

**August 2006
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MOC P

Museum of
Contemporary Photography

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SOLO EXHIBITION EXPLORES WAR REENACTMENT AND REHEARSAL AT MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY, COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO

Major exhibition underwritten by the Lannan Foundation features work by Vietnamese-American artist An-My Lê; also on view are works by Sean Hemmerle, Sarah Pickering, Martha Rosler and Sean Snyder

An-My Lê: *Small Wars*
Museum of Contemporary Photography
Columbia College Chicago
600 S. Michigan
October 27, 2006 – January 6, 2007

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday, October 26, 2006, 5 – 7pm

LECTURE

An-My Lê
Thursday, October 26, 2006, 6:30pm
Ferguson Theatre, 600 S. Michigan Ave.
Lectures in Photography
Photography Department, Columbia College
Chicago

Chicago – In October 2006, the Museum of Contemporary Photography will open two photographic series by An-My Lê, in which the artist explores the conflicts that bracket the last half-century of American history: the war in Vietnam and the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Her series *Small Wars* (1999-2002) depicts men who reenact battles from the war in Vietnam in the forests of Virginia on weekends. Her current and ongoing series, *29 Palms* (2003-present), documents the military base of the same name in the California desert where soldiers train before being deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Famously the first televised war, Vietnam was projected into American living rooms on a nightly basis, and magazines and newspapers devoted page after page to graphic, bloody pictures of battles, massacres, and life at the front. These images played a key role in the discourse of opposition to the war; some by now so iconic that they will be forever implanted

in our minds. In contrast, the war in Iraq today is an unseen war in many ways. There are relatively few photographers embedded in Iraq (Lê tried to be embedded but was denied permission), and much of the imagery that is released by the media is censored and sanitized by government controls and editors' concerns over appearing to have an anti-war bias. There have been almost no pictures of dead or wounded American service people printed in U.S. publications since the start of the war, even though more than 2,800 American lives have been lost as of August 2006.

Lê, who was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1960 and came to the United States as a refugee in 1975, created the *Small Wars* series to explore, as she describes it, "the Vietnam of the mind;" a conception of war that emerged from the vast collection of documentation, personal histories, and fictional interpretations confronting veterans, survivors, and subsequent generations. The war games she photographs are elaborate. Her pictures present men—some of them veterans, others history buffs—simulating combat and war routines using detailed props such as grounded airplanes, tents, and uniforms. Lê is often asked to participate in the reenactments; over the course of the project she acted various roles from translator to, disconcertingly, a member of the Viet Cong. Sensitive to the fact that what motivates her subjects is often a complex web of psychological need, fantasy, and a passion for history, Lê avoids parody and constructs her images to emphasize clarity and craftsmanship over chaos and spectacle.

Lê's pictures from *29 Palms* present an epic American West in lush detail, and in many ways mirror the sanitized view of the Iraq war provided to us by the media today. Like in the Vietnam reenactments in Virginia, and Hollywood just 150 miles away, *29 Palms* is a place where fictions are performed. Marines both rehearse their own roles and play the parts of their adversaries: they are occasionally asked to dress up and act as Iraqi police and civilians, and linguists wearing traditional Iraqi clothing are sometimes brought in to create a ruckus in Arabic. The military housing is tagged with mock anti-American graffiti and fake villages are built of particle board—the houses without backs like the facades used in old western movies.

Lê's work raises questions about the reliability of seemingly objective historical accounts—such as news reports and photographs—that greatly influence how war is communicated and remembered. They have the hallmarks of a documentary project, but importantly, they do not show us what war does. By bringing a new resonance to the phrase "the theater of war," Lê asks us to reconsider the fictions that cloud the ways in which war is remembered, reported upon, and experienced.

TRAVEL

An-My Lê: Small Wars opened at the Marion Center, College of Santa Fe, New Mexico, in January 2006, and traveled to The Rhode Island School of Design Museum in June, 2006. After its MOCP presentation in October 2006, *Small Wars* will travel to the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, England, February, 2007; Ffoto Gallery, Wales, May, 2007; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, July 2007; SFMOMA, Summer, 2008; and to the Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Fall 2008.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

An-My Lê holds a BAS (1981) and MS (1985) from Stanford University and an MFA from Yale University School of Art (1993). Recent solo exhibitions of her work include *29 Palms* at Murray Guy, New York; *Small Wars* at PS1/MOMA Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York; and *Vietnam* at Scott Nichols Gallery, San Francisco. She is the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship (1997), and her work is held in the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; and Sackler Gallery, The Smithsonian, Washington DC.

ALSO ON VIEW:

Sean Hemmerle, Sarah Pickering, Martha Rosler and Sean Snyder

October 27, 2006 – January 6, 2007

MoCP will complement *Small Wars* with works by four artists who expose the glamorization, commodification, and our perceptions of war as dictated by the media, uncovering connections between consumer products, journalism, politics, and violence.

Sean Hemmerle (American, b. 1966) is a Brooklyn, New York-based photographer. Prompted by the events of September 11, 2001, he followed his photographs of Ground Zero with projects that documented the American War on Terror: Afghanistan in February 2002 and Iraq in September 2003. Hemmerle, who is working on a project about the American media, plans to return to Baghdad. In contrast to the traditional fast-shooting photojournalist, he uses a large format camera and long exposure times in making his images. Rather than show scenes of violence or action, Hemmerle's photographs tend to illustrate the initial stages of healing and reconstruction, pointing to the deeper rifts in the societal fabric that can be brought about by acts of violence. Tempe, AZ-born Hemmerle earned his B.A. at the University of Miami and his M.F.A. at the School of Visual Arts. He served in the United States Army from 1984 to 1988, receiving an honorable discharge with the rank of sergeant.

Sarah Pickering (British, b. 1972) depicts the detonation of explosives, tested and paraded for a number of clients at a military base in southeast England. In her pictures, the explosions are ambiguous in their lethality; they could level a house, merely spice up a training exercise with a dose of "shock and awe." Sometimes they are intended for use in a movie, with the explosions fittingly produced for their particular look and shape. In this light, Pickering's photographs provide refreshing insight to the unlikely marriage of military culture and the entertainment industry. While each has different criteria by which they judge these explosive tools, military and entertainment executives still compile similar "shopping lists." For the entertainment industry the explosion might be part of a gripping climax to a scene, but for the military, it is perhaps a key prop in the rehearsal for war. Pickering received her MA in Photography from the Royal College of Art in London in 2005. In the same year she was awarded the Jerwood Photography Award, an award established in 2003 to support promising young or emerging photographers.

Martha Rosler (American) combines press images of the Iraq war with domestic advertisements in the most recent chapter of her series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*. The current series follows from Rosler's legendary set of montages of the same title

made during the height of the war in Vietnam, which were made as a response to the artist's frustration with media images, reporting techniques and even anti-war propaganda. The current series is comprised of fragments of images cleverly arranged into collages that comment on the connection between the war and Iraq and our political and economic climate. Rosler was born in Brooklyn, New York and has been making art and writing since the 1970s. She has been the recipient of five National Endowment for the Arts Grants, was awarded the Spectrum International Prize in Photography for 2005 and the Oskar Kokoschka Prize in 2006. Rosler teaches photography, film, video and critical theory at Rutgers Mason Gross School of Art.

Sean Snyder (American, b. 1972) reveals an underlying logic in the inadvertent product placements that have been apparent in today's mainstream news media. In his video piece *Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars*, Snyder supplies a running commentary on the dense web of relationships between commercial products and the nature of reporting and photojournalism, ultimately arriving at a series of observations on the similarity between our consumption of news media images and our consumption of commercial goods. In drawing these connections, he notes dominant social, ideological and economic structures. He effortlessly flits between products and places, pausing to note the sheer proximity of advertisements to news stories, pointing out the well-documented practice of juxtaposing advertisements and documentary photographs to the benefit of either or both. With the voice of a detached instructor reading a manual, Snyder assumes the role of a passive and disinterested reporter, but paints a picture of reporting as a programmatic activity. Towards the end of *Casio, Seiko, Sheraton, Toyota, Mars*, his monotone musings abruptly give way to footage of real missile strikes. The detached narration suddenly seems absurd and irrelevant in the face of real, and not reported, danger. Snyder lives and works in Berlin.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Karen Irvine is the curator of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago. She has organized numerous exhibitions including: *Audible Imagery: Sound and Photography*; *Anthony Goicolea*; *Tracey Baran*; *Scott Fortino*; *Shirana Shahbazi*; *Goftare Nik/Good Words*; *Jason Salavon*; *Jin Lee*; *Paul Shambroom: Evidence of Democracy*; *Alec Soth: Sleeping by the Mississippi*; *The Furtive Gaze*; and *Camera/Action: Performance and Photography*, among others. She is a part-time instructor of photography at Columbia College Chicago. She received her MFA in photography from FAMU, Prague, and a Masters of Arts degree (expected 2006) in art history at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

EXHIBITION SPONSORS

Small Wars was made possible by a major gift from the Lannan Foundation. The exhibitions, presentations, and related programs of the MoCP are sponsored in part by the National Endowment for the Arts; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; The Mayer and Morris Kaplan Family Foundation; The Henrietta Lange Burk Fund; The Palmer Foundation; the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs/After School Matters; American Airlines, the official airlines of the MoCP, J&L Catering, the official caterers of MoCP, and our members.

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ABOUT MOCP

The Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP), a resident organization of Columbia College Chicago, is the only museum in the Midwest with an exclusive commitment to the medium of photography. By presenting projects and exhibitions that embrace a wide range of contemporary aesthetics and technologies, the Museum strives to communicate the value and significance of photographic images as expressions of human thought, imagination, and creativity.

Image:
An-My Lê
Mechanized Assault, from *29 Palms*, 2003
Courtesy Murray Guy Gallery, New York