For those who fought in the Vietnam War, it’s been a long road back. Artwork by Australian and other participating countries’ veterans first toured Australia in the *Dog Tags* exhibition in 1992 and 1993 that went to Sydney, Canberra and Brisbane. For the first time veterans had a chance to show artworks that articulated the ongoing aftermath of the war and its effects on themselves and their families. Australian Vietnam veteran artists were seeking reconciliation through such group exhibitions, long before America formally renewed relations with Vietnam. Since 1992 there have been twelve exhibitions featuring the art of Australian Vietnam veterans, as well as some Vietnamese artists – including refugees and ‘boat people’. It’s interesting to consider the *Nam Bang!* exhibition (2009) at Sydney’s Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in the light of these earlier exhibitions. Vietnam veteran artists are authentic custodians of this history, having put their lives on the line for their country. Some time after returning home from their twelve-month tour of duty, they would bear witness to their personal experiences through a subversive art practice. This was all the more remarkable in view of the hostile home-front reception given to those who served in this unpopular war. Yet their important contribution to our cultural history, through extraordinarily powerful artworks, is almost completely neglected by our national institutions. It is time for a long overdue re-evaluation and acknowledgment of their profound artistic legacy.

On 8 March 2011 Prime Minister Julia Gillard committed $3.3million for an Australian-themed contribution to the new American Vietnam War Memorial Education Centre at The Wall in Washington, D.C. This Education Centre is an initiative of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) to be built beside the Vietnam Veterans Memorial known as The Wall (which was designed by Maya Lin and built by the VVMF in 1982). Australia will fund state-of-the-art displays to honour Australia’s troops and look at the effects of the war. These effects are dramatised eloquently in the Australian Vietnam veteran’s art that I discuss below. Perhaps the current acknowledgment of these neglected histories by our politicians is the first step in a long-overdue cultural shift.

‘Dog tag’ was the name Australian soldiers used for their official metal ID tags, worn around their necks during the Vietnam War where they served between 1962 and 1972. The *Dog Tags*
exhibition showed at three different galleries, and featured ninety works by thirty-four artists: Australians, Americans, a New Zealander and five Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese artist Le Tri Dung was the first ‘former enemy’ soldier to exhibit in Australia, invited here for Dog Tags in 1992 by the co-curators Peter F. Daly and Archibald Zammit-Ross as a gesture of reconciliation. Reconciliation (presumably between former enemy soldiers of Australia and North Vietnam) was a stated theme of Nam Bang at Casula. On the recommendation of a Vietnam veteran artist, Le Tri Dung was also included in this exhibition – the only former enemy soldier-artist out of the twenty-five selected artists. Neither Le Tri Dung nor any other former enemy was amongst the nine artists commissioned to contribute to that exhibition. Overall, the exhibition favoured Southern perspectives over Northern, and its title ‘Nam Bang’ actually means ‘Southern state or province’. Whilst it showed significant artworks by Australian Vietnam veterans and their descendents, and by refugees or boat people caught up in the war, a wider inclusiveness would have made the gesture towards reconciliation more meaningful.

The philosophy of the Dog Tags exhibition by contrast was more innovative and inclusive. This groundbreaking exhibition was put together with no financial backing from any institution. It showcased a real diversity of images and perspectives on the Vietnam War, representing some important social history. Initially unable to locate women artists that had served or were connected to serving family members, the curators included some American nurses’ poetry about the war. By the last showing in Brisbane at the City Hall Art Gallery and Museum, Australian women artists Jennifer McDuff and Rosalie Cogan were included. This exhibition allowed some recognised artists and others to articulate their experiences of war for the first time. Included were works by South Vietnamese boat people who were detainees in Whitehead Detention Centre, Hong Kong. Most veterans who entered their work were, as a matter of curatorial policy, included in the exhibition; these early exhibitions had therapeutic benefits for the artists. American art critic David James pointed out at the time (Art Issues, Los Angeles, December 1992) that often the least professional-looking artworks had a particularly subversive edge. These artists did not wish to take sides with the North or the South, and aimed at a broad perspective: an acknowledgement that the suffering caused by war knows no boundaries. Furthermore most of the works were done after the war itself, by artists reflecting on their war experiences.

This is in stark contrast to the then current acquisition policy of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra: it did not collect work done from memory – only work done at the time by official war artists showing the perspectives and portraits of Australian troops. The AWM has so far shown limited interest in subversive or ‘outsider’ art by veterans that deals with the aftermath, such as the ongoing effects of war on servicemen. Peter F. Daly exhibited the eloquent painting More Australian History (1992) in the Dog Tags exhibition, where the hand-written names of the ingredients of Agent Orange fill the sky, covering the disembodied heads of soldiers and civilians that resemble death’s-heads. The ironic title reflects how this is a history that is scarcely acknowledged by our official institutions. If such works don’t fit into the AWM’s brief, shouldn’t they at least have a home in our national art collections and museums?

Unlike the work of commissioned war artists, these artworks are the testimonies of veterans who experienced a twelve-month tour of duty and the full brunt of the aftermath, as well as the indifference of officialdom. The works bear witness to diverse experiences and different truths that challenge the orthodox, official images and narratives. At the time of the Dog Tags exhibition the Vietnam Veterans’ Art Group was started, made up of like-minded artists who have kept in touch and exhibited together now for nearly twenty years. Most of these are professional artists who trained at art school after their military service; many have also taught at university level. Vietnam veteran artists are the unique custodians of a first-hand history that has not been easy for them to tell. It’s a history of comradeship, of staunch mateship, that includes not talking openly about the traumas of their war experiences. It has taken a lot for these artists to get to the point where they are prepared to speak out through their artworks. It is a tribute to their courage and tenacity that they have been able to transform these difficult and painful
experiences into an art of mature understanding which conveys an abhorrence of war. The immediate aftermath period saw a hostile attitude from anti-war protesters, some of whom blamed the returning soldiers (many of whom had been conscripts) for the war. Veterans had to fight an indifferent government for their rights to health cover for their ongoing major health problems, from post-traumatic stress disorder to the cross-generational effects of Agent Orange. There had until 1987 been no ‘welcome home’ parade for these men and women. They were consistently ignored by an embarrassed society ambivalent and uncomfortable about the war. Is the way their art has been ignored in our national collections a further legacy of this discomfort?

Intrigued by the silence after Vietnam, many family members and some members of the public who visited Dog Tags were entering an art exhibition for the first time. Since then there have been further significant Australian exhibitions about the Vietnam conflict, reaching an ever-wider audience. An impressive major exhibition was Viet Nam Voices (1997) at Casula Powerhouse, and Viet Nam Voices: Australians and the Vietnam War (2001-2003), which toured some capital cities as well as regional galleries and was revived at Casula Powerhouse from January to March 2009. Former Casula Director Kon Gouriotis deserves credit for facilitating these exhibitions, increasing public awareness of these histories and artworks.

The Nam Bang! exhibition of 2009 examined responses to the Vietnam war thirty-four years after the end of that conflict. In this exhibition the Vietnam veterans’ work was particularly strong, dramatising the anguish, human suffering and waste of life in war. The American art historian and committed peace activist Lucy R. Lippard has had a particular interest in Vietnam veterans’ art here and in America. On the recommendation of Australian Vietnam veteran artists, Lippard was invited as a keynote speaker at the conference that accompanied Nam Bang! In this speech she noted that the textures of memory are so vivid in many of these works that they ‘interrogate our comfort zones’. In asking ‘can art be healing?’ she suggested that the idea of ‘closure’ is a pop psychology cliché, and that much art dealing with the Vietnam War represents ‘unfinished business’ in the psyches of those whose lives were affected by it, implying that there can be no easy answers.

An example of this from Nam Bang! might be Australian Vietnam veteran Terry Eichler’s Meditation on 2,063,500 Deaths (2009) which is composed of a 1968 photo of a group of Vietnamese children, standing in front of charcoal kilns in a village in what was then Phuoc Tuy province. The photograph is printed over sheets of Vietnamese note paper. The children gaze out at us with openness and curiosity, some smiling, some with hands on hips, relaxed and trusting about a future which, we know in hindsight, held violence and war. Eichler has covered the note paper with tiny, carefully drawn rows of symbols of the different hats of the various nations involved in the Vietnam War, to help the viewer grasp the numbers of those who lost their lives. Each hat represents 50 deaths, and there are 41,270 symbols, 40,000 of which are Vietnamese, 10 Australian and 1,163 American — a waste of life on a colossal scale. The delicacy of the careful pencil marks and the care given to memorialise everyone equally who suffered and lost their lives here shows an artist trying to make peace with all sides, to suggest a common human tragedy.

Eichler served in Vietnam as a conscript during 1968-69. He has said (in a presentation at RMIT in March 2003) that ‘War turns everybody into victims — the enemy, civilians, the combatants (and their families) and even those apparently not involved. This fact is still not acknowledged by the leaders who declare and wage war.’ He further noted that as ‘memory is a contested space,’ he sought to offer in his works his memories of the war ‘as a counterweight to other “privileged” narratives that tend to glorify war’.

Ray Beattie’s Image of a Dead Man (1980) shows a chair with the soldier’s jacket and slouch hat on the back of it, and a flag folded on the seat, against a blank grey wall. The soldier’s richly coloured medals are pinned on his jacket idiosyncratically, his shiny ‘dog tags’ of official army ID still hang from the leather strip he wore around his neck, and his jacket and hat reflect the ghost of his body shape. These details are lovingly recorded in a hyperrealist style. Beattie, who was himself an Australian conscript, refuses to glorify the soldier as a dead hero. He subverts official Australian army conventions of how to portray soldiers, for which he was severely criticised when this work was first shown. Instead he offers an understated elegy to an individual, a meditation on an absence which carries a profound sense of loss.

Beattie’s more recent work in this show, the sardonic Morale from the Ministry (2009), presents some Vietnam War-era propaganda posters like the splayed edges of the pages of a book, one behind the other, so that they are reduced to mere decoration. Once used as ideological brain-washing materials, these posters have ironically become a sought-after commodity for tourists in shops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city. Their rich colours and
fascinating abstraction in Beattie’s design silences the past echoes of marching figures and waving flags.

Peter F. Daly’s *The Highway North: Nos. 1-10* (2009) is a series of ten paintings dramatising the long journey back from the war zone for Vietnam veterans, alluding also to the journey he made as an Australian serviceman travelling north towards Vietnam, and his personal journey north of recent times in NSW, seeking some measure of peace in encroaching retirement. Daly uses vibrant colours in the backgrounds of his paintings: bright yellows, deep blues, emerald greens, saturated reds and hot pinks. Together with his modern ‘primitive’ style, they invoke a lost innocence. Frontal-facing, mask-like faces confront us, with stark army crew cuts and staring, traumatised eyes. In painting No.1 the central figure in the line-up is labelled ‘Authentic’ and has a regular face and a smile, where others are scarred, some with band aids indicating their wounds. Daly employs an expressive vocabulary of symbols to convey the anguish of these victims of war, a reminder that the aftermath is forever, a lasting product of the war.

Memorial white crosses are scattered throughout this series for those who lost their lives in Vietnam; red crosses may commemorate the wounded. Daly’s personal iconography includes: jagged elements suggesting weapons, explosions and bombs; sliced oranges symbolising Agent Orange; and candles evoking hope as well as vigils for the dead. There are signs with ironic messages: one figure holds a placard referring to the shameful treatment of the ‘vets’ by their governments and society upon their return home. It says: ‘Homeless vet – will work for human food or dog food. God bless America’. The artist actually saw this man when driving on the Santa Monica freeway in the U.S. In his paintings Daly floats words including labels on foreheads such as ‘Unrecognised,’ ‘Authentic’ or ‘Token’. The works question whether the art of veterans is taken seriously by the art world or is merely included occasionally as a token gesture. Daly is critical of the attitude of contemporary culture that only collects half the history, only tells half the story.

Daly, like so many war veteran artists, bears witness to memories of war that still recur. In painting No.6 a sign reads ‘Get the history right, Pinnochio’; we see men and women who are scarred, spotted and psychologically traumatised, astonished by their betrayal by government. They testify to a different truth than that of a puppet-like figure spouting ideology, telling tall stories. The incident referred to here was when on 27 February 2008 the Australian War Memorial opened new galleries called ‘Conflicts 1945 to Today’ which included the Vietnam War. The exhibition’s storyboard about Agent Orange used some discredited findings of the Evatt Royal Commission, which maintained that Agent Orange was not responsible for any health problems of Vietnam vets.8 The AWM had to correct this storyboard text in response to a flood of objections from veterans across Australia. However it never corrected Volume 3 of their official history of the Vietnam War, *Medicine at War: Medical aspects of Australia’s involvement in Southeast Asia 1950-1972* (1994), which was the source of the erroneous storyboard. Allowing such a glaring error to remain shows an unprofessional, careless and cavalier attitude on the part of the Australian War Memorial, and a disheartening lack of respect for our war veterans.

The Vietnamese artist Le Tri Dung’s oil painting, *The Same Pain for Both Sides* (2009), depicts the Vietnam War as a civil war: the North versus the South. Dung served in the North Vietnamese Army from 1972-1977, during which time he was an official war correspondent and artist. In this work in a free expressive style, he has painted banana fronds down the centre of the canvas symbolising the land itself; on the left is the camouflage hat of the North Vietnamese army, on the right the army helmet of the South. Orange stains fall on both sides of the pale-lilac terrain, representing Agent Orange burning the landscape and the people. In the centre there is a symbolic orange figure of a newborn baby or foetus, skeletal and in a death agony, across the divide between the two Vietnams. Dung shows that due to the ideological battle, and as a consequence of Agent Orange, the two sides of Vietnam were united in suffering and death, the results of which still linger today.

A peace activist, Dung’s late father was a famous lacquer artist, and his numerous grown-up children are also now artists, representing three generations of Vietnamese art history. This was overlooked in *Nam Bang!* although its stated brief was supposedly an interest in second-generation artists after Vietnam – a baffling missed opportunity that was possibly due to Dung’s North Vietnamese background.

Peter Stephenson’s *Casualties* (2009) uses free
brushstrokes and impasto paint to portray two prone figures, victims of the war, over whose bodies float the detached words of the war office, text from the Articles of War of Her Majesty’s Navy (Stephenson’s Vietnam War service was in the navy). The disconnected words are juxtaposed with the deaths of these individuals. Expressionistic brushwork suggests barbed wire dividing the space, touches of red for blood, and orange directional arrows that offer no escape for these soldiers abandoned in the grey abyss of suffering and death. It is a brilliant image for the way war can depersonalise human beings on both sides of a conflict.

Dennis Trew’s work Aftermath – Journey (2009) is a twenty-six-part series of visually confronting photographs that depict the suffering caused to Vietnam veterans and their families, including their newborn babies, by Agent Orange. It is a damning indictment of the aftermath of the policy of using chemical weapons. These are narratives that, as Lippard has noted, need to be restored to the history of this country, truths that must be acknowledged. In these crisp, unflinching images Trew also addresses the suicides and ‘accidental’ deaths of Vietnam veterans. He makes the viewer aware that the difficult journey home for soldiers and their families by no means ended when they came back from the war; there were many more secular ‘stations of the cross’ to endure.

One of the strengths of Nam Bang’ was the diverse points of view in the work by women artists. A descendant of a Vietnam veteran, Kelly Manning, in Plaques of the Day (2009), has painted a young girl – herself – whose image blurs into a war-themed wallpaper, her individuality subsumed in the war story. Manning’s father suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, suggested by the repeating patterns here: yellow helicopters and fiery orange-edged shapes like the map of Vietnam surround this smiling child, who has herself in turn suffered major health problems.

The perspective of a female civilian in Vietnam was shown in a six-minute DVD, Encounters and Journey (2009), by the artist My Le Thi, who was a young adult during the Vietnam War. Her traumatic memories of bombings and fires are suggested in conflagration imagery in her film, along with images of frightened monkeys trapped in a cage. But most of her imagery is of the traditional ceremonies and rhythmic flute-and-gong music of village life in the Central Highlands in Vietnam. Women are shown weaving at a loom, as though with their multicoloured threads they are weaving meaning back into their lives after the painful losses of the war. The difficult journeys of boat people fleeing South Vietnam were commemorated in Nerine Martini’s beautiful and imaginative installation Heaven Net (2009) where fragile miniature boats made of paper and bamboo floated on a fishing net above viewers’ heads.
On the whole *Nam Bang* was a missed opportunity to bring together artists from North and South Vietnam in the name of peace and reconciliation, in contrast to the inclusiveness of the *Dog Tags* exhibitions. Unfortunately *Nam Bang* also omitted the work of some important, well-respected Australian war veteran artists such as Archibald Zammit-Ross, Kerry Selwood, Rob Dorrizi and Giles Hohnen.

The best works by Australian Vietnam veteran artists are subversive and profound, often questioning the value of war. They are also social history documents, bearing witness to the human cost and the colossal destruction of war, questioning traditional myths of masculinity. Vietnam veterans’ art, like other art movements, also challenges our comfort zones and our traditional myths of masculinity. Vietnam veterans’ art, like other art movements, also challenges our comfort zones and our traditional myths of masculinity. Vietnam veterans’ art, like other art movements, also challenges our comfort zones and our traditional myths of masculinity. Vietnam veterans’ art, like other art movements, also challenges our comfort zones and our traditional myths of masculinity. Vietnam veterans’ art, like other art movements, also challenges our comfort zones and our traditional myths of masculinity.

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The questions posed by these artists and their insights about the effects of war have only too relevant today.

1. These are listed in an excellent Education Supplement to *Nam Bang* available via the exhibition’s homepage: www.casulapowerhouse.com/exhibitions/nam-bang.aspx

2. The tour of duty for Australian servicemen (conscripts and regulars) for the Vietnam War was deemed to be twelve months continuous active service. Unlike WWII and Korea, Vietnam was a guerrilla war where there was no frontline, so at any time contact with the enemy was possible. Instead of doing short stints of a few months with breaks, they were exposed to twelve months of continuous vigilance which frequently contributed to stress disorders.

3. *Dog Tags* 1992–1993 was shown at The Coach House Gallery, Sydney; The Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, Canberra; and The Brisbane City Hall Art Gallery and Museum.

4. Through this exhibition audiences in Australia were seeing for the first time personal, unofficial images of war; 26,500 people visited *Dog Tags* in Brisbane alone.

5. *Art Issues* magazine is a bimonthly journal of contemporary art criticism, published by The Foundation for Advanced Critical Studies, Los Angeles, California.

6. The Vietnam Veterans’ Art Group was formed to recognise war veterans’ individual war experiences and to exhibit artworks that contributed to an understanding of this war. Peter F. Daly introduced the concept in 1989 while still an art student. At that time, the Vietnam War was not spoken about and often veterans would assume they were the only artist doing art about their war experiences. Daly realised that contextualising their art and ideas as a group was beneficial and also informative for audiences.

7. For example, Lippard curated the major exhibition *Vietnam in Art* in America, for which she wrote the catalogue *A Different War: Vietnam in Art* in 1990. She recommended several artists for the *Dog Tags* exhibition.

8. The Royal Commission on the Use and Effects of Chemical Agents on Australian Personnel in Vietnam was also known as the ‘Agent Orange Inquiry’ or the ‘Evatt Royal Commission’. The commission’s nine-volume findings were released in 1985. Its general conclusion that Agent Orange was ‘not guilty’ was eventually found to be wrong. The Royal Commission found, however, that under Repatriation law which affords veterans the benefit of the doubt, Vietnam veterans might well have certain cancers attributed to their exposure to Agent Orange. It also supported Vietnam veterans’ claims by finding that the Repatriation Commission had been intentionally finding ‘ways around Court statements of what the law was’ and of emphasising ‘ways in which a claim could be “knocked-out”’.

In *Medicine at War*, AWM historian F.B. Smith maintained that veterans had no case in claiming Agent Orange might have harmed them. He was able to do so only by omitting these two crucial Royal Commission findings.

Kathleen James is a Sydney-based freelance writer, editor and desktop publisher who writes occasional art reviews.

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P8: 1/ My Le Thi, *Encounters and Journey*, 2009, still image from 6-minute DVD.

2/ William Short, *Khe Sanh Vendor*, detail from *Memories of the American War: Stories from Vietnam* series, 2009, 18 Epson K3 inkjet prints, each 59.7 x 59.7cm. This series is based on interviews in Vietnam conducted by Short, an American Vietnam vet, and Willa Seidenberg during the 1990s. As James notes, Short’s series ‘helps the viewer understand some of the North Vietnamese experiences of the war … contemporary portraits are contrasted with photos of them during the war and the text of the interviews telling their stories. They include a Catholic professor of philosophy, a journalist and editor of an English-language newspaper, a student protest leader, female resistance fighters and a member of the all-women’s brigade of the National Liberation Front. Some of Short’s compelling work documents and pays homage to the resisters within the military, many of them scholars. Above the portraits are smaller, coloured photos of the legacy of found-objects from the war: unexploded shells, earth-covered North Vietnamese Army dog tags and medals, melted shrapnel.’


2/ Peter Stephenson, *Casualties*, 2009, oil on linen, 152.5 x 168cm.

3/ Kelly Manning, *Plaques of the day* (detail), 2009, acrylic and oil on board, 240 x 68cm. All images this article courtesy the artists.

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