Cemeti
Institut untuk Seni dan Masyarakat

EN

The Afterlife of Image

21 November - 19 December 2026

Mahardika Yudha
Nguyễn Trinh Thi

Foreword

"The Afterlife of Image" presents works by Mahardika Yudha (ID) and Nguyễn Trinh Thi (VN) that interrogate the colonial and imperial gaze through archival materials and footage. Both artists critically examine how historical and popular images have been weaponized to construct reality from a singular perspective, shaped by those in control of the camera. These works illuminate not only the past but also what theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay describes as potential history— not a radical thinking or ideological struggle against imperialism but a rejection of imperialism's conceptual apparatus that presumes such struggle exists only in the past, as dusty record in the archive (Azoulay, 2019, p.43). This approach entails challenging dominant institutional narratives, questioning the perceived finality of the archive, and recovering what imperial violence sought to suppress (Azoulay, 2019, p.43). By regarding the archive as an ongoing site of political and aesthetic contestation rather than a closed repository of facts, Mahardika and Thi enact a counter-archival intervention that reopens state-sanctioned and colonial timelines.

Mahardika Yudha's video installation, Apa yang Kamu Lihat? Apa yang Akan Kamu Ingat? (What did you see and what will you remember?) (2023), situates this inquiry within the digital omnipresence of colonial remnants. To fully understand his intervention, we must

examine how the Dutch colonial apparatus historically utilized the photographic medium. During the late 19th and early twentieth centuries in the Dutch East Indies, both the colonial state and corporate enterprises used photography not only to document reality but also to manufacture consent and legitimize imperial dominance within the colony through calculated visual tactics.

For example, staged photographs of plantations, with their regimented rows and vast order, propagated the myth of "Rust en Orde" (Peace and Order). These images not only asserted Dutch authority and rationality over the land but also masked violence and erased indigenous presence, presenting colonial rule as both civilizing and inevitable. The aestheticized landscape was used to hide colonial brutality. Plantations under the Cultuurstelsel relied on harshly exploited indentured laborers (kuli), yet photography erased this violence—either omitting native workers or depicting them as orderly, content, and grateful, sanitizing the reality of systemic abuse. When people finally appeared in the photograph, composition reinforced racial hierarchy: white overseers stood in commanding positions, while Indonesian laborers were pushed to the margins or grouped as faceless, nameless workers—visualizing colonial dominance and erasing individuality. Finally, these images functioned as direct propaganda to justify the "Ethical Policy" (Ethische Politiek) of the early twentieth century. The Dutch asserted a moral obligation to uplift the native population,

disseminating photographs of modern processing factories, extensive irrigation projects, and organized plantations to the Netherlands as evidence that colonial rule constituted a noble and benevolent mission.

Through a single-channel video and three archival photographs, Mahardika investigates the complexities of digital accessibility in the present day. He demonstrates how images originating from the colonial camera operator's singular perspective have transitioned from analog archives to contemporary personal screens, circulating widely in digital form. Mahardika interrogates whether contemporary digital practices—such as reframing, zooming, or collage—effectively dismantle historical hierarchies or merely simulate resistance, creating a "daylight dream" of overcoming past oppressions while the underlying structure of the archive persists. His work exposes the enduring nature of the colonial gaze, compelling viewers to reflect on the extent to which imperial structures remain embedded within current technological systems.

Moving from the static archive to the moving image, mainstream global cinema often continues a similar colonial gaze by stripping a foreign country of its actual identity. In Hollywood’s portrayal of Vietnam, the nation-state is completely flattened through a process of visual imperialism and erasure. In iconic films like Apocalypse Now or Platoon, Vietnam is rarely treated as a sovereign

country with its own ancient culture, history, or diverse population. Instead, it is systematically reduced to a hostile, untamed jungle filled with hidden, faceless dangers, or used as a psychological stage designed purely to test the morality, sanity, and brotherhood of American soldiers. In this depiction, the Vietnamese people are relegated to background fixtures—either helpless victims waiting to be saved or terrifying, silent aggressors. The actual geopolitics, sovereignty, and suffering of Vietnamese citizens are completely eclipsed to focus on a domestic American healing process. The war is converted into a resource for the American culture industry, commemorating the conflict as a "media-myth" that dominates global cultural memory.

Nguyễn Trinh Thi's avant-garde documentary Vietnam the Movie (2016) addresses visual imperialism through radical compilation and détournement. To reveal this external perspective, Thi assembles a chronological collage of clips depicting Vietnam from thirty-six different films, including Hollywood blockbusters (Apocalypse Now, Forrest Gump), European arthouse cinema (Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Werner Fassbinder), and Asian productions. Through this editing process, she demonstrates how the global imaginary has consumed and commodified the name "Vietnam," reducing a real country to a synonym for "War." Thi juxtaposes these external and often problematic representations, prompting critical dialogue among them. In doing so, Vietnam the Movie

destabilizes Hollywood's constructed illusions, stripping the original films of narrative authority and reframing their footage as "found artifacts" of Western ideological bias. Ultimately, Thi's counter-archive exposes a profound socio-political tragedy: the authentic, lived history of post-war Vietnam is obscured beneath layers of foreign cinematic myths, metaphors, and geopolitical projections.

Throughout the exhibition, Thi extends this critique to encompass twentieth-century geopolitical conflicts. In Vietnam the Movie (2016), the 47-minute film eschews conventional dramatic linearity, instead employing a "logic of forms" and association, where clips are connected through visual or linguistic cues, particularly the utterance of the word "Vietnam" (Pazzini, 2017). This creative montage compels viewers to confront the global "industry of memory" and the Western appropriation of historical narrative, thereby destabilizing the dominant representation of the Vietnam War. Thi approaches the extensive archive of global cinema not as a repository of historical truths, but as a site of ideological construction, employing formal disruptions to diminish the immersive power of mainstream film.

In her other work presented in this exhibition, a 28-minute installation titled Eleven Men (2016), Thi turns her archival subversion inward by compiling scenes from classic Vietnamese state-sponsored narrative films spanning three decades. Featuring the renowned actress

Nhu Quynh, the film adapts the patriarchal and ironic voice of Franz Kafka's short story Eleven Sons into a female perspective, declaring, "I have eleven men." By repurposing state-owned archival footage, Thi challenges both local ideological frameworks and institutional gender roles, introducing new vulnerabilities, desires, and complexities into a visual history originally constructed to serve nationalistic state agendas (Magiera, 2016).

While the other two works are closely related to the history of Vietnam, Thi's Landscape Series no. 1 (2026) emphasizes how the person and the landscape are positioned as silent witnesses to a place or event that is no longer there. This series compiles news images of anonymous figures pointing toward landscapes without much information. In this exhibition, the series is presented as a sequence of printed photos. This repetitive typology subtly evokes a fictional journey while speculating on what and where the event might have happened.

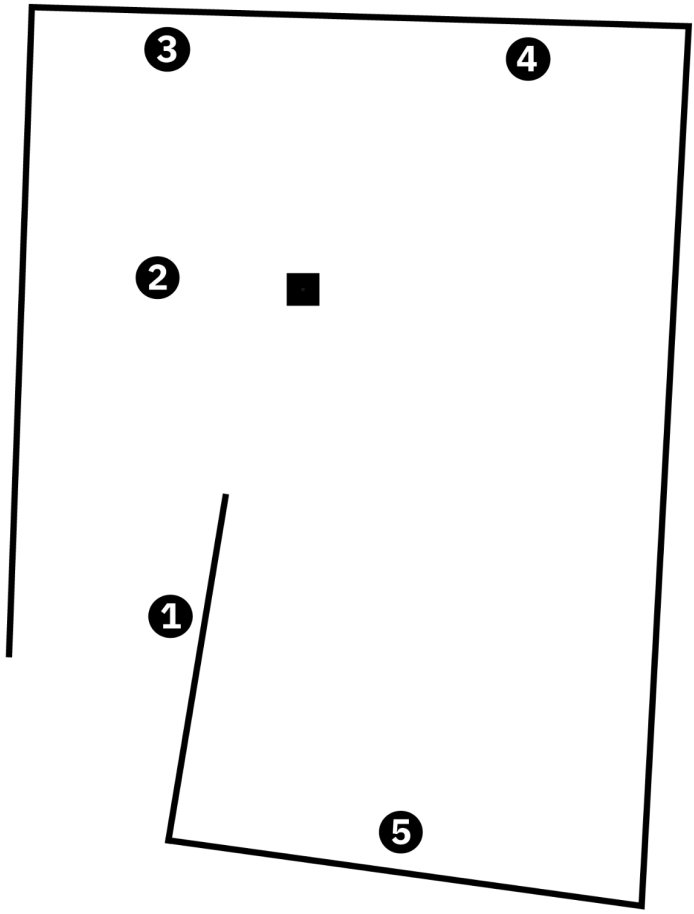
The works of both artists demonstrate how visual media—whether colonial photography or cinematic images—are utilized by dominant powers to portray a nation's reality with constructed myths. A comparative analysis of Dutch colonial plantation photography and Hollywood's depiction of Vietnam, as well as state-sponsored images, reveals a consistent socio-political pattern: the visual reduction of sovereign territories to either economic assets

or psychological stages for external anxieties, as well as serving a nationalistic agenda.

Ultimately, this duo exhibition serves as a critical site to "refuse the stories the shutter tells." (Azoulay, 2019, p.4). Mahardika and Thi illustrate that the archive is not a static repository of definitive truths, but an active arena of contestation. Through manipulation, analysis, and reframing of imperial and state-sanctioned records, both artists challenge hegemonic narratives, thereby enabling alternative modes of remembrance and perception for future generations.

Mira Asriningtyas & Dito Yuwono
Directors of Cemeti-Institute for Art and Society

Exhibition Map



1

Nguyễn Trinh Thi

Landscape Series no.1

Photo print on photo paper, 20 pcs, 2026
Photo installation pattern, shaped like a crocodile, borrowed from "Tung Krapeu", an exhibition at the National Museum of Cambodia with EFEO, 2013.

The *“Landscape Series No. 1”* investigates landscapes as quiet witnesses to history. Vietnamese press images collected explore individual and collective memories through a recurring gesture: people pointing at an invisible yet significant presence just beyond the frame. It emphasizes how the person and the landscape are positioned as silent witnesses to history, to a place or event that is no longer there. While the work adopts the nostalgic cadence of an old-fashioned postcard, the repetitive typology subtly evokes a fictional journey while speculating on what and where the event might have happened.

2 & 3

Mahardika Yudha

What Did You See and What Will You Remember?

Single-channel video, 11 min, photo print on paper, 60 x 33,5 cm (3 pcs), 2023

The "What Did You See and What Will You Remember?" by Mahardika Yudha, re-examines the politics of historical representation—not as a rigid, objective record, but as a

space of interpretation and an instrument of power frequently manipulated to shape specific narratives. Through this 10-minute video work, photographic archives are positioned not as neutral evidence, leading the audience to a concluding question: “What do you want to see, and what do you want to remember?” This question seems to speculate on history and collective memory alike as choices laden with subjectivity.

4

Nguyễn Trinh Thi

Eleven Man

Single-channel video, 28 min, 2016

The “Eleven Men” is composed of scenes from a range of Vietnamese classic narrative films featuring the same central actress, Nhu Quynh. Spanning three decades of her legendary acting career, most of the appropriated movies—from 1966 to 2000—were produced by the state-owned Vietnam Feature Film Studio. The film’s text was adapted from “Eleven Sons”, a short story by Franz Kafka first published in 1919, which begins with a father’s declaration: “I have eleven sons”, then describes each one of them in acute and ironic detail. Transposing the father’s voice of Kafka’s story, the film begins with a woman stating: “I have eleven men.”

5

Nguyễn Trinh Thi

Vietnam The Movie

Single-channel video, 47 min, 2015

Vietnam the Movie uses a carefully structured montage of clips from drama and documentary films to give a chronological account of Vietnamese history from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, encompassing the end of French colonialism and America's involvement in the Vietnam War. But this is no conventional history lesson. Rather, the excerpts chosen contrast a variety of external and often oppositional views, ranging from mainstream Hollywood drama to European art-house. Source material from the US includes *Apocalypse Now, Born on the Fourth of July* and *Forrest Gump*, whilst Europe is represented by the works of Harun Farocki, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog and Jean-Luc Godard. Director Nguyễn Trinh Thi also splices extracts from the films of Nagisa Oshima, Satyajit Ray, and Ann Hui into the mix. The result suggests that any "true" picture of Vietnam has been lost to the multiplicity of symbolic purposes to which the country, its people and their tribulations have been put.

Mahardika Yudha

Mahardika Yudha (Jakarta, 1981) is an artist, researcher, curator, and writer based in Jakarta, Indonesia. In 2003, he joined the Massroom Project and later co-founded Forum Lenteng, where he currently coordinates the Research and Development Division.

From 2013 to 2017, he served as Festival Director of OK. Video – Indonesia Media Arts Festival and has organized numerous art and film exhibitions. His international engagements include the Periferry [1.0] residency at KHOJ Guwahati, India (2008), the JENESYS Program in Japan (2011–2012), and the INFLUX-Riverspace art project (2011–2012).

Since 2014, he has curated the Kultursinema Exhibition Program at the Jakarta International ARKIPEL Documentary and Experimental Film Festival.

His notable works include Sunrise Jive (2005), exhibited at SeMA Biacity Medi Seoul in South Korea (2014), Suara Putra Brahma (2012), The Face of the Black River (2013), Why Didn’t Ernest Dezentje Come to Wamena? (2014), rangjebor (2014, with Mohammad Fauzi), and Golden Memories: petite histoire of Indonesian cinema (2018, with Afrian Purnama and Syaiful Anwar).

Nguyễn Trinh Thi

Nguyễn Trinh Thi is a Hanoi-based filmmaker and artist. Traversing boundaries between film and video art, installation and performance, her practice currently explores the power of sound and listening, and the multiple relations between image, sound, and space, with ongoing interests in history, memory, representation, ecology, and the unknown.

Thi uses montage to compose her work, drawing on different image media, from her own audio and visual recordings to found footage and still images from postcards, photography, newsreels, Hollywood films and ethnographic footage. She is also interested in incorporating new media into current works, including organic materials and natural forces.

Thi's works have been shown at international festivals and exhibitions including the Bienal de São Paulo, documenta, Artes Mundi, Lyon Biennale, the Asia Pacific Triennale of Contempory Art, Sydney Biennale, Singapore Biennale, Thailand Biennale, and Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial.

In 2009, Nguyễn Trinh Thi founded and directs Hanoi DocLab, a center and lab for documentary filmmaking and video art in Hanoi.

This exhibition is supported by
Forum Film Dokumenter (FFD) – Indonesia



