

George Burchett – *δημοκρατία (democracy)*, silkscreen print on Dó (zo) paper, 156 x 321 cm, 2014

George Burchett @ SLOT

14 December 2014 – 10 January 2015

<http://slotgallery.blogspot.com/>

SLOT: Art from Hanoi:

GEORGE BURCHETT 14 Dec 2014-10 Jan 2015

Hanoi born artist George Burchett was delivered into a world of experiences that have profoundly affected his world views¹, and in equal measure the way he makes and considers the function and purpose of art. Andre Vltchek, close friend and colleague of Burchett's wrote "those circumstances...convinced us that real art has to be engaged...and no matter what, it has to be about the people and for the people"²

I asked him about the genesis of the work displayed at SLOT, about the human figure in particular. He replied quite simply "this is my Father"³. In a further conversation he referred to his recent residency at the Muong Studio Art Centre, north of Hanoi.⁴ It was during one of his daily meals there with respected cultural historian and artist Phan Cam Thuong, when he was introduced to 1925-1945 historic drawings by Hanoi artists now in the private collection of Tira Vanichtheeranont.⁵ Appreciatively absorbing this publication, combined with having just accomplished an intense research project of his own, exhibiting his father's photographic works 1954-1966 at the esteemed Ho Chi Minh Museum⁶, suddenly unleashed into his sketchbooks (Burchett is a compulsive drawer) this 'figure in conical hat'. Prior to recent years, Burchett was not looking directly at his own family history in relation to his art making, but it was now all coming together. As he was quoted as saying in 2012 "Vietnam represents the history that my family shares..."⁷ It is clear to me that these histories are inextricable and that Burchett must explore these intertwined narratives, implications, and symbolisms to make sense of his own personal place and voice in amongst these intensely challenging and complex experiences.

On my final visit to his West Lake studio October 2014, he had just completed framing a new series of works on dzo paper⁸ using the above-mentioned figure in a conical hat, but also a straight shooting VC girl, and the finger of democracy (mis/spelt in Greek) – also included in SLOT. To me, this finger is represented as a violent and impertinent gesture and a symbol of tagging and monitoring, one of punishment and control...as Burchett explained "you know, the finger that gets inked". In these screen prints, sometimes in red, and again in white and black, the finger takes on various weighty intonations.

It was the rhythmic imperfections of the repeat patterning, and the obsessive nature of repetition that really excited me. Moreover, these screen printed images were not only presented as framed works but crept around his home including domestic and utilitarian surfaces – such as his wife's⁹ skirt, their sofa cushion covers...and stencilled, graffiti-like in the public laneway. Although a playful repeat patterning there is also a message of stubborn persistence and resistance, a kind of ironic play on propaganda to counter propaganda, but on a contradictory precipice of being commoditised (and why not). The repeat patterning functions like some kind of reminder, perhaps of our propensity to not learn from the past, or not even know the past - because of the hypocrisy and malfunctioning of democracy itself – and even in the present, to not know what we are looking at even when we are staring at it. The elemental form of the images tells me there is something basic I need to know, some missing key to a truth that will help explain the world.

There lingers an easy risk of the 'figure in conical hat' being read as 'just another figure in conical hat'. Perhaps Burchett is toying with this risk. It is arguably such an over exposed, vermin-like, exhausted stereotype...or but is it? What does it really stand for? How do we truly read a symbol across time, place, personal and cultural histories? Each viewer can only respond to it in a way loaded with their own personal history and perspectives. Unless we can usurp and overturn that – by sharing stories and experiences, by digging beneath the surface – we are condemned to our own blind spots. But most powerful of all to me perhaps is this, as I view it, memoriam to the life of his Father, a celebration of his love for "my people"¹⁰, and ultimately a testimony to intergenerational effects of war and conflict. It reminds me of Vltchek's more pointed statement describing Burchett's Father's case: a demonstration of "how 'dangerous' the truth is, how vindictive the Western regime is, and how powerful one single person can be, if armed with talent, courage and integrity".¹¹

Mai Nguyen-Long

Bulli-based artist with a special interest in art from Hanoi

25 November 2014

Thank you to George Burchett for this privilege of exhibiting his work. I urge readers to refer to the two articles attached to gain further insight into the context of his practice (<http://www.georgeburchett.com/>). Thank you also to SLOT for their tremendous generosity and support in making this humble "Art from Hanoi" project possible (<http://slotgallery.blogspot.com.au/>).

¹ It would be impossible for me to do justice to these experiences in a small summary, and I therefore attach two relevant articles which better illustrate some of these details: (1) Time / Lines solo show exhibited a Mori Gallery Sydney 3-24 February 2010 text and images by George Burchett (2) Andre Vltchek, CounterPunch (online) Weekend Edition Dec 7-9 2012 “Burchett’s in Vietnam: ‘Enemies of Australian State’ and Hanoi”

² Andre Vltchek, CounterPunch (online) Weekend Edition Dec 7-9 2012 “Burchett’s in Vietnam: ‘Enemies of Australian State’ and Hanoi”

³ Image of George Burchett’s father: photo page 37 Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh as seen by Journalist Wilfred Burchett © George Burchett and The Gioi Publishers 2011 <see late 50s / early 60s photo below>

⁴ Located in Hoa Binh, established by artist Vu Duc Hieu

⁵ Important and Priceless Works of Vietnamese Modern Arts as Historic Sketches, Political Comics and Drawings by Painters from Indochina School of Fine Arts, Hanoi 1925-1945 - from the Collection of Tira Vanichtheeranont; Authors: Phan Cam Thuong, Nguyen Anh Tuan, and Tira Vanichtheeranont; Nha Xuat Ban My Thuat 2010

⁶ Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh as seen by Journalist Wilfred Burchett; © George Burchett and The Gioi Publishers 2011.; This publication accompanied an exhibition displaying a selection of 100 of Wilfred Burchett’s photographic works dating from 1954-1966.

⁷ Andre Vltchek 2012 CounterPunch

⁸ Dzo paper:

⁹ Burchett’s wife, Ilza Burchett is also an accomplished artist <http://www.ilzaburchett.com/>

¹⁰ Andre Vltchek 2012 in CounterPunch, George Burchett uses the words “my people” when referring to Vietnamese men and women

¹¹ Andre Vltchek 2012 CounterPunch



Image: George Burchett’s Father: page 37 Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh as seen by Journalist Wilfred Burchett © George Burchett and The Gioi Publishers 2011

George Burchett

time/lines

to be opened by

John Pilger

musical performance by

Jon Rose

Opening: Wednesday 3 February 2010 6 – 8pm

Exhibition: 3 February - 24 February 2010

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neri gallery, 3.2.10, Jon Rose



pilger



s. nasht



morl, 3.2.10

e. nasht





neri gallery, 3.2.10



george burchett & john pilger

meri gallery, 3.2.10



The Indonesian Massacre and the CIA

by Ralph McGehee

Covert Action Quarterly, Fall 1979

In my original article (The Nation, April 11, 1981) I tried to explain, through the constraints of the secrecy agreement and the deletions by the CIA's review board, one aspect of the Agency's successful effort to manipulate events in Indonesia in late 1965 and early 1966. The article was based on a classified CIA study of which I was custodian while working in the International Communism Branch of the CIA's Counterintelligence Staff. The Nation joined with me in a lawsuit by the ACLU to gain release of the deleted portions of the article. The Agency claims it cannot delete unclassified lies or speculations. By heavily censoring my article, it effectively admitted to an Agency role in the persecution.

In a recent story in the San Francisco Examiner, researcher Kathy Kadane quotes CIA and State department officials who admit compiling lists of names of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), making those lists available to the Indonesian military, and checking names off as people were "eliminated." The killings were part of a massive bloodletting after an abortive coup attempt taking, according to various estimates, between 250,000 and 1,000,000 lives and ultimately led to the overthrow of President Sukarno's government.

Since then a debate has simmered over what happened. A recent study based on information from former Johnson administration officials, asserted that for months the U.S. "did their damndest" through public pressure and more discreet methods, to prod the Indonesian army to move against Sukarno without success.

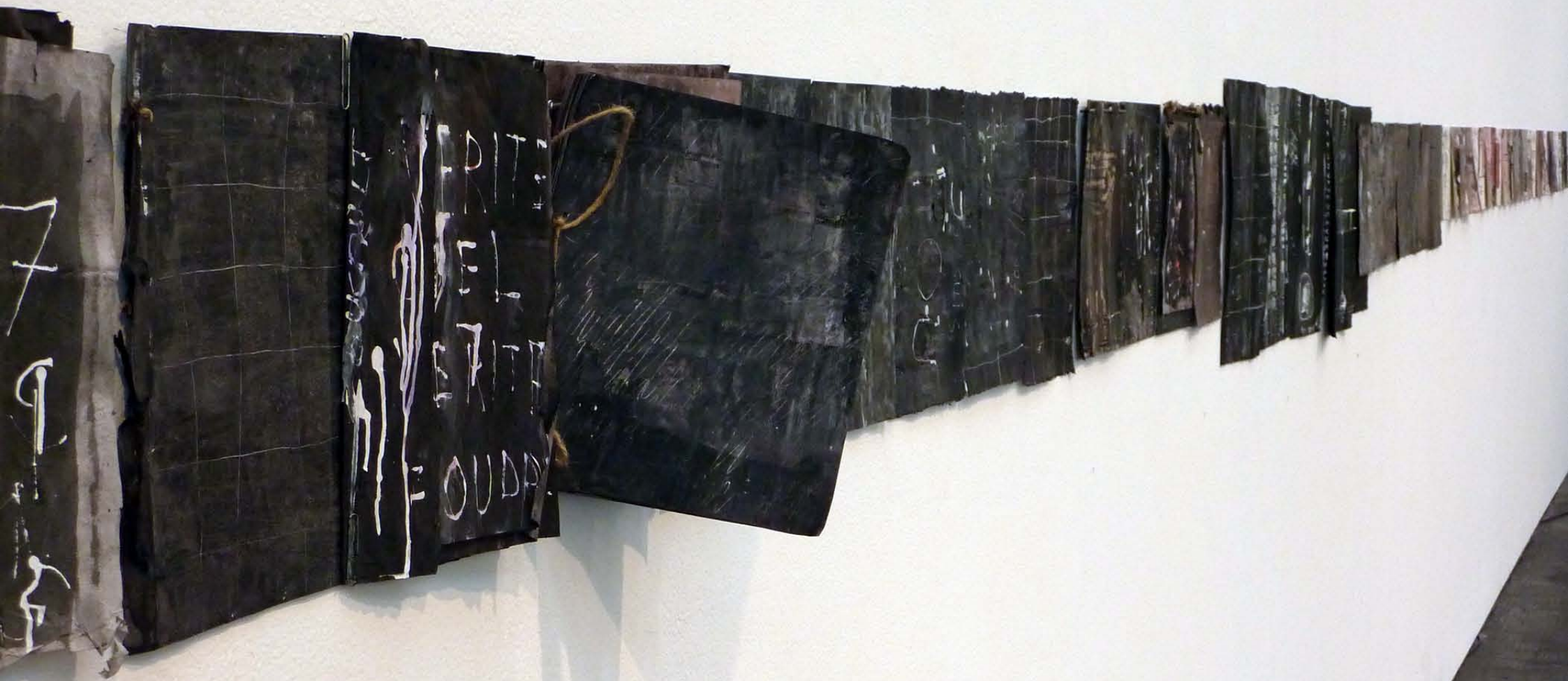
Debate continues over the origins of the coup attempt called Gestapu. Was it the result of CIA machinations, a takeover maneuver by General Suharto, a revolt by leftist officers under the control of the PKI, a power play by the People's

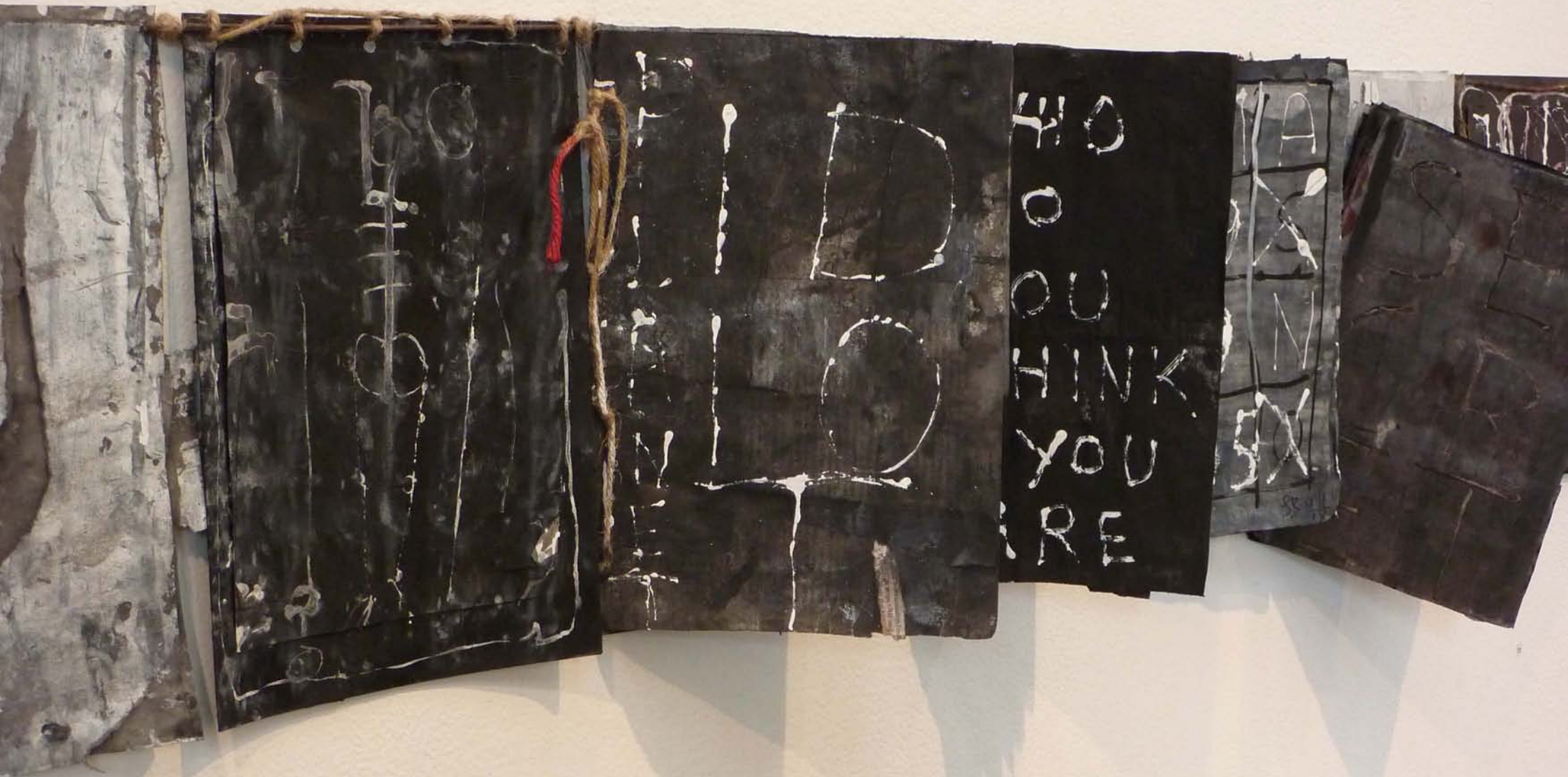














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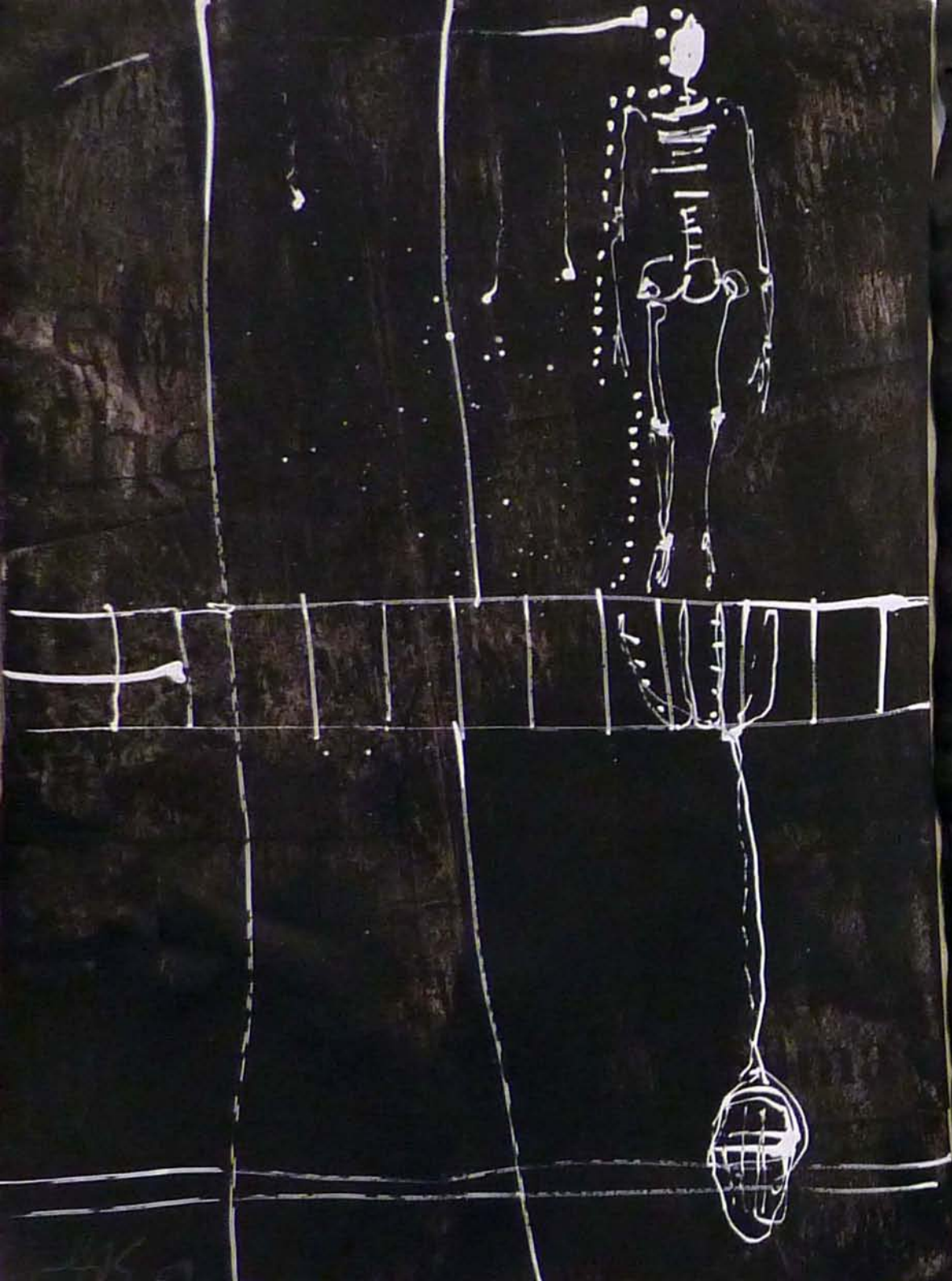


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When
we are all
guilty

+ that will be
true

democracy

Albert Camus



DELIBERATOR



SPOOKS

"We all have lain on us today
the duty to be prepared, to be strong.

Not with the strength of the bully,
but with the strength of a deliberator.

The world needs
the United States of America,
the world needs the British peoples
of the world, the world needs
every scrap of democratic strength.

May all that you stand for, and that
we stand for, be preserved
under the providence of God
for the happiness of mankind."

Robert Menzies

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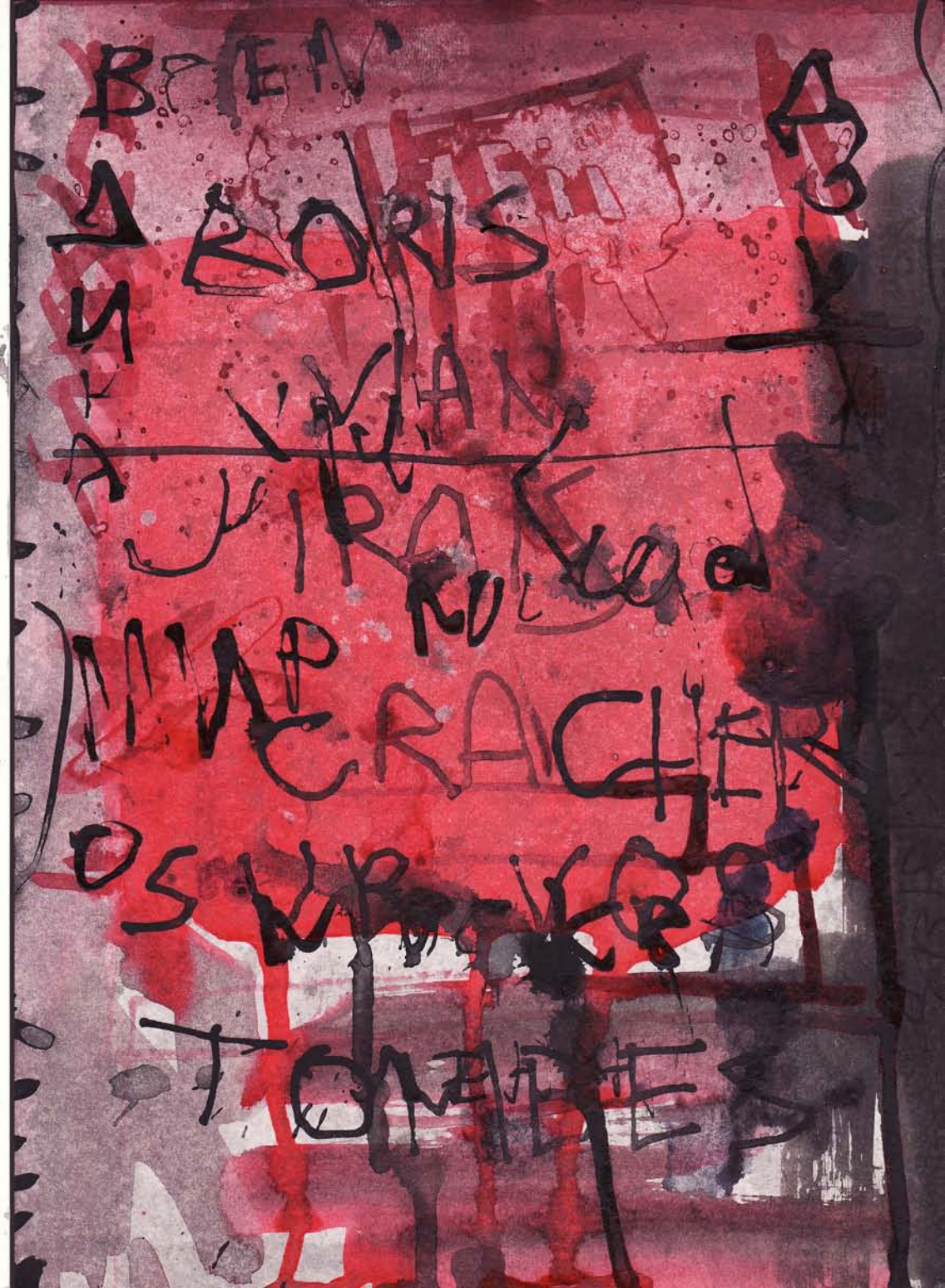
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NOBATAPIN ENFANT
DEUX PALAIS
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CONJUGATE

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J'irais cracher sur
vos tombes

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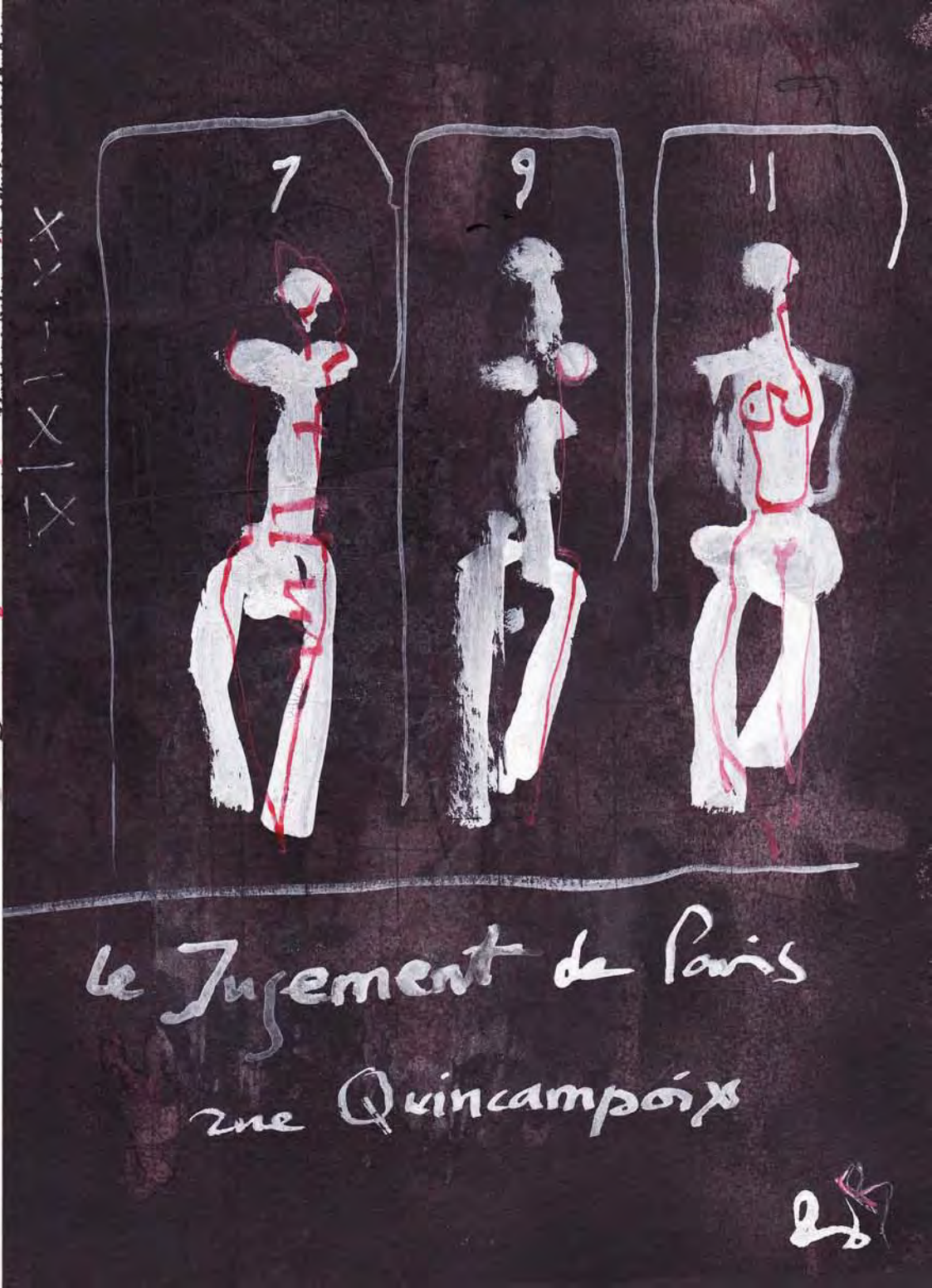
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John Law ~~1756~~
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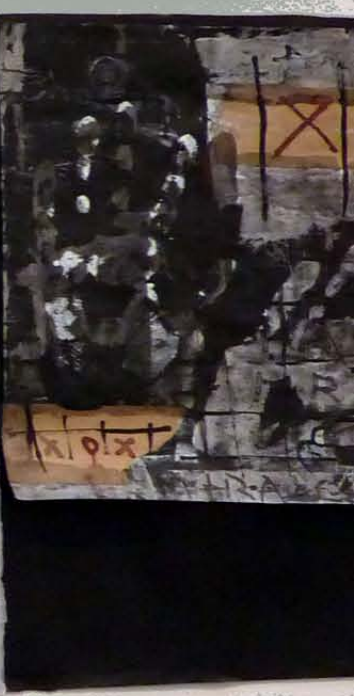
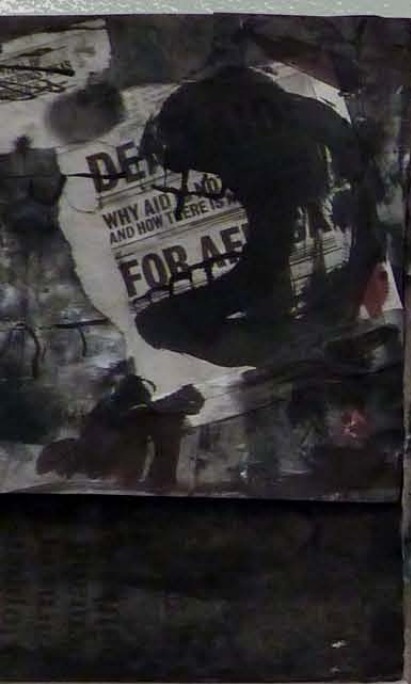
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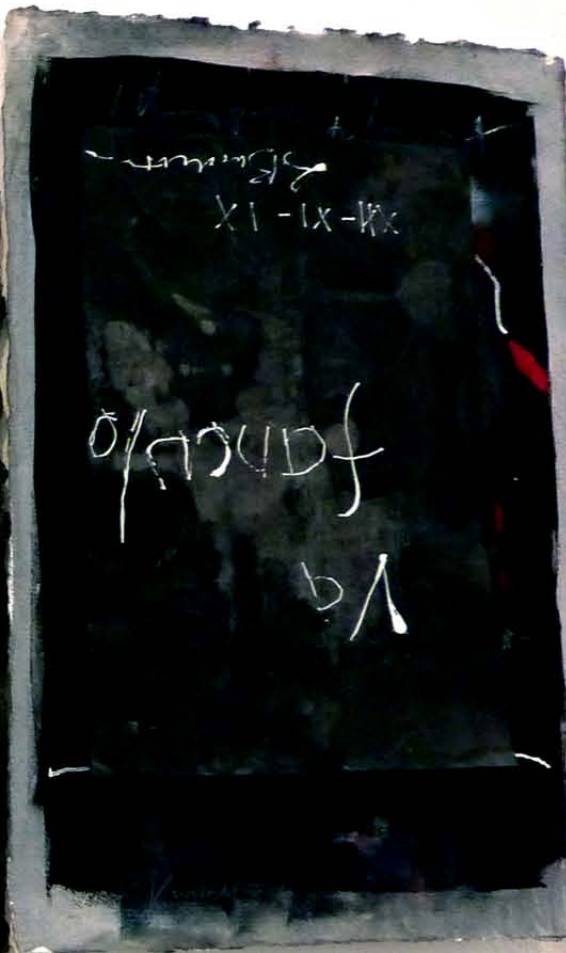
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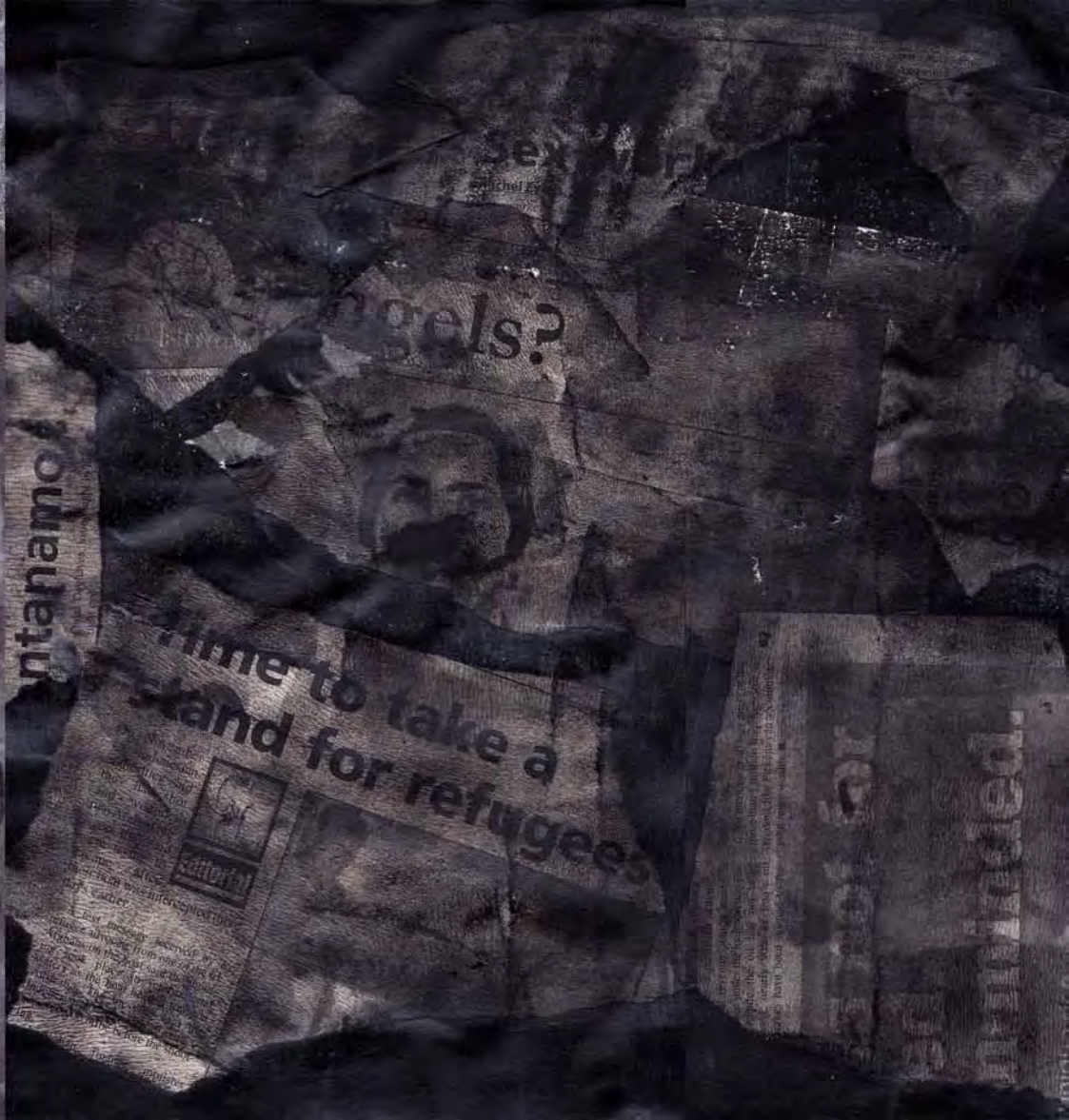




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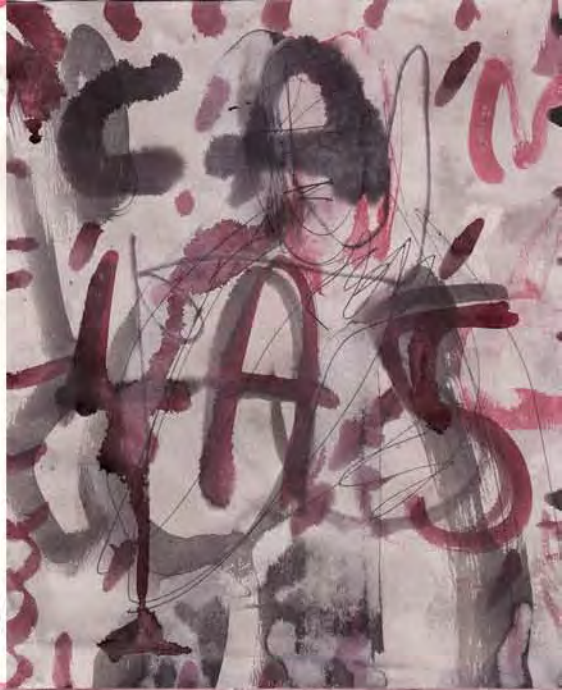
FREEDOM: THE MOST DANGEROUS IDEA OF ALL

BERMAINE GREEN
4 OCTOBER, 11AM

Her wide-ranging talk 'Green' will be for scholars and journalists alike to hear one of the most undisciplined 'analysts' of the world's problems.













THE TEN PRINCIPLES OF BANDUNG

by George Burchett

In May 2009 I visited the Museum Of The Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia.

In April 1955, the heads of state of 29 Asian and African countries¹, many of them newly independent, gathered in Bandung to chart a course for peaceful co-existence and mutual respect between all nations. The conference was hosted by Indonesia's President Soekarno. The museum commemorates this important and mostly forgotten event.

At the end of the Conference, the delegates issued a ten-point declaration known as The Ten Principles of Bandung. They are:

1. Respect for fundamental human rights and for the purpose and principles of the Charter of the United Nations;
2. Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries,
3. Recognise the equality of all races and the equality of all nations,
4. Non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries,
5. Respect for the right of each nation to defend itself singly or collectively, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
6. (a) Abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve any particular interests of the big powers.
(b) Abstention by any countries from exerting, pressures on other countries.
7. Refraining from acts or threats of aggression or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any countries.
8. Settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means, such as negotiation, conciliation, arbitration or judicial settlement as well as other peaceful means of the parties' own choice, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.
9. Promotion for mutual interest and cooperation.
10. Respect for justice and international obligations.

All ten points sound eminently sensible to me.

I was born one month after the Bandung Conference, in Hanoi, Vietnam, one of the participating countries. 1955 was a good year, filled with optimism and promises. The day I was born, the last French colonial troops left Hanoi. Vietnam was finally free and independent, although temporarily divided. In accordance with the Geneva Agreements of 1954, elections were to be held in both North and South, and the country was to be united again. Everyone expected Ho Chi Minh to win the elections in a landslide. One imperial power and its allies wanted to prevent this at all costs. Vietnam was eventually re-united in 1975, not through the ballot box but through armed struggle. We all know at what cost. Millions of people died, millions of bombs were dropped, millions of tonnes of toxic chemicals released and countless atrocities committed because neither the 1954 Geneva accords nor the 1955 Ten

Principles of Bandung were respected by the world champions of “freedom and democracy”.

My father, Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett – an incurable optimist despite witnessing the horrors of the Great Depression, Nazi Germany, World War II, Hiroshima and Korea – was in Bandung in April 1955. There is a very nice photo of him in the Museum. There is also a photo of the *Kashmir Princess*, an airplane chartered by the Chinese government to fly China’s Premier Zhou Enlai to the conference. It was blown up in mid air by an American-made bomb planted by a Taiwanese agent in Hong Kong.² Luckily, Zhou Enlai had a last minute change of plan and flew on a different plane. My dad was also supposed to be on the *Kashmir Princess*, but eventually flew direct from Hanoi with the Vietnamese delegation led by Premier Pham Van Dong.



Wilfred Burchett (right) in Bandung, 1955

On his way back from Bandung, as he was crossing from China into Vietnam, his passport mysteriously disappeared.³ When he applied for a replacement, the Australian government refused to issue him with one. That refusal lasted 17 years. For good measure, Australia’s then Prime Minister Robert Menzies personally decided that I was not to be registered as an Australian citizen, overruling advice that this was illegal.⁴



The wreckage of the Kashmir Princess,
Bandung Museum Of The Asian-African Conference

From 1957 to 1965, we lived in Moscow. These were good years for the Soviet Union. In 1956 Khrushchev had denounced Stalin's crimes at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR, released political prisoners and ushered in an era of openness and peaceful cohabitation. Asia, Africa and Latin America were shaking off their colonial shackles and getting rid of fascist dictatorships. I was on the Red Square in 1961 to greet Fidel Castro. The Soviets were conquering space and humanity was marching towards progress and a world free of oppression, poverty, disease, racism and all the other ills that have plagued the world since the dark ages. Vietnam was resisting American imperialism and my dad was reporting the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people from the jungles of South Vietnam. There was no doubt in my young mind that with the support of the Soviet Union and all of progressive humanity, Vietnam and all of Asia, Africa and Latin America would be liberated from oppression and poverty. That's how the world looked to me back then: bright and beautiful.



My grandfather, George Burchett, presents Yuri Gagarin with a boomerang, Moscow 1961 (The Australian Government refused to allow my father to visit his dying father and then refused to allow him to attend his funeral)

Mr George Burchett presenting Yuri Gagarin with a boomerang on behalf of Australian peace workers, with the hope that he and his fellow compatriots in their journeyings to the stars, will, like the boomerang, always return to earth safely and to a world at peace.

In 1965, we moved to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, so that my dad could be close to Vietnam and as far away from Moscow winters as possible. As I later learned, he was getting extremely disillusioned with the USSR and its lukewarm support for the resistance in South Vietnam. He also sided with China when the Sino-Soviet split occurred.

Cambodia in 1965 was pure heaven, despite the escalating war in neighbouring Vietnam. 1965 marked the beginning of what Tariq Ali called "the glorious decade".⁵ Yes, there was war, misery and oppression, but there was also tremendous international solidarity, an explosion of hope, optimism, and creativity. The Civil Rights movement in the US and the growing anti-war movement worldwide were energising people across the planet. Revolution

was in the air and it had the faces of Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Patrice Lumumba, Mao Tse Tung, Martin Luther King and other legendary revolutionaries and freedom-fighters. My dad was at the centre of the anti-war movement. His books and dispatches from Indochina, published weekly in the New York *National Guardian* and reprinted around the world, were informing the world about the struggle of the people of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The world was still full of optimism, hope and passion. It also looked incredibly sexy, what with rock & roll, flower power and all. It was a great time to be a kid!



My mum and me in the woods around Moscow, September 1961,
Photo [Roger Pic](#)

In 1969, we moved to Paris where negotiations to end the war in Vietnam had started. Post May 68 Paris was the coolest place on earth. The anti-war movement was at its strongest. Everything seemed possible: Vietnam was winning the war. The USA was talking peace (while still bombing Hanoi). On 18 March 1970, my dad's old friend Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia (also present at Bandung) was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup. He declared from Moscow that he was going to fight back and set up his resistance headquarters in Beijing.⁶ Sihanouk is now again king of Cambodia. But at what price? Millions died in the US-imposed war, in US carpet bombings and the ensuing Khmer Rouge genocide.

In 1975, North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam won the war against the USA. The country was finally reunited. And it was swiftly declared an enemy of humanity, ostracized by the international community and denounced as a Stalinist state by sections of the Left. When Vietnam liberated Cambodia from the genocidal Khmer Rouge, there was an international uproar. Joan Baez marched to the Thai-Khmer border to demand the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia and the return of the legitimate government of Democratic Kampuchea – meaning the Khmer

Rouge. The US, UK, Australia, China, Thailand and others backed and armed Pol Pot.

I don't know what evil pact Henry Kissinger made with the Chinese leadership in the 70s. But it worked. Not only did Vietnam become an international pariah, but the western Left split, disintegrated and made itself irrelevant.

Communists and independent voices, like my dad's, who supported Vietnam, were labelled "Stalinists" and stooges of Moscow. Maoists, Trotskyists and assorted leftists were denouncing Vietnamese imperialism. Quite a few were later reborn as neo-cons, clamouring for Iraqi blood.

In France, former Maoists, re-branded themselves as "nouveaux philosophes" and became the new darlings of the French media and Paris salons.

The spoiled heirs of rich families, like the ineffable Bernard Henry-Lévy, got bored or disillusioned with their former "revolutionary" activities and were pontificating about human rights – including Pol Pot's democratic right to return to his killing fields.

The bourgeoisie was reassured. Their sons and daughters had finally grown out of the "revolution" and were denouncing its evils.

So that was the end of the "glorious decade". My dad went on reporting the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and the wars in Angola and Mozambique, but by that time he was labelled a Stalinist, a stooge of Moscow, a KGB agent etc. by both Right and Left. He resigned from the New York *Guardian*, for which he'd been writing weekly for 25 years, because the editors either refused to publish or censored his reports from Vietnam and Cambodia, in which he denounced Chinese aggression against Vietnam and her support for the murderous Khmer Rouge. The *Guardian*, like much of the Left, was toeing the pro-China, anti-Soviet and anti-Vietnam line.

In 1983 my dad finished typing the footnotes for his last book, *Shadows Of Hiroshima*, collapsed and died shortly after. *Shadows Of Hiroshima* was his final contribution to the anti-nuclear and peace movements, based on his experience as the first Western correspondent to report from Hiroshima after the atomic bomb was dropped. His famous *I Write This As A Warning To The World* from atom-bombed Hiroshima still resonates today.⁸

In 1985 I moved to Australia with my wife Ilza and our son Graham to reclaim my birthrights and give our son a warm place under the sun to grow up in. We spent our first six months in the Aboriginal Community of Maningrida, in Arnhem Land, in the Australian Northern Territory. It was there that I learned from Rupert Murdoch's *The Australian* what an evil and despicable man my father was in a series of long articles written by a former Australian "friend" of his. According to these stories, my father was a KGB agent, an agent of Hanoi, Beijing and Pyongyang, an alcoholic and fornicator, a lover of dog meat and other such nonsense. Simultaneously, Australia's "leading public intellectual" published a long pompous piece in the right wing (and CIA-

funded) magazine *Quadrant* denouncing him as a KGB agent and traitor to his country.⁷ Suddenly the world I knew and loved became evil, communism and socialism became dirty words, the USSR was evil, Vietnam was evil, Wilfred Burchett was evil, the Khmer Rouge were evil, but deserved support because they were less evil than the Vietnamese, who had freed the Cambodian people from its killers and enslavers.

For the sake of sanity, I simply switched off. “Let historians sort it out”, I thought. And they did, brilliantly.⁹ But the media doesn’t like history, it likes catchy headlines like “Comrade Burchett Was A Party Hack” or “Burchett: Moral Traitor To Western Civilisation” and other such rubbish.

In 2006 I returned to Hanoi after an almost five decade absence. And it instantly felt like home. Suddenly I was surrounded by friendliness and love. I was again part of the winning team, the team that kicked French colonialists and American imperialists out of their country. Friends took me to see our old home. I wanted to stay!

Then I visited Uncle Ho’s house in Hanoi. And it hit me. I thought this is the most beautiful house in the world. It is a modest wooden house on stilts, modelled on the traditional *montagnard* hut in which Ho Chi Minh stayed during the years of anti-French resistance (1946-1954). It is very simple, elegant, functional and energy efficient – the only “luxury” item was a small electric heater for Hanoi’s winter chills. The house took less than a month to build. Uncle Ho specifically instructed that no precious timber should be used. It faces a large pond in which several varieties of fish breed, and were occasionally cooked for Uncle Ho and his guests. It is surrounded by beautiful gardens, with palm trees, fruit trees, flowers, a great variety of native and imported plants. From here, dressed in simple peasant garb, Uncle Ho directed the resistance against the USA and its allies.

So if you want a model of sustainability, elegance, simplicity, resilience, harmony, goodness, economy, energy efficiency, greenness and beauty, you have it in Uncle Ho’s house.

Our world will be fine if we apply the Ten Principles of Bandung and heed the lessons from Uncle Ho’s modest house-on-stilts.



Ho Chi Minh's house-on-stilts

¹ The countries represented at Bandung in 1955 were: Afghanistan; Bhutan; Burma; Cambodia; Ceylon; People's Republic of China; Egypt; Ethiopia; India; Indonesia; Iran; Iraq; Japan; Jordan; Laos; Lebanon; Liberia; Libya; Mongolia; Nepal; Pakistan; Philippines; Saudi Arabia; Syria; Thailand; Turkey; Vietnam North; Vietnam South; Yemen.

The Ten Principle of Bandung are quoted from the Bandung Museum brochure.

² [Target: Zhou Enlai: Was America's CIA working with Taiwan agents to kill Chinese premier?](#) by Wendell L. Minnick, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 July 1995

³ *Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist: The Autobiography of Wilfred Burchett*, edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin, University of NSW Press, 2005

⁴ *From Traveller To Traitor – The Life of Wilfred Burchett*, Tom Heenan, Melbourne University Press, 2006

⁵ [Where has all the rage gone?](#) by Tariq Ali, *The Guardian (UK)*, 22 March 2008

⁶ *My War With the CIA: The Memoirs of Prince Sihanouk* as related to Wilfred Burchett, Pantheon Books, 1972

⁷ *The Fortunes of Wilfred Burchett: A New Assessment* by Robert Manne, *Quadrant*, August 1985

See also [Once Were Warriors: Wilfred Burchett, Robert Manne and the Forgotten History War](#) by Jamie Miller, Institute of Advanced Studies, September 2008

⁸ *Rebel Journalism: The Writings of Wilfred Burchett*, edited by George Burchett and Nick Shimmin, Cambridge University Press, 2007

⁹ *Burchett: Reporting the Other Side of the World 1939-1983*, edited by Ben Kiernan, Quartet Books, 1986

WEEKEND EDITION DECEMBER 7-9, 2012



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Burchett's in Vietnam

'Enemies of Australian State' and Hanoi

by ANDRE VLTCHEK

The Vietnam Fine Arts Museum in Hanoi is confident and elegant, surrounded by ancient trees, historic villas and a celebrated cultural icon – the Temple of Literature. It puts on display numerous masterpieces of Vietnamese Art, from its earliest days to the revolutionary and Socialist Realism period.



Socialist nation is growing.

This museum is all that its counterparts in Indonesia, Malaysia or India are not. It is because the artists of Vietnam fought for the survival of their nation during the darkest period of French colonial rule; they called upon the masses onto the battlefields and barricades during the struggle for independence, and they inspired and supported this proud land, when it was thrown into hell on earth – enduring carpet bombings, napalm, agent orange, mass rapes and extermination campaigns during the “American War”.

After victory, hundreds of eminent artists rolled up their sleeves and went to work, inspiring tens of millions in their effort to rebuild their ravaged country, and to create an egalitarian, Socialist society. The great modern art of Vietnam was never decorative. It was as utilitarian as anti-aircraft guns, as cranes, and as classrooms.

I lived for almost three years in this city – not a particularly easy three years, as Hanoi, then, was still recovering from the chain of devastating wars and from the collapse of its closest ally – the Soviet Union – and its East European satellite states. By then, both Vietnam and Cuba were in the middle of an epic struggle for survival, battered by the shameful withdrawal of commitments and obligations of the group of countries that succeeded the USSR.

“Where do we go; what do we do?” I was told many years ago by one of the government officials. “We have to make sure that our people survive”.

‘Reforms’ had to be introduced, the economy became mixed, and foreign companies were allowed to enter and to form joint ventures. Bill Gates came to visit, while LV and Gucci began opening their boutiques all over HCMC and Hanoi.

It was all confusing then, as the ‘Hero Mothers’ – those old and proud women who lost their sons and daughters in the wars fought against the French and US colonialists – were seen walking through Hanoi and HCMC streets to their free honor seats at the opera houses, avoiding the Bentleys of the *nouveau riche*. ‘New Vietnam’ was suddenly all about symbols – the latest models of mobile phones, then the hippest types of motorbikes, and later Bentleys. It is said that there is more of them in Hanoi now, than in the city of London. It was confusing then and it is still confusing now.

But what matters, is that this country survived the terror it was put through, that it got on its feet, retained its culture, its creativity and its thirst for social justice... And that it preserved its own form of socialism, no matter how battered the emblems might have appeared from time to time.



Vietnamese women facing French soldiers.

But, back to the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum...

I used to come here often, alone – to dream, and to admire those great Vietnamese masters of the past; artists who lived and were creating during the eras when what are today called Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia, were culturally and economically closely connected with Japan, Korea and China. Vietnam was then firmly present on almost all the major trade routes of Asia Pacific. It was influenced by dozens of the great Asian cultures, whilst influencing them in return.

But above all, I used to come here in search of some good, healthy and optimistic shots of Socialist Realism.

This time, in December 2012, I was in the company of my good friend, the Australian artist George Burchett, who had moved to this city almost two years ago. Or more precisely, he didn't *move* here; he returned here, as this was the city where he was born.



George Burchett in Hanoi.

Now this museum was 'his'; he knew it much better than I ever did. He now became my guide. This is where he has been searching for inspiration, where he has been connecting the past – his own, that of his family and of this nation – with the present.

We walked side-by-side, admiring ancient Vietnamese art, so closely linked with Buddhism, with the Khmers and with China.

But it was understood that both of us came here anticipating the real joy of being confronted by those powerful images, depicting the struggle of the Vietnamese people against the Western onslaught, and by the tremendous euphoria of building the country afterwards.

“Look at those factories, the trains, and the boats on the river!” shouted my friend George, eventually switching from English to Russian: “Here! This is Hai Phong City: factory, steam engine, people; life!”

“It looks like some utopian paradise”, he continued. “Beautiful, really beautiful: it is all here, right here: nature, the work, and enthusiasm...”

I saw it; I could also stare at those canvases for hours. And when I did, the meaning would return to life. The nihilism of imperialism, of individualism, of religions: all those things that were ruining our beautiful planet would soon be fading away, or at least they would hide for a while, in some dark corners.

The message was clear and powerful, and after many long years of circling the globe, of covering wars and the ‘human condition’ in general, I couldn’t agree with it more: ‘It is glorious to fight for real freedom, as it is wonderful to dedicate one’s life to building the nation’.

George and I stood in respectful silence in front of the paintings depicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail and ‘Uncle Ho’ himself; in front of the paintings portraying soldiers and strong, determined women, confronting some beefy and arrogant French soldiers. And we smiled at one of my favorite canvases by Nguyen Sang: ‘Admitting a New Member into the Party’.



Treatment of Vietnamese patriots by French colonizers.

Our enchantment with; our love for this optimistic universe full of devoted work for humanity, was very different from the set of dogmatic official Western doctrines (even, or especially, from the 'new Left') and we knew it would be extremely difficult to translate and to transmit all this, even to some of the people we cared about a lot: to our colleagues and friends somewhere in faraway Canada or California.

It goes without saying that both George Burchett and I, were melting perfectly into this milieu – we grew up under very similar and very 'unusual' circumstances. Those circumstances formed us and convinced us that real art has to be engaged, that it has to be ideological; and no matter what, it has to be about the people and for the people.

George Burchett is not a typical 'Aussie', very far from that.

He was born in Hanoi, in Vietnam, almost a decade before I was born in Leningrad.

And he did not come to this earth by landing into some plush realm; into the universe where a kindhearted Australian diplomat would visit the maternal ward where he was born, give him a big smile, pat him on the diaper and whisper: "Welcome to this wonderful world, our friend; you are now our mate, our brand new little Australian fellow citizen."

Far from that: George Burchett, son of Wilfred Burchett, was born as an exile. His father was considered an enemy of his own nation, and for many years could not even get his hands on an Australian passport. Some called him the "Number one public enemy".

As quoted by *123HelpMe.com*:

"The discontent that was felt towards Burchett by the conservative powers of the US and Australia was so extreme that in an unprecedented move, Burchett's Australian passport was revoked, leaving him and his children living in exile for seventeen years. The Commonwealth repeatedly refused to renew Burchett's passport that was lost in North Vietnam in 1955, on the grounds that 'he was a communist and in 1961 decided that Burchett would not be admitted to the country. This decision was recognised as in conflict with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and was almost certainly unconstitutional'..."

An official doctrine aside, the reason for this charade was very simple: Wilfred Burchett was probably the greatest journalist writing in the English language in the entire 20th Century. He was a giant of letters, a truly independent

thinker and reporter, unwilling to follow the rigid rules of the anti-Communist Western propaganda.

Burchett was the first one to cover the Hiroshima nuclear holocaust. In his powerful report, "I write this as a warning to the world", as all his colleagues stood in line for the official *communiqués* on Japan's surrender, he traveled alone by local trains, almost 1.000 kilometers through the devastated country, to the ruins of Hiroshima. He felt he had to do it – in order to witness and to report the impact of what was later described as one of the most awful experiments on human beings in World history.

But there was much more to Burchett's 'crimes' than Hiroshima.

A true internationalist, and a man with a deep understanding of, and love for Asia Pacific, he wrote on the Korean War and on the brutal killing of civilians, by the US and its satellites. He also uncovered several taboo stories: for instance how the released US prisoners of war, who insisted that they were treated humanely by their Chinese and North Koreans captives, had been "disappeared" by their own army, and locked in mental institutions.

A close friend of China's Premier Chou En-lai, of Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro, Burchett wrote entire books on China, on Cambodia, on Vietnam and on the Soviet Union.

He produced dozens of powerful books of an alternative narrative, all of them written as eyewitness accounts. His range of topics was impressive: from the first man in the space – Yuri Gagarin – to Ho Chi Minh and his struggle for independence, in the books that included "North of the Seventeenth Parallel".

He put into his reports and books his own experience; what he saw with his own eyes, heard with his ears, felt with his entire being; on the battlefields and in all those places that were devastated by Western imperialism. He wrote and he photographed: he documented what was not supposed to reach the eyes of the people inhabiting the US, Australia and Western Europe.

That could not be allowed to go on forever.

Not only was Wilfred Burchett stripped of his passport, he was demonized in the complacent Australian media; called a Communist (a terrible crime!), he was also described as an agent of the Soviet Union, and finally, as someone who was involved in interrogating Western prisoners of war in Korea, taking down their testimonies about the West and its engaging in chemical warfare.

Jamie Miller wrote for the prestigious academic journal "Asia Pacific Journal: Japan Focus" ("The Forgotten History War: Wilfred Burchett, Australia and the Cold War in the Asia Pacific"):

“Wilfred Burchett was one of the twentieth-century’s most important journalists. Amid official denials and conventional reports to the contrary, his were the first accurate accounts of nuclear fallout in Hiroshima and American use of chemical warfare in Vietnam, among many other scoops...

Consequently, he was reviled in Australia’s anti-communist circles...

Ideological antipathy towards Burchett took root easily in a specific factual basis; the classic anti-communist fear of subversion from within found an intriguing counterpoint in Burchett’s subversion from without. From the Korean War until his death in 1983, he was, as the title of David Bradbury’s film aptly put it, the nation’s Public Enemy Number One. Every aspect of his life was painstakingly recorded by ASIO. And from 1955, a succession of Coalition Governments refused to issue Burchett with an Australian passport for seventeen years – it would take the accession of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972 to reverse the policy – and even refused to register his children as Australian citizens for fifteen.”

It often appeared that the entire Western propaganda machine went into overdrive on one single character assassination project.

Burchett’s case clearly demonstrated how ‘dangerous’ the truth is, how vindictive the Western regime is, and how powerful one single person can be, if armed with talent, courage and integrity.

George and I met several years ago. He and Ilza, his Bulgarian wife who is also a well-accomplished artist, were then still living in Sydney, while I was based, among other places, in Samoa, writing on the devastating impact of Western imperialism on Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. My political novel about war correspondents – *Point of No Return* – was already out.

I think it was the great Australian historian Gavan McCormack (professor at ANU), who suggested that George reads my novel: “He writes like your father”. Which made me swell with pride.

We began corresponding; then we met and became good friends. It turned out to be a habit of ours to take long strolls together, and to discuss politics and history, whenever I flew through Sydney.

Then we embarked on an enormous journey together – all over Indonesia – from Jakarta to the terribly poor and isolated island of Sumba, in the eastern part of the archipelago. We traveled and talked about the past, about our families, but also about the enormous US and European propaganda machine, and the distortion of world history. But even then, above all, we were discussing revolutionary art.

All around us was the wasteland called Indonesia, a country that fell the victim of savage capitalism and neo-colonialism. It had no zeal and no revolutionary spirit left in its veins and decaying flesh, and all the way as we drove it was frightening us with its open wounds and smell of decay.

I wanted to know all about Wilfred Burchett. To me his work was like a multi-faceted inspiration: it had both the firmness of a rock, and the pioneering spirit and mobility of a rocket, taking off towards the stars.

Now I needed to understand the man – what was behind all that great work? To put it metaphorically: I comprehended, I loved the song; but I also desired to understand the singer.

I read what the regime did to him when he was still alive; I read it as a powerful warning, a message: that those holding the reigns of power of the Empire would not stop at anything. They were ready to go all the way to prevent people from writing the truth.

I was not scared. For years I have been trying to do what Wilfred did so long before me. And like him, I was determined not to stop.

But I wanted to know the consequences of my actions; I had to be prepared.

George was generous: he was always willing to supply me with stories; sharing the struggle and pain of his father, as well as his own.

Thanks to him, I often felt as if I was part of the family. I never met his father – we were generations apart. But thanks to the stories I heard from his son, I often felt that I did – that we met; and that Wilfred Burchett managed to pass something essential on to me.

“Wilfred loved Hanoi”. George often referred to his father by his first name. “But wherever we were living, he never stayed in one place for long. He always traveled. He came and went. He wrote beautifully about the city, especially in his book ‘Vietnam North’. The way he wrote; it was not always verbally lyrical... however the lyricism could be seen in his photos... But then, it was Hanoi of 1966.”

Now we were in Hanoi of 2012, sitting in one of those subdued but unmistakably elegant and artsy cafes, called *Cong Caphe*. The walls were decorated with paintings – some sort of mild parody on Socialist Realism. The humor was kind, it was not full of the brutality that many Western galleries love to import from China; the comrade-girls with military hats, leather boots

and exposed nipples and pubic hair spreading their legs in front of the portraits of legendary leaders.

In Hanoi things were soft, the past respected. We were drinking a delicious yoghurt coffee, a local specialty.

“I saw several Western teenagers skateboarding at the bottom of the Lenin statue”, I said. “That’s 2012... Nobody tried to stop them. You can imagine what they would do to them in London if they were banging the legs of *Generalissimo* Churchill with their boards...”

“Of course, things have changed”, replied George. “But the city is still beautiful and the essence is still there. Now I want to bring back the reality that my dad reported and to combine it with what exists now.”

“I went back to Hanoi in 2011, to organize my dad’s exhibition at Ho Chi Minh Museum. To have it, the exhibition, there; it is as prestigious as it gets in Vietnam. It turned out to be a very big event. At the end, I was received by the President and he told me that I am always welcomed in Vietnam.”

I recalled the email George wrote to me right after the exhibition. The words of the President unleashed emotions and they led to the dramatic decision: “I am going back.”

In a way, it was like saying, “I am coming home”. And sure, in so many ways Vietnam and the city of Hanoi were that real home that George carried in his heart for decades. When referring to Vietnamese men and women, he always calls them ‘my people’.

“When I was born, Wilfred tried to register me as an Australian citizen, but they refused me. The Prime Minister personally decided that I’m not to be an Aussie”, George told me on several occasions. “I only became Australian citizen in 1969, when my dad got his passport back.”

Before that, Wilfred Burchett had to travel on Vietnamese *laissez-passer* and later on a Cuban passport that was given to him by Fidel Castro.

George tried to live in Australia, with his family, for more than a decade. “I tried to love it”, he told me. “I tried to be a real Aussie.”

He went from one extreme of that vast country to another, living and working in the Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territories and later in the most cosmopolitan city of the nation – Sydney. “I made an effort, but I never felt at home there. It all felt pretentious and empty.”

And so he spoke to the President of Vietnam, and then he went home, in 2011.

“This is my Hanoi” he smiled. Now we were sitting at a table at a small restaurant, in the historic center of the city. There were bird cages, small flower pots, ancient trees and yellow facades of old houses, everything arranged elegantly, as if it was a set on one of Tran Anh Hung’s films.

Except that this was for real, it was real life, not a film.

And I felt happy that my friend George Burchett had finally returned home. At least one of us knew where he belongs.

One day during my visit, we went to the notorious Hoa Lo Prison, a place where French colonizers tortured and executed hundreds of Vietnamese patriots. During American War, this place was nicknamed Hanoi Hilton by several US pilots who were held here as prisoners of war, after being shot down.

This area was my home for three years; the building where I lived was literally growing from the prison premises, and from my windows I could clearly see an old French *guillotine*.

This time I had to film for my movie/dialogue with Noam Chomsky. I filmed the prison, now a museum, and then George filmed me, for yet another film I was working on.

Then we went to a local beer pub, ate mountains of roast pork and did some serious drinking. Life was good.

At one point, he exclaimed: “So many people don’t understand what this country went through! They had to fight the French to gain their independence. Then they were attacked, ravaged by the Americans. The West and China supported the Khmer Rouge, which was continuously attacking Vietnam. Then Vietnam liberated Cambodia, stopped the genocide and deposed the Khmer Rouge. The US protested. China invaded in a punitive excursion. Years later the Soviet Union collapsed.”

He snapped at the Western Left: “After 1975, Vietnam suddenly became the ‘bad guy’. It was not a hero anymore, after it liberated Cambodia. Some people even claimed that it occupied Phnom Penh. A chunk of the Left began singing that old tune about the human rights... until Vietnam had to open itself to Western money and to multi-nationals. And then Hanoi was once again wrong for doing so... What alternatives did it have? Only Cuba stood by it.”

By then we had a few beers in our stomachs. “The Western Left, or at least substantial part of it, hates all Left-wing countries and movements that ever managed to come to power,” I clarified. “It hates China and Vietnam, it hates

Cuba and Venezuela. It wants to stay pure: doesn't want to govern, and it probably doesn't even want any Left wing country to exist... When one governs, one makes errors, but how else to move forward? Big chunk of the Left in Western countries only wants to cry about how it is being marginalized, it hates taking risks..."

On that we patently agreed.

The night was young. At one point, my old friend Dzung joined us in one of the cafes facing the lake.

"Your motorbike is beautiful", I offered, a good old Hanoi compliment.

"It is actually much cheaper than the one that is parked next to it" she smiled, politely. She used to study in Moscow, during the 'good old days'.

We went on talking about *Doi Moi* and about the growing army of *nouveau riche*.

Suddenly I did not want to leave either.

Jamie Miller continued in her report:

"One of the pillars of Warner's depiction of Burchett was his seeming monopoly on the facts. When a large amount of government material on Burchett was declassified in the mid-1980s and released into the hands of maverick academic Gavan McCormack, that pillar collapsed forever. In his ground-breaking 'An Australian Dreyfus?' and subsequent forays over the next two years, McCormack systematically deconstructed the evidence underpinning Warner's articles, the testimony given in court against Burchett, ASIO's files, and the staple rumours on which the Australian press relied. The reverberations were so profound because the facts supporting each of these, due to Warner's involvement at every turn, were much the same.

Some of the blows McCormack landed were devastating. His analysis of the declassified ASIO affidavits of Australian POWs, which Warner had been privileged to for years, revealed that the allegations that Burchett had interrogated Australian soldiers in Korea were unfounded. The affidavits in fact showed that Burchett had deliberately sought out Australian POWs, discussed the war with them (even if they rarely saw eye to eye), wrote home to their families on their behalf, and even drank whisky with them. As for British POWs, McCormack embarrassed Warner by revealing that the 1953 British Ministry of Defense report which Warner had cited as confirming that Burchett was involved in brainwashing, was actually published in 1955 and contained no such allegation, let alone the supporting quote that Burchett was 'actively involved in brainwashing procedures'."

Before I boarded my taxi to the airport, George told me the most essential: “When I went to Australia, I heard them calling my father ‘a traitor’, ‘a Communist’, ‘a torturer of POW’s’, all that nonsense. I had enough, and that is when I turned to painting seriously... I have done it for my father and for humanity. For all those people who still believe in a dream... That great dream called internationalism.”

He paused.

“Vietnam represents the history that my family shares... And it is a truly heroic country.”

“Your dad...” I said. “What was really the chemistry between him and Vietnam?”

“My dad was formed by that great moment when Ho liberated the country. It was all enormous then: the Soviet Union, China...”

He waved as I was leaving.

I looked at his slender figure disappearing in the thick fog coming from West Lake.

There was one only thought on my mind: Australia fucked up endlessly: It produced and then pushed away the greatest journalist of the 20th century, a man so big that even a criminal like Henry Kissinger could not do without him when negotiating the peace agreement with North Vietnam; a man who single-handedly wrote an alternative narrative of the entire continent. And then it lost his son, a great artist, one of the very few genuine internationalists that I met.

Vietnam, quietly but with strength and affection, embraced them both.

Andre Vltchek is a novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. His book on Western imperialism in the South Pacific – *Oceania* – is published by Lulu. His provocative book about post-Suharto Indonesia and market-fundamentalist model is called “*Indonesia – The Archipelago of Fear*” (Pluto). After living for many years in Latin America and Oceania, Vltchek presently resides and works in East Asia and Africa. He can be reached through his [website](http://georgeburchett.com/).
George Burchett, Australian artist living in Hanoi, Vietnam <http://georgeburchett.com/>