
Transforming the Vietnam War: Artists' reuse of published images and the destabilization of interpretation (1960-1972)

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Abstract:

This paper is excerpted from the Introduction chapter of the author's doctoral dissertation currently in process. The dissertation examines artworks produced by a trio of visual artists in the period roughly from the early 1960's through the mid 1970's who chose to draw on images created by photojournalists and television reporters chronicling the American Vietnam War. By appropriating mainstream images and changing only the context in which they appeared, these artists were making statements that likely would have been clear to anyone who encountered the works, and would have raised questions, at the very least, about what the editors who originally published these images meant to communicate about the Vietnam War.

Keywords: American Vietnam War; Rosler, Martha; Kienholz, Edward; Heinecken, Robert.

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My dissertation¹ presents a very close examination of works produced by a trio of visual artists in the period roughly from the early 1960's through the mid 1970's who chose to draw on images created by photojournalists and television reporters chronicling the American Vietnam War², and to co-opt those images (among others) within their artistic productions. What differentiates these artists and the specific works that I am interrogating from the many other artists' works making similar political statements was their wholesale reuse of widely publicized images. These images, originally appearing in some of the most widely circulated newsweeklies of their day or appearing on major TV network news would have been completely familiar to many Americans, while those same Americans likely had no familiarity with the artists. By appropriating mainstream images and changing only the context in which they appeared, these artists were making statements that likely would have been clear to anyone who encountered the works, and would have raised questions, at the very least, about what the editors who originally published these images meant to communicate about the Vietnam War.

All the works I am considering here straddle multiple worlds – art, politics, news, photojournalism, war, anti-war protest – given the nature of their content. Keeping track of the multiple contexts inherent in each work is critical if one is to be able to consider these works in their entirety. While I am not suggesting that the study of anything should be the study of everything, I am suggesting that in the case of art that intentionally incorporates political themes and mass media, one must consider

those themes and aspects as integral parts of the whole. One must, if not take the art out of the art world, at least introduce other worlds into the mix. A photograph of a man holding severed heads, of a child missing her leg, of a television screen fixed on the display of body counts: in what contexts are these images to be considered? If an image of a severed head can be used to connote colonialism, brutality and the horrors of war, something else happens when that image itself is severed from its original context. It might still connote the horrors of war, but victim and victimizer might switch places, and any inherent “truth” in the image (location, photographer, time, date, etc.) might be lost. Similarly, a little girl with a severed leg originally featured in a story about redemption (of sorts), about regaining a life by acquiring a prosthetic, may become no more than a pitiable (and pitiful) character when her picture is cut out and repurposed. And body counts might become a referent for war in general, rather than a direct referent for the very real numbers of American lives lost in a specific conflict.

This dissertation presents studies particular works of three artists: Edward Kienholz (American, 1927-1994); Robert Heinecken (American, 1931-2006); and, Martha Rosler (American, b. 1943). The Kienholz works under consideration were created first (1965 and 1968). The works by Heinecken and Rosler were done at the same time, more or less; Heinecken’s work in 1971 and Rosler’s from 1967-1972 (although Rosler’s works did not enter the art world until much later).

I have chosen to focus on these artists named primarily because it is within specific pieces of theirs that one confronts the use of photographs and other materials taken wholesale from popular news sources of the time. Additionally, I focus on them because all of these artists are “known”: their work resides both in U.S. and international collections, and in museums and archives, and all of these artists have been (and largely continue to be) the subjects of multiple exhibitions and monographs over many years. This is not to imply that these artists alone created work that appropriated news images during the period under question, or that they alone created such works as political statements.³

I am suggesting that, to support art history’s meaningful critique of artworks incorporating original photographic images from this period, the discipline must utilize its existing paradigm⁴, one which demands that our critiques include consideration of the provenance of the original image and the conscious choices made regarding it at each moment of decision, from its inception through the camera lens, to its review and placement by media staff in some popular context, to its insertion in an artwork, and then in relationship to the context(s) of its use or exhibition (or sale) within and outside of the art world.

I believe that there are two primary reasons, one political and one methodological, why that existing approach was abandoned in critiquing works of art from the period encompassing the Vietnam War. First, politically, photomontage from the early to mid-twentieth century was art that rebelled against fascism in the context of the rise of German Nationalism, Fascism worldwide, and the Second World War. As such, the political foe was clear, as was the case against him in the minds of people of goodwill worldwide. This general clarity around good and evil did not exist during the Vietnam period. Second, methodologically and categorically, much of the later artwork from the Vietnam War period was considered “Pop Art”, and by being so defined was less likely to enjoy significant critical consideration.

The stakes at issue in the years just preceding and during World War II were clear, especially in retrospect, and in comparison with the Vietnam War We, and our allies, were fighting ‘The Good Fight’, doing whatever was necessary to counter the identified forces of evil. World War II was “The Good War.” The technique of montage, or photo collage, is often considered specific to this time period as in the exhibition (and catalogue) *Montage and Modern Life: 1919-1942*, from 1992.⁵ Art historian Matthew Teitelbaum describes this period in the preface to the catalogue as “... moments in the USSR, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States at the point when an established modernist avant-garde was challenged by the need to reach a mass audience.”⁶ There was little political danger for American critics in fully judging and pulling apart the sources within a work by John Heartfield, for example, since the message was, and could only be, that fascism is evil. This

extends even to American artists, at least for Fineman, who notes that while few in number, there were some artists in the U.S. who took on political causes through photo collage, notably Barbara Morgan in the 1930s; “Influenced by Heartfield’s work for AIZ, Morgan used the technique as a tool of ideological persuasion in her famous image Hearst over the People [1939] ... Hearst, notorious for his xenophobia, vehement criticism of the New Deal, and vocal support of Hitler and Benito Mussolini, was reviled by the Left as an emblem of American corporate fascism.”⁷ The nuances presented in these works were aesthetic, not political. There was, in this war, only one side that a reasonable person could take. This was not the case during the Vietnam War, particularly during the early years. The Cold War presented Americans with various positions to consider, and for many years the ideological fight against Communism was considered to take precedence over the material form of that fight.

Per my second consideration noted above, the influence of art work like that done by Warhol within the critically created school of Pop Art increased the likelihood that works which employed recognizable images taken directly out of mass media would be relegated to or identified with the Pop Art genre. Indeed in the *Montage* catalogue from 1992 Teitelbaum makes the point that “the relationship between contemporary art [that is, art of the 1980s and 1990s] and the mass media—the links between fine art and popular culture—is surely rooted in montage practice of the 1920s and 1930s.”⁸ The artists more often considered to be under the “anti-Vietnam War” banner tend to be those whose works contained more stylized and abstract forms such as Nancy Spero or Leon Golub (noted below). In this respect a collage with an image clearly clipped out of *Life* magazine has more in common with the representation of a Campbell’s soup can than with a stylized helicopter.

While, in American society generally, art has been considered a discipline and recreation of and for the elite, many Americans applied the same label of “elitism” to the anti-war movement itself during the 1960s, even though a literature exists that suggests the existence of a significant and progressively greater breadth of opposition to the war, including opposition among working-class people and veterans.⁹ Nonetheless, a historical picture of the period, as voiced in cultural productions such as movies, television, and literature, implies that a cultural division existed between mainstream Americans’ consumption of photojournalistic images from Vietnam in magazines like *Time* or *Life*, and that of a subset of the population that accessed the art incorporating these images in museums, further reflecting the elite nature of the anti-war movement. The fact that these artistic works incorporating photojournalistic war images have received significantly more attention from art historians than from media historians could be understood as enforcing this point of view.

The works of the three artists that I am considering pose problems both for art historians and students of photography. For art historians, these works differ from others of the period in that, while their creators were equally committed to messages of dissent against the Vietnam War, they tended to abstract and interpret the images seen daily in newspapers and on television. Thus, it is artists creating more abstract representations of the war such as Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, Peter Saul, and others who receive the majority of the coverage by art historians in monographs and in exhibitions of art dealing with the Vietnam War.¹⁰

One of the ‘problems’ posed by the artists in question was the simple fact that the work they were creating synthesized art and politics, which some art historians and critics believed was not possible to accomplish. The eminent art historian Tom Crow, writing of artists and activists of the 1960s, suggested that one had to choose art or activism; that activists were forced to make a “...total commitment that left next to no time and energy for other pursuits.”¹¹ Crow, writing specifically with regard to Edward Kienholz’s *Portable War Memorial*, but speaking generally about artists’ relationship to Vietnam war images at the time, further stated that “The artists had sense enough to realize that they could not match the searing photographs and video footage issuing from the conflict every day, images that were already doing their work to undermine public support for the war.”¹² Working from that sweeping generalization, he suggested that, “For American artists [...] it was all the more difficult to approach the explosive political issues of the later 1960s in any direct manner.”¹³ In a 1967 article in the *New Yorker*, art critic Harold Rosenberg asserted that “the helplessness of art

when it crosses over into the political arena increases year by year with the expansion of the mass media; the more advanced the communications system the less the impact of the unique aesthetic statement.”¹⁴

These observations suggest that the power of the news image was such that no art could compete with it, or could compete on equal terms, fueling a mythology regarding the power of news images of war to change public opinion. Decades after initiation of a debate over the degree of power incarnate in the press fueled by widely disseminated images of war—even to the extent of blaming the press for America’s loss in Vietnam, and further decades after the notion of such agency largely has been disproved—the power of photography to disseminate the truth of a situation, particularly a violent situation, is still under debate.¹⁵ In our current moment, much of the controversy regarding images centers on the ability to manipulate them – to dissemble through technology. I would suggest that images in the context of the Vietnam War raise issues of much greater complexity and nuance because in the age of analog photography there was a default assumption that the image – the photograph – was an objective representation of fact: an independent truth. And that period similarly witnessed the flourishing of “objective journalism”; the attempt to imbue the profession with an unbiased approach to all that was covered by its practitioners, the idea that professional journalists could and would tell the truth with no opinion attached. Even today journalists face these issues; a recent obituary of photojournalist Stanley Greene quotes him as saying ““We have to be ambassadors of the truth.... We have to hold ourselves to a higher standard because the public no longer trusts the media.””¹⁶ These notions are simplistic, as they negate the influence of photographer, editor, gatekeeper, and/or other agents in the formulation and contextualization of the image and the story.

Contrary to the assertions of critics like Crow or Rosenberg, the artists’ works I discuss document the existence of a category of art that employed images that were concurrently featured in the news through mainstream vehicles such as *Time* and *Life* magazines and television. These artists were approaching ‘explosive political issues’ directly, and harnessing the very mass media that purportedly were leaving them helpless. This art, when examined, contradicts critics’ notions that art and activism had, by definition, to be mutually exclusive.

Among the work that authors like Israel, Frascina and McCarthy do consider, collectives (groups of artists) created much of it.¹⁷ This includes pieces such as the *And babies ...* poster created by the Art Workers Coalition, in 1970. This poster continues to serve as an icon of the Vietnam War, and of anti-Vietnam War protests.

The Coalition artists reused a photograph taken by Ron Haeberle in 1969 and originally published in *Life* magazine, showing the aftermath of an American attack on the Vietnamese village of My Lai (Song My). The photograph shows the dead bodies of women and children lying in a ditch. As Matt Israel explains: “Because of its publication in *Life* magazine in December 1969, the picture had already become the primary image of the incident and one of the most iconic of the war.”¹⁸ The text came from an interview on 60 Minutes conducted by Mike Wallace with Paul Meadlo, one of the soldiers involved in the incident. Wallace asked Meadlo if the American soldiers had truly shot women, children and babies? Meadlo replied that indeed they had shot women, children ... and babies. “Notably, while the origin of the text used in *And Babies* was the Wallace-Meadlo interview, the lettering itself was sourced from the *New York Times*, which printed the interview the following day.”¹⁹ The poster, which itself was to become iconic, used mass media (specifically television and the print press) to make its point; “The poster appropriates two forms of journalistic coverage, documentary photography and televisual utterance, to graphically illustrate the war’s casual attitude to the loss of life.”²⁰

Exhibition catalogues and artist monographs have served as primary source material for the individual artists’ chapters. The following offers a brief introduction to the artists whose works are the focus of this dissertation.

Ed Kienholz spent the majority of his career on the west coast. The works under consideration here are emblematic in format of most of his work; he is considered one of the pioneers of assemblage art, or installation art. Kienholz's work has been widely exhibited and has caused much consternation among conservative viewers for its unvarnished look at various "underbellies" of American life such as bordellos and abortion clinics. Three of his works are under consideration here, all of which commented directly on the Vietnam War, yet which have received little notice for this within existing literature. For instance, of the sources mentioned above, only Frascina's volume includes all three of these works: *The Beanery* (1965), *Portable War Memorial* (1968), and *Eleventh Hour Final* (1968). In the work *Portable War Memorial* (1968) Kienholz employed both current (Vietnam War media images) and iconic (World Wars I & II) images, understanding that the juxtaposition of those elements would be jarring and controversial

Of the three artists under consideration, Robert Heinecken is most removed from the art historical canon. Nonetheless, he has received notice from major U.S. museums, including a retrospective of his work held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) in 2014. Heinecken, like Kienholz, was based primarily on the west coast. He established the photography program at UCLA where he served on the faculty for many years. The work under consideration here, *Periodical #5* (1971) unlike the work by Kienholz or Rosler, was not created for purposes of museum or gallery exhibition; rather it was created as social commentary and protest. Robert Heinecken chose a particularly horrifying image to work with, one that simply by virtue of its removal from its original 'news' context and its imposition within "entertainment" context would be guaranteed to disturb: Heinecken secretly printed an etching of a *Time* photograph that showed a Cambodian soldier holding a severed head in each hand within the pages of *Glamour* and other fashion magazines. Heinecken, unlike Rosler, did not purposely place his work within view of anti-war activists, but his intervention was unquestionably a political and anti-war statement. Yet, none of the current literature dealing with artists and the Vietnam War includes this work within their pages.

When particular images are countenanced by prevailing views, the use of those very images to question such views is inherently destabilizing. Even in the later years of the Vietnam War (1968 and beyond), when American mass media had to contend with progressively greater confusion about their government's intent in an environment of widespread public dissent, those media nonetheless conveyed an impression of consensus, even if governmental objectives were "at odds not only with the nature of that war but also ... with the visual media that were shaping public knowledge of the war."²¹ The magazine *House Beautiful* represented a hegemonic view, as did the images in *Life*. But where the former represented life as it should be, a visual evocation of what 'we' were fighting for in Southeast Asia, the other represented the obverse of that ideal: the harsh truths and dangers inherent in that fight. In juxtaposing images from these publications, making it clear that such juxtaposition was unexpected, and doing this within a particular context, the artist was able to destabilize the original intent of all of these images.

Yet Martha Rosler first placed these disturbing images in contexts where she could be certain that they would be interpreted 'correctly' (in the manner in which she intended them to be understood). That is, she placed the collaged images within the 'alternative press,' a recognized 'climate of feeling,' where their purpose, as articles of protest, would be understood and unquestioned. Later, when she chose to display those same works within the art world, she had to provide labels and captions to ensure that viewers achieved this 'correct' understanding.

Martha Rosler has been, and continues to be, a New York (specifically Brooklyn) based artist although she spent time on the west coast. During the 1960s while in San Diego she created a series of collaged works, eventually called *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, 1967-1972*. During a more recent conflict she created a new series, working in the same way but with updated war photography and current issues of *House Beautiful*, called *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, New Series, 2004-2008*. Rosler intended for the original collages to be disseminated widely throughout the larger anti-war community. Per Israel, "the collages also found their way into

underground newspapers”, an outlet where the same news photographs used in the collages were also reprinted.²²

Both Robert Heinecken and Martha Rosler worked with photographs from mainstream newsweeklies, creating direct political messages with their collages. Despite the similarity in their production there is no evidence that they were aware of each other’s work in this particular vein (although Rosler was certainly aware of much of Heinecken’s other work).

Moreover, in using these images of war contemporaneously these artists raise questions regarding the timeline of iconization. They made deliberate choices of specific images—that is, this image and not that one—and they did so at the time those images first circulated, well before the images had time to become rooted in cultural memory, even though they were broadly circulated at the time through mass media. These acts of choice force us to consider how the artists’ decisions relate to the process of iconization. We presume that both time and feedback loops are required for an image to become separated from its original context and become iconic, or symbolic. As Hariman and Lucaites suggest, “it can take time” for an image to go from familiar, or known, to “iconic.”²³ Given the very brief time between these images’ initial display in popular media (such as *Time*, *Life*, on television) and their reuse by the artists in question, however, it is almost certain that any individual viewing the repurposed images in their artistic context would have been equally aware of those images’ initial, popular source context.

What does this dissertation add to the conversation? To which conversation(s) does it speak? And why does any of this matter? I believe that Art History as a discipline has sacrificed history for consideration of aesthetics: in regarding/critiquing the art works discussed herein, the art historical method used disregards or ignores the significance of the source material. While acknowledging, in some cases, that these works were proffered in protest of the Vietnam War, a majority of these art historical accounts do not consider the meaning of the source materials (images) at the time that the works were created; nor do these critiques necessarily look at the contexts from which those source materials were taken. In many cases the source material is misattributed and misinterpreted; this will be especially evident in analyzing the work by Robert Heinecken. I integrate consideration of history (which as a field might sacrifice aesthetics for accuracy) and art history to suggest that full consideration of the details in these artworks matters because those details mattered greatly to the artists; because those details are not gratuitous or extraneous elements of the work; and, because the Vietnam War has been and remains an essential element of American culture.

The artists examined in the following chapters were regarded and evaluated (and continue to be regarded and evaluated), primarily within one context: that of ‘art’. I am invested in illustrating how these artists’ works, by incorporating images from non-artistic contexts, not only transcended ‘art’, but placed these artists at the locus of much broader conversations regarding the role and responsibilities of artists in highly charged contexts of war and reportage, of truth-telling and both the power and limitations of protest. Current artists are relating to current wars in similar ways; images of war continue to become iconic and the time for that process is attenuated due to increased access and faster dissemination. Images of severed body parts remain in circulation, while images continue to be severed from their contexts, creating disinformation at worst and unconscious re-contextualization at best. I intend to destabilize the art historical interpretations I am alluding to by insisting upon acknowledgment of the other contexts from which and within which the artists worked. The three artists discussed here had varying ideas about the moral and civic responsibilities of artists in times of war, and varying ideas also about the efficacy of art as a tool generally, but especially in protest of prevailing governmental programs such as war. Nonetheless, all three created works that in one way or the other must be read as political statements, given the materials they used and the time period in which they fabricated these works. They certainly differed in their conceptions of what these works might say to audiences, and over time all three redeployed these same artworks in different contexts and to different receptions.

Acknowledgments

I am hoping to complete my PhD in American Studies at Rutgers University-Newark, in December, 2017. This paper is an extract of chapter 1, Introduction, of my dissertation which is currently in process, and currently titled as above: *Transforming the Vietnam War: Artists' reuse of published images and the destabilization of interpretation (1960-1972)*.

References

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- ¹ This paper is an extract of the introduction chapter of my dissertation, currently in process.
- ² That is, The Second Indochina War, 1955-1975, hereafter referred to simply as 'The Vietnam War'.
- ³ Others using repurposed images during and from the Vietnam War include On Kawara, Judith Bernstein, Carolee Schneeman, and James Rosenquist.
- ⁴ That is, the history of works of photo collage by artists such as Hannah Höch or John Heartfield, amply demonstrates a politically charged interpretation, and one that fully explicates the source materials. Heartfield, in particular, is often brought up to Martha Rosler by interlocutors who assume that she was familiar with his work when doing her own. Art historians generally consider Heartfield primarily as a political artist; Mia Fineman's description is a good example; "Heartfield was not a photographer himself, but he spent his career using photography to create politically motivated art ..."
- ⁵ Maud Lavin et al., eds., *Montage and Modern Life, 1919-1942* (Cambridge, Mass.: Boston: MIT Press; Institute of Contemporary Art, 1992).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁷ Mia Fineman, *Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop* (New York: New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Distributed by Yale University Press, 2012), 104-5.
- ⁸ Lavin et al., *Montage and Modern Life, 1919-1942*, 11.
- ⁹ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks the Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2013), for example.
- ¹⁰ For example: Lucy R. Lippard, *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* (Bellingham, Wash.: Seattle: Whatcom Museum of History and Art; Real Comet Press, 1990); Peter Howard Selz, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and beyond* (Berkeley, Calif; London: University of California Press, 2006); Catherine Zegher and Drawing Center, *Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War* (New York: Drawing Center, 2005); Francis Frascina, *Art, Politics, and Dissent: Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America* (Manchester; New York: New York, NY: Manchester University Press; Distributed exclusively in the USA by St. Martin's Press, 1999); Matthew Israel, *Kill for Peace: American Artists against the Vietnam War*, First edition. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013); David McCarthy, *American Artists against War, 1935-2010* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).
- ¹¹ Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.; Prentice Hall, 1996), 179.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 150.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 151.
- ¹⁴ Harold Rosenberg, "Art of Bad Conscience," *The New Yorker* XLIII, no. 43 (December 16, 1967): 138.
- ¹⁵ H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Susan L. (Susan Lisa) Carruthers, *The Media at War* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). These are just a few of the works to deal with the myth of how the media affected the outcome of the Vietnam War.
- ¹⁶ James Estrin, "Stanley Greene, Whose Camera Captured War's Brutality, Dies at 68," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/business/media/stanley-greene-dead-war-photographer.html>.
- ¹⁷ See note 8, above.
- ¹⁸ Israel, *Kill for Peace*, 132.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁰ Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 20.

²¹ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 177.

²² Israel, *Kill for Peace*, 82.

²³ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011), 173.