

LEGACY OF AN ECOCIDE:
Agent Orange Aftermath

Petronella J. Ytsma

Catherine G. Murphy Gallery
St. Catherine University
2004 Randolph Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55105

12 September - 28 October 2009

ALIFORM  PUBLISHING

First Edition

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All photography and silver gelatin prints by Petronella J.Ytsma 2007-2008

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Aliform Publishing
117 Warwick Street SE
Minneapolis, MN USA 55414
aliformgroup@gmail.com
www.aliformgroup.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009934092

Ytsma, Petronella J.
Legacy of an Ecocide: Agent Orange Aftermath
p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-9822784-0-6

1. Petronella J.Ytsma. 2. Agent Orange. 3. Vietnam. 4. Vietnam War. 5. Birth defects. I. Title.

Printed in the USA by Bolger, Inc., Minneapolis, MN

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOREWORD

Since its founding by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet, Saint Catherine University has been educating students to develop expertise not only within their specific disciplines, but to excel in the kind of interdisciplinary critical thinking and problem solving that are hallmarks of a liberal arts education. The tradition of active engagement in social justice and environmental issues brought to us by the Sisters of Saint Joseph is also an integral part of our heritage and is infused throughout our curriculum. It is no surprise, then, that Petronella Ytsma's work would be at home here and I am grateful for what she brings to the Saint Catherine's community. It is clear that her photographs were born of compassion and nurtured by research. As our collective cultural attention span seems to decrease, perhaps photography's greatest gift is to remind us of the usefulness of persistent memory by providing an open conduit to the past. In providing that link, Ytsma's work presents us with a devastatingly hard truth: what has been done here cannot be reversed, only endured. Making these photographs is a gesture that acknowledges that reality. We can only hope that it serves to dampen our apparent eagerness to continue making the same short-sighted mistakes. As a photographer and educator, I am thankful for the example that Ytsma provides. In this case it is an individual artist using her work to confront social, political, environmental, and geographic histories that is having an impact. Her actions are a reminder that at its core, striving for social justice is a human endeavor that frequently takes place on a human scale, face to face, outside the walls of institutions, NGOs, or legislative bodies.

Todd Deutsch
Associate Professor, Chair
Department of Art and Art History
Saint Catherine University

PROLOGUE

What Can Be Done?

The thing that strikes me right away when viewing Petronella Ytsma's photos is the look in many of the mother's eyes. I am very familiar with that tired, caring, concerned and loving look. I see it every time I meet the families that my organization works with in Viet Nam who are believed to be affected by Agent Orange, or more accurately by the 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD) that was an unnecessary contaminant of Agent Orange and some of the other herbicides that the US military sprayed for more than ten years throughout southern Viet Nam during the "American War". That look is often accompanied by the question "What will happen to my children when I die?" It is a heart wrenching question and one that unfortunately I do not have the answer to, but it is one that my organization, other non-governmental organizations and the Vietnamese government are trying to answer.

On each trip to Viet Nam I meet families such as those photographed so beautifully by Nell. Families that have lost a father or mother to cancer or some other unknown illness that are struggling to make ends meet. Single mothers whose husbands abandoned them when their child was born severely disabled. Parents who are unable to work, tend their fields or go to the market because they are home caring for one, two, three, and in some cases four or more children with disabilities. Children who suffer from birth defects and disabilities that with the right resources can benefit from surgery, adaptive equipment, and/or therapy enabling them to go to school, find a job, marry and have a 'normal life'. The hardest children to meet are those who have multiple severe birth defects that require round-the-clock care and who will be bed-ridden for their entire lives and those whose disabilities are such that they can only express themselves through their eyes in a language that often only their parents understand.

By the end of each trip to Viet Nam I am emotionally drained having witnessed so many parents struggle each day to find the psychological strength, physical energy, and financial resources to care for their children. But at the same time my faith in humanity is restored. I am always humbled by the spirit and courage of the parents I meet who face so many obstacles each day to care for their children without complaint, without placing blame. But most of all my faith in humanity is restored by the love that permeates the homes I visit. Love that is so vividly captured by Nell's camera.

While the children portrayed in these photographs may have been affected by the use of Agent Orange and other herbicides forty years ago during the war in Viet Nam, they are not 'Agent Orange Victims'. That classification so often repeated in my mind strips the children of their humanity and their individuality. As these photos depict these are children who are much loved, who are an integral part of their family's lives and their community. Their parents' wish for them is as with any other child, that they have the resources and opportunity to reach their full potential; that they do not suffer from pain, prejudice, and injustice; and most of all that their future is one where they are continued to be loved and cared for even after the parent has died.

Many people ask how I know who is a 'victim of Agent Orange'. There is a great deal of scientific

debate over what dioxin does or does not do to humans. Whereas scientists have found a direct connection between exposure to dioxin and birth defects, cancers and other illnesses in animal studies, researchers have not yet been able to determine with 100% accuracy what the impacts of 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD) are on humans. Part of the problem is that there have not been enough epidemiological studies – particularly studies of the rare diseases, birth defects and other conditions – that enable scientist to find statistically sufficient evidence of an association to dioxin exposure.

However, even with the limitations of the research on dioxin's affects that has been done to date, the US Environmental Protection Agency has determined that TCDD is a known human carcinogen. The U.S. Institutes of Medicine has found sufficient evidence of association between exposure to the herbicides used in the war in Viet Nam and soft-tissue sarcoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, Hodgkin's disease and chloracne. The IOM has also found that there is a limited or suggestive evidence of an association between exposure to the herbicides and laryngeal cancer, respiratory and prostate cancers, multiply myeloma, AL amyloidosis, peripheral neuropathy, Porphyria cutanea tarda, hypertension, and type II diabetes. The list of associations grows as more research is done, with Parkinson's disease and Ischemic heart disease recently added to the list. Vietnamese scientists have found similar health impacts of dioxin as well as digestive ailments, neural disease and skin diseases.

Where there is the most debate is whether or not exposure to the dioxin contaminated herbicides causes birth defects such as those found in the children in these photos. The IOM has found that there is a limited association between the herbicides and spina bifida in the offspring of male and female veterans. The US Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes that service in Viet Nam is associated with higher rates of seventeen other birth defects among the children of female US veterans. Vietnamese scientists have also found that there are high rates of premature births, miscarriages, still births, molar pregnancies and birth defects among women who live in the regions that were sprayed with the dioxin contaminated herbicides. The Vietnamese believe that the toxic herbicides used during the war are causing birth defects in a third generation of Vietnamese children.

While scientists can debate what role the toxic herbicides had on the incidence of birth defects in Viet Nam, for the work that my organization and others do to provide assistance to families such as those portrayed by Petronella it does not matter how they became disabled. What matters is what can be done to help.

There are currently not enough services in place to meet the needs of those affected. The majority of those with disabilities and birth defects are extremely poor. Households not only lose the earning potential of the ill or disabled family member but they also lose the earning potential of the caregivers. This keeps families in a cycle of poverty that they are unable to escape. A lack of financial resources makes health care, education and rehabilitation services out of reach for most families. Rural regions of the country, especially those that were hardest hit by the war, do not have the facilities and trained professionals to provide for the health and educational needs of disabled children.

However, the Vietnamese government, local and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals are doing what they can to assist Agent Orange/dioxin impacted families throughout Viet Nam. The Viet Nam Red Cross, the Viet Nam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA), churches, Buddhist pagodas, government agencies, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, orphanages, and Peace Villages throughout the country provide out-patient and residential care for disabled children. Unfortunately, due to lack of human and financial resources these programs are only able to reach a small percentage of those in need.

At long last, the US government is also starting to address the issue of Agent Orange in Viet Nam. Since 2005 the US has allocated a bit over \$8 million (\$2 million to the EPA) to address the impacts of Agent Orange in Viet Nam. Primarily the focus has been on helping the Vietnamese government to identify and then eventually clean-up the dioxin hotspot at the former US military base in Da Nang, although some of the funding has been granted to three NGOs to provide services to disabled children in Da Nang. This is a welcome change after decades of denial from the US government that these toxic herbicides had any impact at all in Viet Nam. However, the funding allocated to date is only a small fraction of what is needed to address the long term health and environmental impacts of the use of herbicides during by the US in the war in Viet Nam.

To truly address the impacts Agent Orange and the other herbicides used during the war in Viet Nam support is needed from all sectors – the US, Vietnamese and other foreign governments, foundations, and Vietnamese and international NGOs. Last, but not least, support is needed from individuals such as yourself who have had a chance to look into the eyes of the mothers, fathers, grandparents and children in these photographs and having done so can not now turn your back and walk away.

Susan Hammond, Director
War Legacies Project

INTRODUCTION

Opening The Gates

There are gates we dare not open, often because of fear, denial, guilt or shame. But when we are fortunately guided by a gentle gatekeeper we feel safe to explore neglected emotional terrain. This is how I have felt since I first met Petronella Ytsma and accompanied her on some of her visits to survivors of Agent Orange in Viet Nam.

My husband and I lived as working expats in Hanoi between September 2002 and April 2009. Through mutual friends, I was introduced to Ms. Ytsma. We both shared a passion for photography. More importantly, we shared common views of social responsibility, social justice and compassion towards the suffering.

Over the years, I have seen many photos of Agent Orange survivors. At one point, I had also considered doing such a project. But I could not overcome my own fears of confronting the pain and suffering of these parents and children. I realized that my own fears were partly attributed to previous images I had viewed that diminished these survivors as human beings with feelings, varying levels of capabilities, unique personalities and treatable disabilities.

By contrast, Petronella's photo essays are fearless in their confrontation with reality, and yet they are reverent, elegant, gentle and engaging. We, as visitors, are invited to meet these survivors and their families in their homes. They are intimate photos because she approached each survivor with a true sense of love and compassion and restraint when necessary.

On more than one occasion, a mother broke into tears as Nell embraced her into her arms. Later, Nell reflected, "More important than my photos is the gift of being a witness, so they know we care."

Her integrity as an artist and her sensitivity as a human being have thus created a significant collection of photos that open the gate.

Brenda Paik Sunoo

Photojournalist and Author of *Vietnam Moment* and *Seaweed and Shamans: Inheriting the Gifts of Grief*



ARTIST STATEMENT

Petronella J. Ytsma

My work is concerned with social justice and ecological issues from an artistic perspective. Primarily through the lens of my Hasselblad, which allows the 'unhurried visit', I explore remnants and legacy, memory and mirror, and reflect on the civil contracts inherent between image-maker, giver and viewer. Images from this body of work about intergenerational effects of Agent Orange on a specific population comprise a cautionary tale, a never-ending highly controversial one fraught with myriad complexities. As maker and viewer, they confirm my sense of being in the world and are for me the embodiment of a prayer.

From 1961 to 1971 the United States engaged in what can only be described as an ecocide - the most extensive and systematic use of chemical warfare in the history of mankind, for the stated purpose of defoliation in Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia. Much was done in secret, with full denial, and with little thought to long-term consequences on troops, local populations or environment. The most toxic of the chemicals employed was Agent Orange containing high levels of Dioxin. The Vietnamese interpret this as a reclamation chemical to 'bare the leaves of plants for making VN to become a place of fallow hill - empty house.' Estimates of 80 million litres (12 million gallons) were systematically used, impacting about 25% of the land in South Viet Nam.

It is also estimated that 4.8 million people were exposed, at least 3 million symptomatic and 85% of families having 2 or more children affected.

In 2007, and again in 2008, with the aid of a Minnesota State Arts Board grant, I spent several months in Viet Nam, researching and documenting issues surrounding Agent Orange/Dioxin. I visited various 'hot spots', interviewing government and community officials, 75 families and several long-term care facilities, documenting many children afflicted with a wide array of disabilities attributable to effects of Dioxin. These images are some of the portraits of second and third generations affected by this war that ended 38 years ago.

The relevancy of this work lies in the fact that we remain a hegemonic power heavily invested in war and chemical industrial complexes. We fool ourselves into believing that other people's children are not as precious, or human, as our own. These images serve both as a glimpse of the legacy we left, but more importantly, they are my testimony to the children, their families and to the mystery of what makes us human. For them and millions of others, that war is not over. They cannot close their eyes to it and simply move on. I believe it is vital that we meet their eyes and look into this mirror. May these images deny the wish to erase the past and 'the other' from memory.

LEGACY

Nguyen Ngoc Tho, b. 1993



Sinh, b. 2001
TuDu Hospital



Le Minh Thanh, b. 2003



Mother and Son
Nguyen Duc Tu, b. 1984



Third Generation
Nguyen Thi Chung, b. 1993



Untitled
Hoc Mon, 2008



Mother and Son
Le Van Thap, b. 1990



Father and Daughters
Thi Thuong, b. 1999
Thi Nhan, b. 2001



Father and Daughters

Lam Thi Nhap, b. 1969

Lam Thi Xa, b. 1971

Lam Thi Ca, b. 1973



Brothers

Tan Tri, b. 1989

Tan Han, b. 2000



Soldier

Phan Van Phi, b. 1940



Mother and Son
Do Van Len, b. 1977



Tran Do Tho Nguyen, b. 1980



Do Thi Kim Hai, b. 1976



Mother and Daughter
Ho Thi My Huyen, b. 2000



Excerpt from Written Testimony of Charles R. Bailey

Director, Special Initiative on Agent Orange/Dioxin, The Ford Foundation
To the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the
Global Environment, Hearing on “Agent Orange: What Efforts are Being Made To Address
The Continuing Impact of Dioxin in Vietnam?” Washington, D.C. June 4, 2009

From 1961 to 1971, U.S. military forces sprayed more than 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides on forests and crops in southern and central Vietnam. The campaign had both human and environmental consequences. The immediate effect was to defoliate and destroy vegetation over wide areas. The delayed impact came from dioxin, a highly toxic chemical in Agent Orange that is critically harmful to humans.

More than 35 years later, dioxin continues to pose significant health and safety concerns. It remains at dangerously high levels in and around former U.S. air bases where planes carrying the toxic spray were based, in some instances contaminating local food chains. A disturbingly high number of birth defects, cancers, and other diseases have struck Vietnamese veterans, civilians, their offspring and those now living in affected regions of Vietnam. Many American veterans of the campaign and their families have experienced health crises too.

For decades, the after-effects of dioxin remained an unresolved matter between the United States and Vietnam. The United States sought to avoid what appeared to be an open-ended liability; the Vietnamese were concerned that pushing too hard to address the matter might jeopardize their export-led growth strategy and entry into the World Trade Organization.

Now, a new spirit of cooperation is emerging between the two countries. The challenge of the Agent Orange legacy is to focus resources — funds and expertise — to ensure healthy families, and more particularly, to ensure opportunities for people with disabilities in Vietnam to maximize their capabilities and live with self-confidence and self-respect.

This challenge is also an opportunity to transform systems, not only through new facilities, new equipment and new training curricula, but also through concepts such as early detection and intervention, the case management system and inclusive education.

A Separate Reference Note

As efforts accelerate to solve the agent orange/dioxin legacy of the Vietnam War, we recommend that advocates pay careful attention to the two key words, “agent orange” and “dioxin.” These have sometimes been used incorrectly, or interchangeably, in the past.

Agent Orange – was one of a class of color-coded herbicides that US forces sprayed over the rural landscape in Vietnam to kill trees, shrubs and food crops over large areas. Agent orange was a 50/50 mixture of two individual herbicides, 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T. It remained toxic over a short

period — a scale of days or weeks — and then degraded. The production of agent orange was halted in the 1970s, existing stocks were destroyed and it is no longer used. The effects of Agent Orange do however persist in the form of ecologically degraded landscapes in parts of the hilly and mountainous areas of Vietnam. The pre-war forests that existed in most of these areas took hundreds of years to reach an ecologically-balanced mixture of large numbers of species of flora and fauna. Natural regeneration would take centuries to reproduce those landscapes. In addition, in some of the sprayed areas soil erosion and landslides have sharply lowered soil nutrient levels and altered the topographical features of the landscape. These changes have encouraged a few species of invasive grasses of low value. Active replanting with species of trees and shrubs which are ecologically viable and have economic value will require substantial and sustained long term investment.

Dioxin — is a member of the class of persistent organic pollutants which resulted from the deliberately accelerated production of 2,4,5-T, one of the components of agent orange. Dioxin can shorten the life of humans exposed to it and is associated with severe degradation of health in this and, potentially, future generations. Dioxin is toxic over a long period — a scale of many decades — and does not degrade readily. Dioxin is not absorbed by plants nor is it water soluble. It can attach to fine soil particles or sediment, which are then carried by water downstream and settle in the bottoms of ponds and lakes. It continues to adversely affect people who eat dioxin-contaminated fish, molluscs and fowl produced around a handful of point sources of dioxin called dioxin “hot spots.” Dioxin’s continuing impact can be slowed or halted by genetic counselling, cutting the dioxin exposure pathways in the human food chain and by environmental remediation of contaminated sites. The adverse effects of dioxin on human health can be ameliorated in most cases if detected early, but they cannot be fully corrected in some cases by any amount of time or money. If dioxin permanently alters the intricate internal cellular and chemical balances involved in maintaining good human health, there is serious risk of life-long health problems which may ultimately lead to mortality.

AGENT ORANGE

Some Resources

1. Việt Nam Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA)
Room 205-208 B17 Luong Dinh Cua,
Kim Lien, Dong Da Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (84-4) 357-4659 Fax: (84-4) 357-5658
E-mail: hnnccdevn@fpt.vn
<http://www.vava.org.vn>
2. Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign
P.O. Box 303, Prince Street, New York, NY 10012
E-mail: info@vn-agentorange.org
<http://www.vn-agentorange.org/donation.html>
Note: "We have no paid staff. 100% of all monies raised go to our work. Any donations beyond our expenses will go to the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin to provide for the needs of Agent Orange victims in Vietnam."
3. Ford Foundation,
Special Initiative on Agent Orange/Dioxin
Charles Bailey, Director
320 East 43rd Street
New York, New York
Tel: 212-573-4626
E-mail: Ford-AOInitiative@fordfound.org
<http://www.fordfound.org/about/signature/agentorange/>
issue
4. The War Legacies Project
144 Lower Bartonville Rd.
Chester, VT 05143
Tel: 917-991-4850
E-mail: shammond@warlegacies.org
<http://www.warlegacies.org>
5. East Meets West Foundation: The Foundation for Learning, Healing and Health in Vietnam
P.O. Box 29292
Oakland, CA 94604
Toll Free: 1-800-561-3378
Tel: 510-763-7045
Fax: 510-763-6545
<http://www.eastmeetswest.org>
6. Vietnam Red Cross (Hồ Chí Minh City office)
c/o Lily Hue
201 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai
District 1
Hồ Chí Minh City, Vietnam
Tel: 08-8324992
E-mail: aofund@fpt.vn
7. Vietnam Red Cross (Head Office)
Vo Dinh Vinh, MD, Ph.D
Director of Agent Orange Victims Fund (AGORAVIF)
82 Nguyen Du Street
Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: (84-4) 39-420-860
E-mail: vodinhvinhbttg@gmail.com
8. Làng Hòa Bình II
Bệnh viện Từ Dũ (Từ Dũ OB-GYN hospital)
284 Cong Quynh Street, District 1
Hồ Chí Minh, Vietnam
E-mail: phuongtan@pmail.vnn.vn
9. VNAH: Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped / Health and Education Volunteers
P.O. Box 6554, McLean, Virginia 22106 USA
Tel: 703-847-9582
Fax: 703-448-8207
E-mail: vnah1@aol.com
10. Vietnam Friendship Village Project USA, Inc.
P.O. Box 599
Arcata, CA 95518-0599 USA
Tel: 707-826-9197
<http://www.vietnamfriendship.org/vfvp-usa.htm>
11. Thanh Xuan Peace Village
Hanoi, Vietnam
Note: Established in 1991, the Thanh Xuan Peace Village provides a home and education for some 90 children and young people who are suffering from the effects of Agent Orange (ages range from 2 to 23). A main goal is integration into society if at all possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely fortunate to have been able to pursue a journey of this magnitude and it is impossible to enumerate or properly acknowledge all who have guided, encouraged and supported me these past years. It is my hope to have done justice to the faith you placed in me.

I am particularly grateful to St. Kate's for hosting both this exhibition and symposium, and for living strong their commitment to issues of social justice and world citizenry. Kathy Daniels, the Fine Arts department faculty and staff have been a joy to work with.

St. Paul's Mayor Chris Coleman, aiding one solitary individual, penned an introductory letter for the Vietnamese authorities which opened many doors, allowed me to meet the appropriate people who then accompanied me to the various villages, homes and care facilities. Brenda Paik Sunoo and her husband, Jan, opened their home and hearts in Hanoi, introduced me to Pham Tran Long, my interpreter, without whom I could not have gained such intimate access. Through them I met with many professionals who tirelessly work with issues of disability, health, education, housing and policy-making in Viet Nam, as well as many local citizens who honoured me with the title of 'Ba', the respected elder.

My family, my husband, Mark Sauer, and many dear friends unwaveringly gave freely of their time, eye and let me mine their expertise. Evelyn Payne Hatcher, well into her 90's, always recognized the civic responsibility of image-making for the common good and pushed me to continue. Terry Gydesen, Carol Lee Chase, Rebecca Peterson, Aki Shibata, Priscilla Briggs, Christopher Bohnet, Jay Miskowicz, Lauren Justice, Jeanne Frank, to name a few, all gave untold hours to the making of the catalogue, exhibition and taught me many truths about six degrees of separation. One's fate truly is linked to another's.

I remain grateful for the support of the Minnesota State Arts Board for making the return journey possible, the Foundation for the Exhibition of Photography, Robert Hedin at the Anderson Center in Red Wing, Minnesota who quietly and steadfastly has placed this work in public view. Also, a special thank you to Susan Hammond and Charles Bailey for their tireless work on human rights issues. I am honoured you are such an integral part of this work.

And finally, I wish to dedicate this work to the families who welcomed me into their homes, crawled into my heart and taught me about true strength, beauty and grace.



BIOGRAPHY

Petronella J. Ytsma, Photographer



Petronella J. Ytsma (b. 1948, Haarlem, Holland) has been a self-employed photographer since 1987, documenting artwork, art installations, and theater productions. She has worked as an instructor of photography at institutions such as Gustavus Adolphus and the University of Wisconsin River Falls. Her work has been shown in galleries and exhibitions nationally and internationally and is included in numerous collections. She has received various awards, including a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship, a CUE award, and Residency at the FEZ Galerie in Berlin, Germany. She holds graduate degrees from Michigan State University and University of Stockholm, Sweden. This Vietnam series represents only the most recent iteration of an exploration of other countries, cultures, and social issues. She lives on the west side of St. Paul, Minnesota in a converted 1910 fire station, and tends a garden full of tulips.



Thank you from the bottom of my heart.
Tận đáy lòng mình, tôi xin chân thành cảm ơn tất cả các quý vị.

The lotus is seen within the Vietnamese culture as a symbol of purity, strength and endurance, and as a reflection of their own ability to stay strong in the midst of adversity while maintaining their unique traditions.