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Deep *Echology*: Repetition, Space, and Time in the Photography of An-My Lê

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interplay of repetition, space, and time in the photography of An-My Lê, focusing primarily on her series Small Wars and 29 Palms. Lê's work examines the intersection of human violence, memory, and the environment, particularly through the lens of diaspora and trauma. The paper introduces the concept of "deep echology," a term that describes Lê's engagement with ecological principles and her illumination of the echoes of past conflicts in contemporary settings. "Deep echology" helps make visible the multiple layers on which Lê works, blending historical realities, staged reenactments, and contemporary military activities to reflect critically on human violence and its ecological impacts. Taken as a whole, Lê's work raises profound questions about representations of history, memory, and the dichotomy between humanity and nature. Her photography is more than visual documentation. It represents a space of convergence that echoes traumas of the past to inform contemporary ecological and political discourses.

The photography of An-My Lê presents a striking, career-long engagement with time and space, exploring how human violence acts upon its environment and how, inversely, the environment acts upon the human subjects that inhabit it. Memories of war, diaspora, and trauma populate Lê's work, which remains painstakingly ambivalent about who or what is the central subject of the compositions. Lê's series on Vietnam War reenactments in Virginia (*Small Wars*) and military training exercises in Southern California (*29 Palms*), the main foci of this paper, present their human subjects in tension with the surrounding natural environment and sometimes nearly integrated into it. Several entries in both series focalize the environment not as a mere setting but as a primary subject. Meanwhile, Lê's photography presents a deeply ambivalent relationship to time, with *Small Wars* dramatizing reenactment as a form of traumatic repetition and *29 Palms* exploring purportedly future-oriented efforts as their own brand of repetitive violence and environmental destruction.

With these concerns in mind, the present paper explores how Lê's photography can be understood in dialogue with theories of diaspora, trauma, and deep ecology. These overlapping concepts help to explain the temporal and spatial themes in Lê's art, and inversely, her work contributes valuable insights to these theoretical lines of inquiry. Lê's experiments with time and space embody what I propose to term "deep echology," which highlights her work's preoccupation with echoes of the past and its simultaneous deep-ecological critique of anthropocentric futurity as an echo of past mistakes. These themes in Lê's work, like the philosophy of deep ecology with which it engages, are inextricable from an engagement with space. Ultimately, Lê's work explores how both time and space both shape and echo one another in scenes of remembered and anticipated violence, tying the devastation of war to the destruction of the environment through depictions of traumatic repetition and critiques of the anthropocentric human subject.

Lê's series *Small Wars* (1999–2002) offers a nuanced exploration of reenactment by evoking the inherently complicated nature of memory and repetition as elements of trauma. This series captures the performances of a group of Vietnam War reenactors operating in Virginia. The first image of the series, *Rescue*, exemplifies Lê's interest in the common tropes in representation war, depicting a military aircraft, shrouded in smoke and presumably having crashed, surrounded by several soldiers pointing semiautomatic rifles out of frame (Phan).

All four soldiers' lines of sight is directed toward the right and left sides of the image and slightly angled toward the viewer, thereby giving an impression of movement and dynamism, drawing the viewer's perspective outward. The scene echoes the familiar images of war movies, thus invoking the inescapable association between Vietnam *per se* and the Vietnam War. As Nora A. Taylor perceptively notes in a commentary on Lê and other Vietnamese artists, "For decades, war was the only visual reference that international viewers had of the country and stood as the most recognizable symbol of Vietnamese cultural identity" (Taylor). *Rescue* and the other photos in the series engage with this problem, but transform the reference to the Vietnam War into the photographs' own new referent: namely, simulated war as an echo of past violence. *Small Wars* achieves goal first at the basic level of depicting a depiction, necessarily adding one layer of remove from the historical war being reenacted in the scene; and, at a secondary level, Lê captures the unavoidable transformation of the war into a signifier in the present, unmoored from its original context in the jungles of Vietnam.

This aspect of *Small Wars* sheds light on how Lê thematizes the Vietnamese diaspora in her photography, not least in her series *Vietnam* (1996). The latter series features natural landscapes juxtaposed with human infrastructure and subtle signs of the devastating legacy of war. For example, *Untitled, Soc Son* foregrounds the porch of building in disrepair with an expansive rice paddy in the background. Telephone or power lines barely stand out on the backdrop of trees and rolling hills, a reminder of the ubiquity of human infrastructure within the natural environment. In the foreground, the decaying building is scrawled with illegible writing and pock marks that somewhat resemble bullet holes. Although only a figurative reference to the war, the building represents the trauma of war as an indelible scar. Human subjects appear in some of *Vietnam*'s entries, but the majority more closely resemble the interplay between agriculture, natural surroundings, and the varying conditions of the built environment.

Vietnam thus presents diaspora both in terms of physical absence and in terms of an intersection between space and time. Lê's photography in Vietnam is itself an act of return after a decades-long absence following her family's escape from the war (Phan; Sholis). Simultaneously, as in *Small Wars* (discussed further below), the focus on markers of time in *Untitled, Soc Son* underscores the salience of cultural memory in the diasporic experience. As such, Lê's photography—as well as Lê herself in her personal history as a refugee—engages with the expanding concepts of diaspora explored by Deborah Reed-Danahay in her analysis of cosmopolitan diaspora. Reed-Danahay contrasts the cosmopolitan perspective to the "'rootless individual' model," proposing, "There is an idea of groupness, a collective history, and shared memories in this concept [of cosmopolitan diaspora]" (604). She goes on to argue that the Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. most resembles an "antagonistic mode" of diaspora, which describes "a political space in which the current regime of the home country is not accepted as legitimate" (604). This general thesis is well supported by Reed-Danahay's analysis of diaspora memoirs. However, I submit that Lê's photography serves as a counter-example to this analysis, and more closely aligns with the "atopic mode," defined as "a diasporic identity based on space rather than place and connected to ideas of dispersion" (604). As the ensuing analyses will attempt to show, Lê's photography is deeply interested in space, not simply as a setting, but often as the primary subject of the composition. Her work thus conceptualizes diaspora in terms of pseudo-memories captured in photography, echoes of the past that are nonetheless displaced from the past to which they refer. These memories are embodied in space but not wedded to a stable or shared subjectivity. Demonstrating this point, Lê remarked in an interview about fleeing Vietnam, "I say 'we,' but I have no memories of the escape […]. All I have are family photos […]" (Phan). Although Lê is a subject of the photographs in question, she and her family were and are dispersed from the sites where they were taken.

This tension or disconnect between subject and site is a critical theme in much of Lê's photography. The natural surroundings are a critical feature of Lê's commentary in *Small Wars*, lending the photographs an anachronistic, almost uncanny element. The foliage in *Rescue* and the other photos in the series are unmistakably North American, an aspect not lost on several scholars and commentators. For instance, in her discussion of *Brambles*, Shawn Michelle Smith observes that the prominence of trees and plant life throughout the *Small Wars*

series tends to "highlight the fabricated nature of the scenes" (81). Smith writes, "Despite the density of the foliage, this is decidedly not the jungle of Vietnam, and the disparity between the Virginia landscape and that of Vietnam calls attention to the imagined nature of the war the reenactors engage" (Smith 81). Smith rightly points to the resulting tension between the efforts of the reenactors to create "authentic" scenes of jungle warfare and the setting of Virginia, thousands of miles away from where the war took place. Along similar lines, Peter Briggs remarks that the "simulated" war scenes are "at least twice removed" from their historical referents, despite the efforts of the reenactors to make their performance as authentic as possible (30). One effect of this tension is that the photographs, unlike the cinematic tropes they echo, call attention to their own staged nature. Lê's photographs are thus an overt exercise in memory as performance, an echo of an earlier time that cannot escape its situatedness in space.

Equally importantly, Lê's works are invested in revealing a transhistorical, transcontinental crossover between the war of the past and its persisting memory in the present. In other words, the purpose of *Small Wars* is not merely to parody the war in Vietnam or derive amusement from the anachronism of the reenactments it depicts, but to trouble the very distinction between a contrived scene and an "authentic" event. The photographs suggest the lingering, physical presence of Vietnam—the war, the country, and its diaspora—in the present-day United States. Exemplifying this element of *Small Wars* is *Bamboo*, which features a close-up shot of a tall, skinny plant with sprawling leaves vividly dominating the foreground, with a notable absence of human subjects. The photograph appears to be shot from a low angle, giving the plant a looming, haunting character, and departing from Lê's penchant for high perspectives (Klipa 151). The plant depicted may be an invasive species of bamboo or a species indigenous to North America, but the specific identity of the plant is somewhat beside the point. As the title of the photograph clearly indicates, Lê's purpose is to present the Virginia "bamboo" as a genuine signifier of Vietnam's very real presence in the contemporary U.S.: physically, as a memory, and as a pattern that echoes itself in the more recent wars evoked in *29 Palms*.

By subverting temporal and spatial barriers between the historical past and present, Lê's photography develops a nuanced reflection on the nature of trauma both at a mass scale and as embodied in her human subjects. In their theoretical exploration of the origins and future directions of trauma studies, Antonio Traverso and Mick Broderick highlight the potential of visual arts, particularly photography, to invite a figurative interpretation of particular subject matter as representative of a larger whole. The authors argue, "in their specificity, images also possess the capacity to generate abstract meaning and, in fact, more often than not the visual and narrative rendition of the pain of individual characters is interpreted as a synecdoche for the suffering of a people, culture or nation" (6). This understanding of images is particularly germane to Lê's photography, which tend to strike a balance between specificity and abstraction by focalizing distinct individuals while, at the same time, preserving their generic or anonymous quality and also making the surroundings a salient feature of the composition. In a 2020 interview with Brian Sholis, Lê remarks, "I'm interested in giving context to whatever I'm photographing, whether it's a landscape or a person. That often means pulling back—and once you do that, you try to preserve the inherent tension in the form of a picture. I often ask myself, 'How far can I step back before the original subject of interest starts losing its authority?" (Sholis). The operative concept in Lê's commentary is "tension," and the works in *Small Wars* achieve such tension not only by making room for the physical context but by making it less than clear, at times, precisely who or what is the "original subject." For instance, in *Rescue*, the viewer is left to contemplate whether the primary subject is the soldier reenactors, the smoking aircraft, or the foliage. Indeed, the branch of a pine tree lingers in relief at the top-left of the foreground, relegating the subjects to the physical, if not thematic, background of the composition.

In effect, Lê capitalizes on the power of images to transform individual subjectivity into a synecdoche for collective suffering and the repetition of painful memories. Building further on the insight from Traverso and Broderick on the progression from specificity to abstraction, it is worthwhile to draw on Griselda Pollock's poetic and provocative reflection on trauma and visual representation. Her essay underscores the radical break between subjectivity and linear time that is so fundamental to trauma. Pollock posits that "we may speak of **a**

trauma as a historical event of extremity that overwhelms a subject's capacity to integrate what has happened to him or her in their lives" (44, boldface in original). She goes on to tie this definition to a Freudian originary trauma, such that "a" traumatic event is always "unknowingly predetermined as an originary repetition of structural, predisposing trauma," which a concrete trauma then "resurrect[s]" (44). Leaving aside the implications of this approach for psychoanalytic theory, this proposition raises a challenging quandary that can be applied to Lê's use of anachronism and reenactment as synecdochic vehicles for historical trauma. If trauma resurrects or activates something originary about the human condition, then how is it still possible to conceptualize the likes of the Vietnam War as an event embedded in history? For Pollock—and, I would argue, for Lê—the answer to this question that *processing* trauma necessitates an intersection between space and time. Pollock argues, "The passage from trauma might be understood as the move into the narrativity that institutes time, the pause in which memory forms, hence spatializes" (40). This formulation applies nicely to visual art in general, which necessarily relies on space as one of its main vehicles for narrative, and it is especially apposite to the work of Lê, which is decidedly committed to space as the very site in which to reimagine time and temporal relations.

In this light, Lê's above-quoted comments about "giving context" to her subjects is a rather modest characterization of the thematic significance of her technique, at least as it applies to *Small Wars*. The tension to which she refers gives the composition of the images a distinct vitality that interacts with the subject, but that is only part of the point. To push back slightly on Pollock's wording, reenactment serves as a vehicle for a passage *through* trauma in such a way that the trauma is narrativized and also transformed into a concrete space contained within the photograph. This reformulation of "passage from trauma" into "passage through trauma" avoids the implication that photography or any aestheticization neutralizes the pain, suffering, and destruction of the collective trauma of the Vietnam War. Trauma relies heavily on repetition, as Barbara Kowalczuk argues in her analysis of *Small Wars* and *29 Palms* (para. 6). Representing trauma thus involves a simultaneous confrontation and distancing in the case of *Small Wars*, creating what Kowalczuk describes as a "divergence between the photographed events and previous representations of the violence of the war" (4). In effect, the repetitive nature of reenactment and trauma necessarily entail an act of simultaneously looking forward and backward—much like the multidirectional gazes of the soldiers in *Rescue*, pointing the viewer outward beyond the historical and photographic frame.

Lê does similar work with lines of sight in her series *29 Palms*, with similar effects for the intersection of the temporal and spatial and the impacts that this intersection has on the themes and subject matter of the photographs. The first in the series, *Colonel Greenwood*, serves as a perfect example of how *29 Palms* echoes *Small Wars*, albeit with some critical differences. *Colonel Greenwood* depicts its eponymous subject near the center of the foreground, gazing off to the left and behind the viewer at an unidentified and unseen object. Barely visible in the distant background, amidst rocks and detritus, are two military vehicles approaching: for what purpose, the viewer can only speculate. Smith rightly identifies *Colonel Greenwood* as "anticipatory" in nature: "The uncertainty about what one is looking at is central to the power of Lê's photographs of war in the making" (79). In contrast to *Small Wars*, which considers repetitions of the past, *29 Palms* engages with the "fantasies" of "preparedness" that typify military training exercises (Smith 78). In other words, *Colonel Greenwood* and other entries in *29 Palms* look forward rather than backward. The result is anything but the uncritical embrace of forward progress that partly underwrote the modern wars in which Colonel Greenwood's generation fought. On the contrary, what the subject looks forward *to* remains shrouded in ambiguity, if not trepidation. Much as the trauma of violent history is a "specter" in *Small Wars* (Kowalczuk 3), *29 Palms* presents future time and space as a yet-unknown specter that defies anticipation and preparation.

As with *Small Wars*, *29 Palms* is unmistakably interested in war, but the deeper themes of the latter series center more on the ecological dimensions of large-scale military operations—and of modernity more broadly. The series juxtaposes its solders with the striking desert landscapes of Southern California, which evoke themes of desolation and ecological destruction. In *Colonel Greenwood*, the desert haze in the vast background somewhat obscures the plant life, while the foreground consists of barren rocks and an unidentified piece

of construction (perhaps a ventilation pipe) cut off at the rightmost edge of the image. This juxtaposition of a certain kind of "nature" with the technologies of warfare lend the image an overwhelming suggestion of death. Moreover, *29 Palms* relies as heavily as *Small Wars* on the relationality between the subjects and the surrounding landscape. For instance, in *Small Convoy Attack* and *Mechanized Assault*, wooden shelters and military vehicles dot semi-distant landscapes like boulders, implying a blurring and convergence between human infrastructure and the environments they inhabit. Likewise, the brightly lit *Infantry Officers' Brief* and *Infantry Platoon* present a cacophony of human bodies that become nearly indistinguishable from their landscapes. Given the focus on military operations, this convergence suggests devastation more readily than some notion of harmony or human-environment integration.

In so doing, *29 Palms* expresses an ambivalence around the relationship between humanity and nature that resembles the critique of anthropocentrism at the heart of deep ecology. In a discussion of the potential of art and art education for addressing the climate crisis, Tom Anderson and Anniina Suominen Guyas describe the deep ecology concept of "interbeing" as a proposition that "requires a collective shift of consciousness in which the self is fully realized, not through consuming, but through transpersonal relationships" (230). Likewise, Chris O. Abakare's analysis of deep ecology as an alternative to social ecology characterizes deep ecology as a "rejection of person-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image" (100). This conceptualization does well to capture the salience of the Virginia foliage in *Small Wars*. As for *29 Palms*, what Lê often depicts is person-*as*-environment. To varying degrees, the photographs described above see their military subjects blending into the landscape, but it becomes unclear which is consuming and which is being consumed. More recently, Lê has sustained this interest in a fraught relationship between humanity and its natural and built environments, presenting the latter as "sites of contested historical and political discourse" (Wong), a phrase that equally applies to the prolonged wars in the Middle East invoked in *29 Palms*.

By decentering the human subject, deep ecology casts critical light not only on blind consumerism with no regard for the future, but also, more provocatively, on "shallow" forms of environmentalism that seek to preserve the planet primarily for the sake of humanity's survival (Abakare 99–100). The deep ecology critique is both practical and philosophical, as it contends that restoring humankind's relational orientation to earth's ecology will require much more than conceptualizing humanity as a (or *the*) steward of the environment in which it lives and consumes. Such a concept is precisely the sort of bio-hierarchy that must give way to biocentric equality (Anderson and Guyas 226). Along similar lines, Lê views the wars in the Middle East as one of many echoes of anthropocentrism shaping, and likely threatening, modernity: large-scale human efforts repeatedly purport to be stewards of their zones of control—Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, the earth's climate—only to repeat the cycles of violence and destruction in which the trauma originated.

The ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding the human-nature relationship in *29 Palms* has two key implications for deep ecology discourse. First, by focusing on a military outpost in the desert, Lê casts doubt on the capacity of humanity to reintegrate with nature and embrace the interconnectedness of all life forms. This is not to say that Lê casts doubt on the proposals and ideals of deep ecology *per se*. Rather, she shares the philosophy's concern with the reversion back to anthropocentric patterns, which echo through the wars she thematizes in her photography—up to and including Trump's "invisible" yet spectacle-oriented war on COVID-19 (Bianconi; Wallis). What pretends to be preparation becomes, instead, mere repetition.

An-My Lê's photography spatializes time and temporalizes space, ultimately showing the inextricable and interdependent nature of the two. The same principle emerges in the ways in which Lê orients her subjects vis-à-vis the environment: her photography enjoins the viewer not only to consider these elements as related, but to contemplate how deeply they shape one another. This interconnectedness, along with her photography's preoccupation with repetition, suggests a philosophy of "deep echology," which engages with the deep ecological principle of interbeing while casting doubt on the capacity of humankind to break its cycle of ecological and human destruction.

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