Introduction

Joy Glidden

I am going to now give an introduction to our keynote speaker, Phong Bui, who has generously come here at this early hour. Maybe you're up early, Phong. But I will say I'm personally appreciative of Phong's decades-long relationship to artists.

So Phong is an artist, writer, independent curator and co-founder and publisher, artistic director of *The Brooklyn Rail*, Rail Editions, River Rail and Rail Curatorial Projects. Bui has organized more than 60 exhibitions since 2000, including Artists Need to Create at the Same Scale that Society has the Capacity to Destroy—brilliant—an ongoing curatorial project that was exhibited in 2019 as the official collateral event, the Venice Biennial, at Colby Museum in Waterville, Maine, and this year at 10 various venues across New York.

Since 2004, Bui was named one of the 100th most influential people in Brooklyn culture by Brooklyn Magazine. And in 2015, the New York Observer dubbed him Ringmaster of the Kings County Art World. From 2007 to 2010, he served as a curatorial advisor at MoMA PS1. He was a senior curator at Yale MFA, Columbia University MFA, University of Pennsylvania MFA, and has taught graduate seminars in MFA writing and criticism, and MFA photography, video and related media at the School of Visual Arts.

Bui was the recipient of the honorary doctorate from University Arts in 2020. 2020 and the American Academy of the Arts and Letters awards for the distinguished service to the arts in 2021. Bui is a board member of the International Association of Art Critics from 2007 to 2019 and continues on with Anthology Film Archive, Denison Hill, Fountain House, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, Mildred Lane, Monira Foundation, Second Shift Studio Space of St. Paul, The Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, Studio in a School, and the Third Rail. So I pass things over to you, Phong.

Keynote Address

Phong Bui

Thank you so much. Believe it or not, prior to the arrival of the Trump presidency, I did not have this. I still don't remember my phone number. And it was a disaster. As you know, one of my dear friends—a most respected, admiring friend—was the friend and philosopher Paul Virilio, who spent an entire life studying speed and technology. So we have to remember in 1933, when Hitler came to power, it was his minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, who prompted him to create cheap radios, millions of them, given

across every single household in Germany. So every German family can hear his message fast. So what —radio was good for Hitler? Twitter was good for Trump. So what am I doing in the business of communication without knowing how to even have an iPhone?

So it was on Tuesday after the day that he came on television, Monday, March 16, 2020, sometime like 2:30 p.m., I remember clearly, and he deployed the term social distancing. So that's when we launched the Rail's New Social Environment, launched that conversation the next day, which is a daily Zoom, which up to today we have amassed about 830 episodes.

So how do we deploy slowness of culture aggressively against the use of speed of such people? In any rate, one of the most pleasurable for me, thinking back now, was in the—God, how long was it? Maybe Thursday, March 21, 2003, I was having lunch with Leon Golub and Nancy Spero at Finale. And we saw the bombing of Baghdad, which immediately called to mind Turner, William Joseph Turner, two versions of the *Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, which I told both of them immediately.

Technical images have always come from made images. One thing about Leon and Nancy is in addition to the late art historian, who I have the fortune to be adopted almost like a Jewish grandson, namely the art historian Meyer Schapiro.

Beside Meyer and Leon, and I don't know who else I can imagine, maybe David Levi Strauss, who knew every single official, both North and South Vietnam. Be it Ho Chi Minh, be it the former president, Diem, who was assassinated, be it the vice president Ky, Vo Nguyen Giap, and whoever else. They knew every single thing about the Vietnam War, which impressed me a great deal. In any way, one of the most curious affinity or visual rapport, I would say, between technical images and made images is that it persists over time, at times quite overtly, at times very subtle, depending on the context of how the image is created, be it consciously or unconsciously.

Ever seen the invention of the printing press in mid-16th century, leading to the advent of photography in 19th century, and then followed with the invention of moving images in cinema, in film, which in turn gave birth to television, then eventually computer network technology that provided the internet and various forms of social media networks to the intersection that lie between information highways—super information highways—as well as we all imagine the global distribution of images can be so overwhelming.

Yet, in some specific instances, we can all feel the aura of such infinity generated from technical images that at once evoke the made images. Unfailingly, I would say. How can we forget, for example, the legendary writer and investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. You remember him? In the *New Yorker*, he—following the US invasion in Iraq in 2003—had disputed the Bush administration's false claims about Saddam Hussein's alleged stockpiled weapons and ties. You remember? To the terrorism that they were

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doing, which had been used to justify the invasion and to accommodate the first of the three disturbing articles on the abuse, torture at Abu Ghraib, published in the *New Yorker* on April 30th, 2004.

It was the photo, we all remember, of the hooded Iraqi prisoner named Abode Hussain Saad Faleh standing on the box with his two hands extending out with electric wires attached to his ten fingers, this very image—a technical image—captured our attention with great urgency, with great immediacy, at least at first in any rate.

Then we all come to realize—as an image, it stays firmly in our mind, partly because we tell ourselves that it's a familiar image, for we have seen it before, for it may take a few days, maybe weeks for us to realize that it has similar roots and resonances in previous technical images.

Also, say John Filo's photo of Mary Ann Vecchio, the name you might remember, the 14-year-old kneeling over her body, the body of her 20-year-old friend, Jeffrey Miller, who was shot by the Ohio National Guard during the protests on the Kent State University campus on May 4, 1970.

Or say Nick Ut—the Vietnamese journalist's photo of a nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running away from the aerial napalm bomb attack, which burned all her clothes in Trang Bang on June 8, 1972.

Haunting images. What we learned essentially was that the three technical images share a deep affinity to a made image from another time, namely the Pietà. This is extending out the body. It's not quite straight horizontally nor hanging from the cross, the crucifix, which means something else.

So what we learned is three images share this deep affinity to the made image from the older time, which I just mentioned: Pietà. It's a subject in Christian art depicting the blessed Virgin Mary cradling the mortal body of Jesus Christ after his descent from the cross. One famous example is of course Michelangelo: *La Madonna della Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. There are endless other examples of these resonances that have always been persistent throughout the history of art. And it has always been the artist's objective, I think, to explore as deeply as they can in order to channel, in order to recreate whatever comes closest to their truest expression in reality.

We all remember Giorgio Vasari in freshman college—Art History 101—who was a painter and architect during the Renaissance, of course, a contemporary of Raphael and Michelangelo. In 1550 he published *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, which was regarded as the first record of artists of his day and those who came before. Being thought of as the father of art history, Vasari embraced a mission of memory: to save the great artist from the horror, the "second death," as he wrote in the prologue. I'm reading now from the prologue.

"Pondering over this matter many a time in my own mind, and recognizing, from the example not only of the ancients but of the moderns as well, that the names of very many architects, sculptors, and painters,

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both old and modern, together with innumerable most beautiful works wrought by them, are going on being forgotten and destroyed little by little, and in such wise, in truth, that nothing can be foretold for them but a certain and wellnigh immediate death; and wishing to defend them as much as in me lies from this second death, and to preserve them as long as may be possible in the memory of the living…"

Unquote. So I just came back from Amsterdam a few days ago where I saw the 28 precious painting out of 35 known of the Vermeers to be real Vermeers at the Rijksmuseum. I was reminded immediately how during his lifetime Vermeer was a moderately successful provincial genre painter only recognized in Delft and The Hague. He died poor, leaving his wife in great debt. For he was born in 1632 and died in 1675—he was merely 43. Vermeer remained completely unknown for at least a good 211 years—would you believe it!—until there were three long articles was written on his works, in fact, by the French critic, Théophile Thoré-Bürger.

And the mere fact, the mere exceptional sensitivity to optical phenomena, which he realized early in his career—a mixture of genuine ultramarine pigment with tones of gray, usually composed of red, white, bone, black, and raw umber, for those of you who know this, in varying proportion, of course, lends the luminosity: the characteristic coolness of intense daylight, which cannot be attained otherwise. Mixtures of blue in the shadow of objects were to be used, employed systematically by the French impressionists, be it Monet, be it Degas, Renoir, Pissarro, among others. The second can be said of whom, similarly of his time, Piero della Francesca.

Piero, the great Piero, born in 1415, ever since his death in 1462, his work virtually fell into at least 344 years of obscurity. That's a long time. Until Charles Locke Eastlake. I love his book on materials for the artist, by the way. A painter of mild talent who arrived in Rome in 1816 and stayed till 1830, during which time he discovered Piero's work, painting in fresco, all life. Not only did he write on Piero, he also did acquire two Piero masterworks, which had the pleasure to go to London—the National Gallery—when he became the first director: namely the Baptism of Christ and the Nativity.

In Paris, at the same time, it was Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, who on a trip to Italy in 1846, having encountered Piero's work, be it The Resurrection in Sansepolcro, or The Legend of the True Cross in the Basilica of San Francesco, in Arezzo. Not only did he adopt the geometric stability in composition, along with the calmness in portraying the figures, he shared his enthusiasm and admiration for Piero among three generations of symbolists, impressionists, and post-impressionist painters, artists alike.

One can argue that Vincent van Gogh—two thousand plus letters, would you believe it?—he wrote, you had to remember this, in French, not in Dutch, which is to say similar to that of Franz Kafka, who chose to write in German, not in Czech. Why? It's very similar, it's very deliberate, it’s to ensure it would be read more widely than in their respective languages. It's like me writing in English, not Vietnamese, today. One can argue that Vincent Van Gogh—again, aspiration—one can suspect, I guess, that he, as we know, thought that if indeed his paintings might not get recognized whatsoever (for, as we know, his sell-down is

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so monumental); nevertheless, at least the letter would be worthy to be remembered as a record of his existence.

I had this long talk once with—in fact—Leo Steinberg about this, and he agreed with my thesis. He insisted that I should write a book on it. And I said, if I don't do anything else as a publisher of *The Rail*, I think I would pursue that path very happily. But at any rate, I think at this point we should mention to you all—I should mention to you that my approach and my perspective in preserving the artist's legacies is one that buttresses price upon aspects of writing, aspects of reading, curating as well as talking about art in various forms, say from the point of view of ecstatic pleasure, which I think is very important, ecstatic pleasure, art criticism, of course, art history, or simply writing catalog essays, monographs and so on, all of which I truly think have tremendous value to works of art despised of the ups and downs of how they get interpreted in which context, as we know tastes tend to change according to the time, and certainly to the prevailing superficiality of our popular culture with favors, novelty over enduring substances.

We all know that. In our time, especially leading to the arrival of Trump presidency, many of us have come to identify Trumpian America as a kind of a mirror image of Jacksonian America of 1830s. They both, for example, share a common distrust of any form of expertise, aggressively insistent that all important functions are simple enough to be performed by any ordinary citizen. And above all, they both have a strong desire to overthrow whatever they thought represented the establishment.

At this point, as we know, there have been some progress made in presenting works, showing works by older artists, especially older women artists, who haven't had a history of showing their work on a consistent basis. We can cite a few examples. For example, Carmen Herrera, who I know a long time, from 1965 to 1979—a good 14 years—did not even have one exhibit. And from 1979 to 2012—another good 33 years that Carmen had only seven exhibits, all of which were contextually associated with Latin American art.

It was her first exhibit orchestrated by my good friend, Carmen's fellow artist and longtime supporter, the remarkable Tony Bechara, who's now on the board of *The Rail*, that Carmen first did a consequential exhibit at Lisson Gallery: one of her paintings, I think, in 2012, at Lisson in London, and the other, her works on paper, also at Lisson in Milan in the following year, which essentially led immediately to her retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2016. Carmen was 101.

It was in the same year, 2016, that our other friend, Katherine Bradford—Kathy Bradford—at the age of 64, had her breakout exhibit at Canada Gallery. 2016 was also a good year for another fellow friend, our friend, the painter Stanley Whitney, with his critical success at Lisson also in London, as he just turned 60.

At this point, as we remember with two historic events, one, a worldwide protest that certainly was the largest single-day protest in the US history on January 21st, 2017, the day after the inauguration of

Donald Trump as US president, which was prompted by Trump's policy, position and rhetoric, which were considered misogynistic, hence representing the real threat to the rights of women. The other: the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis on May 25th, 2020, that spark, the largest racial justice protest in US history, at least since the civil rights movement. And it went far beyond the nation's border. It inspired global reckonings with racism.

These two events to a great extent have broadened opportunities for artists of cross-generation, artists of color, artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds, artists with wider gender spectrums, and so on.

As I mentioned earlier, the three criteria from which the sources of literature can be generated—again, however unpredictable the way in which works of art get shown—reviews of exhibits, catalog essays, small to big monographs, even films, and of course with our current technology, panel discussion on artist work can be recorded, be disseminated on YouTube for further viewership.

James Kalm is the master of that—the Kalm Report, Loren Munk. All of which, again, are generated from aesthetic pleasure, the love for art criticism, and the love for art history, as I mentioned over and over now, many times, all of which provided the validation, especially when the artists are no longer with us. Especially when members of the family show neither interest nor funds to even pay for storage space, rentals—with or without temperature control facilities.

I would like to close with one last example of the late Philip Guston, the great painter, whose retrospective Philip Guston Now is in its third installment at the National Gallery of Art in D .C., which was the joyful subject of my long meditation on his work, published as the web exclusive in *The Brooklyn Rail* last month. I urge you to read it. First of all, Guston's narrative was the most inspiring story of a struggling artist who had suffered a great deal throughout his life, from being Jewish, family tragedy he had gone through, to being a phenomenal autodidact who taught himself everything on his own, and whom having entered the pantheon of the New York school among his peers—including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Richard Pousette-Dart.

Only after a good three decades of being an abstract painter, Guston had his infamous show—exhibit in the winter of 1970—at Marlborough Gallery. You all remember that show. I was in labor camp, a few years old, so I couldn't see that. Shockingly, it was cartoon-like protest figures, which essentially derailed his entire career up to that day.

It's hard to believe. Not only did his new change in direction revealed everything personal in Guston's entire odyssey, it fused with everything the artist had reconfigured, supplemented in iconography, composition, among other pictorial means from art history, in this body of work. The exhibit garnered endless negative reviews, brought no sales, ended friendships, even with closest friends, which forced him eventually to return to teaching at Boston University until the very last day—well, at least the day of

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the reception of his opening of the retrospective in San Francisco at the Modern Art Museum on May 15, 1980. Guston died the following month on June 7, 1980.

If any artist like Guston who is fortunate enough to have a daughter like Musa Mayer, my dear friend, an author, an advocate, a 14 year breast cancer survivor who led a career as a mental health counselor to pursue an MFA in writing at Columbia University. And it was while she was there in school that she published her first book, the memoir Night Studio. You might have read it, published in 1988. I read it in one day and a half.

It was so compelling, which was more than just her own story, I would say, of growing up in the New York art world in the 1950s. It was rather Musa working through the profound sadness of a daughter who was neglected by Guston, the father, in order to understand Guston, the artist. She needed to separate the two. It is the latter, of course, that compelled her to dedicate her entire life ever since then to elevate the value of Guston's work.

As Nietzsche once said: “Only something which has no history is capable of being defined.” We ourselves anticipate history no more, no less than what Wittgenstein thought as a constant assemblance of reminders.

Thank you.

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