

*Simon Leung: The Surface of the Earth*  
—Cole Akers

Throughout the 1990s, Simon Leung produced a series of works that addressed what he calls “the residual space of the Vietnam/American War.” The term “residual space”, in Leung’s words, “evokes a sense of a remainder—the physically repressed that is bound to return.”<sup>1</sup> In each of these projects—comprising video, performance, and a variety of other media—the artist explores the legacy of violence and displacement generated by the Vietnam War, as well as the disparate identities forged by war. Leung’s single-channel video *War After War* (2011), on view at CUE Art Foundation, is an elaboration of these projects.

Leung made the first of these projects, *Warren Piece (in the '70s)*, while he was an artist-in-residence at PS1 in 1992-93. Informed by contemporaneous discourse that sought to rethink site-specificity, *Warren Piece* was simultaneously a rumination on the institutional history of PS1 and its inaugural 1976 exhibition *Rooms*, and a portrait of Warren Niesluchowski, an assistant to PS1 director Alanna Heiss and a U.S. army deserter who fled to Paris during the Vietnam War. Exhibited as an installation at PS1 in 1993, *Warren Piece* consisted of various documents that referenced the museum and Niesluchowski—such as correspondence between the artist and his subject, institutional marketing ephemera, newspaper clippings, and photographs from Niesluchowski past—as well as three looped videos shown on pedestal-based monitors. The videos included *Under History Lessons 1993*, in which Leung interviews Vito Acconci, who participated in *Rooms* and shares some similarities with Niesluchowski; *Songs 1968-1975*, footage of Niesluchowski working in his PS1 office with a sound track of him speaking about his time in exile and singing popular Leftist songs from the late 1960s; and *How Far is Far From Vietnam?*, in which Niesluchowski and Leung perform physical exercises for actors that were developed by experimental Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, overlaid with an audio track in which Leung repeatedly asks the question, “How far is far from Vietnam?” As a whole, *Warren Piece* draws parallels between Warren’s life in exile and the “dematerializing” artistic practices of the late 1960s/early 1970s that, although often nonrepresentational, were conceptually identified with the antiwar movement.

*Squatting Project/Berlin* (1994), the second project in Leung’s series, was commissioned by the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst in Berlin for an exhibition on the “the business of violence.” Responding to the political effects of German reunification, Leung wheat-pasted one thousand posters throughout the city of Berlin that depicted a nearly life-size image of an Asian man squatting with his back to the viewer and his head slightly turned. The following text appeared in German next to the squatter on only five hundred of these posters:

Proposal

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Marita Sturkin, “Displaced Bodies in Residual Spaces.” *Public Culture* 17(1), pp. 129-152.

1. Imagine a city of squatters, an entire city in which everyone created their own chairs with their own bodies.
2. When you are tired, or when you need to wait, participate in this position.
3. Observe the city again from this squatting position.

After the reunification of Germany in the early 1990s, fifty thousand of the sixty thousand Vietnamese “guest workers” who had come to East Germany in the 1980s as a result of the U.S.-led economic embargo were forcibly repatriated back to Vietnam. In 1993, the German Parliament barred the entry of many would-be immigrants and refugees by revising the country’s asylum laws. In light of these events, Leung’s project attempts to reinsert the presence of expelled Asian bodies back into the urban fabric of Berlin. In an essay documenting this project, Leung describes squatting as a metaphor for the “historical grounding of the recurrent residual trauma of the Vietnam War” and “a counter-technology of resistance...to the technology of wars declared in the name of sovereignty...[as well as] the very terms of sovereignty imposed onto the abjected squatter.”<sup>2</sup>

For a seven-week exhibition in 1998 at the Huntington Beach Art Center in Orange County, California, Leung collaborated with three local communities—Vietnam War veterans, Vietnamese immigrants, and surfers—to produce *Surf Vietnam*, the third project in his series. *Surf Vietnam* took as its premise “Surf’s Up At China Beach,” a *New York Times* article that described an Orange County high school surfing team’s participation in a competition at Vietnam’s China Beach, a site popularized by an American television show of the same name and the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. The exhibition comprised nineteen identical surfboards on top of which were printed an enlarged reproduction of the *Times*’ China Beach article.

Over the course of the exhibition, Leung arranged the surfboards into six different configurations: three of these were based on phrases that appeared in the *Times* article (“Apocalypse Now,” “The Vietnamese are waiting for us to come,” and “The kids really enjoyed getting up on the board”) while the remaining three were arranged in collaboration with the three community groups mentioned above. The specificity of the exhibition’s location also informs a reading of the work: Huntington Beach, a major destination for surfing in Southern California, is directly west of Little Saigon, a neighborhood in the city of Westminster that is home to the largest concentration of ethnic Vietnamese outside of Vietnam. According to art historian David Joselit, Leung’s recontextualization of the China Beach article in Orange County “elaborates the ‘residual space’ of the Vietnam War [and] charts a complex territory of meaning which exists between words, objects, and communities.”<sup>3</sup>

*War After War* (2011) marks a return to the artist’s initial collaboration with Warren Niesluchowski and his mediation on the nature of war. For the last decade,

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Leung, “Squatting Through Violence,” *Documents* #6 (Spring/Summer 1995), pp. 92-101

<sup>3</sup> David Joselit, “Of War and Remembrance,” *Art in America* (May 1999), pp. 142-145.

Niesluchowski has been without a permanent home and, according to Leung, lives as a “cosmopolitan nomad” who stays with friends across Europe and America. The video begins with Niesluchowski’s visit to the library and guesthouse of Yves-Alain Bois, where he alternately reads books, reprises the Leftist songs in *Warren Piece*, and speaks with Leung about their ongoing collaboration.

Interwoven through the video is a voiceover of Leung reading passages from Immanuel Kant’s 1795 essay “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch.” An exploration of the possibility of permanent world peace, Kant’s essay characterizes peace as an inherently unnatural order that relies upon conditional and legal agreements between governments. Leung excerpts the following passage of the essay:

Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another. One may refuse to receive him when this can be done without causing his destruction; but, so long as he peacefully occupies his place, one may not treat him with hostility. It is not the right to be a permanent visitor that one may demand. A special beneficent agreement would be needed in order to give an outsider a right to become a fellow inhabitant for a certain length of time. It is only a right of temporary sojourn, a right to associate, which all men have. They have it by virtue of their common possession of the surface of the earth, where, as a globe, they cannot infinitely disperse and hence must finally tolerate the presence of each other. Originally, no one had more right than another to a particular part of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

In Kant’s vision for peace, the sojourner—a visitor, a “cosmopolitan nomad”—has the right to be welcomed by any nation by virtue of every person’s common ownership of “the surface of the earth.” Like a refugee, Niesluchowski is constantly in need of being welcomed; given his former status as a deserter living in exile, he continues to live in the residual spaces of war.

In a recent issue of *October* on artistic practice and the antiwar movement, Leung suggests that “the radical political subject is also always an ethical subject who must open him/herself to otherness.”<sup>5</sup> Like Kant’s prescription to welcome strangers, Leung’s body of work poetically contemplates the possibility of ethically encountering and identifying with others in the face of war’s remains.

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<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*. New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Leung, “Questionnaire Response.” *October 123* (Winter 2008), pp.102-104.

Cole Akers (writer)  
Biography

Cole Akers is a writer and arts organizer interested in urban history and contemporary art. He was formerly Programs Assistant for Artist Residencies and Academic Programs at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and has organized numerous programs and film screenings around Southern California, including a screening of the films of David Wojnarowicz at Workspace and a symposium on *Learning From Las Vegas* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. He received his B.A. in Literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and his M.A. in Visual Studies from the University of California, Irvine.

Stephanie Cash (mentor)  
Biography

Stephanie Cash has been an editor at *Art in America* since 1993. She edits and writes features, reviews and news stories. Since 2008, she has served as News Editor, which has involved reconceptualizing the news sections in print as “hard” news transitioned to the Web. Recent print articles have included an “In the Studio” visit with Sanford Biggers (March 2011); “Terrible Beauty,” a feature on Wangechi Mutu (May 2010); and “Funding the Arts: Pay to Play,” a story looking at the future of artist grants through private initiatives and DIY online fundraising (February 2011). Cash has a B.A. in Art History from the University of Texas, Austin, and did her graduate work in Art History and Criticism at the State University of New York, Stony Brook.