Q & A

Of Travelling with Dinh Q. Lê, 1999–2014

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Part 1: The Story of a Friendship

Dinh Q. Lê and I started our email exchanges in 1999. A mutual friend, Yong Soon Min, had recommended his work to me, and we began, almost casually, to write back and forth between Viêt Nam (where Lê has lived much of the time since the later 1990s) and California (where I have lived since the 1960s). However, it was only in 2001, after two years of intense emailing, that we met in person at the San Francisco Art Institute, where we were on the same panel.

From the very start, we found we had many interests in common, ones we have sometimes explored in private exchanges and sometimes in public presentations and published texts. In San Francisco in 2003, we created a theatre event called From Vietnam to Hollywood: A Play of Ebb and Flow, which I scripted and in which Lê performed. In August 2005 I traveled to Viêt Nam and stayed with Lê in his Ho Chi Minh City home, working with him as he speedily recreated Mot Coi Di Ve—a huge two-sided hanging quilt composed of a motley array, stitched together, of some 1,500 black-and-white passport photographs, family snapshots, and postcards from the Vietnam War period—for

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a September exhibition in New York at the Asia Society: *Destination for the New Millennium: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê* (fig. 1).2

In 2010, when Lê received a Prince Claus Fund Award, I wrote a formal tribute to him called “Of War and Peace” in the Fund’s Amsterdam-published *Frontiers of Reality*. In the same year—and this perhaps shows the wide range of modes in which we work with each other—he participated long-distance in “All Over the Map,” a project involving performances and small exhibitions in honour of my 77th birthday, organized by Annika Marie with Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam, and held at the Poor Farm, an alternative arts space in rural Wisconsin. Unable to attend the event in person, Lê created a magical alternative. We met in New York, where he was having an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art of a “peace helicopter” made by two Vietnamese farmers, together with his three-channel video *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (fig. 2), and he

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2 The original version of *Mot Côi Di Ve* (2000) had mysteriously and suddenly vanished from its California storage space. Later I described the experience of this 2005 visit with Lê in Ho Chi Minh City in “The Obdurate History of *Mot Côi Di Ve* (‘Spending One’s Life Trying to Find One’s Way Home’),” an essay included in the exhibition catalogue *A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê* (Bellevue, Washington: Bellevue Arts Museum, 2007).