A divisive and controversial conflict, the Vietnam War had a profound impact on American politics and society. It also radically affected the art of its time. As the 1960s began, the most influential U.S. art movements, like color field painting, minimalism, and pop, were abstract or coolly detached from topical issues. But as media coverage of the war intensified and the horrific human toll continued to mount, many artists in the United States felt like the painter Philip Guston, who asked, “What kind of man am I, sitting at home reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?” The moral urgency of the Vietnam War compelled a shift from ideals of aesthetic purity toward those of shared conscience and civic action. Artists of all kinds chose to engage—with their present moment, with politics, and with the public sphere.

Focusing on the height of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, this exhibition emphasizes a “real time” experience of the war period as seen through the eyes of American artists. Some sought to raise political consciousness about the war and, they hoped, to help end it. Others produced art that was not explicitly activist yet was steeped in the imagery and emotions of the conflict. New artistic forms emphasizing the intersection of art and lived experience, such as body art and institutional critique, emerged during this period. So, too, did a greater diversity of voices, as artists of color and women demanded to be heard. The works assembled here make vivid an era in which artists struggled to address the turbulent times and openly questioned issues central to American civic life.

This exhibition is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with generous support from:

Anonymous
Diane and Norman Bernstein Foundation
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Selected Programs
Film: The Anderson Platoon (dir. Pierre Schoendoerffer)
April 17, discussion with Joseph Anderson
Artist Talk: James F. Dicke Contemporary Artist Lecture
May 2, Tiffany Chung
Film: In the Year of the Pig (dir. Emile de Antonio)
May 10, introduced by art historian Erica Levin
July 27, last-chance screening
Lecture: Returns, Refugees, and Refusal: Art, War Memory, and the Politics of Representation
May 23, artist and scholar Viêt Lê
Film: North Star: Mark di Suvero (dir. Francois de Menil and Barbara Rose)
July 13
For details on all programs related to Artists Respond and Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past Is Prologue, see the following websites:

s.si.edu/vietnam
s.si.edu/chung

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In her expressionistic War series, Spero employs the atomic bomb as a symbol of overwhelming state power and indiscriminate annihilation. She also depicts weaponry associated with the U.S. air war in Vietnam. Trying to imagine how Vietnamese civilians saw “these technological monsters wreaking destruction on them,” she portrays helicopters and bombers as terrifying and sometimes animalistic machines. Here Spero abandons oil paint on canvas and embraces antiwar subject matter, purposefully rebelling against the preferences of mainstream collectors and gallerists.

**Nancy Spero**

*Female Bomb*

1966
gouache and ink on paper

The New School Art Collection, New York, NY

**Nancy Spero**

*Gunship*

1966
gouache on paper

Collection of Stephen Simoni and John Sacchi

**Nancy Spero**

*Victims on Helicopter Blades*

1968
gouache and ink on paper

Collection of Terri Weissman

**Nancy Spero**

*The Bug, Helicopter, Victim*

1966
gouache and ink on paper

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, John S. Phillips Fund Art

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**CRITICAL PICTURES**

By the late 1960s, Americans were deeply divided about the legitimacy and purpose of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Amid the climate of passionate public debate, some artists embraced figuration and narrative, modes of expression considered out of fashion among American modern painters since the 1930s. At a time when cool abstraction dominated, these artists ran hot. They created bluntly provocative and dissenting pictures, often drawing on sources such as comic books, bathroom graffiti, and caricature in their effort to make painting equal to the emotional exigencies of the time.

Women, people of color, and artists living far from the art capital of New York City were often the most outspoken and transgressive in their antiwar art, operating as they already did beyond the attention of the critical establishment. Most of the works seen nearby—notably those by Judith Bernstein, Faith Ringgold, and Nancy Spero—appeared only in a few protest exhibitions during the period and were rarely discussed for many years after.
Faith Ringgold
born New York City 1930
*Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger*, from the series *Black Light*
1969
oil on canvas
Glenstone Museum, Potomac, MD
Ringgold, an advocate for racial justice and women’s rights, created *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* in the year of the first moon landing. In it, she addresses U.S. government hypocrisy—massively investing in space exploration and war while ignoring its most vulnerable citizens. Ringgold’s blunt title, camouflaged in the flag design, questions the sacrifices African American soldiers were making in Vietnam on behalf of a country still rife with racism. She included this painting in *The People’s Flag Show* in 1970, a group exhibition protesting censorship that resulted in her arrest, as one of its organizers, for flag desecration.

Peter Saul
born San Francisco, CA 1934
*Saigon*
1967
acrylic, oil, enamel, and fiber-tipped pen on canvas
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art, 69.103
Saul created his *Vietnam* paintings to deliver, as he put it, a “cold shower” of “bad conscience” to the viewer. Here all players in the war are grotesquely dehumanized. The ferocious, Day-Glo scene shows distorted U.S. soldiers torturing and raping cartoonish Vietnamese. In skewering what he saw as a racist war, Saul puts on display American stereotypes of Asians. Intense and startling, these images are designed above all to confront and engage the viewer. Though motivated by current events, the kinetic and densely packed tableau came entirely from the artist’s imagination.

Judith Bernstein
born Newark, NJ 1942
*A Soldier’s Christmas*
1967
oil, fabric, steel wool, electric lights, and mixed media on canvas
Collection of Paul and Karen McCarthy
While studying painting at the Yale School of Art, Bernstein became fascinated by the graffiti she found in men’s bathrooms. With draft calls then increasing, young men often expressed fear and anger about the war in Vietnam. She channeled their darkly mocking tone and taboo sexual imagery in her art. The scrawled message in *A Soldier’s Christmas* captions an image of a woman’s spread legs adorned with an American flag and Christmas lights. (The lights blink when illuminated but are too fragile to be left on today.) Bernstein’s profane imagery and language convey the force of her opposition: “I wanted to make the ugliest paintings I could. I wanted them to be as ugly and horrifying as the war was.”
Judith Bernstein  
born Newark, NJ 1942  
*Fucked by Number*  
1966  
charcoal and mixed media on paper  
Collection of Danniel Rangel

*Fucked by Number* highlights the approximate number of American soldiers killed in Vietnam at the time that Bernstein made this drawing. The phallic, draw-by-number imagery suggests that the public “connect the dots” between the escalation of the war and American leaders’ apparent need to project toughness and masculinity. In *Vietnam Garden*, Bernstein again presents the conflation of masculine and national power as dangerous, even fatal—depicting flag- adorned, erect phallics as military tombstones.

**COOL vs. HOT**
While the Vietnam War stimulated a revival of openly political and emotional painting in some quarters, many of the country’s most prominent artists avoided addressing topical issues in their work. Some vigorously protested the war as private citizens but found it impossible or undesirable to do so in their art. Abstract artists, especially, considered their work ill-suited for tackling current events and valued keeping it separate from political speech.

Yet the pervasive impact of the Vietnam War prompted meaningful exceptions. Seen here alongside the hot rhetoric of figurative imagists like Peter Saul, Jim Nutt, and Paul Thek are more formally restrained or even abstract works that reference the war by leading New York figures such as Barnett Newman and Donald Judd, who normally avoided topical subject matter. In some instances, invitations to participate in protest exhibitions provided a pretext for these artists to merge their art with activism.

Mark di Suvero  
born Shanghai, China 1933  
*For Peace*  
1971–72  
ink, watercolor, and collage on paper  
Private Collection

Sculptor Mark di Suvero made this drawing in Europe, during his self-imposed exile protesting the U.S. war in Vietnam. *For Peace* revisits the last major work di Suvero completed before departing the United States: a forty- one-foot high, bright red structure once titled *For Peace* (now known as *Mother Peace*, 1969–70). The sculpture is a rare work in which di Suvero made explicit reference to peace, both in its title and the symbol cut into one of its beams. The peace symbol is prominent in the drawing as well, appearing twice in elements collaged to its surface.
Claes Oldenburg
born Stockholm, Sweden 1929
*Fireplug Souvenir — “Chicago August 1968”*
1968
plaster and acrylic paint
Collection of Claes Oldenburg & Coosje van Bruggen, courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
“In Chicago, I, like so many others, ran head-on into the model American police state,” wrote Claes Oldenburg of his experience at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, an event marked by police violence against antiwar protesters. “I was tossed to the ground by six swearing troopers who kicked me and choked me and called me a communist.” Oldenburg went on to cancel an exhibition slated for a Chicago gallery, stating, “[A] gentle one-man show about pleasure seems a bit obscene in the present context.” The gallery instead mounted a group exhibition voicing opposition to Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley, who had authorized the police’s conduct. Oldenburg contributed fifty small sculptures modeled after the city’s style of fireplug, suggesting that one be thrown through the gallery window “to launch the protest exhibition.”

Barnett Newman
born New York City 1905–died New York City 1970
*Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley*
1968
Cor-ten steel, galvanized barbed wire, and enamel paint
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Annalee Newman, 1989.433
A menacing perversion of the modernist grid, *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley* boldly departs from Newman’s monumental color field paintings. He produced the sculpture for a protest exhibition organized after the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, when Mayor Richard J. Daley had authorized the police to use extraordinary force against antiwar protesters. The sculpture’s barbed wire form echoes that of barriers that were attached to army jeeps in Chicago for crowd control. Although Newman, then in his sixties, rarely made artworks referencing current events, this one openly aligns with his self-description as an “artist-citizen.”

Paul Thek
born New York City 1933–died New York City 1988
*Warrior’s Leg, from the series Technological Reliquaries*
1966–67
plexiglass, wax, leather, metal, and paint
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 1990 In *Warrior’s Leg*, Thek presents an amputated limb, clad in archaic armor and held in a sleek plexiglass box. Combining associations of religious votives with that of high-end retail display, the work suggests violence and sacrifice lurking beneath the appealing facade of American commercial culture. Created as U.S. troop numbers in Vietnam were increasing, *Warrior’s Leg* reveals the artist’s interest in Catholicism and sacred traditions while alluding to war themes: the rise and fall of empire and the cycle of death and martial sacrifice.
Jim Nutt
born Pittsfield, MA 1938
Summer Salt
1970
crystal on vinyl and enamel on wood
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Gift of Dennis Adrian in honor of Claire B. Zeisler, 1980.30.1
Summer Salt depicts a mutilated and bound figure, possibly a scene of torture. The word play in its title—which sounds like “some assault!”—as well as its transgressive depiction of the body were typical of the Hairy Who, a group of six Chicago artists that counted Nutt a member. Nutt’s violent takes on the human form—most extreme from 1968 to 1970—coincided with increasing draft calls, civil unrest, and media images of the war’s human cost. Nutt was reluctant to assign meaning to his works, but events seem to have influenced him. Whether referencing the suffering of POWs and civilians in Vietnam or assassinations on the home front, Nutt’s painting registers the period’s unease and trauma with an eerie precision.

Carl Andre
born Quincy, MA 1935
"It was no big deal, sir."
1971
collage and ink on paper
International Center of Photography, Gift of the Artists’ Poster Committee with funds provided by the ICP
Acquisitions Committee, 2002
At the center of this work is a page from a World War II-era medical manual showing a soldier with a traumatic facial injury. The caption—"It was no big deal, sir."—is a chilling quotation from Lt. William Calley Jr., the only U.S. soldier convicted for his role in the atrocities at Sơn Mỹ (known as the My Lai Massacre). Calley’s comment about his crimes was widely reported during his trial, when Andre created this work. A minimalist sculptor, Andre made this unusually explicit piece of protest art for Collage of Indignation II, an exhibition of peace poster design.

Donald Judd
born Excelsior Springs, MO 1928–died New York City 1994
Untitled
1971
electro-photographic print on yellow paper
International Center of Photography, Gift of the Artists’ Poster Committee with funds provided by the ICP
Acquisitions Committee, 2002
While Judd opposed the Vietnam War, his minimal sculpture, made of industrial materials in repeating geometric forms, conveyed no trace of his antirwar views. He did, however, create this untitled poster for the 1971 Westbeth Peace Festival. Here Judd combines thirty-two historical and contemporary texts addressing pacifism, activism, governmental overreach, and war itself. The artist’s oft-cited approach to composition—placing “one thing after another”—informs the poster’s construction, with the accumulation of texts conveying the persistent rhetoric of war making.

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Robert Smithson
born Passaic, NJ 1938–died Amarillo, TX 1973

*Partially Buried Woodshed, Kent State*

1970
gelatin silver print
International Center of Photography, Gift of the Artists’ Poster Committee with funds provided by the ICP
Acquisitions Committee, 2002

Smithson completed his earthwork *Partially Buried Woodshed* at Kent State University some four months before that campus saw National Guardsmen open fire on student protesters, killing four. Smithson had created *Partially Buried Woodshed* by piling dirt on a shed until its central beam cracked. The gesture later seemed emblematic of a political breaking point reached nationwide. For many, the shootings at Kent State rendered the place synonymous with broad public distrust of the government. Smithson embraced this retrospective reading of his work, submitting this photograph to an exhibition of peace poster designs in 1971.

**LIVING ROOM WAR**
The Vietnam War was the first U.S. military conflict to be televised. Never before had Americans been able to watch, from the comfort of their homes, scenes of a faraway war unfold in moving pictures. The war was also heavily covered by photojournalists, who operated free of U.S. military censorship and circulated their work in newspapers and widely read magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and *Time*. Media images of the war appear again and again in the art of the period, sometimes quoted directly, sometimes considerably transformed.

The flow of visual information from combat zones to the home front made the war newly vivid and real to many Americans. Martha Rosler’s photomontages combine documentary and advertising images cut from popular magazines, collapsing the distance between “here” and “there,” essentially “bringing the war home,” as she subtitled the series. Edward Kienholz’s living room tableau also transports a distant war into a familiar domestic setting. Perhaps alluding to the potentially numbing effect of steady media coverage, it shows mass death and destruction contained to the scale of a television screen—in the background and easily ignored.

Edward Kienholz
born Fairfield, WA 1927–died Sandpoint, ID 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, MD

Writing about this work in 1970, 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?” *The Eleventh Hour Final* gives physical form to the idea of the “living room war,” a term describing the fact that the Vietnam War was the first in U.S. history to be televised. By 1967, the three major networks had increased their evening news broadcasts from fifteen minutes to thirty, and reporting about the war became intimately entwined with domestic scenes like this one. The title conflates the name for the last broadcast of the day with an ominous sense of the hour before doom.
In her series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, Rosler addresses both gender and militarism, juxtaposing the feminine realm of domestic life with the manly business of waging war. Here she combined documentary and advertising images cut from popular magazines like *Life* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. The composite scenes often show figures from the warfront, like soldiers or refugees, unexpectedly moving through affluent American homes. The images reveal social and economic connections often overlooked. As Rosler put it, “We are not ‘here’ and ‘there’—we are all one, and that is crucial.”

Martha Rosler  
born New York City 1943

three photomontages from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*  
ca. 1967–72  
Unless otherwise noted, all are from The Art Institute of Chicago, through prior gift of Adeline Yates; exhibition copies provided by Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Martha Rosler  
born New York City 1943

four photomontages from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*  
ca. 1967–72  
The Art Institute of Chicago, through prior gift of Adeline Yates; exhibition copies provided by Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York
Martha Rosler
born New York City 1943
*Tron (Amputee)*, from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, in *Goodbye to All That*, Issue 3, October 13, 1970
1970
Newspaper
Courtesy of the artist
During the Vietnam War, Rosler did not exhibit her *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* collages in art galleries but instead produced black-and-white photocopies of them, which she handed out as flyers at antiwar demonstrations. Some were also circulated in the underground press, such as the San Diego-based feminist newspaper *Goodbye to All That!* Today, Rosler exhibits the images as color photographs.

May Stevens
born Boston, MA 1924
*Big Daddy Paper Doll*
1970
acrylic on canvas
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. S. Zachary Swidler, 75.73
In paintings from 1967 to 1976, Stevens created a character she called Big Daddy based on a photograph of her father. Big Daddy came to represent patriarchal authority, white supremacy, and unquestioning patriotism rolled into one. Her series depicts him as a self-satisfied, late-middle-aged man with a pasty white complexion and bald, phallic head. In *Big Daddy Paper Doll*, he sits at center, flanked by outfits representing an executioner, a soldier, a police officer, and a butcher. Arms smugly crossed and a bulldog perched in his lap, Big Daddy embodies the threat of state surveillance and violence, both at home and abroad.

On Kawara
born Kariya, Japan 1932–died New York City 2014
*Title*
1965
acrylic and collage on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons’ Permanent Fund, 2006.40.1.1
The year 1965 marked a turning point in the war in Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson set a new course of open war, sending ground troops to South Vietnam and beginning a bombing campaign against the North. Kawara’s *Title* alludes to this escalation in three succinct phrases. Its central canvas records the date of its creation, while the words “ONE THING” predict the overwhelming presence the Vietnam War would soon have in the public consciousness. Kawara’s restrained reference to a time and place beset with conflict lend the work its unusual emotive power.
Dan Flavin
born New York City 1933–died Riverhead, NY 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
Using his signature medium of fluorescent light, Flavin conjures an atmosphere of dread, aggression, and death. One fixture juts menacingly out from the corner, confronting the viewer like the muzzle of a gun. 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 the war.

SHOOT, BURN, RESIST: THE BODY
With news about death and physical injury a heavy presence in the media during the Vietnam War, the vulnerability of the human form became a widespread preoccupation in art. This was most strikingly addressed in the field of performance art, which tapped into the immediacy and visceral power of live experience.

Body-based work by Chris Burden and Yoko Ono focused attention on the psychological and ethical dynamics of aggression and spectatorship. Performance photographs by Judy Chicago and Dennis Oppenheim reference imagery of burnt flesh associated with the self-immolation of protesters and the use of napalm in Vietnam. Yvonne Rainer mobilized the body in her choreography as a potential instrument of either warfare or dissent. In insisting on the continuity between life and art, and foregrounding the body as both subject matter and political means, performance is deeply characteristic of art formed in the crucible of the Vietnam War years.

Yoko Ono
born Tokyo, Japan 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
In Ono’s Cut Piece, audience members were invited to approach the artist and, one by one, cut away pieces of her clothing. The drama that unfolded placed spectators in a disconcerting position; each had to consider whether to stop, interfere with, or escalate the action. Although Ono is of Japanese, not Southeast Asian, descent, her racial identity informs this performance of Cut Piece. Presented at Carnegie Hall in the weeks after the first U.S. Marines arrived in South Vietnam, it raised timely questions about how to respond to an evolving, uncertain situation, particularly one that places others under duress.
Chris Burden
born Boston, MA 1946–died Topanga, CA 2015
Shoot
1971
performance, photographs by Alfred Lutjeans and Barbara T. Smith
Courtesy of the Chris Burden Estate
In Burden’s landmark performance Shoot, a small group watched a marksman shoot the artist through the arm with a rifle. Exploring physical risk and spectatorship, the piece challenges viewers to consider their roles as potential perpetrators or witnesses of violence. When he conceived Shoot, Burden recalled, “you saw a lot of people being shot on TV every night, in Vietnam, guys my age.” Enacting literal bloodshed and assembling a willing audience around it, the work uncomfortably encapsulates the experience of the bulk of the American people as onlookers to the Vietnam War.

Dennis Oppenheim
born Electric City, WA 1938–died New York City 2011
Reading Position for Second Degree Burn
1970
color photograph
Collection of Linn Meyers
Conceiving of his body as an art medium, Oppenheim lay on the beach for five hours with a volume of military field tactics on his bare chest. Two photographs documenting the beginning and end of his performance show the artist sunburned, except for the area covered by the book. In his mild physical self-harm, Oppenheim registered a sense of what many human bodies in 1970 had to endure. His weaponizing of the sun, in particular, conjured media reports of American soldiers baking in the Vietnamese heat and Vietnamese citizens being burned, far more gruesomely, by napalm weapons.

Judy Chicago
born Chicago, IL 1939
Immolation, from the portfolio On Fire
1972, printed 2013
inkjet print
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2018.11.6
The title Immolation and the cross-legged pose of the nude figure bring to mind a famous photograph of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức, who self-immolated to protest the South Vietnamese government in 1963. Other monks and American peace activists later repeated his radical act. The colorful smoke in Immolation might also evoke the war’s “rainbow herbicides”—most notoriously, Agent Orange—used by U.S. forces to defoliate combat zones. Chicago created Immolation when she led the country’s first feminist art programs, initially at Fresno State College and then at CalArts.
Peter Moore
born London, UK 1932–died New York City 1993
Photographs of Yvonne Rainer’s WAR at the Loeb Student Center, New York University
1970, printed 2008
three gelatin silver prints

Contact sheet of photographs of Yvonne Rainer’s WAR
1970, printed 2018
digital exhibition print
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
A leading figure of avant-garde dance, Rainer departed from the virtuosity of traditional theatrical dance to instead employ ordinary movements and task-like actions in her choreography. In preparing WAR, Rainer made a list of verbs she found in newspaper accounts of the Vietnam War as well as from texts about other military conflicts. She then used those verbs—mobilize, occupy, resist—to create the work’s vocabulary. Split into two teams, her performers executed actions in an indeterminate order while a narrator read excerpts from Rainer’s source material. The participants’ freedom to improvise during the piece raises questions about the agency that people on the front lines do or should possess.

Yvonne Rainer
born San Francisco, CA 1934
Trio A with Flags
1970
performance film transferred to video; black and white, sound, 5:20 minute excerpt from 18:45 minute original
Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2006.M.24
Presented on November 9, 1970, as part of The People’s Flag Show—a group exhibition protesting flag desecration laws—Trio A with Flags was adapted from Rainer’s Trio A, first danced in 1966. In Trio A with Flags, the six participants first tied flags around their necks and stripped out of their street clothes before performing the work twice. The group danced in silence, a quiet that encouraged meditation on the relationship between the flag and the body; between the state—and, for many in the audience, its warmongering—and the vulnerability of bared flesh.

SELECTIVE SERVICE
During the Vietnam War, the military draft—which affected men aged 18 to 26—forced younger Americans to think about potential combat service. Thorny questions of patriotism and sacrifice are embedded in the art of the period, often revealing opposing perspectives that divided the country.

For much of the war, the Selective Service allowed deferments for college and graduate students, a system that was later deemed unfair. Conscripts were more likely to see combat and bore a disproportionate share of the casualties. The draft thus became a galvanizing political issue among economically disadvantaged minorities, who were struggling for full civil rights at home even as their young men fought for the country abroad. The Black Arts and Chicano art movements, ascendant at the time, insisted on art’s political role and emphasized cultural self-determination, providing a context in which artists of color such as David Hammons and Mel Casas tackled themes of national identity and service.
Edward Kienholz  
born Fairfield, WA 1927–died Sandpoint, ID 1994  
*The Non-War Memorial*  
1970/1972  
military uniforms, sand, book, acrylic vitrine, plaque, and printed statement  
Troubled by his country's wartime sacrifice of its young, Kienholz proposed creating a landscape of vast waste and destruction. In *The Non-War Memorial*, he imagined thousands of army uniforms—the same number as American soldiers killed in the war—filled with clay and placed in a chemically destroyed meadow in northern Idaho. Given that mechanical and chemical deforestation were deliberate U.S. military strategies in Vietnam, Kienholz's unrealized plan to plow under and poison a pristine field sought to bring a bit of the war home to the American West.

Seymour Rosen  
born Chicago, IL 1935–died Los Angeles, CA 2006  
Photographs of Asco's *Stations of the Cross*  
1971, printed 2019  
three gelatin silver prints  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Frank K. Ribelin Endowment  
*Stations of the Cross* was a walking “ritual of resistance” against what the performance group Asco considered the “useless deaths” taking place in Vietnam. The male members of the group (which originally comprised Harry Gamboa Jr., Gronk, Willie Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez) paraded down Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles, with Herrón as a Christ/death figure bearing a large cardboard cross. The quasi-Passion Play ended with the trio blocking a U.S. Marines recruiting office with the cross, symbolically halting military recruitment from their Mexican American neighborhood. One year earlier, Whittier Boulevard had been the site of the National Chicano Moratorium March—the largest war protest organized by a minority group, and one that called out the disproportionate burden borne by Americans of color on the front lines.

David Hammons  
born Springfield, IL 1943  
*America the Beautiful*  
1968  
lithograph and body print  
Oakland Museum of California, The Oakland Museum Founders Fund  
When Hammons made *America the Beautiful*, the United States was beset by turmoil, from assassinations and urban uprisings at home to the Têt Offensive and increasing troops abroad. The artist admitted that such conditions mattered to his work: “I feel that my art relates to my total environment—my being a black, political, and social human being.” Hammons created this image by coating his face and arms with grease, pressing them against the paper, and sprinkling the imprint with pigment. Here, his torso and head are draped beneath the flag, which seems both a comfort and a weight. His face, like two profile views conjoined, underscores a double consciousness, suggesting the complexities of identifying as black, as American, or both.
Timothy Washington  
born Los Angeles, CA 1946  
1A  
1972  
etched aluminum, leather, metal studs, nail, and draft card  
Private Collection, Courtesy of Tilton Gallery, NY  
“1A” was the Selective Service designation for someone available for active military service during the Vietnam War. Washington’s title testifies to the personal impact of the draft, especially in African American communities, which were disproportionately affected by it for much of the conflict. Etched in aluminum is a self-portrait of Washington and, behind him, his older brother. Washington stretches his arms toward a tombstone-like piece of leather in which he has embedded his defaced draft card; his name is replaced with “John Doe,” his 1A status marked “forever.” His brother reaches forward, perhaps to prevent the younger man’s defiant hand gesture, possibly to pull him back from a premature grave.

Benny Andrews  
born Madison, GA 1930–died New York City 2006  
American Gothic  
1971  
oil, cut and pasted burlap, canvas, and fabric on canvas  
Andrews cofounded the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, which sought racial equality in the art world. He was also a military veteran, having served in the Air Force in the 1950s. American Gothic was part of a group of paintings he created to register “his feelings and impressions of this place—America,” touching on themes of sexism, justice, and war. Appalled by news accounts of citizens who vocally supported the war despite the immense loss of life and evidence of the government’s deceit, the artist created American Gothic, portraying “the military being used by misguided citizenry.” A soldier on hands and knees strains under the body of a woman holding a tiny American flag, her eyes staring blankly ahead.

Mel (Melesio) Casas  
born El Paso, TX 1929–died San Antonio, TX 2014  
Humanscape 43  
1968  
acrylic on canvas  
Mel Casas Family Trust  
A leading figure in Con Safo, one of the earliest Chicano art groups, Casas had been drafted, served in, and injured during the Korean War. The experience informed his opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In the artist’s words, “the skills of war are killing”—a statement projected here. “$KILL$” also stresses what Casas considered the financial motivations driving war; as Casas put it, “dollars kill.” The figures in front could be a soldier moving from induction, to being equipped, to preparing to fire. Alternatively, 1968 being a presidential election year, the figure at left might be a commander-in-chief being sworn in, his upright arm echoed by the weapons wielded on his orders.

Smithsonian American Art Museum  
4/3/19/td
Rosemarie Castoro  
born New York City 1939–died New York City 2015  
*A Day in the Life of a Conscientious Objector*  
1969  
digital projection  
The Estate of Rosemarie Castoro, Courtesy of Hal Bromm Gallery  
On twenty-four different days in February and March 1969, Castoro spent one hour composing a poem that she hand-printed on graph paper. The resulting twenty-four-part work of visual poetry—which the artist photographed and presented as a slide show, among other formats—channels and contrasts the imagined perspectives of a draft evader, a soldier at war, and a political revolutionary. Alternating between these discordant views, Castoro acknowledged the ongoing debate about democratic rights and responsibilities and the tension between the values of dissent and service.

Philip Guston  
born Montreal, Quebec, Canada 1913–died Woodstock, NY 1980  
*San Clemente*  
1975  
oil on canvas  
Glenstone Museum, Potomac, MD  
*San Clemente* depicts the recently resigned U.S. president, Richard Nixon, with a grotesquely swollen leg, its deformities manifesting what Guston saw as the immorality of Nixon’s tenure. A renowned abstract expressionist painter, Guston was moved by the upheavals of the late 1960s to develop a style of cartoony figuration. He described his disillusionment with abstract painting this way: “I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening to America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?”

Bruce Nauman  
born Fort Wayne, IN 1941  
*Raw War*  
1970  
neon, glass tubing, wire, transformer, and sequencer  
The Baltimore Museum of Art, Gift of Leo Castelli, New York, BMA 1982.148  
Like its counterparts in bar and shop windows, Nauman’s neon sign begs attention, aiming to engage a public beyond the solitary viewer. Rather than peddling war to the masses, however, it seems to broadcast a state of emergency. The neon’s toggling between the words “raw” and “war” mimics the call and response of protest, the work adopting the cadence of civil disobedience.

Wall text labels – *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975*  
Smithsonian American Art Museum  
4/3/19
Leon Golub  
born Chicago, IL 1922–died New York City 2004  
*Vietnam II*  
1973  
acrylic on canvas  
Tate: Presented by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery, Courtesy of Ulrich and Harriet Meyer (Building the Tate Collection), 2012

Golub was a vocal activist against the Vietnam War long before depicting the conflict directly in his painting. For years he addressed the theme of human violence in more generalized ways, as in his *Gigantomachies*, epic scenes of warring, struggling men. Only beginning in 1972 did he create three *Vietnam* paintings that show figures in detail of race, dress, and weaponry. Golub compared the immense scale of these works to the “grotesqueness” of U.S. military might. The irregular cuts in *Vietnam II*’s canvas and the loose way it hangs emphasize his desire to confront the viewer: “The shock of encountering a brutal, tangible monster of this kind means that you have to take account of it—you have to figure out why such a thing appears in your world.”

Wally Hedrick  
born Pasadena, CA 1928–died Bodega Bay, CA 2003  
*War Room*  
oil on canvas  
Collection of Paul & Karen McCarthy

A combat veteran of the Korean War, Hedrick was among the earliest American artists to decry the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. His long-running series of black monochromes were statements of political and aesthetic refusal. He created examples such as *Black and Blue Ideas* by canceling out existing pictures in layers of black pigment. For Hedrick, this redaction symbolized the absence of enlightened thought. The series culminated in a trap-like structure of inward-facing canvases, signifying that the United States had become “boxed in” in Vietnam. Inside *War Room*, an overwhelming blackness is only relieved by looking upward to the open top.

Wally Hedrick  
born Pasadena, CA 1928–died Bodega Bay, CA 2003  
*Madame Nhu’s Bar-B-Qs*  
1963  
oil on canvas  
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum purchase, Unrestricted Art Acquisition Endowment Income Fund, 2004.95

Hedrick’s painting refers to the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức and his self-immolation protesting the South Vietnamese government’s oppression of Buddhists. The monk’s death was broadcast to the world via indelible photographs of him engulfed in flames. *Madame Nhu’s Bar-B-Qs* mentions Trần Lê Xuân (known to Americans as Madame Nhu), a member of South Vietnam’s ruling family and part of the Catholic minority. After the monk’s suicide, she said she was “willing to provide the gasoline for the next barbeque.” The painting invokes the Catholic Sacred Heart and quotes a Buddhist mantra, contrasting both the sacred humanity of Christ and the compassion of Buddha with Trần Lê Xuân’s caustic remark.
SITES OF PROTEST
Following the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, “putting your body on the line” became by the late 1960s a common precept for demanding social change. Antiwar artists adopted techniques of public protest and direct action, unleashing performances and Happenings in strategically selected sites. They also created works informed by their participation in mass demonstrations like marches and strikes.

The museum became for artists what the university campus was for student activists: the site of authority at which they could 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 between audience, museum, and larger political and economic power structures.

Yayoi Kusama
born Matsumoto, Japan 1929
*Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street*
1968
two performance photographs, exhibition copies
Courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Inc.
During the run-up to the 1968 presidential election, Kusama staged a series of antiwar Happenings at symbolically resonant locations throughout New York City. At the Stock Exchange, a site she considered emblematic of the military-corporate complex, the artist painted polka dots on the nude bodies of dancers as they frolicked. Across the street at Federal Hall, the group gyrated at the feet of the statue of George Washington, hero of the American Revolution and an inspiration to Hồ Chí Minh. Seemingly larkish, *Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street* was a canny protest that used nudity to mock militarism, replaced aggression with desire, and infused antiwar politics with playful sexuality. Today best known for her mirrored “infinity rooms,” Kusama first garnered national media coverage for these countercultural performances for peace.

Harry Shunk
born Reudnitz, Germany 1924–died New York City 2006
János Kender
born Baja, Hungary, 1937–died West Palm Beach, FL 2009
*Claes Oldenburg’s Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*
1969, printed 2019
three inkjet prints, exhibition copies
Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2014.R.20
In 1969, a group of Yale University students calling themselves the Colossal Keepsake Corporation invited Oldenburg, a renowned alumnus, to create his first monumental sculpture. Without the administration’s permission, they placed Oldenburg’s *Lipstick* in a prominent site on campus, close to the president’s office and a World War I memorial. Its installation drew a large crowd, spurred by coverage in a special issue of a student publication. At a time of student protests nationwide, the artist described the piece as a “platform for speechmaking.” Its inflatable phallic form—which never operated properly—seemed to poke fun at hyper-masculine, militaristic rhetoric. Ten months later, having fallen into disrepair, the sculpture was removed by the artist. A permanent version returned to Yale in 1974, this time with the university’s endorsement.
Terry Fox
born Seattle, WA 1943–died Cologne, Germany 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

In what Fox called his “first political work,” he wielded a flamethrower to burn a large patch in a garden bed of jasmine. It was a spot on the campus of University of California, Berkeley, Fox observed, where wealthy patrons liked to lunch. Defoliation was a well-known element of the war in Vietnam, part of the American effort to deprive communist forces physical cover and food crops. Fox noted that a somber mood set in as the audience recognized “what was going on—the landscape was being violated.” In the coming days, the garden remained “a burned-out plot”—a reminder of the massive destruction taking place in Vietnam.

Hans Haacke
born Cologne, Germany 1936

MoMA Poll
1970
transparent acrylic boxes, photoelectric counting devices, and paper ballots
Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

In an early example of the art form “institutional critique,” Haacke designed this work for a group exhibition of conceptual art at the Museum of Modern Art. MoMA Poll asked viewers to register their opinion of Nelson Rockefeller, the New York State governor and a longtime trustee of the museum, in light of his failure to denounce President Nixon’s conduct of the Vietnam War. (Haacke’s text nearby describes the context and results of his question.) Making visible a process of participatory citizenship, MoMA Poll reminds audiences that art and art institutions are inseparable from the political and social world.

Fred Lonidier
born Lakeview, OR 1942

29 Arrests
1972, printed 2008
photographs with text on panel
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Restricted gift of the Buddy Taub Foundation, 2014.51

Lonidier, a draft resister and war protester, created 29 Arrests in the immediate aftermath of a sit-in protest at the 11th Naval District Headquarters in San Diego. As police arrested antiwar demonstrators, they were posed and photographed, one by one. Standing a few paces back, Lonidier captured the process, framing the officers as well as the arrestees in his exposures. 29 Arrests acknowledges the camera’s power as a tool of state control while at the same time asserting its activist potential.
Douglas Huebler
born Ann Arbor, MI 1924–died Truro, MA 1997
Location Piece #13 (Washington March)
1969
three color photographs, two gelatin silver prints, and typewritten paper
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
In the late 1960s, Huebler began using photographs and texts to document everyday experience. Location Piece #13 (Washington March) records his participation in the 1969 Moratorium March on Washington, which drew hundreds of thousands in protest of the Vietnam War. Huebler wrote about the demonstration for his local paper; his personal narrative comprises Location Piece #13, a subjective element that is atypical in this conceptual series. In another uncharacteristic move, Huebler allows himself to be seen in one of the contact sheet exposures—as if underscoring the importance of individual citizens showing up and being counted.

Carolee Schneemann
born Fox Chase, PA 1939–died New Paltz, NY 2019
Snows
1967, re-edited 2009
kinetic theater performance, 16 mm film transferred to digital video; color and black and white, sound; 20:30 minutes
Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York
Carolee Schneemann
born Fox Chase, PA 1939–died New Paltz, NY 2019
Viet-Flakes
1962–67, re-edited 2015
16 mm film transferred to digital video; toned black and white, sound, 7 minutes
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Frank K. Ribelin Endowment
Schneemann presented Snows as part of Angry Arts Week, a New York festival protesting the war in Vietnam. The piece integrated live performance with sound, light, and film, including Schneemann’s own Viet-Flakes (shown here, alternating with performance footage of Snows). To create Viet-Flakes, Schneemann panned over war photography clipped from magazines and newspapers. Disorienting and sickening, the film acknowledges the emotions of helplessness, outrage, and apathy that Americans felt when viewing media images of faraway suffering. With Snows, the artist enacted a bodily response to such pictures. The three male and three female performers play a series of changing and contradictory roles, which, at times, directly echo the imagery in Viet-Flakes.

A WAR OF INFORMATION
The Vietnam War coincided with the rise of conceptual art in the United States. Conceptualism asserts the importance of concept over object and thinking over form. That a work of art could consist of facts—and that an art gallery could be used to amplify knowledge and stimulate critical thought—had special resonance in the context of a war driven by information and misinformation. Conceptual artists like Hans Haacke brought real-world reportage into the supposedly neutral context of a gallery, transforming a setting once reserved for aesthetic contemplation into an arena of active questioning.

Likewise, documentary art sought to engage and inform by presenting information. Philip Jones Griffiths’s Vietnam Inc. is a groundbreaking photographic examination of the war, unusual for emphasizing sustained observation and analysis over incidents of sensational violence. Emile de Antonio’s In the Year of the Pig is an equally independent and deeply researched work, the first American film that contextualized the Vietnam War within a larger historical framework.
Hans Haacke  
born Cologne, Germany 1936  
*News*  
1969, reconstructed 2019  
newsfeed, printer, and paper  
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  
Amid the turmoil of the late 1960s, Haacke sought to break down the supposed barriers between the “real” world and the art world. *News* presents a teletype machine relentlessly churning out the news of the day. With this piece on display, the museum becomes a place of engagement, highlighting the important work incumbent on any news consumer. Emphasizing the challenge of sifting through a mass of reportage was especially apt at the work’s conception, given the multiple and conflicting perspectives on the Vietnam War.

Art Workers’ Coalition  
active 1969–71  
*Q. And babies? A. And babies.*  
1970  
offset lithograph  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Jon Hendricks, 2017.10  
The Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) was a group of New York artist-activists. After the exposé of atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers in 1968 in the My Lai Massacre, AWC members Frazer Dougherty, Jon Hendricks, and Irving Petlin designed this poster. Its image was taken at the scene by army photographer Ron Haeberle. The devastating phrase “And babies” came from a news interview with soldier Paul Meadlo, who had participated in the slaughter. Rather than symbolism or metaphor, the artists used journalistic evidence to convey the horrors of the war—horrors the government had kept hidden for more than a year. They printed fifty thousand of the posters, distributed them for free, and displayed them during protests, confronting the public with war’s grisly truths.

Emile de Antonio  
born Scranton, PA 1919–died New York City 1989  
*In the Year of the Pig*  
1968  
35 mm film, black and white, sound, 103 minutes  
UCLA Film and Television Archive  
Pathé Contemporary Films, promotional poster for Emile de Antonio’s film *In the Year of the Pig*, ca. 1968, offset print, Courtesy Center for the Study of Political Graphics  
A fiercely independent filmmaker, de Antonio sought to build historical understanding about the war in Vietnam. He was frustrated by documentaries that condemned the war but lacked analysis. An absorbing montage constructed from hard-to-find footage and original interviews, *In the Year of the Pig* juxtaposes the official U.S. narrative of the war with the statements of journalists, scholars, diplomats, and soldiers who were there. Eschewing the use of voice-over narration, de Antonio challenges viewers to assess the evidence for themselves. By describing how the government decided to pursue war, de Antonio sought to convince the American public they could likewise decide to end it.
Philip Jones Griffiths
born Rhuddlan, UK 1936–died London, UK 2008
twelve gelatin silver prints

*Vietnam*
1967
The J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles, 2010.3.7

*Vietnam*
1970
Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

*Vietnam*
1970
Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

*Vietnam*
1970
Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

*Vietnam*
1970
Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

*Vietnam*
1967
Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

*Vietnam*
1968
Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

*Vietnam*
1967
The J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles, 2010.3.2

*Vietnam*
1967
The J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles, 2010.3.6

*Vietnam*
1967
The J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles, 2010.3.1

Wall text labels – *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975*
Smithsonian American Art Museum
3/26/19/td
Arriving in South Vietnam in 1966, Griffiths set out to produce an in-depth analysis of the war. He could not do so by selling individual photographs to newspapers and magazines, where they would be captioned and contextualized by others. Instead, he spent years creating a book over which he maintained full authorial control. The images in *Vietnam Inc.* appear in careful juxtaposition and sequence, with text written by Griffiths himself. He considered the essential story of the war the collision of two profoundly different cultures, American and Vietnamese. His book conveys how the conflict not only consumed countless lives but also transformed an entire society, driving masses of rural people into urban slums, overturning traditional social structures, and encouraging a shift toward a consumer-based culture—hence his title.

“THE ENEMY. His lack of equipment is a constant source of wonder to the GI’s. Surrounded, this Vietcong ‘defected’ in the best Maoist tradition. Caught in the wires of an ‘automatic ambush,’ he produced a Chieu Hoi (safe conduct) pass to classify himself as a ‘rallier’ to the GVN [South Vietnamese] side.”

“PERSONAL HYGIENE—particularly that of the Vietnamese—was always a matter of great concern to Americans. Every American seemed quite convinced the people were somehow ‘unhygienic.’ . . . The Marine was demonstrating to bored mothers how to bathe a child. One mother realized the Marine was using her vegetable dish to stand the boy in and, to the embarrassment of the other Marines, grabbed the dish and strode off, cursing such disregard for the basics of cleanliness.”

“LIMITS OF FRIENDSHIP. A Marine introduces a peasant girl to king-sized filter tips. Of all the U.S. forces in Vietnam, it was the Marines that approached ‘Civic Action’ with gusto. From their barrage of handouts, one discovers that, in the month of January 1967 alone, they gave away to the Vietnamese 101,535 pounds of food, 4,810 pounds of soap, 14,662 books and magazines, 106 pounds of candy, 1,215 toys, and 1 midwifery kit. In the same month they gave the Vietnamese 530 free haircuts.”

“Despite the $50,000 a minute the U.S. pours into Vietnam, many disabled veterans of the South Vietnamese Army end up as beggars. This one lived with his family in a shack made from old cardboard boxes in the main square of Cantho, the largest town in the Delta.”
WHAM VIETNAM
ca. 1970
handmade book
Griffiths created this book dummy as a sample for publishers. He provisionally titled his project *WHAM VIETNAM*, noting that the completed book would demonstrate “[a]n onslaught, not only by bullets, bombs and napalm, but also of an alien force tearing apart the very fabric of traditional Vietnamese society, perpetrated as part of winning the hearts and minds of the people, known, less euphemistically [*sic*], as the WHAM program.”

Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation

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 outpouring 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.

Many of the artists shown here had an ongoing commitment to both the medium of printmaking and political discourse, including Rupert Garcia, James Gong Fu Dong, and Corita Kent. Each applied the language of mass media and pop aesthetics to promoting social justice—which for them included trying to end the war in Vietnam. As Kent, then a Catholic nun, said in 1962, “The idea is to beat the system of advertising at its own game.... To oppose crass realism, crass materialism, with religious values, or at least with real values.”

Corita Kent
born Fort Dodge, IA 1918–died Boston, MA 1986
six screenprints
Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles, CA

A Catholic nun and educator, Kent embraced the language of pop art to create prints that serve as “advertisements for the common good.” Adopting the poetry of commercial packaging and street signs, Kent’s work promotes a humanistic Christianity and often addresses social justice. After leaving the Church in 1968, she began incorporating photographs from the news media. For example, *phil and dan* shows Philip and Daniel Berrigan, Jesuit peace activists who stole draft records from a Selective Service office and burned them. “I’m not a picket woman,” Kent once said, “though I admire people who are; I’m not brave enough not to pay my income tax and risk going to jail. But I can say rather freely what I want to say in my art.”
Carlos Irizarry
born Santa Isabel, PR 1938–died San Juan, PR 2017

*Moratorium*
1969

Screenprint
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2013.24.1a, b

The density of images in *Moratorium* conveys the ubiquitous presence of the Vietnam War in everyday life. Here Irizarry appropriated photographs and text from media sources. Dominating the left side is a likeness of Vice President Spiro Agnew, famous for his dismissal of antiwar intellectuals as “impudent snobs,” next to an image of a large antiwar protest. President Richard Nixon’s face appears below, tinted orange and repeated in a pop-style grid. Irizarry also quotes antiwar works by other artists: Jasper Johns’s 1969 *Moratorium* flag poster and Picasso’s 1937 painting *Guernica*. Picasso’s painting—condemning the Nazi bombing of Spanish civilians—had been on loan in New York since the 1940s, and Vietnam War-era activists embraced it as an emblem of war resistance.

Rupert García
born French Camp, CA 1941

*¡Fuera de Indochina!*
1970

Screenprint
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Marcus, 1990.1.83

García joined the U.S. Air Force in 1962 and served in Thailand in 1965 and 1966. Upon his return to the United States, he studied art at San Francisco State College, where he joined the antiwar, Chicano art, and Third World Solidarity movements. In *¡Fuera de Indochina!*, a brown face either cries out in pain or rallies in defiance, screaming the work’s title—in English, “Get out of Indochina!” García created the print to raise funds for the National Chicano Moratorium, a group that 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.

James Gong Fu Dong
born San Francisco, CA 1949

*Vietnam Scoreboard*
1969

embossed etching
San Francisco State College Art Department Collection

When U.S. public discourse often reduced Southeast Asian lives to numbers or symbols, Americans of Asian descent saw that most of the people dying in the war looked like them. In *Vietnam Scoreboard*, Dong juxtaposes a photograph of his relatives in China with a picture of a smiling American pilot. “Scoreboard” refers to the victory marks on the side of the plane, which take the silhouetted form of Dong’s family portrait—real people turned into a symbol of achieved “kills.” A pioneering work that combines nascent Asian American consciousness with an antiwar message, *Vietnam Scoreboard* illuminates the real-life connections between “us” and “them,” personalizing the war’s often dehumanizing rhetoric.

Wall text labels – *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975*
Smithsonian American Art Museum
3/26/19
William Copley
born New York City, 1919–died Sugar Loaf Key, FL 1996
*Untitled*, from the portfolio *Artists and Writers Protest against the War in Viet Nam* 1967
screenprint
International Center of Photography, Gift of the Artists’ Poster Committee with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2002

Ad Reinhardt
born Buffalo, NY 1913–died New York City 1967
*Untitled*, from the portfolio *Artists and Writers Protest against the War in Viet Nam* 1967
screenprint and collage on paper
International Center of Photography, Gift of the Artists’ Poster Committee with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2002
On a postcard addressed to “War Chief, Washington, D.C.,” Reinhardt pens a list of objections including “no war,” “no draft,” and “no fear.” The flip side of the card then reveals the artist’s equal conviction that a distance must be maintained between art and war: “no art of war,” “no art about war,” and, finally, “no art as war.” While Reinhardt had a long history of political engagement, his opinions were not generally visible in his abstract monochrome paintings.

Carol Summers
born Kingston, NY 1925–died Santa Cruz, CA 2016
*Kill for Peace*, from the portfolio *Artists and Writers Protest against the War in Viet Nam* 1967
screenprint with punched holes
International Center of Photography, Gift of the Artists’ Poster Committee with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2002

*Artists and Writers Protest against the War in Viet Nam* was created as a limited-edition portfolio to raise funds for the activist group Artists and Writers Protest. Sixteen visual artists participated, displaying a wide range of styles and approaches. Examples by William Copley, Ad Reinhardt, and Carol Summers are presented here. Critic Max Kozloff wrote of the portfolio, “No matter how varied their theme or form, these [images] are meant to testify to their authors’ deep alarm over a violence which . . . has been impossible for them to ignore.”
Malaquias Montoya
born Albuquerque, NM 1938
*Viet Nam/Aztlan*
1973
offset lithograph
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Frank K. Ribelin Endowment, 2015.29.3
Montoya’s activist artmaking began in the context of the California farm workers’ movement but soon referenced the full cultural and political dimensions of the fight for Chicano civil rights. His iconic *Viet Nam/Aztlan* reveals the links among the antiwar, anticolonial, and civil rights movements. Its design equates Vietnam with Aztlán, the mythic Chicano homeland said to be located in the southwestern United States, identifying Chicanos as a conquered and occupied people. In the middle, a Vietnamese soldier and a Chicano man merge together. At bottom, beneath yellow and brown clenched fists, is the Spanish word *Fuera*, meaning “get out.”

John Lennon
born Liverpool, UK 1940–died New York City 1980
Yoko Ono
born Tokyo, Japan 1933
*WAR IS OVER! IF YOU WANT IT*
1969
offset lithograph
Courtesy of Yoko Ono Lennon
In March 1969, rock star Lennon and artist Ono celebrated their marriage by inviting reporters into their hotel room in Amsterdam to witness a “bed-in” for peace in Vietnam. It was a media event broadcast around the world. In December, they continued their antiwar campaign with posters and billboards stating, “WAR IS OVER!” that appeared simultaneously in twelve international cities. The qualification in smaller type—“IF YOU WANT IT”—underscores the importance of each reader wishing for and working toward peace.

Robert Morris
born Kansas City, MO 1931–died Kingston, NY 2018
*Trench with Chlorine Gas*, from the series *Five War Memorials*
1970
Lithograph
Private Collection, Courtesy of Castelli Gallery
Morris created this lithograph in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Cambodia and the killing of students at Kent State University and Jackson State College. A prominent minimalist sculptor, Morris had not previously referenced the war in his work. Here he proposes an X-shaped trench brimming with noxious gas to memorialize the horrors of war rather than its heroics. The artist implies an analogy between chlorine gas, a substance banned after World War I, and chemicals weaponized in Vietnam, such as Agent Orange.
Tomi Ungerer
born Strasbourg, France 1931—died Cork, Ireland 2019

*Eat*
1967
offset lithograph
Oakland Museum of California, All Of Us Or None Archive, Gift of the Rossman Family

In Ungerer’s poster, the friendly imperative “EAT,” reminiscent of restaurant and diner signage, takes a sinister tone. The U.S. government’s stated intention was to free the people of Vietnam and give them the tools of democracy. Yet Ungerer renders this ideological nourishment as a force-feeding. Even as he recognized American hypocrisy, the artist, too, wore cultural blinders. His racially stereotyped depiction of a Vietnamese as a helpless victim of American aggression overlooks that Vietnamese people were not mere bystanders of the war but actors in it.

William Weege
born Milwaukee, WI 1935

*Napalm*, from the portfolio *Peace is Patriotic*
1967
offset lithograph
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

Weege initially created *Napalm* as part of a limited-edition portfolio of twenty-five prints entitled *Peace is Patriotic* while a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. This and other individual plates from the series were later mass-produced as posters. The body is a recurring motif throughout *Peace is Patriotic* and the unsurprising focus of a print entitled *Napalm*. A long-burning and tenaciously sticky gel used by the United States in flamethrowers and bombs in Vietnam, napalm was notorious for inflicting agonizing disfigurement and death on its often indiscriminate victims. Here, Weege jarringly juxtaposes a voluptuous pinup, a line of cavalry, and anatomical diagrams with an image of a person horrifically scarred by napalm wounds.

Liliana Porter
born Buenos Aires, Argentina 1941

*Untitled* (*The New York Times*, *Sunday, September 13, 1970*)
1970
Screenprint
Collection of Leah and Andrew Witkin, Brookline, MA

Images of unidentified Vietnamese people appeared frequently in American news coverage of the Vietnam War, and were often adopted in antiwar art as symbols of wartime suffering. Porter’s print is unusual in calling attention to the humanity elided in such a photograph. Here she appropriates a picture taken by photojournalist John Schneider. It depicts a woman detained by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces on suspicion of communist affiliation. Porter’s text first introduces the woman from afar, stressing her difference as a “northvietnamese.” Her words ultimately guide the viewer to empathy and identification, equating the captive woman with “my mother, my sister, you, I.”
HOME COMING

As the Vietnam War persisted into the 1970s, more artists who had served in the conflict returned and created work informed by their wartime experiences. Like many other war veterans, they expressed both pride and pain about their service. Jesse Treviño, who lost an arm due to injuries sustained in combat, reinvented his painting practice as he recovered, newly asserting his perspective as a veteran and a Chicano. Performance artist Kim Jones developed the persona “Mudman,” who traveled by foot through Los Angeles, wearing combat boots, his face covered by a stocking, and his body coated in mud. Bearing a spiky, wooden structure on his back, Mudman is both imposing and vulnerable, embodying the outsider status assigned to many Vietnam veterans upon their return to the civilian world.

Kim Jones
born San Bernardino, CA 1944
*Wilshire Boulevard Walk*
1976, printed 2016
performance, six photographs by Jeff Gubbins
Courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

Kim Jones
born San Bernardino, CA 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
Jones created his “Mudman” persona in the years following his service as a marine in Vietnam. Of his time there, he wrote, “sweat like pigs work like dogs live like rats red dust covered everything.” In his performance *Wilshire Boulevard Walk*, Jones marched eighteen miles across Los Angeles, first from sunrise to sunset and, a week later, from sunset to sunrise. He traveled with a structure of bound sticks strapped to his back and his body slathered in mud, evoking the “red dust” of Đông Hà. Both imposing and vulnerable, Mudman speaks to the challenge of reconciling wartime and peacetime lives. Nine months after the North Vietnamese victory, Jones in *Wilshire Boulevard Walk* confronted passersby as a phantom of a war just ended—but a war that, for many veterans, was still marching on.

Jesse Treviño
born Monterrey, Mexico 1946
*Mi Vida*
1971–73
acrylic on drywall, mounted on aluminum
Collection of Inez Cindy Gabriel
Treviño was drafted and served as an infantryman in Vietnam, sustaining serious injuries while on patrol in early 1967. Doctors later amputated his right arm—the one he had previously used to paint. Painstakingly created with his other hand, *Mi Vida* marked Treviño’s rebirth as an artist. It portrays his postwar life, from his new prosthetic to his daily coffee and *pan dulce*. Treviño painted *Mi Vida* in private, on the wall of his bedroom, when he was still struggling with chronic pain and the transition to civilian life. Through its creation, he found a new direction for his art, one explicitly rooted in his personal experiences and perspective as a Chicano.
The United States and Vietnam have a complicated history. The conflict known as the “Vietnam War” in the United States—and the “American War” in Vietnam—was long in the making. Global and domestic conditions in the years leading up to the war made for a shifting relationship, as forces in each country pursued their own political and ideological goals.

The region that is today Vietnam became a French colony in the late nineteenth century. During the Second World War, Japanese forces also occupied Vietnam. Communist leader Hồ Chí Minh and his nationalist Việt Minh fighters resisted all foreign authority, and the U.S. government supported them in their struggle against the Japanese. When Japan surrendered in 1945, Hồ Chí Minh declared Vietnam an independent state. After that, the United States, hoping to contain the spread of communism, backed France’s attempt to reestablish colonial rule. After an eight-year conflict, Hồ Chí Minh’s forces defeated France in 1954. At peace talks in Geneva, the major world powers decided to temporarily divide the country instead of upholding independence. Two nations eventually emerged: the noncommunist Republic of Vietnam in the south, supported by the United States, and the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, allied with the Soviet Union and China.

Political tensions escalated and war broke out between the North and South. Without making an official declaration of war, the United States provided steadily increasing aid to South Vietnam. The commitment of U.S. ground troops in 1965 finally brought America’s long involvement in Vietnam into the open.

The Vietnam War didn’t start in 1965. Although the United States had been involved in Vietnam for many years, it was only in 1965 that the first battalions of U.S. Marines arrived in the country. This commitment of troops brought the conflict in Vietnam to the attention of many ordinary Americans for the first time. As draft calls mounted and images of wartime suffering streamed into U.S. homes via television and print media, the nation became increasingly engulfed by the conflict.

What follows is not a full timeline of the Vietnam War. Instead, it chronicles major events that brought the war home to ordinary Americans—among them, the artists in this exhibition. These moments shaped Americans’ understanding of the war in Vietnam and their relationship to it. It is a timeline of the dramatic events that challenged artists to respond.

1965

- President Lyndon B. Johnson orders air attacks on North Vietnam and deploys ground troops to South Vietnam [fig.]
- First “teach-in” against the war is held at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
- First major public demonstrations take place in the United States, both protesting and supporting the war
- First major engagement between U.S. and North Vietnamese forces takes place in Battle of Ia Drang
- As American military presence increases, the number of Western journalists in Vietnam skyrockets
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1965: 184,300
1966
- Senator William Fulbright holds televised hearings questioning U.S. involvement in Vietnam
- Artists erect the Peace Tower in Los Angeles to protest the war [fig.]
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1966: 385,300

1967
- Ramparts magazine publishes an essay featuring photographs of South Vietnamese children injured by American napalm [fig.]
- Hundreds of artists participate in Angry Arts Week in New York City in protest of the war
- Martin Luther King Jr. publicly denounces the war in Vietnam [fig.]
- An antiwar demonstration in Washington, D.C., draws hundreds of thousands of protesters [fig.]
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1967: 485,600

1968
- Previously secure South Vietnamese cities like Sài Gòn are attacked during the Tết Offensive [fig.]
- Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis. Massive civil unrest follows in Washington, D.C., and other American cities [fig.]
- President Johnson announces he will not seek reelection
- Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy is assassinated on the campaign trail
- Peace talks begin--and immediately stall--in Paris
- Police violence erupts at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago [fig.]
- Richard M. Nixon is elected President [fig.]
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1968: 536,100

1969
- The Art Workers’ Coalition, an activist artist group, forms in New York City
- American troops in Vietnam hit their peak at 543,000
- U.S. forces sustain heavy losses at the Battle of “Hamburger Hill” (Đồi A Bia) [fig.]
- The United States lands the first man on the moon [fig.]
- Pursuing his plan of “Vietnamization,” President Nixon announces gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops
- Hồ Chí Minh, the revolutionary leader and president of North Vietnam, dies
- Large demonstrations take place across the United States as part of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam
- News of the atrocities committed the year before by American soldiers at Sơn Mỹ (My Lai) breaks in the United States [fig.]
- The first televised draft lottery is held
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1969: 475,200
1970

- President Nixon sends American troops into neutral Cambodia [fig.]
- At Kent State in Ohio, four students are killed by National Guardsmen during a protest against President Nixon’s Cambodia order [fig.]
- Eleven days after Kent State shootings, two students are killed by police at Jackson State College in Mississippi
- Construction workers and student protesters violently clash in the Hard Hat Riots in New York City
- The Art Strike against Racism, War, and Repression calls for New York City museums to close for a day
- Tens of thousands participate in the National Chicano Moratorium March in Los Angeles [fig.]
- Artists organize The People’s Flag Show in New York to protest flag desecration laws
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1970: 334,600

1971

- More than a hundred U.S. military veterans and civilian contractors testify to war crimes committed in Vietnam during the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit
- Lt. William Calley is convicted for murdering 22 Vietnamese civilians at Sơn Mỹ
- Vietnam Veterans Against the War organizes a national protest in Washington, D.C. [fig.]
- A Harris public opinion poll shows that 58 percent of Americans believe the war in Vietnam is not only a mistake, but “morally wrong”
- The publication of the Pentagon Papers, first by the New York Times, results in a landmark Supreme Court decision upholding freedom of the press [fig.]
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1971: 156,800

1972

- President Nixon takes steps to ease tensions with major communist powers China and the Soviet Union
- North Vietnam launches the Easter Offensive, an invasion of South Vietnamese territory [fig.]
- The U.S. government announces that no new draftees will be ordered to Vietnam
- The American public reelects President Nixon with almost 61 percent of the popular vote [fig.]
- President Nixon orders the “Christmas Bombing” of North Vietnam in the hopes of forcing concessions at the negotiating table. The effort is unsuccessful
- U.S. troop levels in Vietnam at the end of 1972: 24,200

1973

- Paris Peace Accords are signed and a general cease-fire goes into effect [fig.]
- The United States begins withdrawing troops from Vietnam; by June, fewer than 250 remain
- 591 American prisoners of war are released from North Vietnam [fig.]
- Congress votes to end all U.S. military action in Southeast Asia. President Nixon vetoes the bill but agrees to stop bombing in Cambodia
- As U.S. troop levels fall, Western media coverage of the war drops dramatically
1974

- Despite the cease-fire, full-scale war resumes between North and South Vietnamese troops
- Richard Nixon resigns and Gerald R. Ford becomes president. Nixon receives a full pardon for any crimes committed in office [fig.]
- President Ford issues amnesty for draft evaders and deserters [fig.]

1975

- North Vietnam begins its final push against the retreating South Vietnamese army
- Congress refuses additional military aid to South Vietnam
- The last American personnel, along with some South Vietnamese, evacuate from South Vietnam [fig.]
- Outnumbered and isolated, South Vietnamese troops are forced to withdraw, leaving the road to the capital Sài Gòn open and largely undefended [fig.]
- North Vietnamese troops accept the surrender of South Vietnam

The Vietnam War didn’t end in 1975.

Though North Vietnamese forces captured the South Vietnamese capital of Sài Gòn on April 30, 1975, officially ending the war, the repercussions persist. More than a hundred thousand fled when the state of South Vietnam collapsed. The exodus of refugees from Vietnam—as well as those from Laos and Cambodia—continued for years, driven by ongoing instability and conflict. Hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians eventually settled in the United States, but adopting a new home was not the end of their journey. Their stories and the legacy of war are explored in the concurrent exhibition Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past Is Prologue on the second floor of the museum.

American military veterans, returning to a divided country, also had to negotiate new lives, some bearing physical or psychological scars. Families who lost loved ones continue to grieve. Despite the trauma of the war, wounds have begun to heal. In 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial created a site for remembrance on the National Mall. In 1995, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam normalized relations, an effort led in large part by veterans.

The Vietnam War changed everyone who lived through it, citizens and soldiers, civilians and artists. The art made in response to the war was provocative, political, and, ultimately, personal. Now, we invite you to share your response.

The end of the war was just the beginning.

There are now roughly three million Americans of Southeast Asian descent who contribute to the rich mosaic of life in the United States. Contemporary artist Tiffany Chung (b. 1969, Đà Nẵng, Vietnam) explores the living memory of the war among Vietnamese refugees and their families. Experience her exhibition, Tiffany Chung: Vietnam, Past Is Prologue, in the museum’s second floor galleries.