

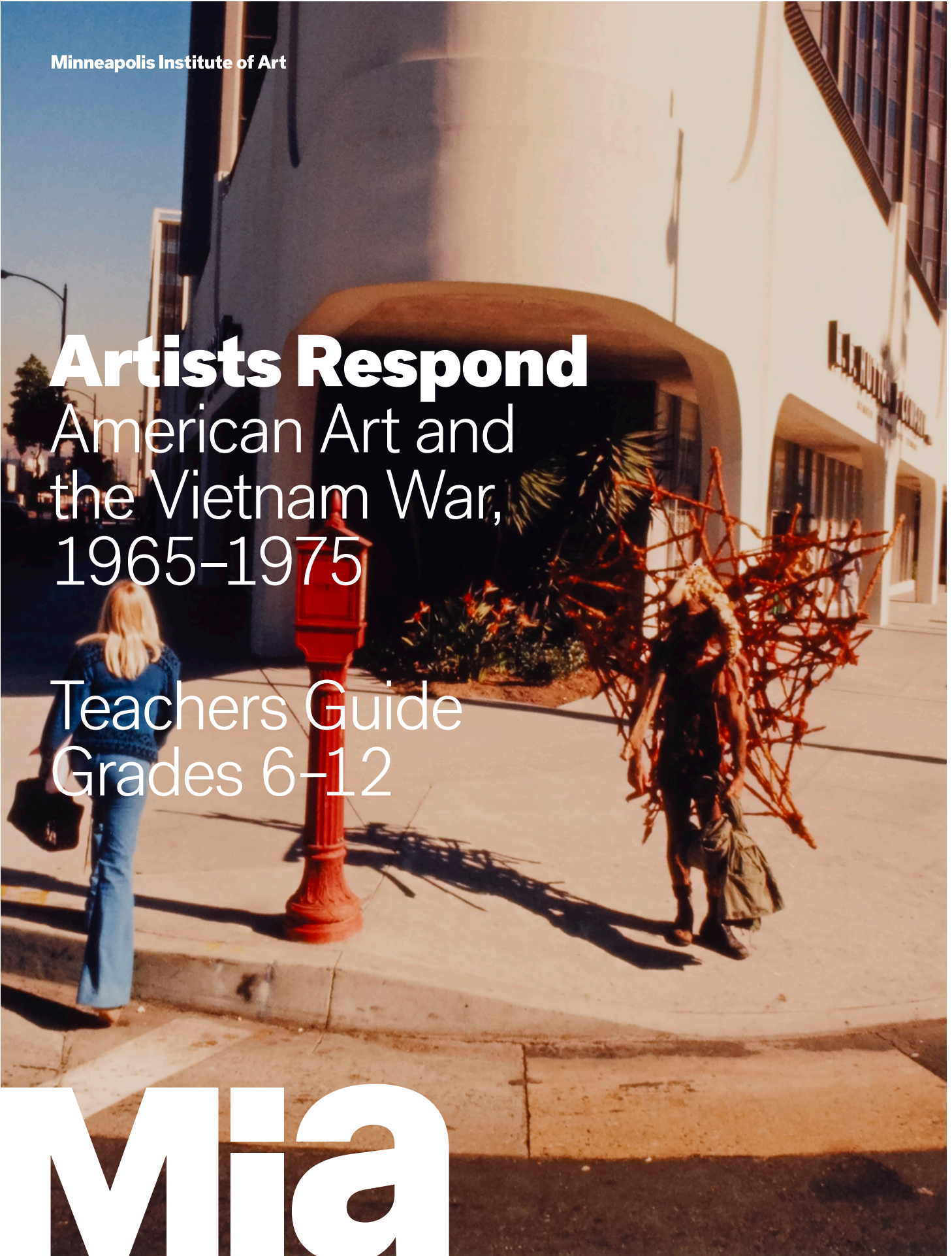
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Artists Respond

American Art and
the Vietnam War,
1965–1975

Teachers Guide
Grades 6–12

Mia



Teachers Guide

For Teachers and Students Grades 6–12

Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965–1975

September 29, 2019–
January 5, 2020

This teachers guide accompanies “Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965–1975.” The guide is designed to facilitate conversations in the classroom before a museum tour or between chaperones and students on self-guided visits. It introduces the special exhibition’s main themes and featured artworks in preparation for a visit to Mia, and it contains projectable images and discussion prompts.

Looking to visit the exhibition on a free self-guided experience or take a guided tour? Simply complete your tour request [here](#).

We look forward to seeing you at Mia soon!

“Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965–1975” focuses on real-time reactions to the Vietnam War, called the American War by the Vietnamese, during the 10 years between U.S. troops landing in Vietnam to the fall of Saigon. During this period, visual artists living in the United States boldly returned to social content in art, and they spurred a rise in the political expressions of documentary art and body art.

The exhibition highlights artists who chose to engage with their current moment in both the public sphere and politics. The war can be read in the imagery and tone of their work. Within a decade, the art transitioned from calm and cool to expressions of empathy, sorrow, and shock.

“Artists Respond” features work by more than 50 artists. These artworks illustrate developments across multiple media and movements, such as painting, sculpture, and graphic art; performance and body art; documentary cinema and photography; and conceptualism. Major themes reflect topics such as the impact of media in the home, opposing perspectives, sites of protest, prints for peace, and homecoming—work informed by personal experiences gained from serving in the war.

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Media Partner:



Exhibition Themes

Media in the Home

Cool vs. Hot

Shoot, Burn, Resist: The Body

Selective Service

A War of Information

Sites of Protest

Prints for Peace

Homecoming

Additional Theme:

In Context

Cover:

Kim Jones (American, 1944), *Wilshire Boulevard Walk* (detail), 1976, performance, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels & Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, Photo by Mindy Barrett

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Theme 1

‘Living Room War’: Media in the Home

The Vietnam War was the first U.S. military conflict to be televised. Never before had people living in the United States been able to watch, from the comfort of their homes, scenes of a war unfold. The war was heavily covered by photojournalists, who operated free of U.S. military censorship and circulated their work in newspapers and magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and *Time*. Media images of the war appeared repeatedly in art of the period, quoted directly or considerably altered. The mass stream of visual information from combat zones to the home front made the war vivid and real to many in the United States.

Edward Kienholz, *The Eleventh Hour Final*, 1968

The Eleventh Hour Final gives physical form to the idea of a “living room war.” This term describes the Vietnam War as the first war in U.S. history to be televised. The title combines the name for the last broadcast of the day with an ominous sense of the hour before doom. Writing about this work in 1970, Edward Kienholz pointedly asked, “What can one man’s death, so remote and far away, mean to most people in the familiar safety of their middle-class homes?” By 1967, the three major networks had increased their evening news broadcasts from 15 to 30 minutes. Reporting about the war became intimately linked with domestic scenes like this one. The war’s mass death and destruction, when reduced to the scale of the TV screen, appears to suggest the potentially numbing effect of unending media coverage.

Questions

1. As you step into this room and look around, what are some details you notice? How does the room make you feel? What about the room makes you feel this way?
2. How does the artist’s choice of medium (living room setting) impact the message? What specific details do you feel underscore the message?

Look at the shape of the TV. How would you describe it? Why do you suppose Kienholz designed the TV in the shape of a tombstone?

The TV screen shows a tally of wounded and dead from both the U.S. and Vietnamese sides; meanwhile, a wax head with staring eyes lies behind the screen. How does this relate to the mass broadcast of carnage to the U.S. public during the Vietnam War? In what ways is Kienholz’s message relevant today?

3. When asked about the work and his attention to the medium, Kienholz said: “Obviously television has a tremendous potential. But there is no communication in the world. Dead, dead, dead.” Before social media, television and newspapers were the main outlets for the public to receive news on current events. Today, news is not only accessible by a smartphone, but people can also choose their news sources or ignore news entirely.

Do you think social media has improved news and communication in the world—or weakened it? How so?



Edward Kienholz (American, 1927-1994), *The Eleventh Hour Final*, 1968, Tableau: wood paneling, concrete TV set with engraved screen and remote control, furniture, lamp, ash trays, artificial flowers, *TV Guide*, pillows, painting, wall clock, window, and curtain, Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland
© Kienholz. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

Theme 2

Cool vs. Hot

Many prominent U.S. artists avoided topical issues in their art. Some were avid protesters as private citizens, but found it impossible or undesirable to use their art as forms of protest. Some abstract artists considered their medium inadequate for addressing current events and kept it separate from political speech. However, the inescapable impact of the Vietnam War prompted meaningful exceptions.

Dan Flavin, *monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (to P. K. who reminded me about death)*, 1966

Using his signature medium of fluorescent light in *monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (to P. K. who reminded me about death)*, Dan Flavin creates an atmosphere of dread, aggression, and death. Two tubes are mounted horizontally on the wall at roughly eye level, where their ends meet in the corner. A third tube is positioned across those units to form a triangular frame, which holds the fourth tube that projects out from the corner, confronting the viewer. In his title, Flavin declares this minimalist sculpture a monument to those “killed in ambush”—a fate and combat tactic associated with the war in Vietnam. The dedication “to P. K.” alludes to Flavin’s friend, the artist Paul Katz, with whom he had discussed the human toll of war.

Questions

1. Look closely at this artwork. How does the sculpture make you feel? How would you describe the work? What characteristics, if any, do you find surprising? What effect would the sculpture have if Flavin had used blue instead of red? Or yellow?
2. For U.S. audiences in 1966, the word “ambush” would have signaled conditions U.S. soldiers faced in combat, fighting in unfamiliar landscapes by an often unseen enemy. How does Flavin interpret these deadly military tactics through the structure of *monument 4*?
3. Some Americans assumed the superior U.S. military technology would lead to a clear victory; however, North Vietnamese and insurgent fighters learned to use surprise and close range to engage U.S. troops. The sculpture alludes to guerilla combat to create a sense of foreboding.

Why might *monument 4* matter to the nation today? To veterans? To families? To you? How does this sculpture help you reflect on the perspectives of soldiers during the war and veterans today?



Dan Flavin (American, 1933–1996), *monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (to P. K. who reminded me about death)*, 1966, red fluorescent light, The Estate of Dan Flavin © 2018 Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo courtesy David Zwirner

Theme 3

Shoot, Burn, Resist: The Body

Because of the heavy presence of death and physical injury in newscasts and print publications of the time, the vulnerability of human form became a widespread motif in art. This resulted in performance art that tapped into the immediacy and power of live experience.

Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1965

In *Cut Piece*, Yoko Ono invited audience members to wield scissors to cut away pieces of her clothing. As this unfolded, spectators found themselves in an unsettling position—to stop, interfere with, or escalate the action. Although Ono is of Japanese, not Southeast Asian, descent, her racial identity informs this performance. *Cut Piece* was presented at Carnegie Hall in the weeks following the first U.S. Marines arrival in South Vietnam. It raises timely questions about how to respond to an evolving, uncertain situation that places others under pressure or distress.

Questions

1. Whom do you notice in this image of the performance? What do you think Yoko Ono might have felt as she performed? Why do you think so? How do you suppose those audience participants might have felt? As a spectator, what would you have done?
2. Given the timing, what details might make this performance effective? Do you suppose its impact might change depending upon its venue? The city? How so?
3. How does one respond to an evolving, uncertain situation that places others under pressure? Why might this matter to you?
4. How is this performance relevant to the Vietnam War? How is it relevant in today's world?



Yoko Ono (Japanese, 1933), *Cut Piece*, 1964, performed 1965, Performance, 16 mm film by Albert and David Maysles transferred to video; black and white, sound, 8:25 minutes, Courtesy of Yoko Ono Lennon © Yoko Ono 1965/2019

Theme 4

Selective Service

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. military draft targeted men aged 18 to 26. It forced younger Americans to think about potential combat service, exposing opposing perspectives that divided the country. Pointed questions of patriotism and sacrifice are embedded in the art of the period.

The Selective Service allowed deferments for college and graduate students, a privilege many came to consider unfair. The draft became an animating political issue among economically disadvantaged minority populations, still struggling for full civil rights at home even as their young men fought abroad. The Black Arts and Chicano art movements evolved at the time. The movements insisted on art's political role and emphasized cultural self-rule, which tackled themes of national identity and service.

David Hammons, *America the Beautiful*, 1968

At the time David Hammons created *America the Beautiful*, the United States was surrounded by turmoil, from race riots, the assassinations of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and urban uprisings at home, to the Tét Offensive and increasing numbers of troops abroad. Hammons credited this context to his work: "I feel that my art relates to my total environment—my being a black, political, and social human being." To create this image, one of a series of body prints, Hammons coated his face and arms with grease, pressed them against the paper, and sprinkled the imprint with pigment. A flag was already printed on the surface; his torso and head imprint are draped by the flag, which seems to be both a comfort and a weight. His face is a conjoining of two profile views, which accentuates a double consciousness—of identifying as black, American, or both.

Questions

1. How would you describe the artwork?
2. What details do you consider most important? Why?
3. Regarding *America the Beautiful*, Hammons stated that he had a "moral obligation as a black artist, to try to graphically document what I feel socially." How does this work of art embrace the complexities of his identity?
4. How is the complexity of identity relevant today in the United States? Why does it matter for us as individuals, our communities, nation, and world to try to understand different perspectives?
5. How would you represent your identity in an artwork?



David Hammons (American, born 1943), *America the Beautiful*, 1968, Lithograph and body print, Oakland Museum of California, The Oakland Museum Founders Fund © David Hammons, Photo courtesy the Oakland Museum of California

Theme 5

A War of Information

The Vietnam War coincided with the rise of conceptual art in the United States. Conceptual art* emphasizes the artistic intent in the creation of the art over the resulting object. Therefore, art practice could consist of just about anything, including the gathering and distribution of facts. This proved especially important in the context of a war driven by information and misinformation.

Hans Haacke, *News, reconstructed*, 2019

Hans Haacke was a conceptual artist who brought real-world coverage into the supposedly neutral context of a gallery with his artwork, *News*. This interjection transformed a setting traditionally used for aesthetic contemplation into an area of active questioning.

Amid the turmoil of the late 1960s, Haacke sought to break down barriers between the “real” world and art world. News services spewed reporting about not only political happenings, but also sports and entertainment. *News* displays a teletype machine churning out news of the day into the museum space and before museumgoers. It emphasizes the challenge of sifting through the mass media coverage, given the multiple and conflicting perspectives on the Vietnam War. The ongoing noise of the teletype, combined with the heaps of steadily accumulating printed paper, suggests there will be no break, ever, from news.

Questions

1. Using your senses, what do you notice and feel? In terms of conceptual art, what do you think is the importance of the idea behind *News*? What about Haacke's choice of materials and presentation makes it effective as a work of art?
2. Think about sifting through news. How does this message translate today with social media? Has it become more difficult, or easier, to sift through news today? Why?
3. If you updated this conceptual art, what would it look like today? How could the audience engage? What would your message be? Why would this be an important message for your community?

*Conceptual art is art for which the idea (the concept) behind the work is more important than the finished art object. Emerging as an art movement in the 1960s, the term usually refers to art made from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. (Definition from the Tate Modern.)



Hans Haacke (German, 1936), *News, Reconstructed 2019*, Newsfeed, printer, and paper, Installed at Paula Cooper Gallery in 2005. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase through gifts of Helen Crocker Russell, the Crocker Family, and anonymous donors, by exchange, and the Accessions Committee Fund. © Hans Haacke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Theme 6

Sites of Protest

Antiwar artists adopted a variety of techniques for public protest and direct action. These methods included arranged performances and events in strategic sites. Artists created works informed by their participation in mass demonstrations, such as marches and strikes.

Museums became for artists what the university campus was for student activists—a place to direct their protest. Works of institutional critique, such as the Guerrilla Art Action Group's *A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art*, raised questions about the very settings in which they took place, calling attention to the connections among audience, museum, and larger political and economic power structures.

Terry Fox, *Defoliation*, 1970

Terry Fox characterized his performance, *Defoliation*, as his “first political work.” “Defoliation” technically means to destroy the leaves of trees, a tactic used by U.S. forces in Vietnam to deprive Communist forces of physical cover and food crops. In his work, Fox used a flamethrower to burn a large jasmine patch in a garden bed on the campus of University of California, Berkeley—a place where wealthy patrons liked to lunch.

The choice to burn jasmine was charged because jasmine is slow to bloom. At a moment of hopeful ecological consciousness in the United States, Fox reported a somber mood among the audience as they acknowledged “what was going on—the landscape was being violated.” Days after the performance, the garden remained “a burn-out plot.” This scorched-earth artwork was a reminder for people of the massive obliteration taking place in Vietnam.

Questions

1. When looking at the photographs, what most grabs your attention? Think about if you were there; what senses would affect your experience that you cannot get from looking at a photograph? How might people have felt observing the event in person?
2. Fox's actions caused an immediate shock, but also long-term consequences. Destruction produced by defoliation efforts abroad was often conveyed through photographs—of forests destroyed, descending fogs of napalm, or blazing flamethrowers—yet the impact of those actions was hardly limited to such singular moments. As you look at the photographs of Fox's actions, do they effectively reflect the emotions you might expect, and a sense of tragedy as well? Why or why not? With that in mind, how might the individuals in the picture have reacted to the photographs of destruction abroad in Vietnam? What is lost in photographs?

Artwork not pictured in this guide. In the exhibition at Mia only.

Terry Fox (American, 1941–2008), *Defoliation*, 1970, printed 2010, Performance, photographs by Barry Klinger, six gelatin silver prints; University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Gift of Brenda Richardson, 2014.1.a-f

Theme 7

Prints for Peace

Prints have long been used for social critique and raising awareness because they are affordable to produce and easy to distribute. The abundance of graphic art during the Vietnam War ranged from protest posters with clear, strong messages to experimental works that reflected recent developments in pop art and conceptualism. Artists created limited-edition prints to raise funds for the antiwar movement; they also produced prints anonymously and in large quantities to give away at demonstrations, sell at low cost, or post in the streets.

Rupert García, *¡Fuera de Indochina!*, 1970

Rupert García joined the U.S. Air Force in 1962 and served in Thailand in 1965 and 1966. When he returned to the United States, he studied art at San Francisco State College, where he joined the antiwar, Chicano art, and Third War Solidarity movements.

The Chicano art movement represents efforts by Mexican-American artists to establish an artistic identity in the United States. In García's *¡Fuera de Indochina!*, an abstracted light brown face either cries out in pain or defiance, screaming the work's title, which translates in English as "Get out of Indochina!" This appears in yellow graffiti-style type across the lower part of the page. García created the print to raise funds for the National Chicano

Moratorium. This group framed its antiwar stance as a civil rights issue, citing statistics that Mexican Americans comprised a disproportionate number of U.S. soldiers and casualties in Vietnam.

Questions

1. How would you describe this print? What details make you say that? How does this print make you feel?
2. García based the face in his print on a poster of a Vietnamese soldier, though he left the speaker's identity open to interpretation. Why do you suppose García chose to make the figure racially ambiguous? Would you say this is an effective strategy? Why or why not?
3. This print was reproduced on the back cover of the widely distributed bilingual pamphlet *La Batalla Está Aquí* (The Battle is Here) (1972). The pamphlet's Chicana authors presented economic and statistical data to persuade young Chicanos to oppose the draft, including documentation of the "real cost" paid by the Vietnamese. In this context, how does this print illustrate concerns of Chicano identity? Do you suppose this print would be more effective with economic and statistical data of the war? Why or why not? What about the reverse: would those statistics be as meaningful without the print? Why or why not?
4. Think of physical and virtual locations, like social media, billboards, and street art, where illustrations are effective today. Think of one or two images that you feel have particular impact. What makes these effective for you?

Where would you place a print for peace? Why?

How would you design your print for peace?

What is your message and who is your target audience?



Rupert García (American, born 1941), *¡Fuera de Indochina!*, 1970, Screenprint, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Marcus. © Rupert García, Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery. Photo courtesy the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Theme 8

Homecoming

Artists who had served during the Vietnam War returned home and created work informed by their personal experiences. They expressed both pride and pain about their service in the conflict.

Kim Jones, *Mudman Structure (large)*, 1974

Kim Jones created a persona called Mudman following his service as a marine in Vietnam. Of his time he wrote, “. . . sweat like pigs work like dogs live like rats red dust covered everything.” In his performance *Wiltshire Boulevard Walk*, Jones walked 18 miles as Mudman across Los Angeles. He traveled sunrise to sunset, and then, a week later, from sunset to sunrise. He trekked with a structure of bound sticks strapped to his back and his body slathered in mud, which evoked the “red dust” of Vietnam.

Mudman Structure (large) presents the challenges of reconciling wartime and peacetime lives. The spiky “walking sculpture” was both frightening to see and a burden to wear. Nine months after the North Vietnamese victory, Jones, like many veterans, would march on as phantoms of war into their day-to-day lives.



Questions

1. Look at these images to see how Jones carried the weight of sticks on his back. Compare them with how the materials rest in the gallery. How do the materials evoke the weight of the war veterans carry with them? In what ways do the materials exhibited here memorialize the performance?
2. Think about how the sticks would feel on your back and how the mud smeared on your skin would eventually dry. What might you feel carrying a structure like this on your back in the sun and dark?
3. Jones stated about the structure, “[it] makes me larger but it also hides me . . . it makes me more powerful and it cripples me.” Keeping the size of the sticks in mind, how would you react to an individual approaching you in this attire? What specifics make you feel that way?
4. Jones recalled how strange it felt to be back in “the world” after a year serving near the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam. Mudman refers to the difficulty of reconciling wartime and peacetime lives. Why do you think the transition experienced by veterans is important for us to acknowledge? How does it affect families and communities? How do you feel about Mudman now that you have had time to think about it? Why?

Kim Jones (American, 1944),
Wiltshire Boulevard Walk, 1976,
performance, Courtesy Gladstone
Gallery, New York and Brussels &
Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp, Photo by
Mindy Barrett
©Kim Jones



Kim Jones (American, 1944), *Mudman Structure* (large), 1974, Sticks, mud, rope, foam rubber, shellac, and acrylic; shown with chair, boots, and bucket of mud, Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp © Kim Jones, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels & Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

Artists Reflect

Contemporary Artists Reflect Views on the American War

Organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, “Artists Reflect: Contemporary Views on the American War” complements the special exhibition, “Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965–1975.” This exhibition features drawings, textiles, video, photography, and installation work made by six Southeast Asian artists. The artists have been deeply engaged with the impact, meaning, and legacy of the Vietnam War—or as the Vietnamese call it, the American War.

U.S. audiences have rarely had a chance to understand the viewpoint of Laotian and Vietnamese artists on the war’s legacy. “Artists Reflect” provides a way of seeing the war—in fact, there were multiple, related wars—through the experiences of today’s Southeast Asian diaspora* community. The Twin Cities is home to a large Southeast Asian population, many of whom arrived in the wake of the war.

The featured artists are contemporary Laotian-American, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-American artists: Tiffany Chung, Pao Houa Her, An-My Lê, Dinh Q Lê, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, and Danh Vo. Using mediums such as map/tapestry, photographs, and video interviews, their artwork relates specifically to the war and its impact.

*A diaspora arises from the dispersion of a particular group of people beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

In Context

In the 1960s, Asian Americans represented less than six-tenths of one percent of the U.S. population. One study estimates only 16,000–37,000 people originating from Vietnam lived in the United States before 1975. Because of the influx of refugees from Southeast Asia following the wars, more than 1.7 million Vietnamese Americans and over a million Americans who are of Lao, Hmong, Cambodian, or Thai descent now live in the United States.

Tiffany Chung, *Reconstructing an exodus history: flight routes from camps and of ODP*, 2017

One of Vietnam's most acclaimed contemporary artists, Tiffany Chung (b. 1969, Đà Nẵng, Vietnam) explores the patterns of conflict, migration, and displacement in relation to history and cultural memory. Her multimedia work illuminates neglected accounts of the war and shows how the United States has been shaped by the history and people of Vietnam. Chung highlights the experience of refugees who were part of the large-scale immigration during the post-1975 exodus from Vietnam. These narratives are frequently absent from art of the Vietnam War era.

Reconstructing an exodus history: flight routes from camps and of ODP cases addresses the international flow of refugees. Chung's work studies the geographical shifts in countries traumatized by war, human destruction, or natural disaster. Her embroidered map of the world shows the forced migration routes of the South Vietnamese by plane from refugee camps in Asia.

As Chung said in *Smithsonian Magazine* (3/29/19): "I'm honored to have taken on this huge task of unpacking this war through the perspective and experience of the Vietnamese-Americans that I interview and learn from. It has been my undertaking to fill up the vacuum in the narratives of this war, with the Vietnamese histories and memories which are vital in comprehending the war's legacies, but are often ignored in the American narrative of it and omitted from Vietnam's official record."

Questions

1. Consider the size of the work. How does its size influence your viewing experience? Why do you think Chung chose to make this artwork so large? What can size add to an artwork and topic?
2. As you visualize the migration routes of refugees, what does it reveal about war, human destruction, and natural disasters? How do they affect us globally? In our community? In our families?
3. How does learning about and seeing the Vietnamese perspective through Chung's artwork assist in our understanding of the war on a global scale? Why does this matter? What does Chung's artwork make you wonder about?



Tiffany Chung (Vietnamese American, born 1969), *Reconstructing an exodus history: flight routes from camps and of ODP cases*, 2017, embroidery on fabric, 55 x 137 in., Minneapolis Institute of Art 2018.12

