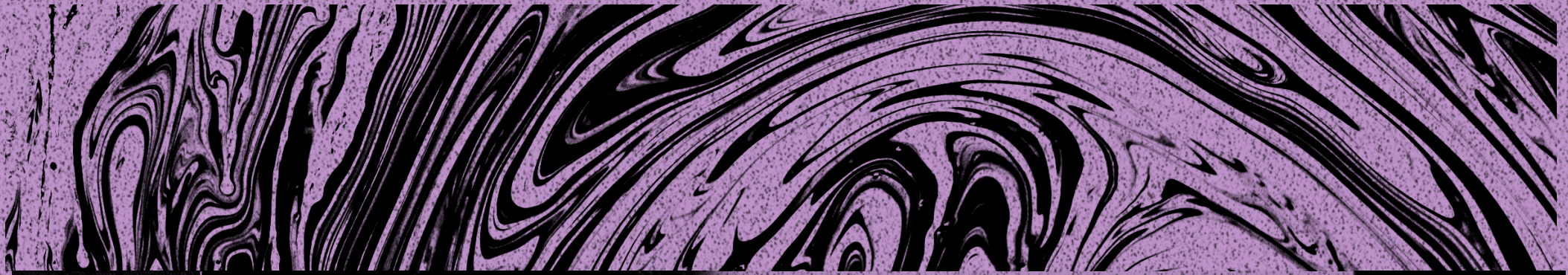


# FIELD NOTES



***order and anarchy:  
country is a poem***

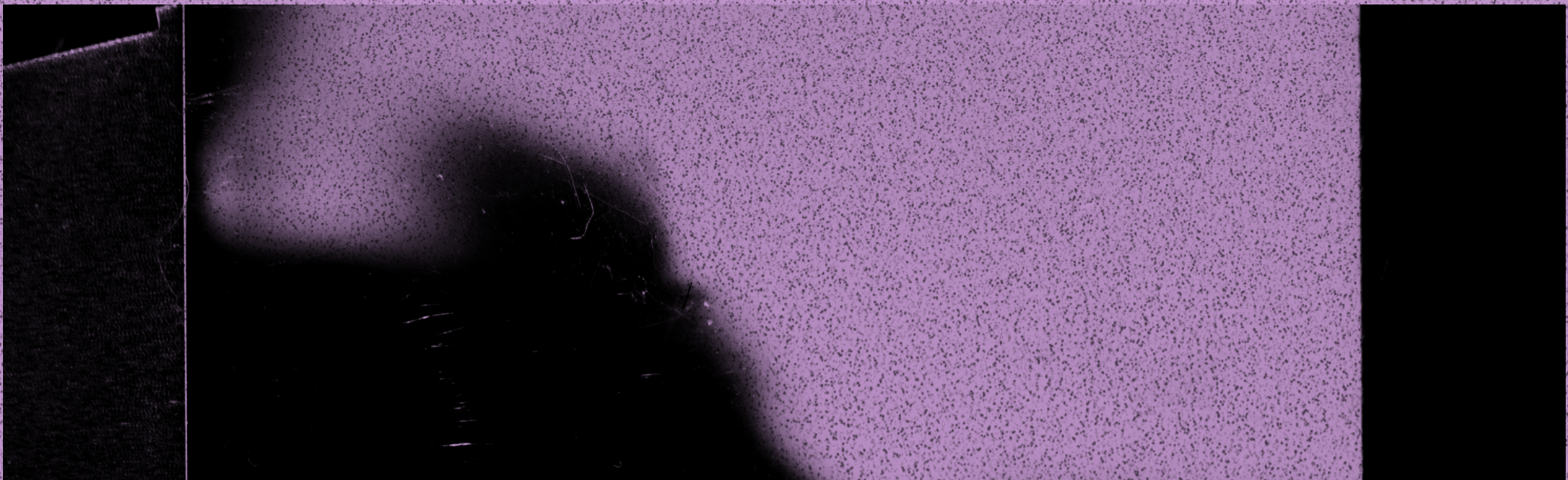
by Lana Nguyen

reflecting on

***Fluid Memories***

by Chung Nguyen

*Presented as part of Dancehouse  
Season 2, 5–22 Aug, 2026*



Field Notes is a Dancehouse initiative that commissions writers, academics, and artists to produce in-depth reflections on works within the Dancehouse program. Moving beyond conventional reviews, these texts aim to extend the life of each performance and contribute to a broader conversation about contemporary dance and choreographic practice.

**DANCEHOUSE D/**



*"To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define."*

*— Simone Weil, The Need For Roots*



*Fluid Memories (2026) by Chung Nguyen. Photo by Jeff Busby.*





When you walk into the room for the performance of *Fluid Memories*, you are handed a bright red scarf. Being a well-intentioned audience member, I take it. As the rest of the audience slowly fills the room, we build a sea of red.

The room is arranged with the audiences split across three sides of the space. I'm on the left side of the room and I look directly over to the audience on the right; we mirror each other. We neatly sit in our rows, scarves draped on our laps, awaiting instruction.

As we slowly settle into this formation, Chung Nguyen marches in the middle of the room, as if in the military. He starts shouting commands: *ng nghiêm* (attention), *bên trái quay* (turn left), and *ng hỉ* (at ease). With each instruction, he changes his body and its direction accordingly. Between the strict, tight, harsh movements of a body stepping in line or turning direction, there is also the occasional counterbalance with the instruction of *ng hỉ* (at ease). This instruction allows moments of release, breath and softness where Chung's body slips out of formation and unfurls.



Initially he marches through long distances of the room, covering a lot of ground. Soon, the instructions and movements quicken in pace, and they are overlaid with an outside, pre-recorded version of his voice, doubling the momentum. With quicker instructions, his body is forced to walk within shorter distances, creating a frenetic shifting of directions, almost short-circuiting.

He begins to tell us about the fall of Saigon in April 1975, an event marking the end of a 20 year war that led to the North and the South of Vietnam coming under one party communist rule, the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. After the 'unification', it has been mandatory for young people in primary and secondary school to wear red scarves, also known as khăn quàng đỏ. The fabric symbolises the "blood of revolutionary heroes" of the communist party.

Chung instructs us to pick up our scarves, and shows us how to tie them around our necks. Moving across the room, he looks at and praises our efforts. Soon, we're all in uniform.



*Fluid Memories* (2026) by Chung Nguyen. Photo by Jeff Busby.



Across the room from me in the audience there are two people who did not take the scarves at the beginning of the performance. They watch everyone gladly take and wear this weighted symbol, which to many Vietnamese people, particularly those accepted as refugees here after the fall of Saigon, also represents the bloodshed, torture and death of many Vietnamese people as a consequence of dissent or opposition, the loss of the possibility of democracy and the distancing of land, cultural lineage and family. Their refusal reveals another side of the story.



*Fluid Memories* (2026) by Chung Nguyen. Photo by Jeff Busby.





Chung continually plays with this dynamic of the willing, sometimes uninformed audience member. We unwittingly comply with violence, upholding our social contract to the performer. This is extended when Chung introduces the game of 'pằng pằng', a schoolyard game. In the game, one person makes a fake gun with their hand and shoots at a person across from them. In turn, the person aimed at surrenders by putting their hands up. If they react too slowly or do the wrong move, they are eliminated. The rules are simple, reactive and violent.

Chung starts to train us for the game in our seats. We all point our hands in the shape of the guns, shooting into the empty centre. He asks us to get louder, more forceful, and we do. The two people who chose not to wear the scarves also don't play.

The phrase 'banality of evil' was made famous through Hannah Arendt's writing around the 1961 trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. It speaks of evil not only coming from a darkness or ill intention, but rather something much more bland, compliant and amenable.

In her writing, ten years after the trial, she comments on Eichmann's testimony to be full of clichés and language rules. She writes:

*The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of someone else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.*

— Hannah Arendt,  
*Thinking and moral considerations*





It is this thoughtlessness, this looking away, this inability to contend with the reality of another that can lead to a world out of order; a world that steps aside from our humanity. What is scary about this, is that we are all capable of doing it so easily.

Chung tests our moral lines continually, coaxing us into collective action and asking us to play within a series of rules. It shows us the horror of how easy it is to comply. It asks us to consider when necessary trust turns into blind belief. This piece does not pretend to know the answers and tugs on the different sides of this question continually, trying to find the line between generative collective solidarity and violent ideology.



One of the strongest images in the piece is when Chung is walking from a far corner, in a beam of light, wearing only black shorts. He walks with a glass vessel that is half full of water on top of his head. Every movement and shake of the liquid is caught by the light. He walks very slowly. Every muscle in his feet and his calves come together to allow him to achieve this near impossible act of balance. It is a concert of effort.

Slowly, Chung eventually takes the vessel off his head, and holds the water, swishing it in its container from side to side. He speaks of a proverb in Vietnamese, "uống nước nhớ nguồn", which translates to 'when drinking water, remember where it comes from'. It asks us to remember where we came from, to remember our roots. I don't think of this in terms of a national identity, but in a way of remembering elemental connections that move beyond affixed identities and histories. It asks us to appreciate what made us, the linking cycles of rivers, oceans and rain, the links of our ancestors and the links between each other.



*Fluid Memories* (2026) by Chung Nguyen. Photo by Jeff Busby.





He asks a few audience members to help him hold this idea, their hands also meeting the glass container as it shakes and moves. In this act, the history of collective thoughtless compliance through shared uniforms, actions and games shifts to an intentional collaborative support of life, tuning our discernment between exercises of collective power and what constitutes real solidarity.

Even the most thoughtful, generous, collective ideology can be twisted out of shape by confused ideas or bad actors. An ideology set towards collective empowerment can ferociously become bloody towards dissent, undermining its generous dream. Similarly, ideas of individual freedom can be used for coercive control and manipulation by corporate interests or imperial powers.



The delicacy of the ability to discern where our values are rooted and how they extend at scale is the reason that we must walk carefully, in integrity and spirit. Our dreams must move through the fullness of our body, from water to the earth, through our feet, to the sky.

In Vietnamese, the word for country is 'đất nước', combining đất (land/soil) and nước (water).

It's from this balance that life and truth springs; the fragile and generous connection between worlds.



*Fluid Memories* (2026) by Chung Nguyen. Photo by Jeff Busby.

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*Lana Nguyen is an independent curator, writer and researcher with a particular focus on projects that stem from and interact with the politics and cultures of place. Interested in experimental, collaborative and public art, her practice has recently revolved around creating spaces for long-form learning and exchange, site responsive cultural production, and culturally-led initiatives for climate response.*

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**DANCEHOUSE D/**