# Off the Front. European Artists and the Vietnam War (Rome, 17–18 May 27)

Rome, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, May 17–18, 2027
Deadline: Dec 20, 2026

Gianlorenzo Chiaraluce

Off the Front. European Artists and the Vietnam War (1955–1975).

This workshop examines how the Vietnam War was interpreted, mediated, and mobilized across a range of European artistic practices that reflected critically on the geopolitical alignments the conflict brought into view.

The years between 1955 and 1975, from the aftermath of the First Indochina War to the fall of Saigon, coincide with some of the most radical transformations in European art and visual culture. If this period witnessed a profound shift in the very status of the artwork, the Vietnam War offers a prism through which to examine how emerging artistic practices negotiated the demands of political engagement, the circulation of images, and the question of artistic autonomy.
The Vietnam War was simultaneously a conflict over Vietnamese national reunification and sovereignty, and an international confrontation involving the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and allied nation-states. The strategic contours shifted substantially over time: from the 1954 Geneva Accords, through the intensification of US military intervention in 1964-65, the Tet Offensive in 1968, the expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos, to the withdrawal of US troops in 1973 and the fall of Saigon in April 1975. Its violence affected not only military forces but also Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian civilian populations through aerial bombing, forced displacement, counterinsurgency operations, and the extensive use of chemical defoliants.

In Cold War Europe, Western and Eastern governments adopted divergent positions, and artistic and intellectual responses took equally varied forms. The conflict was approached as a colonial war, a national liberation struggle, a Cold War confrontation or a symbol of American imperialism (Bradley and Young 2008; Nguyen 2024). It also served as an instrument through which local political tensions could be articulated and competing positions on sovereignty, decolonization, and international solidarity negotiated and made visible. Vietnam became part of a wider political vocabulary associated with Third Worldism and anti-imperialism, sustained by international conferences and initiatives that reverberated across Europe and beyond, such as the Russell Tribunal (1966-1967) and the International Vietnam Congress held in West Berlin (1968).

The unprecedented role of mass media in reporting from the battlefields made the relationship between politics and the visual unavoidable. Newsreels, television reports, photojournalism, and illustrated magazines brought images of the conflict into European public life to the point that it came to be described as a "living-room war," a formulation already used by critic and journalist

Michael J. Arlen in 1966 with reference to American television. These mediated forms of proximity raised questions about the ethics of spectatorship, the political uses of photographic and televisual coverage, and the possibility that sustained exposure to circulating imagery may itself prompt an impulse to intervene in that circulation, to resignify its materials and to produce further images in turn.

Relevant studies have examined European diplomatic, intellectual, and activist responses, particularly in France, Britain, West Germany, and Italy (Blang 2011; Montessoro 2004; Goscha and Vaïsse 2003). How these positions intersected with the transformations of artistic practice, however, remains less systematically explored. Existing accounts often treat European solidarity and anti-war mobilization primarily as political or social phenomena, without fully considering how Vietnam was translated into artistic languages, institutional critiques, collective forms, and interventions in public space.

Scholarship on the artistic response to the Vietnam War has expanded considerably in recent years, particularly in relation to the United States (Ho 2019), where military service, domestic politics, public opinion, and artistic production were directly affected. While American art criticism largely remained silent on the war as it unfolded, Lucy Lippard – one of the most active critics on the subject and herself a participant in the artists' protest movement – was among the first to provide a systematic account of its artistic legacy (1990). She described Vietnam as a "different war," assessed in terms of the intrinsic differences between the various parties who fought it, and one that marked a departure in the modern history of visual art, not least because a significant number of those who documented its events were themselves combatants.

This call, however, invites contributions that interrogate a further form of difference: that of those who stood outside the battlefield itself yet remained attentive to and troubled by its course. In what sense did the Vietnam War, despite being fought in a distant theatre, become for European artists an event of direct relevance? How did references to Vietnam inform European artistic debates on Third Worldism, anti-colonial struggle, and international solidarity? How were the categories that had emerged from national liberation and revolutionary movements translated, adapted, or contested within diverse artistic contexts? And how did engagement with Vietnam shape European artists’ understanding of political commitment, artistic autonomy, collective action, and institutional critique?

The war's differences also operate at the level of identity and memory. Lippard has argued that war must be continually rediscovered within a contemporary creative vocabulary. As Viet Thanh Nguyen has written (2016), this war suffers from a crisis of identity rooted in the very ways it was meant to be apprehended and remembered: wars, in his view, are always fought twice, once on the battlefield and once again in memory. Taken together, these observations suggest that the artistic categories, forms, and operations examined in this workshop remain relevant to the present and available for reactivation. In light of the conflicts currently unfolding on European territory and beyond, we welcome papers that critically reassess the forms of support and solidarity through which artists positioned themselves in relation to wars they experienced off the front. What kinds of knowledge can this memory produce today, especially once it has become part of a collective trauma?

We seek papers that move towards a critical interrogation of the categories, methods, and inter-

pretive frameworks through which the relationship between art and political conflict can be analyzed, prioritizing approaches that use case studies as a means of articulating broader methodological arguments. Contributions may address the following themes:

1. Institutional critique. To what extent did opposition to the Vietnam War inflect critiques of artistic institutions such as galleries, museums, and biennials? Which alternative forms of public intervention did it generate, including ephemeral actions, events, happenings, guerrilla theatre, festivals, demonstrations, and street works? What role did different institutional and political contexts play in shaping the possibilities of artistic dissent?

2. Images of the conflict. How were circulating images of the Vietnam War recontextualized and transformed through drawings, posters, flyers, and photomontages into artistic and activist objects?

3. Bringing the war home: solidarity, symbol, dissent. Through which formal and conceptual operations was a distant war localized, universalized, or recast as an allegory of domestic struggles? How did artists navigate the gap between political identification and historical difference, including the risks of simplification and appropriation?

4. Collaborative practices and the rethinking of authorship. In what ways did political commitment shape new models of artistic cooperation, collective production, and shared responsibility? At the same time, how did collective artistic forms negotiate the tensions between political organization and individual agency?

5. The role of European art criticism. How did critics, journals, and institutions react to the conflict? Were texts published, or exhibitions and editorial initiatives organized, explicitly in support with the Vietnamese people or in opposition to American policy?

6. Anti-war art and its visual idioms. What traces did the pressures of the period leave on individual artists' styles, turning them into vehicles of dissent, solidarity, or ambivalence? Were the formal and iconographic strategies that had been devised in response to the war repurposed in subsequent conflicts, or were they exhausted by the urgency from which they had arisen?

The workshop is organized by the Weddigen Department of the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome.
We invite proposals for 20-minute papers in English. To apply, please send an abstract of 1,000–1,500 words, a brief bibliography, and a short biography of no more than 150 words, combined in a single PDF, to Gianlorenzo Chiaraluce (gianlorenzo.chiaraluce@biblhertz.it) and Caterina Martinelli (caterina.martinelli@biblhertz.it) by December 20, 2026.
The workshop aims to minimize its carbon footprint and therefore discourages air travel. Online participation will be offered.

Scientific Organization: Gianlorenzo Chiaraluce and Caterina Martinelli

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