

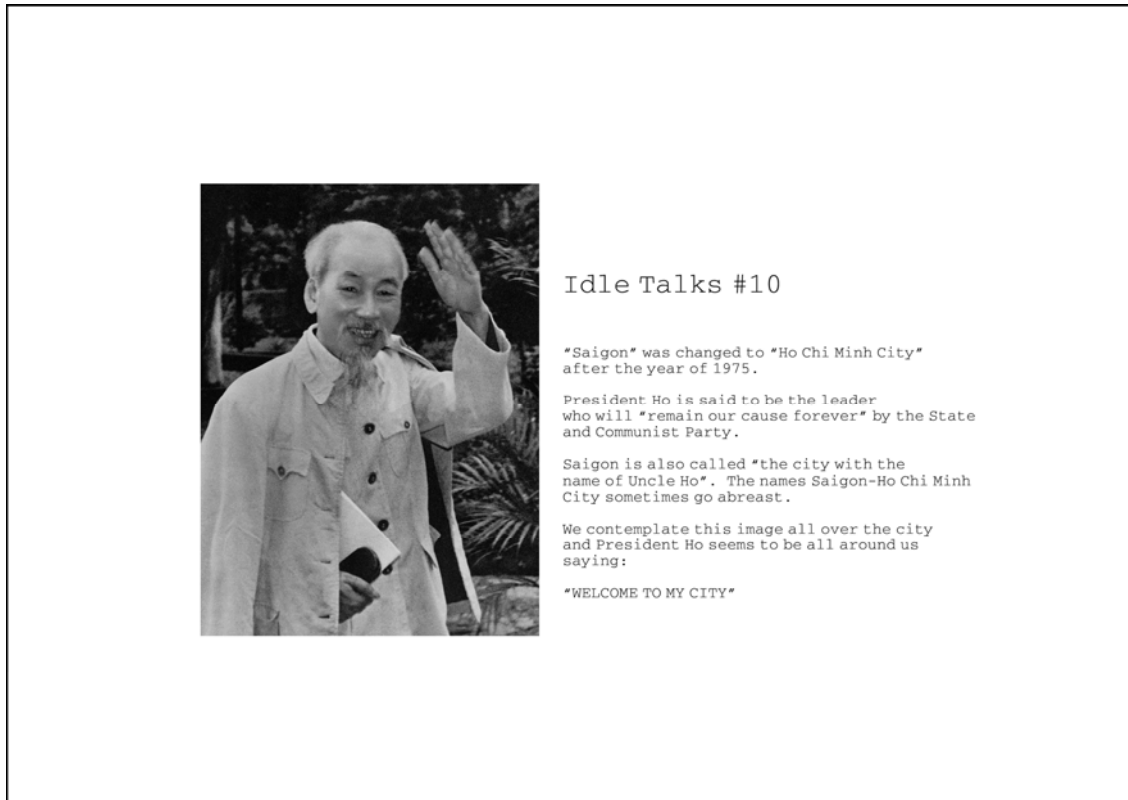
## **In the Age of Schizophrenia, Icebergs, and Things that Grip the Mind**

**Sue Hajdú, Visual artist, Curator, Writer.**

Encountering Saigon in the early 1990s, I was confronted with an unfamiliar concept of time in photography. I am not talking about moments, the tripping of shutters, the splattering of light onto a frame of film. No, I am referring to historical time. Time as epochs. Time that lingered thick and dense like heavy wedges or chunks that could barely be budged.

To understand Vietnamese notions of historical time just listen to the way they talk. Stories about recent history, about everyday lives in the city are usually prefaced with 'before 75' or 'after 75.' 'Modern times,' 'the information age,' even 'the 20<sup>th</sup> Century'—of course these times are parallel overlays, but they do not have much resonance. They are the poorer cousins in the conceptual vocabulary. Instead, the monumental demarcation line of historical time in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—'75.' The line things happened before and the line things happened after.

Things that happened after: capital left fairly much instantly. What remained was soon devalued. In the utopia of a new time, there was no need for time to hurry. The ideology of change was no longer about the flittery change of new fashions or the latest pop songs, but a different kind of change. Time could take as long as the new powers wanted it to. When I encountered this kind of time, I could no longer think in terms of seasons or years or decades. Instead, I was faced with the time of epochs that sludged heavily like massive icebergs. Time geared down into a slow motion horror. A concept



From *Idle Talks Series, #10*, by Ngo Dinh Truc © 2004

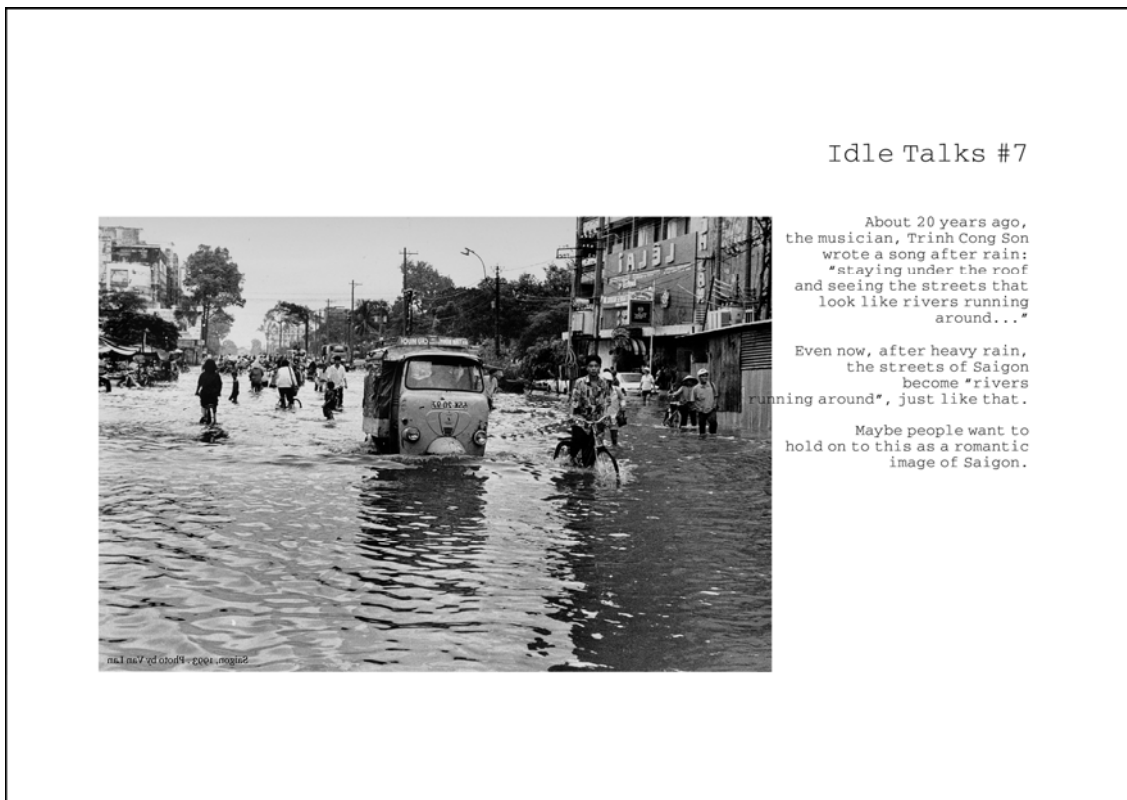
of time so alien to Westerners, except for perhaps those who experienced the longest wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

That horror could be read in physical minutiae—in archaic styles of typography, in bits of architectural language, in the design of shoes and shirt collars. My task as a temporal archaeologist was not a difficult one. Cholon—Saigon's massive Chinese district—was teeming with signifiers of the iceberg, but really, they were everywhere. One could easily find this kind of time—and photograph it. The horror was that there was nothing retro about this encounter at all. It was the real thing and not a style.

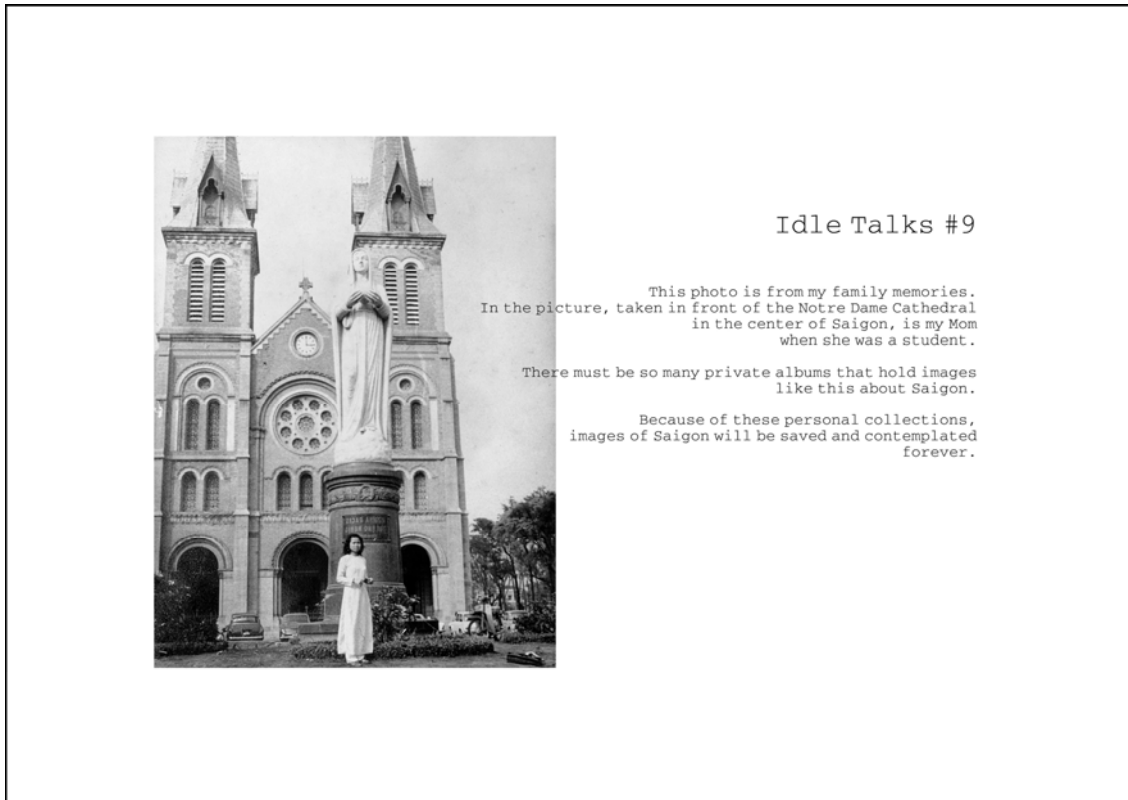
Now, a newer horror. Now even the stronghold of Cholon is giving way. Succumbing. A new ideology creeping in, manifest physically in lifestyle, in the use of color, in new physical structures, in the piling up of garbage. This is not to say that even back then some degree of schizophrenia did not exist. It intensified in the new millennium, as mobile phones, cheaper air tickets, the speed of email, and off-the-rack fashions from Korea and Hong Kong induced a new way of inhabiting time in a city whose layout of

space was essentially medieval, in a city where industrialization had barely happened. Pre-industrial, post-industrial, Wild East frontier town, teleconferencing, guild streets, Bruegel market town, one-horse-for-each-man town colliding with lets-all-become-happy-commuters town. The schizophrenia of multiple historical time periods. The speedboats of new time crashing in to the semiotic codes of the temporal iceberg; slowly melting in the tropical glare.

Here we find the work of five guys born in the 1970s. Into the womb of Saigon. Born into the ‘after 75’ town. They stand now at a vaguer demarcation line. How to articulate the desire to move into a new time—beyond photographic modernism, beyond national romanticism—as the schizophrenic superstructure shrieks behind their backs and the residue of the iceberg still grips the mind? We imagine that we are free, free thinkers, independent, unimpeded by the specters of minds or memories older than us. We are not.



From *Idle Talks Series, #7*, by Ngo Dinh Truc © 2004



From *Idle Talks Series, #9*, by Ngo Dinh Truc © 2004

Ngo Dinh Truc never imagined he would make work about Saigon. In contrast to the other photographers in this essay, he created the *Idle Talks Series* for a specific purpose: to participate in an exhibition that required a series of black and white photographs about his city. What to create in response? After some introspection, he realized that his feelings about this place where he has lived all his life were not about now, but about the time when he was little. The Saigon of his parents.

Truc reproduced ten well-known photographs of urban scenes or personages that have been used to represent Saigon over the years and then superimposed his own words as text. His work is an urban history of/in photography, looking back on itself. It is fully conscious of its functioning as a representation of the circular loop of this place, of the trauma that is embedded quietly in the idle stories he has written.

The physicality of iceberg time—its domestic setting—can be found in the bluish-green haze of *Apartment Block* by Lam Hieu Thuan. The building itself—constructed to house US military officers during the Vietnam War—is a physical anti-monument to a

brute and practical modernism, which was about to become even more brute and practical.

These flat regular modernist surfaces are punctuated and textured with evidence of life being led. Life spills across them, across their standardized boundaries. Life is strung out over balconies, it litters the stairwells, it occupies the corridors and common areas, with people relaxing, socializing, marrying. It engages in illegal activities as work and business infiltrate public space—a very Saigonese phenomenon. It cuts across the rules and regulations of management, until management makes a perfunctory response, and everyone scurries back in to their greenish-blue homes. Here is the energy of a populace on whose behalf the war was fought, these poor, the masses, the *sans-culottes*—a populace whose energy can barely be contained, the unruly masses.



From *Apartment Block*, by Lam Hieu Thuan © 2005

Loose undirected energy that spills all over the place, and ennui—the co-existence of these things always confounded me. Who was to inhabit such buildings and such wedges of time? The ex-soldiers back from re-education camps with their lust for life whittled away? The ex-soldiers coming back from Kampuchea with their legs blasted

away? Or just men, unemployed men, unemployable men at a time when unemployment rates were astronomically high and extended families could keep you anyway. Kept men, living kept lives ... they used to fill the cafes. You could be pretty darn poor, but still, a *café sua da* was yours, you were king of an un-illustrious leisured class, king of the *café sua da*. Its sticky condensed milk covers the bitterness of coffee pretty well. I used to know a lot of these men, they were my friends—we could be friends because I was a photographer who flew in for a few weeks—a photographic tourist who shared a similar sense of leisure (art that I could make at my own pace). I always marveled at the miasma of socioeconomics.

They say it's a Saigonese habit, to just sit like that, like the men in Nguyen Tuong Linh's series, *Jobless Café?* It's a particular kind of man. Tanned, boney, eyes wired.



From *Jobless Café?* by Nguyen Tuong Linh © 2005

In Vietnam, cafes are spaces for men. I think that there is even a saying, 'men in cafes, women in the market.' Women do not go to cafes. Or at least they did not used to. Now

there's a new breed, cruising out of their day spas and schmoozing into the cafes, mobile phones and pointy high heels, sipping cappuccinos and pecking at some dish; the business mafia wives in ex-pat cafes spitting distance from the Opera House. The men in Linh's cafe, they tend not to talk to each other. Most go alone. They do not talk to strangers. They sit in silence and look straight ahead. It's not like the gossipy women downtown. Linh's favorite café is on a quiet street. It's a head-space between home and some place else, like the feeling we sometimes get when sitting on a train or in a car, when we want the motion carrying us between origin and destination to go on forever. Just carry us, no thinking to do.

These men sit and stare. I do not know if they are happy or not. A schizophrenic Babel is erected around them as cranes drone day and night across Saigon. The city, forced to crumble, but always resurrecting itself—multiple metamorphoses, like in Truc's photographs. Emotional landmarks, sites and sighs of endearment as we cruise on our motorbikes—our favourite trading houses from the 1920s disappear overnight. Crappy electronics shops take their place. Random people, random objects, are tossed together. Chaotic juxtaposition. An inglorious resurrection of sorts.

Bui The Trung Nam aims to express this in his work. He puts 'random' images together: people, objects. His overt theme is the new city and the old city, however the work harbors a generalized anxiety about speed and change. The contemporary aesthetic of these photographs belies an anxiety about social transformation—the classic, oft-propagated idea that sways hearts so easily, that to change means to lose something, to lose one's authenticity, one's identity. Easy to feed off, and to feed with syrupy longings and trite national memory.

The anxiety of being unmoored—of not knowing what the nation will become in ten years time. The anxiety of no plan for the future. Market forces are great to get rich on but they do not provide the security of national plans and a mapped-out and knowable future. Nostalgia for futures, for pasts, for authenticity, for things that are Vietnamese and a time when people knew how to behave. When was this lost? What exactly is lost?



From *In the South of Cholon*, by Bui The Trung Nam © 2006

This clinging identity of food and customs and dress? Identity? Is this all it amounts to? Let me hypothesize for a moment, horrible as it may sound. Ask any man on the street, any noodle seller or *xe om* guy what it is to be who he is—a citizen in this city, in this country in this time. What could he articulate beyond a cliché? How much time does he spend scrutinizing these things? How much of his thinking is done for him already?



From *Untitled*, by Bui Huu Phuoc © 2004

Bui Huu Phuoc takes identity shots for a living. He is privy to a secret—he can see all the bits that fall out of the frame. And he sneaks a shot of these too. It would appear





From *Untitled*, by Bui Huu Phuoc © 2004

that true identity lies in these bits, and we smile at the irony, but Phuoc says that most people just walk in to the studio and behave the way they do in normal life. They do not put a lot of effort in to the ID shot. If this is the case, then those little 3x5cm portraits with the blue backgrounds truly *are* ID photos. No persona is being especially created.

We all know that cameras lie, they cut things out. This is less interesting than the fact that we willingly comply. Phuoc's clients seem happy to have their identities created out of these little bits—head and shoulders—to have themselves carved up, official, bland and wooden, while other bits hang loosely at the edges of the conformist blue. Regular shapes, barely contained mess and bits around the edges. It reminds me of the apartment blocks.

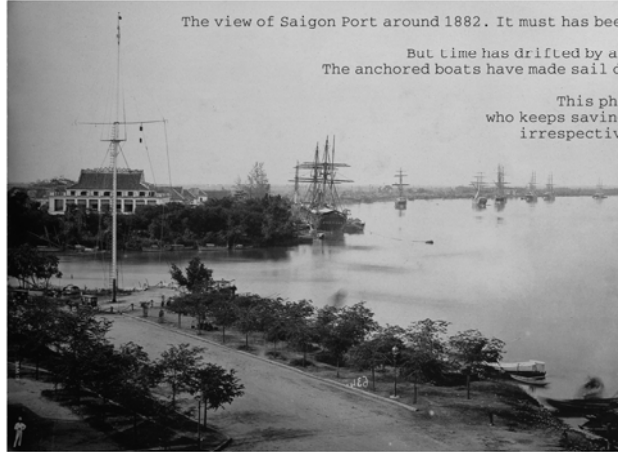
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These five photographers are young; they are attempting something new, yet all their works are an index of the iceberg. Perhaps this is inevitable. The iceberg was huge, stubborn, omnipresent, hypnotic; and we are not living in the age of heroic new beginnings. Mischievously teasing sometimes, or showing us the messy bits, their photographs are out of line. These guys are not concerned with the beautiful or the prescribed identity of the place. They are willing to scrutinize in a way that their fathers and their peers did not scrutinize. This scrutinizing is a kind of ice pick.

Vietnamese or not, we all know the easy and immediate definitions for this place. It is very simple to fall back in to circularity, in to a freeze-dried imagination. Whether we grip onto the trauma, or onto unchanging definitions, it is bad for us. Truc knows this. In *Idle Talks #1* he writes: 'This photo is like an eccentric who keeps saving everything perfectly, irrespective of the passage of time or the flow of water.' Perhaps herein lies the answer to the anxiety lurking in Nam's photographs.

As Truc explained to me: 'a photograph has the power to help us imagine something. Our experience of something before seeing a photo and after seeing it is always different.' These photographs beg for an expanded vision of possibilities in an age without ready answers. Perhaps at this new, more slippery historical juncture, Saigon and its inhabitants need to subject themselves to the scrutiny of an identity shot. And then take it from there.

## Idle Talks #1



The view of Saigon Port around 1882. It must have been a peaceful afternoon.

But time has drifted by and water has drifted by.  
The anchored boats have made sail downstream to the ocean.

This photo is like an eccentric  
who keeps saving everything perfectly,  
irrespective of the passage of time  
or the flow of water.

From *Idle Talks Series, #1*, by Ngo Dinh Truc © 2004

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*This essay was originally written to appear in a monograph of photographs by these photographers. Sadly, the book was never published. The essay was re-edited for publication in Portal during the author's residency at Bundanon, Australia, in June 2008. Many thanks to The Bundanon Trust Artist in Residence Program for this invaluable opportunity for focused work.*