Vietnam was heavily supported by the United States, they were left on bare ground when President Nixon decided to retreat the US forces. The withdrawal resulted in an advancement of the North-Vietnamese forces to finally take over the country in 1975.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that the victory of the communists finally liberated Vietnam from the French colonial empire, there was never truly a peaceful ending to the war. The years that followed the fall of Saigon, which now goes by the name 'Ho Chi Minh City', were characterized by food shortage and starvation. This was the result of a failed ration system that was implemented as one step towards a socialist regime.<sup>49</sup> Nearly three million people were close to starvation, and another five million of the Vietnamese population were malnourished by the year of 1988.<sup>50</sup> Undoubtedly, these years were not any less painful than those during the war. As the result of a violent socialist regime that limited the freedom of the Vietnamese population, approximately two million people fled their motherland and relocated to foreign countries. Among these, several thousands of Vietnamese families escaped their country by boat – leaving both homes and family members.

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<sup>45</sup> Sontag, "In Plato's Cave", 13.

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 161 – 162.

<sup>47</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 159.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, 159 – 162.

<sup>49</sup> Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. DOI: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uio.no/10.1017/9781316650417>. 239.

<sup>50</sup> Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*, 240.

My mother was only eleven years old and the second youngest of her seven siblings when they had to leave their belongings and home in Saigon, as if they were going to school or work for a single day. Throughout my childhood, her stories of fleeing Vietnam have been told to me and my brother as bedtime stories. My childish excitement over her stories about the journey from Saigon into the endless sea, the small fishing boat my family escaped in, the heat from the sun and the lack of food, is now replaced with curiosity and a profound desire to understand my heritage and my family's complex longing for a time before mine. During the 1970s, Vietnamese families were found on the open sea in overly crowded fishing boats and picked up by large industrial boats that brought them to other countries across the world. In 1975, the first Vietnamese families arrived in Norway and among them was my own family (Fig. 2). The mass exodus of Vietnamese people that left their homes after the war constitutes the Vietnamese refugees today. These refugees are known as "Overseas Vietnamese" or "Boatpeople", as most of them fled by boat.

### **On Diaspora, Water and the Boatpeople**

In her adolescence, Ea Sola and her French-born mother were forced to migrate Vietnam in the early 1970s, due to the Vietnamese-American War. After years of relocation in various places, they finally settled in Paris and became part of the Vietnamese diaspora.<sup>51</sup> Her father, who took party with the opposition groups against the French colonial powers and the US forces, stayed in Vietnam. To obtain a more profound understanding for Ea Sola's process towards the creation of her performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), I will delve into her own (but also the Vietnamese diaspora as a group) history of migration and displacement. In the coming sections I will therefore explore what the term, *diaspora*, involves and what it entails for the Vietnamese communities across the world. Through these explorations, I wish to come closer to Ea Sola's sensations of longing and belonging as these themes seem to affect her work – as the coming chapters eventually will disclose.

The term, *diaspora*, is rooted in the Greek verb, *speiro*, which means "to sow" or "to spread". Together with the preposition, *dia*, which means "over", the signification of the word *diaspora* means "to spread over" – namely, the human condition of migration or colonization.<sup>52</sup> The concept of a diaspora is not limited to solely one definition, and the term is greatly discussed within the fields of anthropology and social sciences. Historically, the term has been

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<sup>51</sup> Rivka Syd Eisner, "Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola's *Forgotten Fields*" in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*, edited by Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013. 128.

<sup>52</sup> Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas – An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1999. IX.

affiliated to Jewish, African, Palestinian and Armenian people who have been spread over different sites of the world, to finally end up in a state of exile characterized by collective trauma of war and the dream of a banished home. Thus, a diaspora is a community of people from the same ethnic group, culture or religion settled outside of their motherlands – caused by various reasons such as war, genocide or political unrest.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, diaspora should be understood as a non-normative term, as the different reasons “to spread over” the world involves several levels of experiences and sensations: socio-political, collective and personal aspects of migration, resettlement and identity constitute the elusive character of a diaspora.<sup>54</sup>

In his essay, *Diasporas*, James Clifford approaches the term through a postmodern view in an attempt to understand its “traveling”, or intangible, concepts. Throughout his essay, Clifford addresses William Safran’s rather schematic definition of the concept of diaspora (or should one claim them to be requirements?) that unfolds in a six-point model:

1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another [...].<sup>55</sup>

Safran suggests that communities of minorities should share more than one of the traits above, to truthfully be defined as a diasporic group. Despite the rigidity of these proposed characteristics, Clifford acknowledges the benefits of a definition as such because of the elusiveness of the term, *diaspora*, and thus, its potential to lose definition.<sup>56</sup> However, one should pay attention to not limit the definition of a diaspora to Safran’s schematic conception of the term, as minority groups run the risk to be put into assessments of whether or not they can be characterized as a diasporic community.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, Clifford also states that the histories of the different diasporas are all unique; namely that the form of a diaspora is composed by that specific group’s articulation of travel and escapism, home, memories and transnational connections.

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<sup>53</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, IX.

<sup>54</sup> James Clifford, “Diasporas” in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (August 1994): pp. 302-338. 306.

<sup>55</sup> William Safran, “Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” in *Diaspora A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1991): pp. 83-99. 83-84.

<sup>56</sup> Clifford, “Diasporas”, 306.

<sup>57</sup> Clifford, “Diasporas”, 306.



In Vietnamese, the word, *nuoc*, has two significations; *water* and *home*.<sup>58</sup> According to the Vietnamese scholar, Huynh Sanh Thong, this dualistic word addresses Vietnam's long history of aquatic culture, influenced by how water has affected the country's ecological and geographical changes.<sup>59</sup> Water is an omnipresent element in Vietnam as a geographical area, specifically prominent by the long coastline and the Red River Delta in the North. Here, the many rivers and tides gave rise to waterways that crisscross one another, branch out and divide the delta into many small communities with their own cultures based on local knowledge about water and how to control it.<sup>60</sup> Thus, water has also affected the Vietnamese culture through different myths about an aquatic spirit being the source to Vietnamese sovereignty.<sup>61</sup> By this, it is evident that water is a unifying element for the Vietnamese people and their conception of independency – both geographically and culturally. In spite of this, the signification of water changed in the 1970s when the sea became the passage way for hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people's fleeing from the communist regime.<sup>62</sup> The naming of the Vietnamese diaspora as "Overseas Vietnamese" or "Boatpeople" indicate the many lives that escaped their homeland by boat across the open sea. Henceforth, the word, *water*, might represent both home and migration, unification and separation, longing and belonging – all current themes within the discourses on diaspora.

Vinh Nguyen writes the following in his book chapter, "Nuoc/Water", in the anthology, *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival*:

And so scenes of water populate Vietnamese diasporic cultural productions; the sea and the boat become sites of return to re(-)member and (re)imagine personal and collective histories and identities that undulate on water, in excess of total recollection and containment.<sup>63</sup>

Ea Sola's performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), pays attention to these Vietnamese diasporic cultural productions influenced by "scenes of water", expanding the aquatic culture of Vietnam beyond the country's national borders. Other Vietnamese diasporic artists, such as multi-media artist, Danh Vo (Vietnam/Denmark) and author/poet, Ocean Vuong (Vietnam/US) also use water as a gateway into their memories of Vietnam. In *Drought and Rain* (1995), the contradictory elements, drought and rain, evoke the performing bodies' memories of how their

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<sup>58</sup> Vinh Nguyen, "Nuoc/Water: Oceanic Spatiality and the Vietnamese Diaspora" in *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival*, edited by Lynda Mannik, 1. ed., pp. 65 – 80. New York: Berghahn Books, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvKipj7hqz.8>. 65.

<sup>59</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the*, 26 – 27.

<sup>61</sup> Nguyen, "Nuoc/Water: Oceanic Spatiality and the Vietnamese Diaspora", 65.

<sup>62</sup> Nguyen, "Nuoc/Water: Oceanic Spatiality and the Vietnamese Diaspora", 66.

<sup>63</sup> Nguyen, "Nuoc/Water: Oceanic Spatiality and the Vietnamese Diaspora", 67.

ways of living were destined by the cycles of nature; namely, the flooding river deltas as the result of a monsoon, the alluvial deposits that remained after a rainfall and gradually rebuilt the deltas – and lastly, the drought that came with the scorching sun.<sup>64</sup> As drought and rain come and go, the alluvial deposits that remain have made it possible to trace the undocumented history of Vietnam and its inhabitants.<sup>65</sup> By tracking the ancient stream terraces created by the many cycles of nature, one also achieves an understanding for the aquatic and maritime environment that have laid the foundation for the development of an agriculture characterized by wet-rice cultivation, as well as a rich culture of fishing that can be traced through stoneware, bronze artefacts and decorated pottery created by alluvial clay, that still remain.<sup>66</sup> How can we understand *Drought and Rain* (1995) as a remainder/reminder after the Vietnamese-American War? And how does this performance become an “alluvial deposit” that makes it possible to trace undocumented experiences and memories of war through moving bodies?

### 2.3 Displacement and the Yearning for a Home

To settle down in Paris was not an easy task for Ea Sola. The urban environment of Paris was a great contrast to the life in the forests by the Mekong Delta that she was used to. Despite that her life in Vietnam was characterized by war and unrest, she could not find peace in France either.<sup>67</sup> A strong sensation of alienation emerged. Not only was she disconnected from the familiar nature of her motherland, she was also situated in the country of the colonial power that had exercised violence towards her own people for several decades. The oblivion of the French people and the French government caused rage in Ea Sola’s state of being, and as an act of opposition, she “[...] rejected everything [...]”.<sup>68</sup> Standing completely still in the streets of Paris for several hours a day became Ea Sola’s bodily revolt. By cultivating the feeling of displacement and alienation, she also entered a bodily presence that she later recognized as her first step towards performance. This bodily revolt – or nonviolent protest – was repeated over and over again – at the very same place – day after day.<sup>69</sup> This silent protest gained attention from the Parisians that passed her by, which made Ea Sola realize that bodily active stillness

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<sup>64</sup> Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the*, 24 – 25.

<sup>65</sup> Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the*, 56 – 57.

<sup>67</sup> Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability”, 136 – 137.

<sup>68</sup> Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability”, 137.

<sup>69</sup> Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability”, 137.

was indeed a powerful way to engage in social change.<sup>70</sup> In an interview with Rivka Syd Eisner, Ea Sola states: “[...] if everyone stop like I am stopping, there is no war possible.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, Ea Sola’s bodily devotion to stillness gave rise to discoveries of how nonviolence could be a powerful way to engage in social change.<sup>72</sup> Her strong sense of answerability for change and engagement in questioning the war and violence that repetitively occurs all over the world, is transferred into her artistic praxis that can be understood as a concoction of influences from European and Asian dance and theater.<sup>73</sup>

### **From Butoh to Memory Work**

In the search for her own performative praxis, Ea Sola explored different forms and techniques in the field of dance and theater. Among the more prominent of these was the Japanese avantgarde dance, Butoh, established in the early 1960s by dance artist, Tatsumi Hijikata.<sup>74</sup> Butoh emerged in the wake of World War II, after the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had terrified a whole world with their eliminating powers. With the nuclear bombings as the backdrop to the development of Butoh, it becomes clear why Butoh also goes by the name “the Dance of Darkness”.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the nuclear bombings left the Japanese people with lifelong trauma and bodily injuries. Dancing in a time of political unrest and pain gave rise to an anarchistic, expressive and grotesque body that drew inspiration from avantgardists such as Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille.<sup>76</sup> However, Hijikata refused to subordinate both Western and Japanese ideals within the field of dance and theater. Instead, he aimed for the origins of the Japanese body, longing for a time *before* constructed realities such as gender, nationality, aesthetic consciousness and knowledge.<sup>77</sup> In 1968, Hijikata premiered with one of his most famous performances, *Rebellion of the Flesh*.<sup>78</sup> This happened during the same year as the demonstrations against the US’ interference in the Vietnamese-American War. Since Butoh emerged from the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there are several parallels between Ea

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<sup>70</sup> Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability”, 138.

<sup>71</sup> Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability”, 140.

<sup>72</sup> Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability”, 138.

<sup>73</sup> Eisner, “Ea Sola’s Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability”, 140.

<sup>74</sup> Bonnie Sue Stein, “Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty and Mad” in *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1986): pp. 107 – 126. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145731>. 110.

<sup>75</sup> Bonnie Sue Stein, “Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty and Mad”, 111.

<sup>76</sup> Kurihara Nanako, “Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh” in *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2000): pp. 12 – 28. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146810?origin=JSTOR-pdf>. 19 – 20.

<sup>77</sup> Katja Centonze, “Process of Corporeal Corruption and Objective Disfiguration: In Tatsumi Hijikata’s 1960s Butoh” in *Performance Research*, Vol. 23, Issue 8 (2018): pp. 15-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1573055>. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Stein, “Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty and Mad”, 115.

Sola's praxis and this avantgarde dance, as her bodily engagement in acts of performance also sprung out of memories of war and violence, like the napalm attacks that ruined the Vietnamese forests, villages, and civilian bodies.

In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2011, in conjunction with her *Drought and Rain* (*re-enactment 2011*)-performance, Ea Sola converses with Alfred Hickling about her very first encounter with Paris after escaping her motherland, and her bodily revolt against the urban environment. "I needed to revolt, to save myself"<sup>79</sup>, she proclaims in the interview. A similar statement could have been articulated by Tatsumi Hijikata or Kazuo Ohno, who both revolted against the traditional Japanese dance and drama-forms such as the Ancient Japanese Noh-drama. In Butoh, trauma is mediated through the body in a formless manner, which evokes memories of horror and cruelty. Through the Butoh-dancer's abilities to transform the material world, unconsciousness and dark spaces of the inner world come to rise in abstract re-enactments of war, violence and horror. The body becomes a medium of remembrance and recollection that articulates the past in a contemporary space. In Butoh, there is a distinct nostalgia for an origin – a prehistorical body that is untouched by the Western world. Nostalgia for an origin is also traceable in the work of Ea Sola – a prominent feature of *Drought and Rain* (1995) – but while the masters of Butoh rejected tradition, Ea Sola returned to Vietnam to research her ancestors' undocumented histories found in the bodies of local Vietnamese elders.

After a decade of "exploring the memory of the body"<sup>80</sup> – as stated in a conversation with Eisner – Ea Sola returned to Vietnam in the late 1980s when the country finally opened for the Boatpeople to return home after the war. This return reunited Ea Sola with her own family, but it also made it possible for her to re-make the home she once had to flee.<sup>81</sup> In Vietnam, her studies on the memory of the body continued, albeit this time through anthropological research of Vietnamese traditional music, dance, religion and village customs.<sup>82</sup> In a remote village in the Red River Delta, Ea Sola immersed herself into the lives of some of the older women in the village. To obtain a profound understanding for these women's lives and how the decades of war had influenced their ways of living, Ea Sola stayed with them in their homes.<sup>83</sup> These studies resulted in a unique artistic expression that can be viewed as a bricolage of traditional Vietnamese elements combined with influences from avantgarde performance art. Eventually, she created *Drought and Rain* (1995) with the peasant

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<sup>79</sup> Alfred Hickling, "Ea Sola: 'I'm not an intellectual, I come from the forest'" in *The Guardian* (2011). Link address: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/aug/25/ea-sola-drought-and-rain-vietnam-war>.

<sup>80</sup> Eisner, "Ea Sola's Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability", 140.

<sup>81</sup> Eisner, "Ea Sola's Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability", 141.

<sup>82</sup> Eisner, "Ea Sola's Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability", 142.

<sup>83</sup> Eisner, "Ea Sola's Transnational, Transcultural Arts and Answerability", 142.

women she encountered during her stay. Her process towards the creation of *Drought and Rain* (1995) commenced with her sensations of displacement and her yearning for a home. Perhaps this longing for Vietnam was reinforced by the impossibility of returning to her motherland before 1989. Ea Sola's desire to re-make a home she once had to flee brings us to issues regarding nostalgia and the drive to return and conserve. Because ultimately, the home one dreams about going back to is not the same as the home one has departed or been expelled from.

# 3 The Limitations of Experience and the Possibilities of Nostalgia

## 3.1. The Limitations of Experience

For immigrants and their descendants, displacement as the consequence of fleeing one's motherland has shown to give rise to sensations of not belonging in a host country, as well as strong yearning for a lost home. As one delves into the realm of the diasporic subject's complex state of being, one soon discovers different nuances of displacement that further emphasize the state of in-betweenness experienced once questions regarding home and homeland arise. By scrutinizing what a home and a homeland signify for a diasporic subject, we will discover that the term, *diaspora*, extends beyond the original Ancient Greek understanding of what displacement entails. In contrast to Safran's schematic definition, and perhaps more related to Clifford's postmodern and traveling conceptualization of the term, I will highlight the term, *exile*, as one nuance of displacement. By looking closer at the term exile in the context of diaspora, new understandings for the diasporic subject's temporal limitations and possibilities will come to rise through Svetlana Boym's ideas of *restorative nostalgia* and *reflective nostalgia*. How can returns to the past be explored as something different than solely a limitation or a stagnation in the past? Throughout this chapter, I will thus explore how the peasant women's bodies embody "the discontinuous state of being", established by Edward Said in his well-known essay, "Reflections on Exile".

### Endless Exile and Lost Homes

To acknowledge one's own status as a refugee is different from referring to oneself as being in exile. In Marie Louise Seeberg's contribution to the anthology, *Andre Bilder av "De andre"*<sup>84</sup>, the Norwegian social anthropologist reveals how Vietnamese refugees in Norway often struggle to denote their host country as their new home. By looking at exile as a nuance of the diasporic state of being, she discovers the limitations of "being in exile". Exile can be understood as a temporary condition with an end as a displaced subject always seeks for ways to return to its homeland. But when returns never takes place, one must view exile in a new light. Marie Louise

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<sup>84</sup> A direct translation of this title could be: Other Images of "the Others".

Seeberg establishes exile as an aestheticized version of diaspora. The aestheticization of exile takes place when migrating one's homeland becomes tightly connected with loyalty. Migrants who have left their homeland seek returns because the acknowledgement of a host country as their new home equals the acknowledgement of defeat. According to a Vietnamese proverb rendered by a Vietnamese refugee interviewed by Seeberg, "Life is a temporal house, to die is to return home."<sup>85</sup> This works as an example on how exiled subjects and their loyalty for a homeland can be aestheticized into martyrs, or even heroes, as they still are willing to die for their homeland regardless of the impossibilities of returning home.

For my mother, her first years in Norway were characterized by polarized sensations of displacement: While my mother and her siblings established their new life – their new beginnings – in a small city outside of Oslo, my grandfather never managed to settle. In an interview I did with my mother in 2014 for Professor Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk's performance project, *I møte med det tapte* (in conjunction with Eeg-Tverbakk's PhD project, "Theater – ting: Towards a Materialist Practice of Staging Documents"), she recalls my grandfather's complex state of exile, through a particular childhood memory:

I had saved up money to buy my own bike. It turned out to be a blue "DBS Kombi", a bike one could fold in two. After each ride I washed my bike so it would always shine, but one day my father demanded me to sell it. He wanted to go to France where several other Vietnamese refugees lived. His thoughts about seeking away to somewhere else were thoughts he had for many years after our arrival in Norway. It was not until he became a great-grandfather that he understood that we were going to stay – but until then he had lived his life in a constant escape from the communists and the unknown. To find safety was impossible in my father's restlessness. I sold the bike, but we never left.<sup>86</sup>

My grandfather never acknowledged Norway as his new home, but to return to Vietnam was not an option as long as the communists were in government. His loyalty to Saigon before its fall in 1975 marks the complexity of being in a state of endless exile. The occupation of Saigon was the collapse of my grandfather's Vietnam, and the rise of Ho Chi Minh City was the rise of a new country that Vietnamese refugees never will acknowledge as their home out of loyalty to Saigon. Thus, the yearning for a home, among Vietnamese refugees, is not a yearning for the contemporary Vietnam built on a communist regime that later turned the country into one of the world's fastest growing economies. It is rather the yearning for a lost country and a past that one left for the purpose of democratic values and freedom. Anti-communism has become

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<sup>85</sup> Marie Louise Seeberg, "Eksil eller diaspora? Hjem eller hjemland?" in *Andre bilder av de andre: Transnasjonale liv i Norge*, ed. Øyvind Fuglerud, pp. 64 – 91. Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2004. 81.

<sup>86</sup> *I møte med det tapte* (2013), created and performed by Simon Aasheim, Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk, Justine Nguyen, Helene Skogland, Aurora Solvang, Toril Solvang, Thomas Steene-Johansen, Aksel Tjønn & Nel Ewa Tomczyk. Oslo: Nationaltheatret, 2013. Performance date: 17. August.

equivalent with loyalty and love for Vietnam before 1975, which amplifies what the Vietnamese-Norwegian social anthropologist, Anh Nga Longva, names “the mystery of return”<sup>87</sup> – a total conviction that returning to a Vietnam without a communist regime one day will be possible.<sup>88</sup> This conviction prevents refugees of the Vietnamese-American War from returning to the communist-ruled Vietnam of today because this country is simply not their home. In this train of thoughts, the state of exile is not fueled by the aim to return home, but rather the loyalty and longing for a home that one once fled. Thus, the diasporic state of being for Vietnamese refugees can be seen as an aestheticized version of exile as their displacement from their motherland is justified by martyrdom and heroism.

### **Sensations of a Home**

If the communist-ruled Vietnam no longer is identified as the home of the displaced Vietnamese people, this question arises: What is a home? Through this question, I plunge into the object for the diasporic subject’s longing, that is, Vietnam before 1975. Marie Louise Seeberg explores different ways, in the Vietnamese language, to denote a home. Among these is the Vietnamese dual term, *que huong*, which signifies the home in a rather abstract manner. Directly translated, this signification means both village and scent.<sup>89</sup> The latter signification can be connected to atmosphere, ambience or aura. Thus, to denote a home *que huong*, one addresses the elusiveness and mythic aura of somewhere familiar and safe; like the scent of incense that, despite its invisibility, evokes sensations connected to memories of a place and time before migration and displacement. According to Seeberg, *que huong* is in movement as it does not belong to the nation state, which makes it possible for refugees to maintain the spirit of Vietnam in the diaspora. By traveling to *que huong* in their fantasies and dreams, home is always within a temporally range.<sup>90</sup> As *que huong* makes it possible to return home – to Vietnam before the fall of Saigon despite the diasporic subject’s dislocated state – a host country will never be identified as home. Rather, a host country is experienced as a temporal place; like a site of visit where the displaced person is a guest in another person’s house. From *que huong*, temporal complexities emerge: as it maintains the dream of a time before the Vietnamese-American War, the Boatpeople, refugee camps and unknown countries, it also permits the romantic fantasy of the past to pervade the harsh reality of alienation in the present time. Henceforth, the process of maintaining the past is an action that unfolds in the present time. And ironically, the

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<sup>87</sup> In Norwegian: “Tilbakevendingsens mystikk”.

<sup>88</sup> Seeberg, “Eksil eller diaspora? Hjem eller hjemland?”, 67.

<sup>89</sup> Seeberg, “Eksil eller diaspora? Hjem eller hjemland?”, 77.

<sup>90</sup> Seeberg, “Eksil eller diaspora? Hjem eller hjemland?”, 77.



similarities between the word ‘maintaining’ and the French word for ‘now’– that is, ‘maintenant’ – is unmistakable. If home is *que huong* for the exiled Vietnamese refugee, one must address the issues of temporality that come to rise when the aura of a lost homeland is maintained and suspended in the present time. As the action of maintenance happens ‘maintenant’, the past disrupts the present time and lures the longing subject to live on in a complex state of in-betweenness. This intermediate state is in constant movement between past and present, where the past is the point of return and the present a temporal deviation. Edward Said states in his essay, *Reflections on Exile*: “Exile is a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past.”<sup>91</sup> By being “cut off” from their past, to use Said’s own words, an exile’s way of surviving the loss of a homeland will be to restore the past through *que huong*. Returning to this nostalgic vision of a lost home makes a displaced subject’s state of being *bearable*, but nonetheless painful:

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 the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.<sup>92</sup>

The unhealable rift, according to Said, is irrecoverable and impossible to eradicate. And as the deep sorrow of losing a homeland is unhealable, the return to a time before migration becomes of paramount importance compared to presence in, and awareness for, the present time. Thus, the ‘unhealable rift’ that marks the ‘cut-off’ between a displaced subject and a homeland can never be recovered. While exile is romanticized and aestheticized in poetry and literature, the sorrow of losing a homeland is an indispensable element in the diaspora. But as a displaced subject’s continuous travel to *que huong* might appear as a limitation to the experiences of life, it also enables a temporal multiplicity when the old intertwine with the new. A discontinuous state of being must therefore not solely be understood as something disruptive to the displaced subject’s solidity on earth; its sensations of belonging, its satisfaction with the present time and its new environment. In the coming chapter I will therefore look into the possibilities of nostalgia through Svetlana Boym’s forward-thinking view on the term that will be uncovered as a prominent element of *Drought and Rain* (1995). Henceforth, I wish to explore how the discontinuous state of being is embraced by Ea Sola through an aesthetics of “cut-offs”, which involves holes, gaps, fractions and interruptions that are important parts of her memory work

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<sup>91</sup> Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, pp. 173 – 186. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. 177.

<sup>92</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile”, 173.

that is founded upon her experiences of displacement; her urge to return to Vietnam, and her attempt to re-make a lost home.

### 3.2. The Possibilities of Nostalgia

To aestheticize the state of exile follows a long tradition within literature and art. In the work of prominent authors such as Vladimir Nabokov and filmmakers such as Andrej Tarkovsky, one is invited into the complex world of exiled subjects where their yearning for their homelands are romanticized into poetic depictions of displacement. In the latter's film, *Nostalghia* from 1983, Tarkovsky embodies the loss of a homeland through a Russian poet's stay in Italy. There, nostalgia is conveyed as a strong longing for a homeland; a homesickness that pervades the poet's mind. From *nostos* – the Ancient Greek significance of returning home and *algia* – a suffix with the significance of longing,<sup>93</sup> the term *nostalgia* embodies the diasporic subject's ambiguity rather precisely. With Boym's own words on the term, she captures the haunting sensation of loss and estrangement, juxtaposed with the fantasy and affection "... for a home that no longer exists or has never existed,"<sup>94</sup> within the diasporic subject's mind. The terms exile and nostalgia are closely related but in contrast to exile (that is to be dislocated from one's homeland) nostalgia addresses the actual yearning for a home. It is thus nostalgia that arises once the exiled subject seeks its homeland, or *que huong*, as the very locus of dreams and fantasies. However, as the longing for home becomes a troublesome fantasy, the crucial issue of temporality is launched: "At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams."<sup>95</sup> Thus, through a rather sentimental definition of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym establishes the term as an amalgam of spatiality (*nostos*) and a modus of temporality (*algia*). Put more precisely, nostalgia does not address the home as a tangible location, nor as an action of return. Rather, it is a way of approaching time. Henceforth, the question that follows in the coming sections is: How does Boym's conceptions on nostalgia provide us with new understandings for a displaced subject's discontinuous state? And why should we reconsider the normative understandings of the displaced subject's urge to return to memories of war and home, as limiting to the experiences of life?

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<sup>93</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, "Introduction: Taboo on Nostalgia?".

<sup>94</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, "Introduction: Taboo on Nostalgia?".

<sup>95</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, "Introduction: Taboo on Nostalgia?".

## Restorative Nostalgia

At this point in my thesis I have discovered that a displaced subject's urge to restore a romanticized and aestheticized vision of a lost homeland is driven by the need to overcome the 'unhealable rift' that disrupts their sensations of belonging. With *que huong* as the locus of return for the Vietnamese diasporic subject, nostalgia becomes its saving condition. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym launches two different ways of understanding nostalgia; namely, *restorative nostalgia* and *reflective nostalgia*. However, as Boym makes clear, both terms must be understood as tendencies of how shape is given to longing and not as absolute definitions of what nostalgia is.<sup>96</sup> When looking closely at the word, nostalgia, and how it is constructed of *nostos* and *algia*, one will come closer to an understanding of what restorative and reflective nostalgia signifies. While restorative nostalgia is affiliated to the prefix, *nostos*, and thus aims to reconstruct – or, restore – the home that one once lost, reflective nostalgia is occupied with the suffix, *algia*, namely, the actual longing and yearning. Now, there must be put weight on the differences between to restore a lost home and to remember one, to finally understand how the diasporic subject's state of being can be limiting, but also – and perhaps more importantly – productive and exciting.

Restorative nostalgia strives to repair the heartache of the displaced person's loss of a homeland through restoration of traditions, customs and material objects that decreases the distance – psychologically – to a homeland.<sup>97</sup> Svetlana Boym emphasizes her statement on restorative nostalgia through a closer look at the migrant's home, in which is compared to the body and function of a jewelry box. In a migrant's home, one will find family photos taken in a different time and a different country. One will find textiles and homeware from other cultures, as well as religious signs. The smell of foreign spices, and perhaps incense, fills a migrant's home, making one forget the actual location of the present time. Restorative nostalgia has the ability to ignore the defaults of the past. Instead, it collects the most precious and glorified memories of a homeland that will constitute a migrant's jewelry box. Svetlana Boym argues that migrants that are in a state of restorative nostalgia tends to be more restrictive, perhaps even conservative, in their way of living as the restoration (one could even use the word conservation) of the traces of a homeland gives rise to a solid safeguarding of the past.<sup>98</sup> I must underscore that my purpose with this section is not to accuse anyone's nostalgic relation to their homeland for being ignorant. Nevertheless, I wish to highlight that restorative nostalgia is selective in its way of recreating an image of a homeland, and thus, limits the displaced subject's

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<sup>96</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Part 1, Ch. 4: "Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins".

<sup>97</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Part 1, Ch. 4: "Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins".

<sup>98</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Part 1, Ch. 4: "Restorative Nostalgia: Conspiracies and Return to Origins".

memories of the past to a romanticized and aestheticized vision of a lost home. Restorative nostalgia represents the “normative” understanding of what nostalgia is: The strong yearning for a homeland and the need to restore it through fantasies and dreams. The restoration of, let’s say Vietnam, is affiliated to a romantic vision of Saigon before its fall in 1975. This might be troublesome as the ability to be aware of one’s position in the present time is obscured by the state of constant return to a time created by selective memory. However, my aim with this thesis is not to impeach anyone’s loyalty to their homeland for being invalid because they are indeed valid.

According to Clifford, a diasporic subject’s state of being is a mediation that happens in the in-betweenness of longing for a past and living in the present time<sup>99</sup>, but for some diasporic subjects, the past is more prominent, and thus, restorative nostalgia becomes the saving condition. For others (perhaps mostly descendants of immigrants), the state of in-betweenness dominates and obscures the ability to truly obtain a feeling of belonging, as neither place (ex. Vietnam – the origin of my family, or Norway – the place I have been born and raised) can be characterized as home. Either way, there is indeed an inherent need to return to a time that resembles a home. The issues of nostalgia occur once returns to the past become attempts to obscure the realities of the discontinuous state of being, with restoration and conservation as a way to resist displacement. In *Drought and Rain* (1995), we witness embodied remembrances of Vietnam through the performing bodies and the folkloric elements that colors the piece throughout. We could, through a superficial point of view, understand Ea Sola’s performance as solely a nostalgic piece (in the general sense of the term) – an attempt to re-make the home she lost in the 1970s when she fled her village and the forest surrounding it. But as Ea Sola refers to her artistic praxis as ‘memory work’, I must stress the differences between ‘restoration’ and ‘re-membling’: While ‘restoration’ indicates recovery, retrieving and reversion, ‘re-membling’ suggests some sort of brokenness between the components that make something complete, like the rift between a displaced subject and its homeland. Through the action of re-membrance, Ea Sola acknowledges the holes, gaps, fractions and fragments that trouble the vision of restorative nostalgia. And it is namely this acknowledgement, or self-reflexivity, that enables Ea Sola’s memory work as a reconciliation with her discontinuous state of being that characterize her presence in the present time.

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<sup>99</sup> Clifford, “Diasporas”, 311.

## Reflective Nostalgia

To understand Ea Sola's work as solely "nostalgic" is a one-dimensional understanding of the temporal multiplicity of the displaced, longing subject that is situated in a state of in-betweenness; like a pendulum that moves between the past and the present time. While the concept of restorative nostalgia is a way to conserve and rebuild a lost home, the term *reflective nostalgia* is the very antipode. Unlike restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia never strives to reconstruct the romanticized *que huong*. Nevertheless, those who are in a state of reflective nostalgia are in the possession of a certain awareness of history and progress. A reflective nostalgist is capable of acknowledging a homeland in ruins, or, that Saigon is now replaced with Ho Chi Minh City<sup>100</sup>, despite the pain that comes with the 'unhealable rift' that occurs between a displaced subject and a lost homeland. While a person who dwells in the restorative nostalgic condition strives to decrease the temporal distance to the past, a reflective nostalgist's reflexivity of time, change and displacement enables an understanding for the past, the present and the future as a complex amalgam of temporalities.<sup>101</sup> In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym states that reflective nostalgia is composed by elements from both *mourning* and *melancholia* in terms of losing a homeland. As Boym draws on Sigmund Freud's account of these terms, I will look into how he distinguishes these correlated conditions in *Mourning and Melancholia*. Although this text was published as a clinical work, it was also a personal one. When *Mourning and Melancholia* was first published in 1917, Freud went through a period characterized by worries and sorrow related to the First World War. The brutal warfare and violence performed against civilians made great impact upon his thoughts on war, pain and death.<sup>102</sup> According to Freud, a regular account for mourning would be to refer to it as the reaction to the loss of a loved person, a country, one's liberty or an ideal etc.<sup>103</sup> Although mourning deviates from what Freud refers to as "the normal attitude to life"<sup>104</sup>, it is not viewed as a pathological condition as it also has the ability to pass with time.<sup>105</sup> Admittedly, melancholia may also be a reaction to the loss of an object, but the distinction between the two conditions arise through the ego: While mourning is the reaction to the loss of something from the outside world, melancholia dwells in its introspective self – its ego. Freud writes: "In

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<sup>100</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Ch. 1, Part 5: "Reflective Nostalgia: Virtual Reality and Collective Memory".

<sup>101</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Ch. 1, Part 5: "Reflective Nostalgia: Virtual Reality and Collective Memory".

<sup>102</sup> Joel Whitebook, *Freud: An Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. DOI: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uio.no/10.1017/9781139025119>. 338.

<sup>103</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914 – 1916): On the History of Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*. Translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey and Anna Freud, pp. 243 – 258 London: The Hogarth Press Limited, 1957.243.

<sup>104</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 243.

<sup>105</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 243 – 244.

mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”<sup>106</sup> The object-loss is indeed present in both conditions, but as mourning relates actively to the world, melancholia remains disillusioned and unconscious to the world outside of oneself. Thus, a melancholic person is oblivious to its circumstances due to the ego’s ascendancy.<sup>107</sup>

With Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* as the backdrop to Boym’s conception on reflective nostalgia, I believe we will come closer to an in-depth understanding of how reflective nostalgia differs from restorative nostalgia. While nostalgia of the restorative kind continuously rewinds to *que huong*, a reflective nostalgist’s attempt to rebuild this lost home never takes place. The complexity of reflective nostalgia comes to rise in the duality between the conscious character of mourning and the introspectiveness of melancholia. While restorative nostalgia dwells in the past, reflective nostalgia dares to return, repetitively, but without losing its liaison with the present time. Through this movement, reflective nostalgia fluxes between the ache of loss and optimism for the future.<sup>108</sup> A reflective nostalgist is thus aware of its losses in the past, its current condition in the present time but also its possibilities in the future. Moreover, reflective nostalgia demands an awareness of the interconnection of past, present and future that is rooted in both collective and subjective memories. And by this, a reflective nostalgist’s true force is its self-reflexivity.

Taking into account the research material of my thesis, I will use both restorative and reflective nostalgia as gateways into the memory work of Ea Sola. In *Drought and Rain* (1995), past and present intertwine simultaneously as the personal intersects with the historical. By looking into the performance that embodies memories of the Vietnamese-American War, I will uncover how Ea Sola’s self-reflexivity and temporal consciousness come to rise in her performance that, at first glance, possesses traces of restoration and conservation of *que huong*.

### **3.3. Ways of Returning in *Drought and Rain* (1995)**

In some ways, the different ways of returning to the past in Ea Sola’s *Drought and Rain* (1995) can be seen in the light of a broader discussion on performance art and war. Rebecca Schneider, author of the book, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, approaches the concept of ‘reenactment’ through an extensive study of this phenomenon’s occurrence throughout the history of performance art. What does reenactment mean? And why

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<sup>106</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, 246.

<sup>107</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, 245.

<sup>108</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Ch. 1, Part 5: “Reflective Nostalgia: Virtual Reality and Collective Memory”.

do we have the need to reenact war scenes that have already occurred? Schneider elaborates the apparent need to return to the past through theatrical reenactment; from reenactments of war scenes from the Civil War in the United States, to the more current works of, among others, Marina Abramovic. In her book, Schneider explores psychological, cultural, political, subjective and artistic drives to return to scenes of war from the past. Schneider states that reenactment can be understood in many ways. In the field of performance studies, and within the art field in general, the term is both debated and constantly changing. For some, it is solely a matter of reproduction and literal recreation; namely, to reproduce a historical event according to historical “truth”, or, an attempt to create performative documentations of “what really happened”. This strive to reproduce, retrieve or rewind historical events in a restorative manner is challenged by Schneider’s porous approach to time. Following Schneider’s own words on this approach, time is full of holes and gaps – a vision that addresses the fragmented nature of memories.<sup>109</sup> Thus, reenactment in Rebecca Schneider’s point of view, is more a matter of returning to the *memories* of war and not to so much to historical events, always through the temporal medium of performance art.

In the coming sections, I will look at the temporal aspects of performance art and how the complex amalgam of past, present and future is enabled once Schneider deconstructs Peggy Phelan’s statement on the disappearing nature of performance art. According to Phelan, performance art leaves no remains because its temporality is situated solely in the present time. More specifically, this implies that once a performative act happens it also disappears. Schneider’s opposition against Phelan’s viewpoint of the temporality of performance art is important to my further exploration of Ea Sola’s return to memories of war as a memory work of the reflective kind. How does the temporal medium of performance art become an extension of Ea Sola’s self-reflexivity? And furthermore, as Schneider’s porous approach to time points to the discontinuous state of the displaced subject, I will explore how an aesthetics of “cut-offs” (one could also name this as an ‘aesthetics of porosity’) gives shape to the temporal multiplicity in *Drought and Rain* (1995).

### **Returning to the Past in *Drought and Rain* (1995)**

Through multidisciplinary artist Janica Draisma’s documentary on *Drought and Rain* (1995), we are provided with detailed footage of scenes from the performance during its last tour in 1998. The documentary also contains rare footage of the production of the performance, as well

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<sup>109</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, 6.

as Ea Sola's own contemplations upon her drive to explore memories of Vietnam and war, why she engaged the peasant women as performers in her piece, and the folkloric elements that embody her nostalgia for her homeland. In the documentary, it becomes clear that Ea Sola's intention is to return to the origin of Vietnam. She states: "I wanted to go to the beginning of Vietnam. The beginning of its history which really meant the North. And that really meant the peasant culture" (my own translation from French).<sup>110</sup> Ea Sola attempts to trace her way back to Vietnam before imperialism, colonialism, the Vietnamese-American War and the economic growth of Vietnam in our present time. She returns to Vietnam's traditional theater, its traditional customs and its traditional sounds. Cone-shaped hats (in Vietnamese they are named *nón lá*, which means "leaf hat"), the poetry of the national poet, Nguyen Du, and the sound of the characteristic Vietnamese instrument, Dan tranh, are just a few of the elements in the performance that constitute Ea Sola's yearning for a time before war and violence. With her nostalgia for Vietnamese traditional art and culture, Ea Sola utilizes elements from *hát chèo*, a satirical musical theater form that originated in the villages of Northern Vietnam during the thirteenth century. The performers of *hát chèo* are usually not trained dancers, actors or musicians but peasants from the villages where the performances are held. And in fact, one of the most startling characteristics of *Drought and Rain* (1995) is Ea Sola's engagement with untrained performers; the local female peasants from the Red River Delta dressed in traditional attire and hairdos.

These folkloric elements that dominate the expression of *Drought and Rain* (1995) makes it evident that Ea Sola possesses a strong nostalgia for the traditional cultures in the villages of the river deltas in Northern Vietnam. In the documentary, she contemplates upon how she grew up in the forests, barefoot, like the performing women in her piece.<sup>111</sup> In one scene of *Drought and Rain* (1995) we witness Ea Sola's own body move in slow movements while a masked body, shirtless and barefoot, aggressively follows her contemplating body that seems to perform some kind of ritualistic dance.<sup>112</sup> While her body dwells in its introspective self through movements that creates the image of an abstracted bird, the masked creature approaches her like a shadow from the past. Is it the past that intrudes on her presence and obscures her awareness for the audience?<sup>113</sup> In this sequence, Ea Sola's face and body are turned away from any spectator. A melancholia for the home she once lost appears on stage through her body's introspective dwelling in the past. One could argue that this particular scene

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<sup>110</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma". YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RVFgyF6jYA>, 2:24.

<sup>111</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 4:03.

<sup>112</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 4:00 – 4:35.

<sup>113</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 4:25.



points to a restorative nostalgia by the masked creature from the past that enchants Ea Sola's body with unawareness for the present time. However, to recall Ea Sola's work as solely restorative or conservational would be a disregard for the self-reflexivity in her memory work that arises in the temporal multiplicity of performance art. How does this multiplicity come to rise in Ea Sola's performance? And how does *Drought and Rain* (1995) return to memories of war without losing liaison with the present time?

### **Temporal Multiplicity and Self-reflexivity in *Drought and Rain* (1995)**

In the opening scene of *Drought and Rain* (1995), one of the peasant women, whose name is Doan Thi Ket, enters the stage and sings:

On the land [Vietnam], rich with alluvial deposits wedded to blood.  
My ancestors for centuries opened up our pathways.  
This Epic dance – 'Drought and Rain'.  
Recounts the history of thousands of destinies.  
And this is what the poem said  
(*voices reply*: what did it say?)  
The present generation, do they remember the centuries past?<sup>114</sup>

In this prologue, Vietnam's aquatic culture sets the foundation for the rest of Ea Sola's memory work. Throughout times, alluvial deposits – namely, the remains after nature's cycles of drought and rain – have given shape to the landscapes of Northern Vietnam. By tracing these alluvial deposits that, for each cycle, changes and accumulates into new patterns, forms and structures, one simultaneously traces the undocumented stories of Vietnam and its people. These forms and structures have given shape to the river deltas that run through Vietnam, like blood vessels giving life to the many small communities that depend on water. Tragically, the lives of the Vietnamese civilian population were brutally disrupted by the violence of the Vietnamese-American War, performed by both the US forces and the Communist Party of Vietnam. One would think that the ending of a war would lead to peace, but the years that followed the Vietnamese-American War were highly characterized by a turbulent political climate for those Vietnamese people who stayed in their homeland. Curtailed freedom of speech, poverty and death as the consequence of starvation, and "reeducation" of those in opposition to the Communist Party of Vietnam became their postwar reality.<sup>115</sup> Instead of sweat dripping into the water due to long hours in the rice fields, the blood of the lost lives during and after the Vietnamese-American War flows into the water of the river deltas that provide the present

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<sup>114</sup> Eisner, "Drought and Rain: re-creations in Vietnamese, cross border heritage", 799.

<sup>115</sup> Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, 451 – 453.

generation with life. In this way, past and present are inseparable. In similarity to alluvial deposits as the remains after drought and rain, I will explore Ea Sola's performance as the remains and archival deposits of the performing bodies' experiences of war.

The temporal multiplicity of theater and performance art is discussed in Rebecca Schneider's publication through an in-depth account of the "liveness" of performance art, which is an on-going discussion within the field of Performance studies. Schneider discusses Peggy Phelan's viewpoint on the live aspect of performance as that is connected to disappearance; namely, that once performative events takes place in the "now" they leave no remains. Rather, they disappear with the immaterial quality that a live performance possesses (in which Phelan claims to be its biggest strength<sup>116</sup>).<sup>117</sup> However, issues concerning Phelan's attempt to liberate live performances from mass reproduction arise once we acknowledge that the live aspect of performance is not solely rooted in the live or present time. By liberating performance art from materialism – and thus, mass reproduction – through the "liveness" of performance makes performative acts disappear in what is named "real time". With "real time", one addresses the actual time of the "taking place" of live acts. By opposing the "after" of events, and thus the remains of a performance, Phelan's argument refuses the multiplicity of time; namely, the possibilities of re-creating, reenacting or returning to the past.<sup>118</sup> If performance art does not leave any remains because of its disappearing quality, it becomes impossible for a performative act to be archived and returned to in the future. Rebecca Schneider discusses the troubling of disappearance further in her article, "Archive Performance Remains", where she questions the vanishing of performative acts, as argued by Peggy Phelan.<sup>119</sup> By viewing reenactment as an act of recurrence, the issue of "liveness" in performance art arises. If reenactment in performance art is a matter of repeating or replaying memories from the past over and over again, then the uniform live aspect of performance art dissolves at the threshold of return. Thus, Schneider questions Phelan's statement that performance art is solely an act in "real time", and therefore she writes: "[...] is the present really so temporally straightforward or pure – devoid of all basic delay or deferral if not multiplicity and flexibility?"<sup>120</sup>

Following the prologue of the performance, sung by Doan Thi Ket, sudden darkness fills the stage before light and silhouettes of mountain peaks arise, depicting the hilly landscape of Northern Vietnam (fig. 3). Eventually, contours of cutout figures that slowly approach the

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<sup>116</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and war in times of theatrical reenactment*, 91.

<sup>117</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and war in times of theatrical reenactment*, 91.

<sup>118</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and war in times of theatrical reenactment*, 102.

<sup>119</sup> Rebecca Schneider, "Archives Performance Remains" in *Performance Research*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2001): pp. 100-108. DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792). 100.

<sup>120</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, 92.

fourth wall of the performance space appear on stage.<sup>121</sup> It is hard to notice at first (especially for those who experience the performance through video recordings – like me) that the cutouts are animated by the performers’ bodies. It is indeed a mythical – nearly phantasmagorical – sphere one is invited into. Slowly, a large vision of a ghost makes its entrance (fig. 4). The phantasmagorical ghost that revives from the darkness of the stage moves slowly in wave-like motions created by the individual bodies’ bending and rising.<sup>122</sup> Despite the fact that we are looking at a phantasm, it is evident that the performing bodies seek the ground as they move up and down. There is a sensation of gravity that pulls the floating ghost towards the floor, and when the bodies meet it, they begin to collect something with their hands that we cannot see.<sup>123</sup> What are they collecting? What do they remember through their bodies? The postures and movements of the performing women’s bodies are reminiscent of those of peasants in the rice fields: their backs are bent while their arms reach out for the long and green rice grass that they collect with their hands. Despite the spectator’s capability to recognize these movements as the work of rice farmers, they are not performed in a literal manner. Nor is the performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), an accurate re-enactment of historical events. Rather, it is the bodies’ memories of labor work in the wet rice fields that is embodied. On stage, the rice grass and the watery rice field are replaced with nothing else than air and mats made of straw that fills the whole floor of the stage. Through this absence of material props, an aesthetics of “cut-offs” takes place; holes and gaps disrupt the completeness of the performing bodies’ memories, and with this phantasmagorical creature, *Ea Sola* underlines the temporal multiplicity of *Drought and Rain* (1995). The haunting past takes shape in this creature that pierces through the live act of performance art, disrupting its absolute devotion to the present time. With this phantasmagorical scene, images from the peasant women’s pasts are being animated into ghosts that comes to life in our material world.<sup>124</sup>

With Said’s statement on the diasporic subject’s discontinuous state of being in mind, I will argue that the present time is not pure, nor is it straightforward. The ‘unhealable rift’ that occurs between a displaced person and its homeland applies to *Ea Sola* and her personal history of migration and displacement. However, it also applies to the peasant women whose bodies perform in *Drought and Rain* (1995). Despite the fact that they never migrated Vietnam, this rift is still present as the loss of a homeland not always involves migration and displacement. It also involves the loss of freedom, peace, safety and family members. The homeland they knew

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<sup>121</sup> Janica Draisma, “*Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie* – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma”, 0:15 – 1:14.

<sup>122</sup> Janica Draisma, “*Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie* – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma”, 1:43.

<sup>123</sup> Janica Draisma, “*Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie* – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma”, 1:41 – 2:35.

<sup>124</sup> Terry Castle, “Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Autumn 1988): pp. 26-61. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343603>. 29.

before imperialism, colonialism and the Vietnamese-American War is not affiliated with violence but water; the Red River Delta, the wet rice fields, and the drought and rain that predicted the future of their harvest. After the Vietnamese-American War, farmers (especially from ethnic groups from remote regions) were forced to abandon their agricultural work in favor of the industrial factories that emerged during a disastrous postwar-period as an attempt to restore the country's economic growth.<sup>125</sup> Due to the Communist Party of Vietnam's deprivation of the peaceful lives of ethnic groups and peasants, sensations of losing a home does not only apply to diasporic communities. Ea Sola's piece is therefore full of deferrals, delays and disruptions enabled by the 'unhealable rift' situated in-between the peasant women's memories of Vietnam before war and violence, and their performing bodies in the present time. These "cut-offs" breaks with the uniform "liveness" of performance art, making the temporality of *Drought and Rain* (1995) flexible, multiple and complex. The temporal multiplicity of *Drought and Rain* (1995) also means that the memories of the peasant women remain rather than disappear. The peasant women's mediation of nostalgia for a time before war, as well as their undocumented stories of the Vietnamese-American War turns their bodies into important sources of knowledge. And as these stories remain rather than disappear, they also give prominence to Ea Sola's vision of the body as a living archive; namely, a material location where re-enactments of memories from the past are allowed to unfold. She states: "The archive-body is the place where pasts and practices converge, and where they are continually questioned, re-performed, and re-made within the ever-emerging present."<sup>126</sup> To profoundly understand Ea Sola's vision of the body as a living archive, I will delve into the term, *archive*, that has been debated in philosophy and theory as well as in the corporeal world of performance studies. What is an archive and how does it connect to the moving body? And how is *archiving* a bodily process of reflective nostalgia that permeates the memory work of Ea Sola?

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<sup>125</sup> Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, 454.

<sup>126</sup> Eisner, "Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola's *Forgotten Fields*", 132.

## 4 The Body as an Archive

### 4.1 The Archive and the Body

“Order is no longer assured.”<sup>127</sup>

Jacques Derrida (“Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”)

In *Drought and Rain* (1995), Ea Sola’s urge to return to her memories of Vietnam and the war is juxtaposed with consciousness for the present time and self-reflexivity that I have explored through Rebecca Schneider’s notion of the temporal multiplicity of performance art, as well as Svetlana Boym’s account for reflective nostalgia as a conscious return to memories of a time before war. By looking at *Drought and Rain* (1995) as the work of a reflective nostalgist, I wish to delve into the performing bodies of the peasant women in *Drought and Rain* (1995) as their memories of the past are mediated through their moving bodies. Moreover, I will explore why Ea Sola chose to engage these women in her work, and how their bodies embody remembrances of the past but also a consciousness for the present time. Their presence on stage is namely not solely a choice based on the choreographer’s nostalgia for Vietnamese traditional musical theater. To come closer to an understanding of the importance of the peasant women’s bodies in *Drought and Rain* (1995), as well as their constant movement between the past, present and the future, I will turn to the notion of the *archive*, and two different perspectives on it. How is the term, archive, connected to the performing body of Ea Sola’s work? And how do these bodies become what Ea Sola herself calls “archive-bodies”? These are questions that I will return to throughout this chapter and explore through Jacques Derrida’s “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression” and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Woman Native Other*. Moreover, this chapter will forge a connection between the notion of reflective nostalgia that I addressed in the previous chapter, and the notion of the archive explored in this one. In other words, how can the ‘archive-body’ be viewed as an embodiment of reflective nostalgia?

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<sup>127</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 11.

## On the Archive

What is an archive? And what does it mean to archive? In “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, Derrida deconstructs the signification of the word, archive – a term rooted in the Ancient Greek *arkhe*. According to Derrida, *arkhe* unifies both *commencement* and *commandment*. It is thus a principle of where things begin and where exercise of order unfolds.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, the term, archive, can also be seen in relation to another Ancient Greek word, that is, *arkheion*; namely, a house or a domicile. In making these etymological connections, Derrida establishes the archive as a domiciliation of the law – a physical protection of official documents.<sup>129</sup> Thus, from this perspective, an archive is hence a physical space where documents are being stored and systemized – like a museum or a library, for example. Furthermore, Derrida forges a connection between *arkhe* and the notion of *consignation*, which means “to gather together”. This “gathering together” is a primary feature of the archiving function that consigns documents and other sundry material from the past into a supposedly unified body; a corpus or a system in synchrony.<sup>130</sup> Thus, “to archive” is a matter of putting things into order with the aim to seek the origin of things; to obtain “authentic” history – or, truth – through consignation of documents from the past.<sup>131</sup> This drive to conserve and put things into order is what Derrida names “the archival drive”.<sup>132</sup>

The title of Derrida’s publication, “Archive Fever”, points to the archival drive to seek historical truth which is both ideological and unachievable, according to Derrida himself. Simultaneously as the archive is a matter of consignation, it is also a matter of destruction.<sup>133</sup> In psychoanalysis, the term “drive” may be connected to the words “obsessive” and “excessive”, and thus it is never in balance.<sup>134</sup> Henceforth, the “drive’s” obsessive strive to restore order turns it feverish, which suggests a persistent impossibility and even failure of the ordering, gathering, and anchoring function of the archive and the act of archiving. Furthermore, Derrida argues that archives are in fact dis-composed by conflicted oppositions that do not solely aim to conserve the past, but also to auto-destruct and erase memories – an argument that he derives from Sigmund Freud’s theories on the death drive and pleasure principle, also known as Eros and Thanatos. It is precisely the chiasmatic relations between dualities such as life and death, civilization and aggression, love and destruction that renders

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<sup>128</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 9.

<sup>129</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 10.

<sup>131</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 10.

<sup>132</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 19.

<sup>133</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 14.

<sup>134</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1995. 13 – 15.

the archive simultaneously possible and impossible. While the pleasure principle strives for harmony, balance and stability, the death drive involves traumatic repetition, excess, erasure and, at times, self-destruction.<sup>135</sup> And it is namely this play of opposites that deconstructs the archive as a place where order is sustained and conserved. Thus, to conserve for the sake of historical truth is an unachievable goal once the aggression of the death drive is located at the heart of the archive. Accordingly, the archive is not simply a place of order and synchrony, but rather a “compulsion” to collect and forget.<sup>136</sup> The death drive’s compulsion to erase and destruct gives rise to holes rather than wholes, and an ineradicable amnesia in and about our memories of the past. Henceforth, I will allow myself to compare this compulsion to the ‘unhealable rift’ for a displaced Vietnamese subject, whose loss of a homeland is irreparable despite its attempting to restore a condition of *que huong*. This is the hypomnesic quality of the archive as the death drive’s aggression creates holes and ruptures in our memories of the past, which is also a crucial factor for the archive’s temporal multiplicity.<sup>137</sup> So far, I have examined Derrida’s deconstruction of the archive as a space for conservation and restoration of the past through its gathering function. The death drive’s aggression towards the archive’s feverish attempt to construct historical truth reinforces Rebecca Schneider’s porous approach to time and memories, as well as the displaced subject’s discontinuous state of being, according to Said’s notion of the ‘unhealable rift’.

*Drought and Rain* (1995), as a performance piece, can be experienced as a compulsion to re-construct the past with restorative nostalgia as the leading force to return to a lost homeland. As Ea Sola and the peasant women’s memories take shape in the folkloric elements – that are grounded in repetitive cultural acts – they are transformed into almost phantasmagoric ghosts from the past as they appear in this mythical atmosphere of nostalgia. But however restorative this nostalgia may seem, Ea Sola’s return to the past is not constituted by elements put into order that tells a familiar story of the Vietnamese-American War. Rather, the performance consists of untold memories of Vietnam and the war, mediated through the performing bodies of the peasant women. It becomes evident that Ea Sola never attempts to re-enact events from the Vietnamese-American War to document “what really happened”. Nor is it a re-production of the collective trauma produced by war photographs such as *The Napalm Girl*. The collective memory that shape our understanding for the Vietnamese-American War is, according to Derrida, manufactured by a feverish compulsion to collect and conserve elements from the past for the sake of historical “truth”. But how truthful is the pain of *The*

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<sup>135</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 13.

<sup>136</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 14.

<sup>137</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 14.

*Napalm Girl* for, e.g., my mother who possesses her own experiences of war, migration and displacement? Why is it worth questioning the manufactured truth about the Vietnamese-American War, that is based upon certain privileged slices of history? With these questions in mind, it becomes evident that Ea Sola's work cannot be characterized as the work of a restorative nostalgist as her experiences of war and migration manifest themselves as gaps, holes and fractions that disrupts any absolute affiliation, or stagnation, in the past. Like Derrida's deconstruction of the archive's drive to put documents from the past into synchrony – a uniform body of knowledge where historical "truth" harmoniously unfolds uninterrupted – Ea Sola too opposes the manufactured truths about the Vietnamese-American War by inviting an audience into corporeal realms of lived, and unlived, experiences. In similarity to the death drive's aggression against the utopian fantasy of historical "truth", Ea Sola's *Drought and Rain* (1995) embodies less privileged stories about Vietnam and the war through the peasant women's bodies and the 'unhealable rift' that has become an omnipresent element in their state of being, after losing the home and childhood they once knew. Moreover, through *Drought and Rain* (1995), Ea Sola provides a space for newness and growth to rise as returns and repetition creates gaps, holes and ruptures in her account of the past – not to mention how the return itself inflects our vision of a precolonial Vietnam. By looking at *Drought and Rain* (1995) as an archive where returns to the past are executed with consciousness and purpose, Ea Sola proves to be highly self-reflexive in her nostalgic work.

Throughout this section, I have explored how Derrida's Freudian impression of the archive is a destruction of the archive as a patriarchal site where power and order are being exercised. Instead, Derrida turns the archive into an ambivalent play of opposites where Freud's principles of death and pleasure give rise to a temporal multiplicity that destructs the archive's drive to solely conserve. This notion of the archive is applicable to Ea Sola's performance piece, as her memory work is not solely an attempt to re-make a lost home, in the same way as a restorative nostalgist is driven to restore *que huong*. In contrary, one could choose to understand *Drought and Rain* (1995) as an exploration of how the body's return to memories of the past, through the complex temporality of performance, takes part in a chain of storytelling which gives rise to new understandings for the Vietnamese-American War.

### **The Body as an Archive**

Derrida's notion of the archive in connection with Boym's reflective nostalgia, as well as Schneider's conception of re-enactment, is very relevant for my exploration of *Drought and Rain* (1995), as the temporal multiplicity of the archive can be connected to Schneider's



conception of how re-enactment in performance art is not only rooted in the past, but buckles – recoils and echoes – between past, present and future. Derrida’s archive can also be understood as a prolongation of Boym’s reflective nostalgia (constructed by mourning and melancholia) as returns to the past are interconnected with consciousness for, and of, the present time, and always in relationship to visions for the future. As Ea Sola’s performance is characterized by temporal multiplicity and self-reflexivity, I wish to take a close look at how the archive can be applied to my further exploration of the peasant women’s bodies as Ea Sola herself establishes the body as the very locus of her memory work:

My work  
It is through the body.  
And through the body means,  
From the head,  
To the feet.<sup>138</sup>

Inspired by the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, an influential professor in Rhetoric and Gender Studies at UC Berkeley who works within a feminist and postcolonial perspective, I will explore how the body becomes an archive through her celebrated publication, *Woman Native Other*. There, she states that the earliest archives (or libraries) were the memories of women and their bodies transmission of them.<sup>139</sup> It is indeed a powerful statement and as I read her writings, it becomes clear to me that memories are not limited to the mind, but – according to Minh-ha – the mind and the body are inseparable entities. It is namely a matter of transmission and words: How does words transmit from woman to woman through their ears, mouths, hands and bodies? A grandmother’s memories are transmitted to a mother, and a mother’s memories are transmitted to a daughter through the act of telling and listening. This is how women take part in a chain of repeated memories, or storytelling, that constitute an archive of shared memories and stories, that change and become new for each repetition.<sup>140</sup> Following Trinh T. Minh-ha’s complex conception of the body as an archive, it has become clear to me that I too am part of my mother and her ancestors’ archive. I grew up in Norway, but my mother’s transmission of her own memories of Vietnam, the war, migration and displacement has become inherent stories within my body. My mother’s words have been transmitted from her mouth to my listening ears, and as I write this thesis, I transmit these memories to you through my fingers’ writing.

Both Derrida and Minh-ha write about how dualities arise in the archive, but also how they are interdependent. In “Archive Fever”, Derrida states that: “There is no archive without

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<sup>138</sup> Eisner, “Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola’s *Forgotten Fields*”, 130.

<sup>139</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 121.

<sup>140</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 121.

a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside”<sup>141</sup>, while Minh-ha writes: “But thought is as much a product of the eye, the finger, or the foot as it is of the brain.”<sup>142</sup> Could the archive’s exteriority be the body? Transmission of stories from one body to another means repetition and change, and not merely preservation and storage. As my mother’s memories transmit into my body, they change as they are repeated, performed, reproduced, copied. Thus, these memories are never perfectly iterated because my body – as it perceives and re-enacts stories – not only finds consolidation in them, but also incessantly differs with each repetition of them.<sup>143</sup> The body as an archive is always in change and flux. In this sense, the archive is a bodily matter because the chain of transmission that occurs in-between bodies gives rise to alteration and inflection of memory. As this repetition of memories takes place within and outside of our bodies, we forget at the same time as we remember. This is the way newness can arise, because through amnesia we begin again.<sup>144</sup>

One could look at this accumulative body as a form of embodied consignation; namely, a corporeal process of gathering together memories and stories from the past through transmission. However, this process is not solely a matter of conservation and restoration. Like Derrida’s deconstruction of the preservative archive, and Boym’s reflective nostalgia that is grounded in the diasporic subject’s self-reflexivity and temporal awareness, the body as an archive expands beyond the limitations that longing for a circumscribed past might indicate. The accumulating body, or, the body as an archive, is thus rooted in the transmission of memories and stories from one body to another, which always entails repetitions and change. My mother’s story is not solely her own and, as she passes it on, I receive it – but again, it is not solely mine neither. In this sense, to return to a beginning, or a definite origin, is impossible as we all partake in “[...] a stream that flows into another stream [...]”<sup>145</sup> Our memories and stories have no beginning, nor end, and as the process of transmission is based on sharing stories through telling and listening, archiving can be viewed as a process of re-enactment; a complex weaving of past, present and future.

Thus, *Drought and Rain* (1995) can be viewed as the result of Ea Sola’s anthropological studies in the Red River Delta. When she first returned to Vietnam, her aim was to trace her way back to her homeland’s beginning, but through my exploration of Minh-ha’s notion of how the body is understood as a living archive, it becomes evident that the origin of things is only one fragment of a whole which renders a longing subject’s attempt in re-making a lost home

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<sup>141</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 14.

<sup>142</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 39.

<sup>143</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 122-123.

<sup>144</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 129.

<sup>145</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 123.

impossible. In the coming section, I will therefore look into the single bodies of the peasant women in *Drought and Rain* (1995) and how their personal memories and stories partake in the creation of a larger historical context through the chain of transmission.

## 4.2 The Archive-body in *Drought and Rain* (1995)

In Janica Draisma's digital video documentary on the production of *Drought and Rain* (1995), Ea Sola re-tells the peasant women's stories of how they used to dance in their villages, but also how the Vietnamese-American War made a brutal end to their childhood. Ea Sola describes the peasant women as "Ready – at any moment – to dance. The dance that they knew when they were children" (my own translation from French).<sup>146</sup> By this, I will explore how the peasant women trace their way back to the past through movements that slowly unfold through their archive-bodies. How does their individual bodies partake in a chain of transmission? By following Trinh T. Minh-ha's conception of women's memories as the first archives, and how their bodies become living archives through processes of embodied storytelling, I wish to come to a closer understanding for the archive-body – a term coined by Ea Sola herself in an interview with Rivka Syd Eisner. Moreover, I will look into what the scholar of performance studies, Diana Taylor, implies when she introduces the term, *repertoire*, as a corporeal challenge to the archive in its traditional ordering function. My aim in this section is thus to delve into the body as an archive, and how embodied remembrances of Vietnam are enabled in Ea Sola's 1995-performance.

### Repertoires or Archive-bodies

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor opposes the traditional signification of the archive as a domiciliation of documents and objects from the past that strives to protect and conserve them. She argues that the main difference between her conception of the repertoire and the Ancient Greek notion of the archive (in which Derrida also opposes) lays in the repertoire's ability to both retain and transform memories, stories and knowledge from the past through re-enactments of embodied memories.<sup>147</sup> Put more precisely, while the traditional notion of the archive consists of stabilized materials protected against change, performance art

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<sup>146</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 4:45-5:00.

<sup>147</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire – Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003. 20.

constitutes a repertoire of embodied knowledge that is mediated through the body; namely, “a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge [...]”<sup>148</sup>, which points to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s complex conception of the archive as the memories of women that flows through processes of bodily transmission. Moreover, the repertoire expands beyond the archive’s static way of conserving. Like Trinh T. Minh-ha’s statement that it is the memories of women and their transmission of these that constitute the archives, Taylor’s conception of the repertoire is found in performative practices, such as storytelling, rituals and dance, and their abilities to conserve memories and knowledge through embodiment.<sup>149</sup> The repertoire can therefore be perceived as a corporeal archiving of knowledge and memories that unfolds in the performative act of transmission from one body to another; from the performing bodies of the peasant women in *Ea Sola*’s performance, to an alert audience that is open to perceive their stories. Taylor’s conception of the repertoire enables the body’s capabilities to be a material location for habit, tradition and culture to unfold. This is what Rivka Syd Eisner names “the historicity of the body,”<sup>150</sup> which points to *Ea Sola*’s own vision of the body as historical – namely, as an archive-body.<sup>151</sup> Following this train of thought, I wish to utilize *Ea Sola*’s term, *archive-body*, rather than Diana Taylor’s *repertoire*: While the notion of the repertoire can account for the processes of returning to one’s past and the transmission of memories and stories through bodily engagement, the archive-body is the actual location where these processes take place. Henceforth, my question is the following: how does the archive-body manifest itself in *Ea Sola*’s performance? How does each archive-body’s individual repertoires take part in a larger historical context?

In *Drought and Rain* (1995), *Ea Sola*’s choreography captures the complexity of different stages of the history of Vietnam. But despite the folkloric elements and references to imperialism, colonialism and war, these stories are not solely geopolitical. By exploring the peasant women’s movements – both individually and collectively – the history of Vietnam will reveal itself as a bodily matter. In the coming section, I will delve into one part of *Drought and Rain* (1995) where the choreography is constituted by a grouped formation constructed by the peasant women’s bodies; an apparent whole that, by the individual bodies’ movements, is dissolved into fragments. Within this formation, the performing bodies of the peasant women alter between complex hand movements and rapid footwork that follow the rhythmic beats created by the traditional drumming-instrument that is originally utilized in Buddhist temples. The drumming beat is indeed insistent – nearly hypnotic – as it fills the performance with a

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<sup>148</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

<sup>149</sup> Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 18.

<sup>150</sup> Eisner, “Living Archives as Interventions in *Ea Sola*’s *Forgotten Fields*”, 131.

<sup>151</sup> Eisner, “Living Archives as Interventions in *Ea Sola*’s *Forgotten Fields*”, 131.

ritualistic ambiance. By this drumming beat that captivates the performing bodies as well as the spectators' bodies, I will allow myself to address the performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), as a ritual of remembrance as rituals and traditions are rooted in bodily acts of repetitions. According to the dictionary, *Merriam-Webster.com*, one way to define the term, *tradition*, is: "the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction."<sup>152</sup> How does the peasant women hand down information, knowledge, stories and memories through their elderly bodies, to the present generation? And what is the importance of this process of transmission? In the coming section I will thus look at how transmission of knowledge – from one body to another – connects the present generation with their ancestors' past, which makes the immateriality of memories and amnesia remain through the materiality of the archive body.

### **The Historicity of the Archive-body**

The particular part of *Drought and Rain* (1995) that will work as a gateway into my exploration of the peasant women's archive-bodies, commences with an 'active stillness', which evokes Ea Sola's street performances in Paris during her first years as a refugee. When the peasant women enter the stage, their bodies barely move, except their feet that slowly carry their tense bodies backwards.<sup>153</sup> This bodily state must not be confused with a body in complete standstill. Rather, it can be understood as a body that is completely devoted to its presence in time and space. Through its stillness, the body becomes a resistance to all the noise and violence in the world. After some time in this active stillness, the warm stage light hits the performing bodies like the sun. Then, slowly and controlled, the peasant women lean their tense torsos backwards to face the light.<sup>154</sup> With the solar heat hitting their faces, the cycle of nature takes place on stage through the sun's drying, burning and damaging abilities.<sup>155</sup> Little by little, the consistency of the grouped formation is disrupted by the peasant women's discontinuous state of being, embodied through each woman's repetitive and individual hand movements. Once the drumming beat establishes a staccato rhythm for the moving bodies to follow, their hands start to create images from a lived life through movements that are perplexing and somehow disturbing to watch. Thus, Ea Sola's memory work is not aestheticizing. On the contrary,

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<sup>152</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "tradition," accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tradition>.

<sup>153</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 5:13.

<sup>154</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 5:15.

<sup>155</sup> The word, "drought", is defined by: "a period of dryness especially when prolonged" and "specifically: one that causes extensive damage to crops or prevents their successful growth." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "drought," accessed May 24, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/drought>.

*Drought and Rain* (1995) must be understood as a protest, a bodily revolt, that through nonviolent acts opposes the violence that struck Ea Sola and the peasant women's homeland.

The active stillness of the peasant women's bodies gradually turns into something reminiscent of a demonstration: as one woman stretches her arms straight out in a military-like manner, another woman's hands cross one another which creates the image of a bird, perhaps echoing some of Ea Sola's gestures in the moment of the performance when the artist herself dwells in her introspective self. Another woman's hands are placed in front of her chest and upper belly, which reminds me of a shield that serves the purpose to protect her body. A third woman's hands move in an intricate yet inscrutable way: while one hand seems to hold on to something, the other moves up and down in a continuous movement simultaneously as it appears to pull down invisible threads. Another woman keeps her hand in a raised position with her fingers forming a "V", while the person next to her holds one hand in front of her chest showing her waving palm to the audience. There is also a woman who looks into both of her palms and then towards the audience again. These are only a few of the individual hand movements performed by the peasant women.<sup>156</sup> As they repeat these movements, some women move backwards while others move forward. In contrast to the mystical atmosphere of the phantasmagoria in the earlier stages of the performance where the faces of the performers were covered by the leaf-hats, and the introspectiveness of Ea Sola's movement registered as a turning away of her face and body from the audience, the peasant women in this scene turn their faces, eyes and whole bodies towards the audience. Their hand movements are determined and their glaze direct. With this insistency, they demand attention. Any spectator would be drawn into their mesmerizing storytelling as their archive-bodies express complete devotion to the process of transmission.

Through these abstracted hand movements, we are invited into their memories of a rural life in the Red River Delta. The peasant women's hands grasp for something we cannot see, smell or touch – yet, it is namely this absence of props that enables their bodies to enter the state of an archive-body. Their bodies alone are the materiality of the performance, and it is through movement that memories and stories from the past unfold. And as their bodies' historicity takes place on stage, the history of Vietnam is told through the peasant women's lived experiences and memories of the past, but also by their bodies' presence on stage. This is how the individual body juxtaposes the collective body of Vietnam. In *Woman Native Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha writes: "[...] we do not *have* bodies, we *are* our bodies, and we are ourselves while being the world."<sup>157</sup> Thus, the history of Vietnam is not solely a history of war,

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<sup>156</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 6:25 – 7:40.

<sup>157</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 36.

imperialism and colonialism. It is also the history of each individual body's memories and knowledge of loss, labor, migration and immigration.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's conception of the archive as the memories of women that flows through a chain of transmission is also recognized by Rebecca Schneider in *Performing Remains*. Connected to her statement that performative re-enactments are in the possession of multiple temporalities, she argues that for certain cultures which recognize embodied rituals and storytelling as history, the residues, or, remains (namely, what is left when the live act of performance has ended) are created by a "network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment – evidence, across generations, of impact."<sup>158</sup> Thus, the multiplicity of time in the re-enactment of embodied memories is dependent upon this chain of transmission that occurs between bodies, making performance remain rather than disappear. The peasant women's embodied storytelling is rooted in their inherent memories of labor, war and loss, and as they perform *Drought and Rain* (1995), their stories are transmitted – indeed perpetuated – through the listening and watching body of a spectator. As I observe the women's gestures, I receive their stories. They inhabit my body and begin to dwell within me as a participant in the chain of transmission. What makes *Drought and Rain* (1995) remain are thus the archive-bodies drive to transmit knowledge, stories and memories from one generation to another. The archive-bodies of the peasant women are in constant change as they repeatedly move through their memories of Vietnam and the Vietnamese-American War, to finally transmit the stories of Vietnam – which are also their own – to a Western audience that is invited to partake in this chain of transmission that unfolds in Ea Sola's *Drought and Rain* (1995). The peasant women have all felt – experienced – the violence of war with their own bodies, and no one else could have told their stories better than themselves. Thus, material objects in the form of theatrical props would be redundant in the re-enactment of the peasant women's memories of war, as it is the archive-body itself that is the actual materiality – the exteriority – of these memories.

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<sup>158</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 100.

### 4.3 Aesthetics of Absence

“To listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn, for understanding means creating.”<sup>159</sup>

Trinh T. Minh-ha (*Woman Native Other*)

Throughout this thesis, I have drawn on Said’s notion of the displaced subject’s discontinuous state of being, Boym’s conception of reflective nostalgia, Schneider’s porous approach to time, and Derrida’s destruction of the archive to achieve a more complex understanding of diasporic memory and the performing body in Ea Sola’s *Drought and Rain* (1995). *Drought and Rain* (1995) challenges us through *absence* as it is the cuts, gaps, holes, switches, flickers and fluxes that characterize the fragmented nature of the peasant women’s embodied remembrances of Vietnam. The interconnection between remembrance and amnesia is rooted in Derrida’s deconstruction of the archive as a place where memories accumulate in a capitalistic system through systematization and domiciliation of documents from the past, which makes history static.<sup>160</sup> By contrast, Derrida’s notion of the archive is a clashing of forces between the drive to conserve and the death drive’s urge to destruct – a duality that gives rise to absence. In similarity to Derrida, Ea Sola too rejects the static and descriptive archive that constitutes our collective memory of the Vietnamese-American War. Instead, she cultivates the abstraction and the absences of the peasant women’s memories of war, which challenges our collective memory that have been resting on the descriptive war photographs generalities; namely, their descriptive but generic depictions about the pain of others. In *Drought and Rain* (1995), Ea Sola and her ensemble work *with* these constitutive gaps that has become her and the peasant women’s aesthetic of absence, and an entry into the tactility and complexity of their archive-bodies’ memories of war. Once we remember we also forget, and according to Ea Sola, it is namely through absence that movement takes place.<sup>161</sup>

The movement,  
Appears *because*,  
Of the absence of something.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 121.

<sup>160</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, 15.

<sup>161</sup> Eisner, “Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola’s *Forgotten Fields*”, 140.

<sup>162</sup> Eisner, “Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola’s *Forgotten Fields*”, 140.



## Working with Absence through Movement

In Janica Draisma's documentary on the production of *Drought and Rain* (1995), *Ea Sola* contemplates the abstracted features of her memory work: "I did not have a desire to create a description because experiences like that are indescribable."<sup>163</sup> A body's experiences of war, violence and loss are, in fact, impossible to depict through literal descriptions as a body consists of both restored memories and traumatic amnesia. Thus, to create an accurate description of the peasant women's stories were never *Ea Sola*'s aim. In one sequence of *Drought and Rain* (1995), the women reveal their long black hair that earlier in the performance was tied up with a towel – the traditional hairdo for women in Northern Vietnam. In this sequence, the peasant women sit on their knees while they vigorously clap wooden sticks against each other, creating an unpleasant noise that goes like: "clack-clack-clack!" With their hair loose, they shake their heads to the fast and sharp beat of the wooden sticks.<sup>164</sup> The formalism that characterized the earlier grouped formations of the performance (like a sequence where the state of active stillness takes over the peasant women's bodies – making their bodies tense and their movements excessively controlled and tedious<sup>165</sup>) and the rhythmic drumming beat, are now replaced with rapid and uncontrolled footwork, as well as the atonality of the wooden sticks. Here, to use Derrida's words: "Order is no longer assured."<sup>166</sup> And this is namely what happens in this sequence: When the peasant women commence their rapid and uncontrolled footwork, they move across the stage towards a single woman that lays on the floor as a dead body. As they gather together around the body, they become more and more reminiscent of a herd of crows.<sup>167</sup> The noise created by the wooden sticks accumulates and intensifies while the footwork and headbanging seem to be driven by despair and pain. However, as we watch the women's movements, there is no description of actual events that might have caused this chaotic state. According to *Ea Sola*, war, loss and death are at the extremity of things, which makes the peasant women's memories indescribable.<sup>168</sup> Thus, the abstraction and chaos of the performing bodies of *Drought and Rain* (1995) can therefore be understood as the peasant women's embodiment of their discontinuous states of being where holes dissolve wholes due to the 'unhealable rift' that has partially cut them off from their memories.

The chorographical juxtaposition of order and chaos in *Drought and Rain* (1995) demonstrates the archive-body's opposition to a certain notion of the archive as site where order

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<sup>163</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 21:40 – 21:45.

<sup>164</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 22:30.

<sup>165</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 14:47 – 17:14.

<sup>166</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression", 11.

<sup>167</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 22:35 – 22:55.

<sup>168</sup> Janica Draisma, "Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma", 21:40 – 25:00.

is sustained; a place where the manufactured completeness – the stipulated “truth” – of the history of the Vietnamese-American War is unbroken. In contrary, the archive-body marks itself as a material location where fractures are allowed to unfold, and where an aesthetics of absence provides us with new perspectives and understandings for the pain of others. As the peasant women expose their bodies to spectators whose knowledge about war and Vietnam is perhaps limited to the generalities, we are being confronted with an answerability to watch, listen and learn despite the opaque – and at times impenetrable – features of the performance.

### **Confronting the Present Generation**

One of the most challenging elements of *Drought and Rain* (1995) is indeed the photographic portraits of dead national heroes and lost ancestors that appear towards the end of the performance. These photographs break with the absence of theatrical props that by now have established the archive-bodies of the peasant women as the ruling materiality of *Drought and Rain* (1995). Albeit the fact that these photographs are portraits of lost – and perhaps forgotten – ancestors and national heroes from the past, their presence takes place on stage despite the weathering of their material bodies that have happened over time. The photographic portraits make their first appearance when they are presented by the peasant women in a sequence where the hand movements and footwork are resumed. Throughout this sequence, we witness a juxtaposition of chaos and active stillness; while some of the women dynamically perform the hand movements and footwork, other keep their bodies tense while they hold the portraits with their hands. In this way, the audience is directly confronted with the faces of the lost ancestors and national heroes. Moreover, enlarged versions of these portraits are displayed at the backdrop of the stage towards the end of the performance, making the portraits impossible to ignore.

When the peasant women present the portraits, their dialogue with the audience of *Drought and Rain* (1995) is yet again direct and insistent – one might say demonstrative. Clothed in traditional attire, the women reveal the portraits and begin their confrontation with the audience. The women alternate between showing the photographic portraits and a repetition of the hand movements that are being performed in the same meticulous way as earlier in the performance.<sup>169</sup> All this happens at the very same time as the footwork of the women rock their bodies backwards and forwards. Eventually, the women line up in a row with their arms stretched out, still holding the photographs of dead national heroes and lost

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<sup>169</sup> Janica Draisma, “Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma”, 20:30 – 20:48.

ancestors.<sup>170</sup> The insistency and directness of their gaze come forward as a confrontation with the audience – or moreover, the present generation – which makes the prologue of *Drought and Rain* (1995) resonate and rejuvenate through the peasant women’s bodies:

On the land [Vietnam], rich with alluvial deposits wedded to blood.  
My ancestors for centuries opened up our pathways.  
This Epic dance – ‘Drought and Rain’.  
Recounts the history of thousands of destinies.  
And this is what the poem said  
(*voices reply*: what did it say?)  
The present generation, do they remember the centuries past?<sup>171</sup>

Since the beginning of the market reform (named *doi moi* – comparable to *perestrojka* under the Soviet Union) in Vietnam, that was initiated as an action against the poor economic conditions of the country after the Vietnamese-American War, spiritual and religious practices have been blossoming in Vietnam since the late 1980s.<sup>172</sup> Ancestor worship is an old trans-religious tradition deeply inherent within the Vietnamese culture. In more recent time, modern media such as photography has become an important element in the rites of Ancestor worship as technology and material objects have increased as one consequence of Vietnam’s shift towards a socialist-oriented market economy.<sup>173</sup> To use photographs in the rite of Ancestor worship serves the purpose to prolong the materiality of the dead person to decrease the distance between the dead and those still alive. Thus, Ancestor worship can be understood as a rite that builds a bridge between our material world and the spirit-world to maintain the memory of the dead – like restorative nostalgia that strives to sustain the past through *que huong*. However, what we experience in *Drought and Rain* (1995) cannot be understood as solely a maintenance of the past, but moreover a past that takes place in our present time through the peasant women’s insistent confrontation with the present generation.

In this sequence of *Drought and Rain* (1995), a transmission of the memories of the dead happens through the peasant women’s bodily confrontation that forces us to re-member “the history of thousands of destinies.” Despite the descriptiveness of the faces in the photographic portraits, and moreover, the materiality of the photographs themselves, it is impossible for us to understand the dead ancestors’ histories solely by the descriptive depictions of their faces. It becomes evident that the purpose of *Drought and Rain* (1995) is not to maintain

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<sup>170</sup> Janica Draisma, “Ea Sola – Sécheresse et Pluie – digital video, 26 min, 1998 – Janica Draisma”, 20:50 – 21:22.

<sup>171</sup> Eisner, «Drought and Rain: re-creations in Vietnamese, cross border heritage», 799.

<sup>172</sup> Gertrud Hüwelmeier, “Cell phones for the spirits: ancestor worship and ritual economies in Vietnam and its diasporas” in *Material Religion*, Vol. 12, Issue 3 (2016): pp. 294-321. DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2016.1192149](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2016.1192149). 296.

<sup>173</sup> Hüwelmeier, “Cell phones for the spirits: ancestor worship and ritual economies in Vietnam and its diasporas”, 297.

a descriptive materiality of the dead, but to re-member their indescribable – immaterial – histories. Thus, the aesthetics of absence is yet again established on stage as the ritualistic form of Ancestor worship is dissolved into an abstract confrontation with the present generation. There is no burning of incense or offerings as one usually would do during the rite of Ancestor worship. Neither is there any form of prayer. What we see is abstracted hand movements, grouped and dissolved formations, and of course, the demonstrative gaze of the women. The opaqueness of the performance demands us to pay attention. By listening carefully with our whole bodies, we will eventually understand that the peasant women's confrontation demands us to become aware of our amnesia and oblivion for the untold stories of Vietnam and the dead. "The present generation, do they remember the centuries past?"<sup>174</sup>

Through the peasant women's abstract hand movements, we are invited into a rite of remembrance that evokes their bodies repertoires; the work they performed in the rice fields in the Red River Delta, the hard labor work in the factories, but also the violence that struck their bodies during and after the war. However, the peasant women's corporeal memories do not solely come from their personal pain, but also from the pain of their ancestors as the rite of remembrance involves transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. Thus, the repertoire of each archive-body is personal, but also historical. As the spectators of *Drought and Rain* (1995) watch, listen and absorb the peasant women's embodied remembrances of Vietnam and the war, their own bodies configurate into complex amalgams of past, present and future as they now take part in the peasant women and their ancestors' chain of transmission.

According to Trinh T. Minh-ha, preservation of memories happens through listening and understanding.<sup>175</sup> Thus, this is how the undocumented histories of Vietnam remains in *Drought and Rain* (1995); namely, through the peasant women's transmission of memories, stories and knowledge to a listening audience. However, Trinh T. Minh-ha also states that to preserve also involves burning<sup>176</sup> which means that to re-member is also an acknowledgement of the 'unhealable rift' – the incurable wounds that remain after the loss of a homeland – that the archive-body cannot escape. Thus, the archive-body does not seek to repair the rifts, gaps, holes and fractures that pervade its state of being. Rather, it seeks to make them endure. Its transmission of stories and memories comes from an answerability to make their ancestors' – and their own – pain remain through this chain of transmission. Accordingly, healing does not necessarily mean to *repair* but to *share* experiences of pain and loss. In this way, we become

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<sup>174</sup> Eisner, «Drought and Rain: re-creations in Vietnamese, cross border heritage», 799.

<sup>175</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 121.

<sup>176</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 121.

capable to work our way through the incurable wounds that have become inherent parts of our bodies, by sharing and listening to memories and stories of war and violence.

## Conclusion

My thesis came into being due to a personal desire to expand and deepen my knowledge of Vietnam and the war that unfolded in my family's homeland in the period, 1957 – 1975. Throughout my life, my mother has shared her stories of a childhood characterized by war, migration and displacement but also stories of how she felt at *home* in their crowded house in Saigon. Her storytelling has affected the way I see her, but this understanding is limited to a collective memory characterized by generic visions of war and pain. As I take part in a cultural body where our knowledge about pain is rooted in manufactured truths about the Vietnamese-American War, I have in this thesis attempted to come closer to a more diverse and corporeal understanding of Vietnam and the Vietnamese civilian' experiences of war. In my contemplations regarding the unjust and generic images of Vietnam and the pain of others, I have encountered Viet Thanh Nguyen's conceptions of how we remember war by their names, Susan Sontag viewpoints on Nick Ut's war photograph, *The Napalm Girl*, and Judith Butler's notion of the term, *grievability*, that question's the ethical dilemmas when it comes to exercise of violence in the act of self-defense.

As my family's story of Vietnam and migration has been my motivation to delve deeper into Ea Sola's artistic praxis and performance, *Drought and Rain* (1995), I must stress the fact that my proximity to this thesis's research material has been rather close. With Tone Pernille Østern's methodology, *Å forske med kunsten*, that is based on the term, *aesthesis*, I have allowed myself to enter this process with my whole body to sense the material through my own experiences of my mother's storytelling – however always with self-reflexivity for my closeness to Ea Sola's work. Thus, with my mother's stories of how displacement enables sensations of longing for a lost home as the backdrop to my research, Ea Sola's urge to return to Vietnam in the late 1980s has been important to understand her process towards the creation of *Drought and Rain* (1995). *Returns* has been a key-word in this thesis, and an exploration of how returns takes shape in Ea Sola's work became the gateway into a complex – however intriguing – realm of nostalgia, archives and embodied remembrances of Vietnam. By this, it became evident to me that returns to the past does not solely involves stagnation in lost times, but moreover, it can also enable possibilities to de-stabilize, expand and challenge our rigid affiliation to historical “truth”.

Through an exploration of Svetlana Boym's conceptions of *restorative nostalgia* and *reflective nostalgia*, I have discussed how reflective nostalgia can turn a displaced subject's longing for a lost homeland into a complex amalgam of past, present and future by its abilities

to return without losing liaison with its present time. Self-reflexivity has therefore worked as a gateway into how Ea Sola's memory work is in the possession of a temporal multiplicity that expands beyond a displaced subject's longing for a lost homeland. Moreover, as we have gradually discovered that *Drought and Rain* (1995) is the work of a reflective nostalgic, it has also become evident to us that Ea Sola's memory work does not obey to the traditional archive of historical "truth", constructed by generic visions of Vietnam, the war and the pain of others.

By looking into the term, *archive*, and how Jacques Derrida deconstructs its traditional function as a systematization of elements from the past into a harmonious body in synchrony, I have discovered how *Drought and Rain* (1995) can be viewed as a revolt against the archive as a place where order is sustained. A juxtaposition of chaos and order, and an aesthetics of absence that arise as the result of the 'unhealable rift' that characterizes the displaced subject's discontinuous state of being, is thus discovered in Ea Sola's performance. These elements emphasize her revolt against the historical "true" archive that has laid the foundation for our generic knowledge and understanding of Vietnam, the war and the violence executed against her own people.

In *Drought and Rain* (1995), Ea Sola provides us with a new type of archive where newness and growth are allowed to rise, simultaneously as returns and repetition creates gaps, holes and ruptures as the result of the displaced subject's discontinuous state of being. This archive is the body itself, and by exploring the performing bodies in Ea Sola's performance, I have come closer to an understanding of how memories and stories can persist – endure – in a living organ through what Trinh T. Minh-ha names "the chain of transmission". In *Drought and Rain* (1995), we witness how the peasant women transmit their bodily memories of Vietnam and the war to their audience. As the spectators' bodies receive these memories, they also remain. Thus, the archive-body is a living organ that exists due to its flesh and blood but also due to its abilities to make untold and immaterial memories remain through storytelling that happens between bodies and generations. And this is how Ea Sola's work provide us with new perspectives regarding pain, loss and longing by establishing the body as a living archive.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have become aware of the importance of my mother's transmission of her memories, but moreover, the importance of how I receive them. It is not solely a matter of listening, but to listen *carefully*. How does it really *feel* to receive her memories? And how do I become one part of a larger context – a larger archive? As I have begun to listen with my whole body, an awareness and understanding – a self-reflexivity – for the historicity of my archive-body has taken place. In *Woman Native Other*, Minh-ha writes: "When armors and defense mechanisms are removed, when new awareness of life is brought into previously deadened areas of the body, women begin to experience

writing/the world differently. This is exciting and also very scary.”<sup>177</sup> I believe this applies well to the discoveries that I have made throughout this thesis. By accepting the wounds of the past – the rifts, gaps, holes, fractions – that come with the loss of a homeland, one will also obtain a new awareness for our bodies’ temporal multiplicity. As I experience my mother’s transmission of her stories, I also experience my ancestors’ past. And for each time I receive a story or a memory, my body changes and configures. Thus, I become able to understand the pain of my ancestors differently.

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<sup>177</sup> Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, 36.





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## List of Figures



Figure 1: *The Napalm Girl*, Trang Bang, 1972. Photo: Nick Ut. Accessed from: <http://web.archive.org/web/20110121082648/culturevisuelle.org/catastrophes/files/2010/11/petite-fille-napalm-vietnam.jpg>, 10 June 2022.



Figure 2: The first Vietnamese refugees arrived in Norway in 1975. Here, a photograph of my grandfather (the man with the Fedora hat) and my mother's cousin (the young man with the white shirt in front) at Fornebu Airport, June 4th in 1975. Photo: NTB Scanpix.



Figure 3: *Drought and Rain (re-creation 2011)*, performed at the Edinburgh International Festival the 1-2 September 2011. Photo: Le Anh. Accessed from:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110610202131/http://eif.co.uk/drought>, 10 February 2022.

Comment: Despite that this is a photography from the 2011-re-creation, this scene is similar to the one in the original performance from 1995.



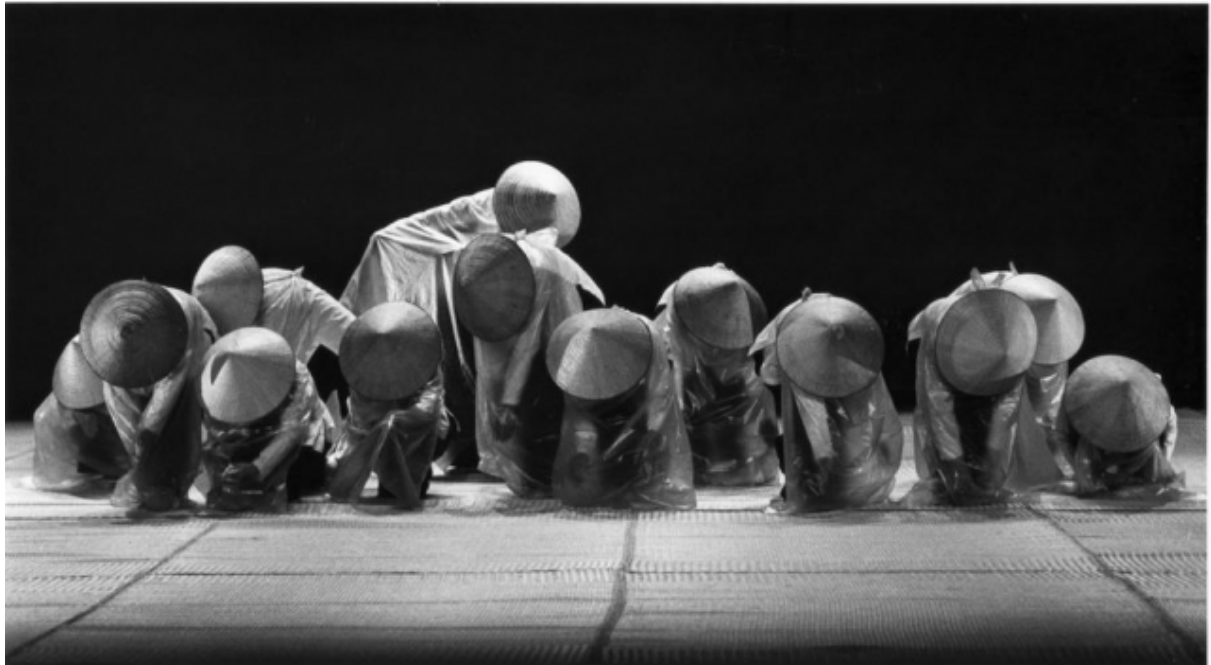


Figure 4: *Drought and Rain (re-creation 2011)*, performed at the Edinburgh International Festival the 1-2 September 2011. Photo: Le Anh. Accessed from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110610202131/http://eif.co.uk/drought>, 10 February 2022.  
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