Minh Nguyen

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Cookie Jar 2
The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant

Film still from *Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười* (*When the Tenth Month Comes*), 1984, directed by Đặng Nhật Minh. Vietnam Feature Film Studio

I

I saw X sitting at the end of the bar and walked over so eagerly that I almost barged into him. It was our second near collision of the day. That morning, we had run into each other on the street. He, an acquaintance from my previous visit to Hanoi, turned out to be living around the corner from me. I hadn't slept that night and so it all felt like a great coincidence. This, I should have known, is the humbling panic of the incipient crush, when someone so alien abruptly feels familiar.

I had come to Hanoi on a research grant to study the Vietnamese independence movement and its culture, a self-appointed mission that at times felt like my calling and other times like a misguided exercise in diasporic yearning. X is the same age as me and had experienced the life my parents and I had forsaken when we immigrated to the US from Saigon. In my exhaustion, it all felt like serendipity.

The bar was close to train tracks that run through the Old Quarter and are a popular tourist attraction. People drink and socialize on the tracks, stumbling off the path when a train arrives, its horn roaring. Sitting against a wall, we watched tourists pose for photos, angling their bodies only feet from the hurtling machines. Rows of rice wine infusions lined the bar's shelves, along with glass bottles stuffed with herbs and garlic cloves, coiled snakes and animal intestines.

We ordered a bottle of honeycomb wine and caught each other up on all that had happened in the seven years since we'd last seen each other. He told me about his life in the city, and maybe it was released by the liquor, but a sadness started to seep through my body. Was this desire or envy? He knew the depths

of Hanoi in a way that no amount of study could ever replicate. I steadied myself by gazing at the tiny, gold flecks floating in our honeycomb wine. They looked familiar. Where had I seen those flecks before?

We left the bar wasted and walked along the train tracks without plan or direction. The night air was frigid and smelled of gasoline. We stumbled through a stretch of fog until we vaguely made out the Temple of Literature in the distance. Not really thinking too much, surrendering to the story of the night, we decided to hop the fence. The sprawling campus was built in 1076 on the ground of Vietnam's first university, to honor the sacred pursuit of study. There are lines of stelae, or stone slabs, inscribed with the names and achievements of scholars who passed imperial examinations. Some of the stelae balance atop turtle statues. I had been coming to the temple in the mornings to study the turtle statues. Now he was here with me.

We walked by gnarled trees that have been growing for centuries. We arrived at the pond Thiên Quang, or "Heaven Light," in the middle of the courtyard, which was designed to mirror the sky, reflecting the twin kingdoms of heaven and scholarship. Maybe we kissed, but that doesn't matter.

I woke up in the evening of the next day, feeling impossibly clearheaded. I responded to messages I had been ignoring for weeks. Cascading gold flecks—I suddenly remembered. In a previous research phase, I had read about Christians in the Middle Ages who reported seeing gold flecks descend from the sky during ecstatic visions. An impossible image that I could now faintly imagine. I felt an urgency to tell X. I wanted to tell X everything.

II

Optimism is erotic. In an image from the pages of *Hình ảnh Việt-Nam* (Vietnam pictorial), one of the Communist Party's longest-running magazines, launched five months after the Việt Minh defeated the French troops in 1954, a boy and a girl are enveloped by a field of flowers. The photo collage is from 1957: soft reds, pinks, and whites, a blossoming hill under open sky. The flowers are the size of the figures' faces. It's a mild type of dramatization, a fantasy of the imaginable.

Factories of glowing chrome machines, women in pristine lab coats, gleaming metals of industry and collectivization. These images, scholar Thy Phu writes in *Warring Visions* (2021), are better understood as "photographic paintings." Aligning the "realism of photography with the fantastical contrivances of propaganda posters," the images' hand-treated color "lent definition and vibrancy to a reality that appeared rooted in the present yet was still to come." This subtle enhancement encapsulates the fantasy-within-reach appeal of socialist realism—shock for the idealist, pleasure for the materialist.

These were the types of things I had come to Hanoi to study: the paintings, posters, films, and photographs classified as propaganda or wartime art, an ecosystem of romantic optimism rendered across media. I was drawn to a broad and somewhat arbitrary window, between 1945 and 1975—after the August Revolution and the Việt Minh's victory over the French, and before the Fall of Saigon, when North Vietnam took over the South. I imagined this period as an existential triumph, a cleavage in time when anything seemed possible—an outbreak of love before things hardened into rule.

Historians agree that the communists prevailed in 1945, among the many anticolonial forces, because they were the most organized. What is acknowledged less often is the creativity of their enterprise—their robust arts and culture strategy. The Việt Minh and the Communist Party's intellectual affiliates considered art and literature essential tools in the struggle for national independence, unification, and socialist revolution. In this realm, too, centralization required consensus. This wasn't easy to come by. It would take a decade before the regime rolled out the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's official culture policy, overseen by General Secretary of Culture Trường Chinh. Going forward, artists and writers would be conscripted to make realist literature and art—so crucial to the Soviet and Chinese revolutions. Nguyễn Thị Định, Party leader and one of the chief authors of the cultural guidelines, touted realism as a way to "establish models of the social life that is growing" and to "make tomorrow appear in the midst of today." This was Marxist-Leninism at its most exalted. In what other ideology do politicians assume such an active role as art critics?

Today, socialist realism is deemed a niche subject, which is ironic, because it was intended to captivate the hearts and minds of all people. This aesthetic school is still displayed on billboards throughout Vietnam: old posters from the revolutionary period stand out among more recent government billboards, which offer crude, generic versions of the socialist realist style. They both celebrate archetypes: simple cartoons of nurses, doctors, agriculturalists, engineers; men, women, and children, all playing their parts; literal representations of family values and occupations deemed necessary for the advancement of socialist society. People may still be fascinated by these posters as kitsch, but no one is taken in by their spectral power.

I've learned over the years that my fascination with propaganda art is not necessarily shared by friends who live in Vietnam. To me, what stands out is the promise of the revolution—what could have been and still could be. If I had spent my whole life there, the broken promises that followed would probably be more resonant.

How did my interest in this aesthetic world begin? I certainly didn't grow up with it in America. But perhaps that was the reason why it gripped me, because it was exotic and foreign, something that I wasn't supposed to like. It was a subject that my family assumed was forbidden in the US. I remember in college when my grandmother saw my books and expressed concern that I was in possession of Marxist texts. "Won't you get in trouble for carrying those?" No, I told her. Repression doesn't quite work that way here.

Hình ảnh Việt-Nam's outlook was future-facing. Given that emphasis, Phu observes, it may seem strange that some of the hand-colored images depict not technological prowess but idyllic agrarian scenes. The photographs are "awash in the sentimental flush of timeliness [and point] nostalgically to a past far removed from the metallic radiance of a triumphal future to come." This sense of religious steadfastness was a mainstay of Vietnamese communism, which combined Marxism and Confucianism through "the continuity thesis." Marx espoused a notion of love as social formation, influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), which proffered love as the highest state of humanity. "The essence internal to all human relations is love," Marx wrote in his "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845). "Men's political, economic, and ideological conflicts are the quarrels of lovers who know not that they love." Marx's faith is defined by

a state of waiting, a religious conviction that communism will arrive.

In certain religious literature, the tenses that distinguish past, present, and future become interchangeable. Old Testament theology, for instance, is written in what is called the prophetic present tense, where a present perfect or past perfect tense may be used to refer to the future. There is a similar predictive affirmation in socialist realist rhetoric. The Việt Minh would write speeches to the masses using anticipatory verbs to describe plans as if they had already happened.

III

Falling in love is, among other things, the quickest form of information exchange. X and I would message each other throughout the day, usually while I was surrounded by a dusty moat of catalogs in the Vietnam Film Institute (VFI). I was reading about the Vietnam Film School, the first of its kind, built after Hồ Chí Minh's Decree No. 147/SL established the state-owned Vietnam Movie and Photography Enterprise in 1953. The decree articulated a two-part task for Vietnamese cinema: "to build socialism, and to struggle for the liberation of the South for the reunification of the country." Vietnamese cinema was established during times of extreme political and economic instability and, later, genocidal carpet-bombing. Guerillas set up film development labs in war zones, sourcing their equipment from solidarity groups around the world.

In 1959, the Vietnam Film School opened its doors and the Party created a Department of Distribution through the Vietnam Film Studio, which included traveling exhibition structures, mobile cinemas, and infrastructure for international circulation. The film unit produced the country's first narrative feature film, *Chung một dòng sông* (*On the Same River*, 1959), which retells the story of revolution from the perspective of the peasantry. The film centers on two lovers separated by a river at the seventeenth parallel, a line drawn through the country and enforced by the US military after the 1954 Geneva Conference. Hoài is a young woman from the South and Vận is a fisherman from the North. The lovers, who are separated at the beginning and reunite at the end, are stand-ins for the two halves of the country. The personification of national interests through

lovers would endure in Vietnamese cinema for decades, even in Đặng Nhật Minh's *Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười* (*When the Tenth Month Comes*, 1984), the first Vietnamese film to be shown in the United States. X and I, reeling backward in time.

I scanned the roster of the first class of the Vietnam Film School. There was a column that designated where students had arrived from—the North, the South, all parts of the country. The state archives today only contain records from the North, though anticolonial and anti-imperial dissent was burgeoning everywhere. The Việt Minh were not the only, or even the first, group to make revolutionary cinema. Communist filmmakers from the South had created a type of cinema called Bưng Biền–Đồng Tháp Mười in the 1940s. A civilian who witnessed Bưng Biền called it "the crystallization of romance from people who dare to think and dare to do." This activity was squashed, and the Southern communists were erased from history.

I texted X a photo of the class roster and a message. "What if instead of academic research I wrote an erotic screenplay about the film school?"

"It would certainly be more fun to read."

"A Southern schoolgirl has just left dance class and kneels by the courtyard fountain to relace one of her slippers. She hears a voice from above her, a crisp, zippy accent. She looks up to see her classmate, a Northern boy, haloed by the sunlight, hair swept across his face. Smirking down at her, he extends his hand. 'Did you hear?' He asks. 'The school is starting a cinematography class.' He pulls her upright and lightly holds her by the waist for balance as they face each other. He looks into her eyes: 'Should we make a movie together?'"

"Do they fuck?" X asked.

"Yes, but this is a Vietnamese film, so we don't see it."

He told me about *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*), a 1991 novel based on the author Bảo Ninh's time as a North Vietnamese soldier. Bảo was one of the five hundred soldiers who went to war in 1969 with the Twenty-Seventh Youth Brigade and one of the ten who survived.

The story is narrated by a middle-aged soldier named Kien, who is tasked with collecting the bodies of his comrades from the jungles of Central Vietnam. Waiting for a bombing run to cease, Kien recalls seeing friends scorched by napalm or dying slow deaths due to malnutrition. He also recounts the salacious details of the women he slept with and fantasies of others he encountered. Though Bảo denies any relation to the protagonist, the novel is clearly autofiction.

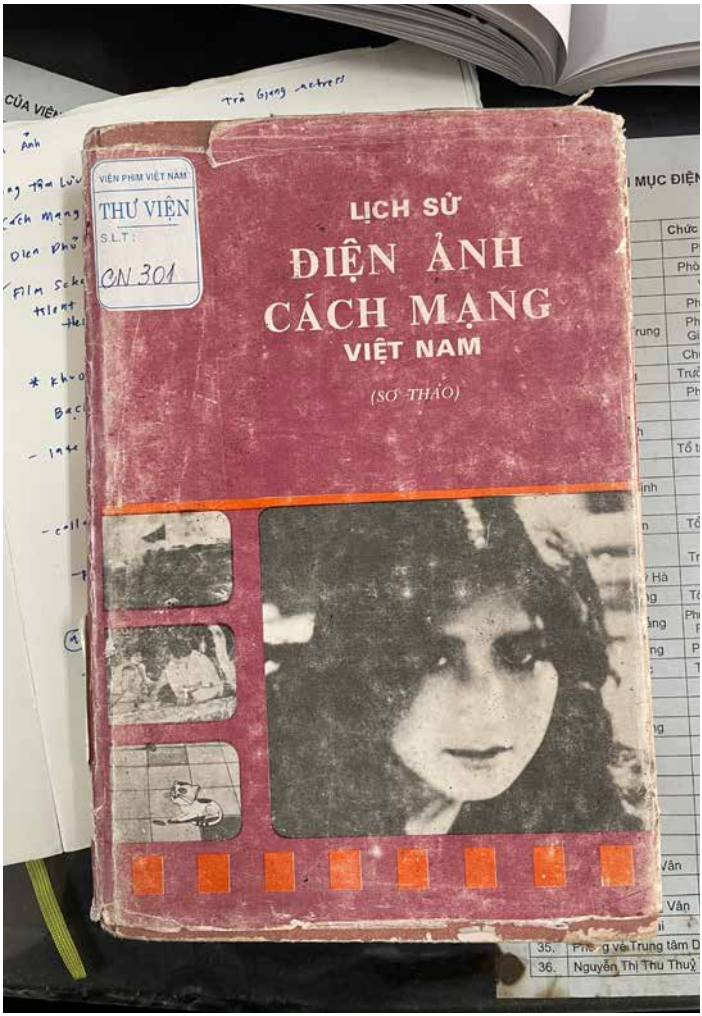
"It's a crushing story of disillusionment," X said to me. "It's one horny book."

"Revolutionary romance," or *lãng mạn cách mạng*, was the Party's designated aesthetic form. The Việt Minh were influenced by Soviet philosophies and Mao's notion of the "contradictory unity" of realism and romanticism, but they also drew from their own country's dramatic literary tradition. Leaders like Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh, and Tố Hữu presented themselves as poets and adopted poetry's sentimental rhetoric in recruitment materials for the Party. Literary movements in the 1930s such as Thơ Mới (New Poetry) were marked by postcolonial cynicism and disillusionment. Meditations on beauty were considered a form of retreat. Party leaders took such poems and rewrote them. "Feelings and Emotion," written in 1938 by one of New Poetry's biggest stars, Xuân Diệu, was altered so that the dreams

of clouds and winds in the original were replaced by dreams of destroying the brute forces of imperialism. This method was highly persuasive and convinced many intellectuals to join the Party. As the poet Nguyễn Tuân remarked, "It changed my view away from art for art's sake toward life."

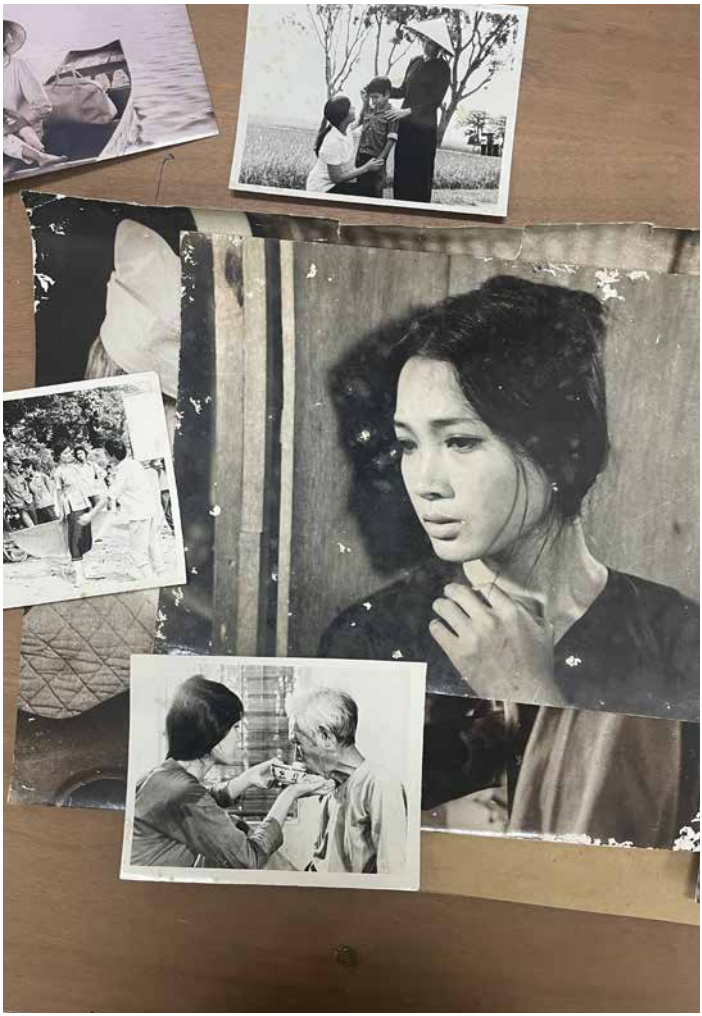
Politicizing love forces difficult questions. Is love concrete or abstract? How does the notion of revolutionary love relate to the romantic love one feels for a person? Is the couple a formal hindrance to societal love, as Herbert Marcuse argues in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), or can the two be coterminous? Is the goal of love under communism to subordinate romance to love for the collective? The philosopher Christian Lotz writes that "love is a form of being social in which the sensual life is as complex as the social world, and not simply an abstraction from the latter."

That is to say: the more you love, the more you exist. Your capacity to learn expands, your sensitivities are heightened. Your audience is defined, your stakes are clarified. Love makes a different life feel possible. In this way, the two senses of romance do not appear so different at all.



Cover of *Lịch sử điện ảnh cách mạng Việt Nam*, 1983, government-produced history of revolutionary cinema. Photographed by the author at the Vietnam Film Institute, Hanoi

Production photographs from *Chung một dòng sông* (*On the Same River*), 1959, directed by Nguyễn Hồng Nghi. Photographed by the author at the Vietnam Film Institute, Hanoi



Production photographs from *Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười* (*When the Tenth Month Comes*), 1984, directed by Đặng Nhật Minh. Photographed by the author at the Vietnam Film Institute, Hanoi

IV

One afternoon X and I visited Thanh Uy Art Gallery, a few miles outside central Hanoi. The gallery exhibits the personal collection of an older Vietnamese man who made money through the herbal medicine business and accrued the collection over many years, learning the intricate details of every piece in it—of lithographs and etchings, woodcuts and engravings, screenprints and paintings. We stood in front of an etching called *Trả Thù* (*Revenge*, 1971), by the artist Lê Huy Tiếp. In the image, a man with his back to the viewer is moving on foot at the center of the frame. He is without a shirt and shoeless. The ground below him is scattered with skulls and bones. Yet there is a certain vitality in his stride, a spirit that animates his muscles. He wields a knife. Three floating beings—ghosts of the martyred—guide him, one with her hand pressed gently against his back. Together they move toward a radiant sun that is dripping with what might be blood.

I was surprised by the work's incandescent grief, in contrast to the stoic facial expressions in most socialist art. Lê made this etching when the United States was in its seventh year of an annihilationist bombing campaign. Starting in 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson launched Operation Rolling Thunder, a siege that would last until 1971, the "US air war" decade would decimate whole family trees and flatten entire towns. Such a severe campaign could only be justified if the people on the ground were not perceived as fully human. The US military didn't count the human victims of their crimes as dutifully as they counted destroyed trucks, trees, bridges, tunnels, and smokestacks.

The invocation of emotion in Vietnamese propaganda, then, might be considered an act of rehumanization—the reclamation by Vietnamese people of their humanity, for themselves and an international audience. Love becomes one expression alongside anger and anguish in a spectrum of propulsive emotions. It is harder to fathom killing people who love each other.

At the Vietnam Film Institute, I watched another masterpiece of emotion as strategy, the 1974 film *Em bé Hà Nội* (*The Little Girl of Hanoi*), directed by Hải Ninh, who graduated from one of the first cohorts of the Vietnam Film School's directing class. The film was made in reaction to the "Christmas bombings" of December 1972, which dropped at least 20,000 tons of explosives mainly on Hanoi. During the twelve-day assault, an estimated 16,000 Vietnamese people were killed. For the film, Hải drew on civilian accounts of the bombardments. Hải himself hid in a wet, cold, and fully packed shelter with his daughter.

Set in Khâm Thiên, the most severely bombed area in Hanoi, the film is narrated by an eleven-year-old girl named Ngọc Hà, who is looking for her father. She meets a soldier during her search, and their conversations cut to sequences of her memories. The film opens with a bus, full of children, journeying along a road. A girl's ebullient voice sings: *I walk across city streets, filled with love*. The film is remarkable not only for how it privileges the perspective of a child, but also for how this perspective departs from militant cinema's chief convention: emphasis on the nation's fighting spirit. The viewer sees the world and the ravages of destruction, as well as love and intimacy, through the eyes of a noncombatant. *Little Girl* is filled with affection. Ngọc Hà holds her teddy bear and is held, in turn, by her mother and grandmother. In a scene in which she surveys the wreckage of her house, she weeps among stoic

adults. By "mapping tenderness onto the inexpressibility of pain and the rubble that the war causes," the scholar Qui-Ha Hoang Nguyen writes, *Little Girl* presents a vision "of the agency of the damaged."

The following day, I came home to my apartment, where a package a package wrapped in a brown paper bag was leaning against the door. Inside was Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War.* I brought the book to the couch. From the window, I had a direct view of the high-rise tower where X worked—where he, in fact, was at that very moment. Maybe he could see me.

Bảo recalls that when he joined the Party at the age of seventeen, he was swept up by the songs and literature at recruitment camps. When the war ended, the government hailed Bảo and other surviving soldiers as victors. But he didn't feel heroic. He felt broken. *The Sorrow of War* was Bảo's final project at Hanoi's Nguyễn Du Writing School, established after the war to train writers to support the new state. It took him a decade to gather the courage to put the story on paper. His friends collected money to print copies of the book. *The Sorrow of War* circulated underground, among students, because its candid reflections bristled against the official state narrative. But Bảo was writing precisely for the soldiers who were uncritically exalted by the Party, whose tortured lives deserved honest assessment.

"No one could read those kinds of [state-produced] novels," Bảo said. "How could you stand a book that praised you to stupidity?" The Party banned *The Sorrow of War* when it came out.

X was right. The novel is as sensuous as it is abject. The narrator, Kien, speaks from the precipice of death, in a fugue state where dreams are indistinguishable from memories. His

descriptions glitter with sentiment, as if he were recalling mystical lands rather than warscapes:

> I was back standing in the Jungle of Screaming Souls. The stream, the dirt road, the empty grass clearings, the edge of the forest of days gone by, were sparkling in sunshine. I was standing in this peaceful, picturesque scene, looking Southwest towards the four olive green peaks of Ngoc Bo Ray mountain, when my new dream adventure began.

Kien's reflections on love bring him psychological and physical relief from his destitution, affirming a life well-lived. He thinks back to the time "before the cruelty and destruction of war had warped his soul," when "he had been aching with desire, hilarious, frivolous, and lighthearted," when "he was worthy of being a lover and in love." In moments when Kien's condition seems especially dire, his reminiscences become religious. He describes gazing at the sky and seeing a "heavenly glow," which "streaked, sparkled, and vanished like a falling star," and, for a fleeting moment, "bathed him in serene light."

Though Bảo himself disavowed the Party's glorified narrative, Kien's reflections on his role as a soldier dovetail with the holy steadfastness of socialist realism: "In contemplation an odd idea takes root in his mind.... At the bottom of his heart he believes he exists on this earth to perform some unnamed heavenly duty." The first time Kien feels this "sacred force" is while he is on an assignment in the jungles to gather the remains of the dead:

> The force nurtured him, protected him, and willed him on, renewing his thirst for living and for love. He had never before acknowledged this heavenly duty, yet he had always known it existed within him as an integral part of him, melded with his soul.

Like the film *Little Girl*, Bảo's novel gives agency to the damaged. Though *The Sorrow of War* became an international bestseller when it was translated into English in 1994, Bảo struggled to convince the Vietnamese authorities to lift the local ban. "He never understood why his book was banned by the government," the poet Nguyễn Quang Thiều has remarked. "He was just sad about what happened. And he wrote about it."

In the years following the August Revolution of 1945, everything seemed to be in flux. The shared goal of liberation and the agency of the artist did not yet seem mutually exclusive. They could even be symbiotic. After the end of French colonial rule, Western art and literature were generally derided, as individualistic, bourgeois, and counterrevolutionary.

The Marxist scholar and critic Đặng Thai Mai, who received a Franco-Vietnamese education at the College of Pedagogy in Hanoi in the 1920s, belonged to a transitional generation that reevaluated the colonial influence on their education. Đặng was appointed to the Cultural Association for National Salvation to draft guidelines for art and literature under socialism. In that role, he renounced his past. In a series of articles spanning the late 1940s, he addressed the long-running debate between art for art's sake and art for life, and emphasized that the artist has a responsibility to the people. Only when it has broad social relevance will it become art:

> While a world, a regime, is still disintegrating, if we recognize that neutrality is only a meaningless term and that the freedom of an individual cannot be disconnected from public life and that the meaning of art can only be realized within the community, within human society, then we also must realize that the new art and literature must flower in social reality, and it must be art and literature of the "socialist-realist" kind.

There was vehement disagreement as to whether art and propaganda are interchangeable. What distinguishes one from the other? In those years, the concept of propaganda (*tuyên truyền*) did not have a negative connotation. Many Party leaders proclaimed that art and propaganda were indeed exchangeable: propaganda is persuasion and art, at its most effective, is persuasive. As Cultural Association member Nguyễn Đình Thi argued, "Literature and art are a kind of propaganda without propagandizing, and precisely because of this they are the most effective form of propaganda."

Both Đặng and Nguyễn's lines of argument elicited mixed reactions and prompted a public response by the outspoken and well-respected painter Tô Ngọc Vân. One of the first graduates of the Indochinese College of Fine Arts, Tô was a prominent artist, known for his classical paintings of high-society women and an ardent defender of beauty. "Art has changed our way of life," he stated. It "made everyone aware of beauty in a more understanding manner."

Expressing his concern in a 1947 article titled "Propaganda and Art," Tô wrote that "propaganda art is not true art because it expresses a political purpose, raises political slogans, delineates

a political path for the people to follow, and displays situations that will generate in them a political attitude." Art, on the other hand, "was an expression of an individual soul, an attitude of an individual toward things, telling his feelings more than philosophy about any issue."

Both art and propaganda are necessary, but to Tô, their differences come down to not only timing but time span: "Art has everlasting value while propaganda art has only temporary value." It is one thing for the Party to decide to prioritize propaganda production over art during a crisis ("in our people's period of struggle today, this temporary value is bigger than the eternal value of the artistic treasures of mankind"); it is a grave error to conflate the two.

Doubling down in a letter to Tô the following year, Đặng asserted that an artist was invariably a propagandist for one ideology or another and that the work was only of value when it supported a "progressive" goal. Tô shot back: "It is erroneous to conclude that propaganda art could approach the level of true art!" Art and propaganda art, he emphasized, use different techniques to reach different goals. It is as absurd to demand that all art be persuasive in a literal sense as it is to insist propaganda art be subtle and unique as art; it is an "illogical invasion injurious to the art of propaganda, which by its nature must be plain and clear." To conflate them is a disservice to *both*.

This exchange would become known as the Tô Ngọc Vân-Đặng Thai Mai debates. General Secretary of Culture Trường Chinh addressed both positions but ultimately affirmed Đặng's orthodox view:

> When propaganda achieves a certain level, it becomes art. When art reaches a particular level of effectiveness, art clearly has a propagandistic nature. Thus, there may exist propagandists who are not or not yet artists, but it cannot be that there are artists who are not propagandists entirely.

Trường's view would be reflected in official policy. In 1949, the Party tightened control, establishing more restrictive guidelines. Tô was reigned in and followed the official policy but inside still felt the conflict of two selves—the nationalist and the artist. "Here lies the principal point, the torment of my soul," he wrote in the newspaper *Văn Nghệ* in 1949, "how to make the self that serves the nation and the masses and the self that serves art—the artist of course cannot forget this responsibility—not to come into conflict or, even worse, betray one another."

V

On my first visit to Hanoi seven years ago, I traveled through the city with my aunt. We visited the mausoleum where Hồ Chí Minh's body is displayed, though there is some speculation as to whether the body is truly his. The state history tour is a spectacle of memorialization, all pomp and circumstance. The whole process can take a few hours. In a group of twenty or so, we observed a commemorative choreographed dance, then were brought into a theater to watch films about the Party's valiant efforts to liberate the country.

During one of the films—newsreel footage of Hồ Chí Minh's funeral and the procession that led up to viewing his body—my aunt started to cry. She dabbed her cheek with a handkerchief. What was she feeling? Did the scene genuinely move her, or was this reaction ingrained, a response to some kind of cue? Is there a difference? After the footage ended, we were ushered in to see the famous corpse. The room was dimly lit, and the line moved quickly. I tried to take as much time as I could. I craned my neck to look at the supine figure, squinting to see if it was really him. The guards nudged us along. Why did the communists have such a strong penchant for embalming the body?

My family, to me, has always personified the notion of domestic love as a small island of communism—how love can activate a radically non-transactional way of relating. My aunt and my uncle, two of six siblings in my mom's family, never married. They are in their fifties and sixties and live with my grandmother in the house where they were born and raised, and where I was born and raised, in Saigon. They care for my grandmother every day, cooking for her, washing her clothes by hand, bathing her, assisting her every trip to the bathroom.

When my grandmother wakes up, my aunt gazes at her and asks, "How is my precious jewel? How is the love of my life?" It is the most rarefied devotion, to commit to taking care of someone for the rest of their waking days.

About ten years ago, my uncle bought a farmhouse in Củ Chi, a rural area an hour outside of Saigon's center. The farmhouse is near the site of the famous Củ Chi tunnels, part of an extensive underground network created by guerilla troops and used by the Việt Cộng as a base during the 1968 Tết Offensive. National history can be bittersweet in the South; for my family it is both a source of collective pride and a reminder of violent destitution. Like Hồ Chí Minh's mausoleum park, the entire area around the tunnels has been turned into a tourist attraction.

Last year, my uncle, aunt, grandmother, and I decided to visit. The park features artifacts demonstrating Vietnamese victory. During our visit, a dented US UH-1A helicopter was displayed on the lawn. The placard read "one of hundreds of aircraft shot down and captured by the liberation guerillas of the South." Nearby, there was an exhibition of explosives, cluster bombs, and rocket launchers, collected from around the area. The weapons were assembled in neat rows under straw hut roofs. The metal plates affixed to the sides of the bombs revealed their provenance: "Dispenser Aircraft SUU-30B/B, Camden, USA." To this day there are undetonated bombs all over Vietnam; all-women volunteer groups are locating and digging them up with their bare hands. We were taken into an auditorium where an animated video about underground guerillas was playing. It included depictions of their living quarters and elaborate defense tactics, set to bombastic electronic music.

Many Red tourist attractions feature revolutionary figures made of wax and wearing uniforms and simple smiles. At the

memorial park, guerilla mannequins lie on straw mats in sleeping quarters, or they are assembled around a table for a Party committee meeting. They stand in a newsroom, facing a chalkboard bulletin, awaiting news and instructions. Inside the tunnels, life-sized wax figures also appear, dressed in hospital scrubs and performing an emergency medical procedure. Others are huddled beside a table, underneath a banner inscribed with a common slogan: "Không có gì quý hơn độc lập, tự do" (Nothing is more precious than freedom).

When we visited, live actors mixed among the figures, dressed as guerillas and performing small tasks. Some knelt to uproot grass stalks in the swamp, while others plunged fishing nets into water. They repeated these actions for the duration of the park's opening hours. The actors blended in with the visitors in the imitation landscape. It was difficult to discern who was officially part of the reenactment.

It astonishes me that, despite the ways my family personally suffered under the communists, they still revere them. Maybe what they respect is the commitment and devotion. Once, my grandmother asked me if I knew that Uncle Ho never had a family. The nation was his family, she explained with a tone of approval. "He saw all of us as a family. He left Vietnam to train in France then in Russia, but he knew he would return. Thirty years later he came back. For thirty years he kept us in his heart."

My grandmother can no longer walk, and the park's paths were too narrow for her wheelchair. My aunt and uncle carried her through the site. In their devoted hands, she flew.

I recalled my family's trip to the tunnels to X one night as we sat at a dim bar in our neighborhood in Hanoi, full of alleys that fold into each other, tucking us into the city. The bar is owned by

Korean expats, like many businesses in the area. I recounted to X that while walking in the memorial park, I had come upon an old billboard in the middle of a grassy expanse. The billboard depicted a guerilla fighter with a gun strapped to her body as she carried a baby in a buoyant swoop; the text below her read "Ra trận để giành lấy mùa xuân" (Go to battle to claim the spring). I told him it reminded me of Pablo Neruda's line "Killing the flowers will not delay spring," as seen on the signs of many protesters, from North America to Hong Kong to Myanmar. Within the sentiment is an eros of propagation, acts of resistance refigured as symbols of fecundity.

X pulled out his phone and began typing in the search bar. He showed me one of Hồ Chí Minh's New Years poems, written before the Fall of Saigon, about aspirations to reunite the country. The poem was written in the participatory tense. We huddled together to read the screen.

Nam như cội với cành,
Anh em ruột thịt, đấu tranh một lòng.
Rồi đây thống nhất thành công,
Bắc Nam ta lại vui chung một nhà.
Mấy lời thân ái nôm na,
Vừa là kêu gọi, vừa là mừng xuân.

(The South is like root and branches,
Blood brothers, fighting with one heart.
Then there was a successful unification,
North and South, we are happy together again.
A few kind words,
It's both a call and a celebration of spring.)

The things I learned from X felt strangely innate, like what I had always known but forgotten.

"You know Hanoi used to be named Vạn Xuân, back in the sixth century?" he asked me that night. "You know what Vạn means, don't you?" I shook my head. "Ten thousand. Ten thousand Springs."

VI

On my last night in Hanoi, X came over to my apartment. When he rang the bell, it was nearly midnight. I was leaving for the airport at dawn and had been lying awake for several hours, hounded by dread. I pulled an oversized T-shirt over my head and opened the door.

X stood there, backlit from the hallway light, holding up a bottle before moving inside. I asked him how he was and didn't hear how he responded. We looked at my suitcases standing upright by the wall.

Two of them contained all the materials I had gathered on Vietnamese history—books and scans from my research trip, which I would now take home, to the heart of the empire that had decimated this city. I planned to scrutinize these stories from a distance, to stitch together some semblance of a lineage.

X looked disappointed. Maybe he was just sad I was leaving, or maybe the disappointment ran deeper. He couldn't fly off with me and he would never write this story. I was the one with the passport and suitcases. The diasporist is also just a tourist in the end.

I brought two glasses from the kitchen as we went into the bedroom. I lowered myself onto the bed while he stood over me, unscrewing the bottle. In the dark he sat down on a chair facing me. I could hear the neighbors playing ABBA's "Happy New Year" outside my window, a song all Vietnamese people know. *May we all have our hopes, our will to try, if we don't, we might as well lay down and die…*

We remained in the same position for hours, mostly in silence. The night sky, illuminated by pollution and LEDs, gradually lightened. At dawn, my consciousness flickering, he decided to leave. There wasn't much left to say at that point. Everything was clear.

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Andy Warhol, Color Polaroid

How does art fit into the life of a writer, as an object of study or as an object of desire? The four pamphlets that comprise *Cookie Jar 2* offer a range of possibilities: in the diary pages of an art critic hitting the road with her punk band, looking to check out *Las Meninas* at the Prado; in conversations about Vietnamese socialist realism amid romantic entanglement; in the relay of telepathic artworks by women considered peripheral, and men now canonized; and in a reckoning with the dehumanization of black and indigenous people by the early American circus industry. "Every encounter, no matter how strange or new, eventually reveals the patterns of possibility innate to the life before it," writes Hannah Black in her essay for this volume, on the life and work of the artist Joseph Yoakum.

Cookie Jar is a pamphlet series of long-format arts writing produced by the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. The series is named after Warhol's vast and weird collection of cookie jars scoured from flea markets, thrift stores, and estate sales. Each volume of the series highlights various ways through which writing may yet encounter art.

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—Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha, Editors

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