



PROJECT MUSE®

Spirit of Friendship: Artist Groups in Vietnam Since 1975

Zoe Butt, Bill Nguyễn, Lê Thiên Bảo

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,
Volume 2, Number 1, March 2018, pp. 145-179 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2018.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690547>

Spirit of Friendship:

Artist Groups in Vietnam Since 1975

ZOE BUTT, with the assistance of BILL NGUYỄN and LÊ THIÊN BẢO

Translated to Vietnamese by Dương Mạnh Hùng, and available at

<http://www.spiritoffriendship.org/resource>

September 2017

Abstract

This curatorial text was written to accompany an exhibition of the same name, which also launched an online timeline and resource platform, and ongoing research project. The focus of this text and its associated projects is “artist groups” in Vietnam since 1975. The authors and curators emphasise friendship between individuals in the formation and functioning of these “artist groups”, and note that many were not officially recognised or named as “collectives”. Notions of experimentation and independence in artistic practice are emphasised, as these demonstrate how these artist groups extended the possibilities for contemporary art in Vietnam beyond what was taught or officially endorsed by state institutions, and also by the emergence of a tourist-oriented market. “Spirit of Friendship” is presented here as a resource for further research.

This curatorial text, and the exhibition it accompanied (held at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre in Ho Chi Minh City from 29 September to 26 November 2017), seeks to highlight the role and contribution of artist friendships in furthering the development of experimental languages in Vietnam, since 1975. As an educational display, the exhibition gave recognition to how

[**Southeast of Now**
Vol. 2 No. 1 (March 2018), pp. 145–79]

“friendship” continues to further the testing and encouraging of ideas among artists, beyond what was officially understood, taught or predominantly exhibited in Vietnam in the years following 1975. As curators and researchers, we believe these artists’ works to be worthy of more than catering to ideological/formal and touristic (commercial) demand.

Conceived as an introduction, this text (like the exhibition it accompanied) provides a general map of activity outlining 22 artist groups¹ from across Vietnam, focusing primarily on the visual arts. This endeavour was initiated particularly for the local audiences of The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre in Ho Chi Minh City, aware that their access to the history of contemporary art in this country is incredibly limited, due to Vietnam’s lack of diversity in cultural infrastructure operating with comparative and interdisciplinary experience and expertise.

Beginning with the Gang of Five² who started working together in the 1980s (arguably the first example of artist friendships mutually identifying themselves as driven by shared motivation in the post-American War era), this exhibition’s chronology charts until 2017, and provides a diverse range of evidence—such as quoted testimonials, documentary photographs and videos, exhibition catalogues and artworks from the artist groups themselves—illustrating the rise of independent³ artistic activity across the country.

From the utilisation of domestic living rooms to the reappropriation of traditional architecture; from public activation of artists’ studio space to the phenomenon of the bar-cum-studio; from the hostel as art host to the occupation of diplomatic zones as sites of artistic production—what we observe in this landscape is an entrepreneurial flair for strategic survival as artists strive to be heard in a community greatly underestimating their role in society. In addition to highlighting such “do it yourself” pro-activism in locating space and means, the Spirit of Friendship project shares how artists pay homage to the lives of artists before them, as a means of learning, and remembering their legacy. We focus on the practices of four artist groups—Salon Natasha, Nhà Sàn, Group of 10 and Sàn Art—for their facilitation of differing means and modes of making, thinking, talking and disseminating artistic ideas, thus influencing their community’s capacity to participate and understand the experience of art as a conduit for grappling with differing perceptions of contemporary life.

Sustaining a shared feeling of motivation for a mutual contribution as a group of friends labouring together is not easy, however, and when the financial realities and career opportunities of life become all too overwhelming, it is often only friendship that fires the tendrils of collective endurance, and even then it can be fraught with differing levels of commitment and

belief. The Spirit of Friendship exhibition visually focused on the memorable moments of kindling trusting friendships through art; while its associated public programme, a one-day symposium held on 4 November 2017 at The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, sought critical reflections and observations of the struggles of sustaining such grassroots infrastructure. In that event, we created a constructive discursive space where enduring dilemmas were shared, debated and hopefully given insight for creative improvement.

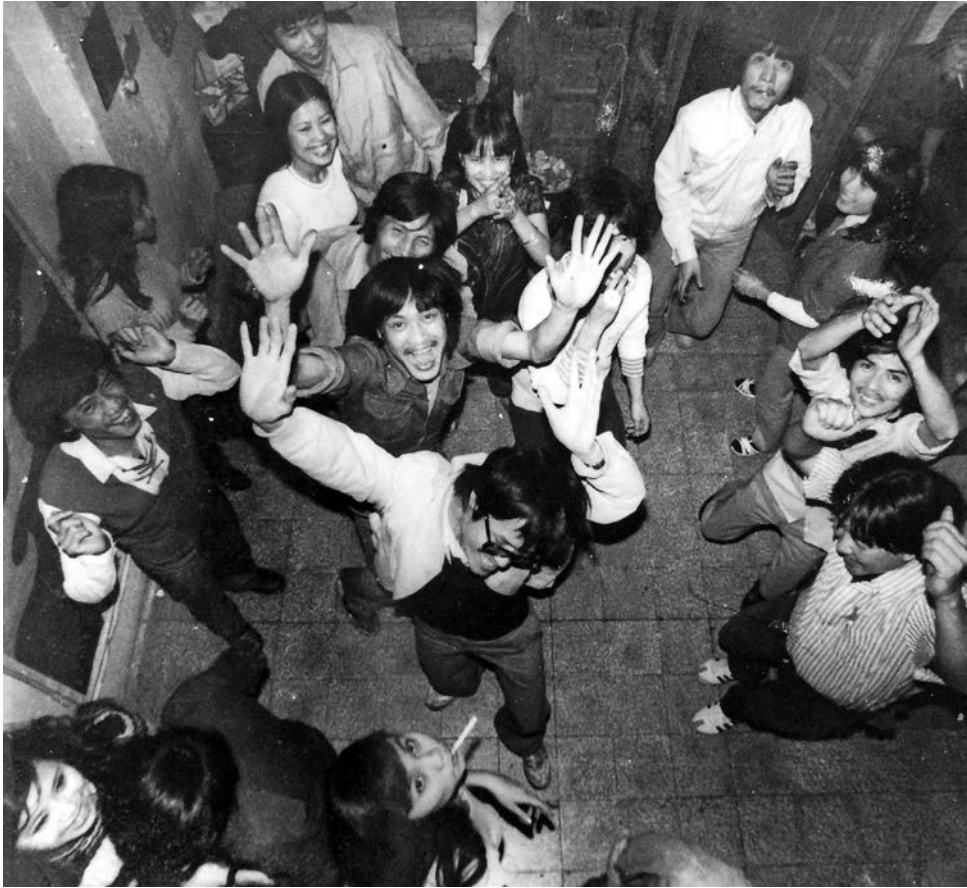
Spirit of Friendship is by no means comprehensive; rather, it is conceived as the first chapter of an ongoing research project (with a dedicated website: www.spiritoffriendship.org), which desires a deeper and broader exploration of Vietnam's art history, in order to better understand from whence we come—and from here, where and why do we move forward.

As a research and archive programme, it celebrates the Vietnamese artistic community's resilient ingenuity, which has sought innovative means of building audiences for art within a socio-political context that clandestinely monitors their public (and at times private) activity. The project is marked by individual reflections of collective artistic labour and its supportive networks. This in turn evidences how these perspectives are propelled by—and operate in response to—the tensions between internal and external social assumptions, between those who remained and those who fled, between honesty and (self) censorship, between ambition and earning a livelihood: these being but a few of the persistent dilemmas that continue to characterise Vietnam's experimental art scene today.

Conjuring “Spirit”

As members we are almost the same age, and have known each other for a very long time, ever since we applied to go to art school. And because of that, establishing the group was really honestly based on friendship. After we graduated, we realized how rough and cramped the conditions were for making art. So we decided to start the group with a simple reason, which was to nourish our desire to create. The other way was to quit art and go to Eastern Europe (which was the most promising place for those who wanted to escape from poverty and war; Western Europe was riskier and more expensive since you had to travel by ship). The group met up, drank tea and wine almost daily, we also went on picnics, visited some studios and went dancing! (which was illegal at that time)

—Trần Lương, Gang of Five⁴



These were the early days of the Gang of Five. Gazing at a black-and-white photograph that Trần Lương has shared of that moment (top), observing as youthful glee dances beneath arms raised, eyes drawn excitedly towards a camera overhead, it is striking to recall that this was a group of artists who had survived a protracted ideological war.

In another image (p. 149), we see a staged group portrait of five handsome young men dressed in black, all looking away from the lens, except Lương, who is armed with his signature stare that, to this day, continues to challenge assumed understandings of power. Much of the photographic documentation featured within the bilingual chronology of the *Spirit of Friendship* exhibition and website is similarly confident and celebratory in tone. From the openings of events that approximated “exhibitions”, to the processes of collaborative artistic production; from impromptu gatherings in song, to artists gathering and engaging in pointed group critique: what these small windows offer is but a glimpse into what might be similar experiences anywhere in the world’s diverse landscape of artistic communities.



In Vietnam, however, these artists who were and are committed to pushing differing modes and concepts of art-making beyond official or commercial dictates, continue to endure a landscape in which government and influential figures of wealth perceive such experimentation as suspicious for its cultural subversion, or as not a socially palatable economic investment. As a consequence, Vietnam today does not possess museums, libraries or universities with critical comparative expertise and resources on the history of art, either local or international. Thus, for better or worse, there are very few experienced curators, dealers, collectors and scholars who can readily argue for the validity and value of the experimental pioneers of Vietnamese art.

Given these circumstances, just how do these artists survive, and what motivates them to continue their work?

In an attempt to answer these questions, it is necessary to share a little background on the social and historical specificity of this country's experimental artistic landscape, and perceptions of it. As Trần Lương alludes to above, escaping poverty and war was the ultimate dream for a survivor who endured the international conflict between 1955 and 1975 (the collapse of the French Empire and the ensuing bloodbath that gave way to the establishment of the Communist State of Vietnam). Whether living in the north or south of the country, all artists faced some kind of battle of conscience with their ideas following the end of the American War. After 21 years of partition,⁵ there

were stark differences in artistic leanings between the divided communities of north and south. North Vietnam had been ensconced in socialist realism since 1945,⁶ as a vehicle to serve the ideology of Marxism and the growing dialogue with international communism. In the south, however, up until 1975, the extensive contact with American culture, the remnants of French philosophical attitudes in the translation of existential European thinkers (such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche), and the proliferation of printing houses (particularly in Saigon), all meant that southern artists were more exposed to western art movements, playing with form and composition in ways that were not permitted for their northern counterparts. In 1966, the first Fine Art Museum in Vietnam was established in Hanoi, but only after museums addressing political issues had been first set up, such as the Museum of Revolution, in 1959. It is revealing that northern artists who had relocated to South Vietnam, following the ousting of the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, were no longer considered worthy of its halls.⁷

With the Fall of Saigon in 1975 came the move towards “re-education”, which saw the artistic communities of the south conscripted into the armed forces by the Fine Art Association (Hoi My Thuat), often to violently detrimental ends.⁸ For the first decade of Vietnam as a one-party state, life was incredibly tumultuous for artists. Friendships were integral to propelling commitment to artistic experimentation. The members of the Gang of Five in Hanoi felt compelled to work off the official grid, exploring a life of art beyond the socialist realist official dictum, and feeling an urgent need to conceptually and critically reflect on the nature of their everyday. Other groups of artists in the renamed southern city of Ho Chi Minh (formerly Saigon) were living amongst northern artists whose belief in the nationalist (and thus communist) cause had awarded them senior positions in the newly established Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association (Hoi My Thuat Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh). In the early 1990s, the Group of 10⁹ found themselves friends under such circumstances precisely because of their commitment to art (particularly to the language of abstraction, which was not officially accepted at the time), despite their differing political attitudes, which will be discussed in more detail below. While the political ideology of the state may be a key influence in the generation of an artistic aesthetic, also of critical importance for mutually motivated experimentation in art in post-1975 Vietnam was the introduction of national economic reforms in 1986. Following what is locally referred to as *Doi Moi*,¹⁰ artists found increasing access to technology and international opportunity, thus fragmenting the dominance of a socialist worldview about the purposes, materials and meanings of art. Artist and filmmaker Nguyễn Trinh Thi (founder of Hanoi Doclab) says of this time:

until the early 2000s, artists mainly used video as an additional element to art installations or documentation of performances (in much the same way that video entered China in the early 1990s, where video art was first seen as a social tool of documentation, as opposed to an exploration of the form itself). In the 1990s, and even to this day, knowledge of the conceptual history of art and the exploration of abstraction beyond the “Abstract Expressionists” is not found in universities. Thus it was due to the popularity of television and film that artists studying and working in Vietnam were introduced to the potential of video as an artistic medium, largely drawn to its artistic potential as opposed to its structural capabilities.¹¹

From the early 2000s, the artist’s toolbox began to engage the digital realm.¹² Digital cameras (still or moving) became a more affordable medium that immediately captured a “truth”, which questioned the role of artists and the purpose of their expression in society. An example is the establishment of HanoiLink in 2006.¹³ The questioning of the construct of “truth” was further deepened with access to the World Wide Web,¹⁴ enabling comparative thinking on issues such as identity (thus explorations of sexuality in the subversive installations and performances of Trương Tân and Nguyễn Minh Thành); the role of spirituality (in dialogue with questions of ideological belief, as evidenced in the work of Trần Lương, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Nguyễn Minh Phước); or the prevalence of social corruption and immorality (illustrated in the graphic figurative work of such artists as Nguyễn Văn Cường and Lê Quảng Hà). It is important to note that, even today, still none of these critical experimental (and conceptual) art histories are taught in the secondary or tertiary levels of education in Vietnam.

The economic reforms of *Doi Moi* did, however, afford educational exchange opportunities. In 1987, artist Vũ Dân Tân found himself with the offer of study abroad, first in the Soviet Union and then Cuba. He was drawn to the compositional quality of music and the art of the stage, and succumbed to the thrall of animation, eventually returning to Hanoi with his Russian wife, Natasha Kraevskaia. Emboldened by the spirit of *Perestroika* and the way artists in the USSR had removed the ideological shackles from their artistic energies and outputs, Salon Natasha was born in 1990 (essentially the front room of Tân and Kraevskaia’s family home¹⁵), within which a multitude of music nights and “salon”-style exhibitions of local artist friends began to regularly occur.

Around that same time in Ho Chi Minh City, the Group of 10 (a group of artist friends who were also teachers and students) began to embrace abstract ideas in painting, demonstrating a mutual desire to technically and conceptually explore the painterly surface beyond the limited scope of the plastic arts schooling inherited from the French, and the heavy-handed dictum of socialist realism. Members of this group were to become instrumental in arguing to the cultural authorities for the need to officially approve such abstract artistic language.¹⁶ In the 1990s, the trickle of foreign curators, dealers and collectors with interest in Vietnamese art slowly turned into a steady stream, introducing the lucrative idea that being an artist could be a “career” or a form of livelihood (as opposed to a professed tool of the state). This shift also had a fundamental effect on the development of contemporary art. A private and commercial landscape for art began to flourish, where the apprehension of tourist demand—a desire for something “Vietnamese”—particularly pushed a language of art, opportunistically supported by the Vietnamese government, as a series of undebated cultural stereotypes propped up as national symbols of culture (such as the conical hat, the *ao dai* dress, the lacquer box or the lotus flower).

It was in 1994 that American art dealer Suzanne Lecht decided to establish her commercial gallery Art Vietnam in Hanoi, initially drawn to the inexplicable energy of the individual projects realised by the artists within Gang of Five, and also the artists who would eventually be regarded as the Avant Garde Calligrapher Group (locally referred to as the Zenei Gang of Five¹⁷). Art Vietnam was a commercial initiative with productive collector networks beyond Asia, thus increasing recognition of these experimental pioneers, supporting the production of artworks and organising exhibitions by such artists whose aesthetic language extended beyond the stereotypes made for the growing tourist market. This support of experimental artists was furthered that same year by the arrival of German artist Veronica Radulovic, who came to Vietnam to study lacquer art, becoming the first international lecturer since 1975 to be employed at the Hanoi University of Fine Art, supported by the German Academic Exchange Service. Artist Nguyễn Minh Thành, from Hanoi Triad,¹⁸ comments:

At that time, seeing Trương Tân's novel and daring paintings, looking at artworks of Veronika Radulovic, along with foreign books and videos on contemporary art that she brought to Vietnam, and engaging in discussions and talks—all of these were inspirations for us to practice drawing and creating art. At that time, we were tired of the formal education at school and had started slacking.¹⁹

With Doi Moi also came a stronger and more active cultural diplomacy between Vietnam and foreign governments, with Alliance Française (later renamed L'Espace), Goethe Institut, British Council, Japan Foundation and, later, the Cultural Development Exchange Fund (CDEF) of the Danish government (mainly operating in Hanoi), all evidencing strong advocacy of experimental art practice in Vietnam. These foreign-funded initiatives predominantly demanded that Vietnamese artists engaged or collaborated with an artistic expertise from their respective country, however, and thus directed (and limited) the cultural and historical directions of artistic enquiry by Vietnamese artists.²⁰

It is instructive to glance in comparison at Ho Chi Minh City in the early 1990s: a city whose intellectual and creative intelligentsia had largely fled in 1975, following the communist stitching of the country into one. In the early 1990s, Ho Chi Minh City was considerably quieter than Hanoi, devoid of any foreign NGOs or cultural diplomacy programmes. However, in 1995, this slowly began to change, as Vietnam and the USA restored diplomatic relations, with Vietnam also becoming a full member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the same year. These political shifts proved to be significant, for they opened the door for Vietnamese artistic exchange with the Southeast Asian region, and even more critically for the former South Vietnam, the chance for those who had fled to return home.

The return of artists who are celebrated today, such as Đinh Q. Lê (who was one of the first artists to relocate in 1996 from the USA to Ho Chi Minh City), was indicative of a growing wave of Viet Kieu,²¹ determined to return and contribute to the competitive growth of Vietnam's financial, social and cultural platforms. It was also in 1996 that Trần Thị Huỳnh Nga decided to establish Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre within the grounds of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Museum. This little gallery, nestled within the decaying ground floor of a state institution, was the first space in the former South Vietnam to gather a network of an array of artists from across the country, indeed the Southeast Asian region, in Ho Chi Minh City. It was through the artistic gatherings at Blue Space that artistic friendships were furthered beyond the local, at times inspiring initiatives to do something on their own.²²

A unique character of Ho Chi Minh City, differing greatly from Hanoi, was the mingling of Viet Kieu, foreign and local artist communities.²³ The social tensions between these groups manifested in particularly fraught relationships. For example, the assumption that Viet Kieu had access to wealth and mobility functioned as a prime source of social stigma at the local level.²⁴ Thus such artist initiatives as “a little blah blah”²⁵ (formed 2004), Wonderful

District²⁶ (formed 2006) and Sàn Art (formed 2007) were influential amalgamations of friendships that effectively bridged such social divide, demonstrating the beneficial networks afforded from such partnerships (results also reflected in the growing private business sector).

The growth in such artist-friendship activity was arguably also spurred by the growing international attention afforded to Vietnamese art. Major exhibition platforms associated with museum collections in the 1990s, such as the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial (since 1979, previously referred as the Asian Art Show); and the Queensland Art Gallery's Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (established 1991) were engaging curatorial research into Vietnamese experimental pioneers, and acquiring their artworks. Similarly, art dealers (such as Plum Blossom Gallery in Hong Kong²⁷) and freelance curators (such as Sherry Buchanan, the first curator to give recognition to the work of Trần Trung Tín²⁸) were actively pushing Vietnamese experimental practices abroad.

Alongside these efforts, within Vietnam collectors such as Lê Thái Sơn, Adrian Jones (Witness' Collection, formed in 2002); Dominic Scriven (DOGMA Collection and Art Prize, formed in 2009), and Post Vidai (a group of three collectors, formed in 1993) were vital in their support of experimental explorations by Vietnamese artists. By the early 2000s, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City possessed a heady number of commercial galleries (predominantly tourist-focused), though glaringly few were willing (and equipped with necessary collector and exhibition networks) to represent artists of this experimental scene.

While financial instability is a reality faced by experimental artists all over the world, a crucial concern for the sustainability of experimental art practices in Vietnam is the urgent need for reform of its educational curricula and expertise. Vietnam inherited an *École des Beaux Arts* system of studying the Plastic Arts, introduced by the French in 1925, with a curriculum that, since the 1950s, has had little innovation, and lacks any critical comparative engagement of local or foreign developments in aesthetic ideas and theories. Thus, artists who seek to successfully engage with international markets must be incredibly proactive and strategic (similarly to this country's economic and tourist industries). Addressing the lack of educational opportunities for artists is especially central to the activities of artist groups such as Nhà Sàn in Hanoi and Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City. Their projects not only challenge themselves with historical and conceptual approaches to art-making, but also engage in critical dialogue between local and non-local forms of interdisciplinary cultural knowledge.²⁹



FIGURE 1: “Leaving A Mark”, installation shot from Spirit of Friendship exhibition, 2017, The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Photograph courtesy of Phan Quang

It is in acknowledging this complicated and socio-politically nuanced artistic landscape that the curating of this exhibition was physically divided into four sections on the gallery floor of The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre. The first section—also replicated on the project website at www.spiritoffriendship.org/artists—comprised a lengthy timeline, which attempts to provide a basic map of this experimental artistic landscape, noting particular social, economic and cultural milestones within and beyond Vietnam. The exhibition’s second section, Leaving a Mark—Finding the Way Forward, presented four mini-exhibitions dedicated to specific artist-friendship groups whose projects left indelible marks on the development of an experimental artistic thinking in Vietnam. Strategies of Survival, the third section, focused on how particular artist groups have innovated the use and access to space, in order to display and share their art, despite financial or political limits. Finally, a section titled Artists Looking at Artists consisted of a screening programme of moving image works, including documentaries, short films and videos. In these films, artists examine the lives and methods of other artists, not only in an act of memorial, but also as a means of recording—and thus providing access to—the legacy of art and artists to be remembered by a broader community.

The following sections of this curatorial text expand on these various sections of the Spirit of Friendship exhibition.

Leaving a Mark—Finding the Way Forward

Situated at the spatial centre of this exhibition was a focus on the work of the Group of 10, Salon Natasha, Nhà Sàn and Sàn Art, four artist groups specifically chosen for their demonstration of how artist friendships have addressed the lack of networked support, opportunity, expertise and educational resources available for artists in Vietnam, through unique means of artistic exchange and production, exhibition making and the creation of dynamic learning environments.

Group of 10 (as they came to be named)³⁰ was a unique group of artists who, beginning in 1989, started to exhibit in the ground-floor offices of the newspaper *Van Nghe*, gathering together as friends in Ho Chi Minh City over a table, ten chairs, a few bottles of vodka and a sardine box. This scene was soon enriched by leaflets about their annual group exhibitions, and recent issues of *My Thuat*, a magazine on fine art published by the Ho Chi Minh Fine Art Association, which two of the Group of 10 members, Ca Lê Thắng and



FIGURE 2: A part of Group of 10 in an exhibition in Hanoi, 1993. From left to right: Nguyễn Tấn Cương, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Nguyễn Trung, Ca Lê Thắng, Đào Minh Tri, Trần Văn Thảo. Photo courtesy of artist Nguyễn Tấn Cương and Nguyễn Kim Tố

Nguyễn Trung, were partly responsible for publishing. This was an unusual yet significant group of people, for its members hailed from both North and South Vietnam, making Group of 10 arguably the first group of artists to work together across this previous ideological divide.³¹ This was partly a consequence of the communist-appointed Fine Art Association forming national membership, and in the process sending significant artistic talents south to lead its initiatives. But it also reflected the artists thinking practically about the chances of a better livelihood.³² Leaving aside their ideological leanings and (perhaps intimidating) official appointments,³³ these artists came together in the spirit of art, particularly for an exploration of abstraction: a mode of painting not officially permitted (and thus not taught or supported) at the time. Their first group show in 1989 came to be an annual event in Ho Chi Minh City, and the January 1992 edition was recognised as the first to display abstract art in the country.³⁴

Within the Spirit of Friendship exhibition, nine paintings are on view, representative of the Group of 10 artists' practice from the 1990s, and demonstrating their abstract explorations. Đỗ Hoàng Tường remembers,

In 1993, the exhibition 'Tác Phẩm Mới' [Recent Works] at 29 Hang Bai, marked a grand introduction of Saigonese artists in Hanoi,



FIGURE 3: A corner of the exhibition The Recent Works (1990) at the gallery room of Văn Nghệ newspaper, 462 Xo Viet Nghe Tinh Street, 1990. Photograph courtesy of artist Nguyễn Tấn Cương and Nguyễn Kim Tố

proposing a different perspective on art practice at the time. This pioneering encounter formed many friendships and collegial connections between North and South (such as our information and art discussion exchange with the 'Gang Of Five')³⁵.

In Hanoi, Salon Natasha was also a scene of exchange and community support in the 1990s, with evenings often given over to improvisational experimental performances between poets, musicians and visual artists (amongst others). Natasha Kraevskaia recalls a visit by artist Bonny Bombach (co-founder of the Community Printmakers Murwillumbah or CPM in Australia), who stumbled into the street-front studio of Salon Natasha in 1996 while holidaying in Hanoi. He happened to catch a glimpse of a recently arrived letter from the Queensland Art Gallery, which was an invitation for Vũ Dân Tân to participate in the forthcoming Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, a national flagship exhibition in Australia, not far from where Bombach lived. Excited by the prospect of meeting again, Bombach, Vũ Dân Tân and Kraevskaia promised to get in contact if and when they came to Brisbane. This meeting spurred the creation of Crosscurrents, a project in which single artworks by multiple authors were created across two continents between artist-friends of Salon Natasha and CPM. Artworks in ink, watercolour or acrylic on paper were sent back and forth between Vietnam and Australia by mail, with the receiver embellishing and reinterpreting what they were sent with their own response. Sometimes, the artwork would travel back and forth more than twice.

In the Spirit of Friendship exhibition, a dedicated room presented a selection of these artworks and documentation from this exchange, with the Crosscurrents project illustrating the pre-digital era of envelopes, letters and printed photographs that enabled the process. Kraevskaia comments, "It is worth a mention that the Hanoi Post office was very supportive, they let the project go on, satisfied by my explanation that it was just a children's game instead of demanding official authorization for posting artworks, as was determined by law at the time."³⁶ The fact that a private initiative between two individuals, beginning as a kind of friendship, a game of exchange and exploration could result in a collaborative exhibition attracting support for its showcase in Hanoi (27 March–8 April 1998) and a regional touring show throughout New South Wales, Australia (1998–2000) demonstrates the power of commitment between artists to share their experimentation despite the limits of finance and the significant geographical distance between them.

The year 1998 was significant for the local art scene in Hanoi, as it marked the birth of one of Vietnam's most resilient independent art spaces—



FIGURE 4: "Salon Natasha", installation shot from Spirit of Friendship exhibition, 2017, The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Photo courtesy of Phan Quang



FIGURE 5: Vũ Dân Tân and Natasha Kraevskaia sitting in the front gallery space of Salon Natasha, 1998. Photograph courtesy of Salon Natasha



FIGURE 6: Sound performance by Vũ Dân Tân, Lê Hồng Thái and Vũ Thị Nhusha, at the opening of the exhibition Thanh Sac, 4 March 2000. Photograph courtesy of Salon Natasha

Nhà Sàn.³⁷ Over the last two decades, Nhà Sàn has initiated and staged some of Vietnam's most critical experimental projects, having nurtured generations of artists, while always keeping its doors (and minds) open to those curious enough to step in. Aware that the status of art and artists in Vietnam continued to be officially challenged, and that more artists were responding to contentious historical issues in their work, Nhà Sàn understood early on the necessity of thinking like a "curator". This was a role that was little understood or practised in Vietnam at the time, and not found in any of its state institutions. In Vietnam, a curator takes on myriad other roles besides an "exhibition maker", often working as a study partner who shares knowledge, researches and debates with artists; and as a mediator who negotiates and connects artists with the public, the authorities and other agents in the cultural field.

Nhà Sàn perceived that it was no longer a question of what or who to curate, but rather, *how* to curate. Nhà Sàn continue to take the multiple roles and functions of a curator in Vietnam as the starting point for their curatorial approach and artistic work. They offer different ways to think about the longevity and sustainability of an art space: relocating four times



FIGURE 7: “Nhà Sàn Collective”, installation shot from Spirit of Friendship exhibition, 2017, The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Photograph courtesy of Phan Quang

in nearly 20 years and overcoming financial limitations by securing sponsorship from the business sector whilst continuously challenging the nature of curating and documenting art history.

For Spirit of Friendship, Nhà Sàn Collective proposes a different look into their history by presenting one of the often little-discussed micro-histories of a woman named Lê Thị Lương and widely known as Mẹ Lương, the wife of Nguyễn Mạnh Đức (one of the co-founders of Nhà Sàn Studio), and her kitchen space. Lovingly called “mẹ” (“mother”) by all, Mẹ Lương welcomes, cooks and tends to all artists, visitors or any passers-by, her motherly presence maintaining the organic and family-oriented environment of Nhà Sàn. Located on the ground floor, beneath the living room, her kitchen space opens up an additional meeting point within the architecture of Nhà Sàn Studio itself, enabling for the more private and humble but no less significant chit-chat to take place. Inviting Mẹ Lương to represent the space and the group, and using her kitchen space and self-curated cookbook as source materials, Nhà Sàn Collective metaphorically points to—and to a certain extent reiterates—what it means to make art and to be artists in the context of Vietnam today.

The final project exhibited in the Leaving a Mark section of the exhibition was Sàn Art Laboratory (2012–16), which was the first independent and locally



FIGURE 8: Artist Lại Thị Diệu Hà performing “Flying Up” in IN:ACT international Performance Art Festival, 2010, Nhà Sàn studio, Hanoi, Vietnam. Photograph courtesy of Phan Quang

driven artist-in-residence programme in Vietnam, initiated and organised by Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City.³⁸ With a focus on the production of art as a space of knowledge creation via talking, the Sàn Art Laboratory programme ultimately responded to Vietnam’s education system and its lack of encouragement for critically sharing artistic ideas via comparative reading, writing and speaking. The first session of Sàn Art Laboratory took place in 2012, with artists Tuấn Mami (Hanoi), Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai (Hue) and Trương Công Tùng (Ho Chi Minh City) as “residents” of the lab (as they locally came to be called). They met their nominated “talking-partner” at least twice a month: Mami with artist collective The Propeller Group; Mai with artist Tammy Nguyễn; and Tùng with artist/designer/writer Sita Raiter. In addition to these conversations with assigned “talking partners”, the “lab” residents carried out artist talks, open studio gatherings, group critique and a final group exhibition at Sàn Art. Many impromptu parties were had at the lab, with a constant flow of visitors (resident artists, visiting guests from out of town and the local community) also spending time at the main gallery space and reading room of Sàn Art.

Through an open call process of application, the focus of the lab was initially Vietnamese artistic production; however, by 2014, it was extended to artists across Southeast Asia. Assessed by an international jury, applicants

FIGURE 9: “The Lab”, installation shot from Spirit of Friendship exhibition, 2017, The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Photo courtesy of Phan Quang



under 35 who had portfolios which demonstrated their commitment to experimentation with ideas and materials in their practice were considered—particularly those willing to take part in critique and discussion. Sàn Art Laboratory consequently generated an active community of artists, curators and interdisciplinary thinkers who came together with the pointed purpose of learning from each other’s experience and expertise. Trương Công Tùng shares:

In the Lab, while other artist residents were focused on developing their personal projects into full-fledged exhibitions, I was going from one experiment to another with various materials: from painting with powdered paint, video art, sculpture using polyester, to artworks that are induced from field-work method. Troubled by my confusion, I feared that I could not form a stable approach for myself. But after the Lab ended, it dawned on me that the Lab environment had provided us with an opportunity to experience new media, materials, and art forms—a counter-curriculum to what was being taught at the Fine Art University. It also taught us to be unafraid and pursue our postponed ideas.³⁹



FIGURE 10: Sàn Art lab #4 group critique in 2014. Photograph courtesy of Sàn Art

Inside the Spirit of Friendship exhibition, a dedicated room showcased three artworks that these artists from Session 1 of the “lab” consider “transitional” for their practice, sharing how their methods and approach to art-making has changed since their “lab” residency. Interestingly, all three artists have since engaged with the impact of context on behaviour, whether it is human or animal in nature, a characteristic also present in their group exhibition realised in 2012. Like many of the 24 alumni of Sàn Art Laboratory, Tuấn Mami, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai and Trương Công Tùng have gone on to do significant projects with international presence and critical acclaim.

Strategies Of Survival

... We formed through a combination of frustration, vision, passion, excitement, democratic openness and tact. a little blah blah's program was increasingly dedicated to the powerful 'friction zone' created by: art and public space; or whacky, unexpected space; or engaging the unlikely public and everyday people directly. There was a tremendous amount of energy in that. You have to remember how groaningly dusty institutional art was in Vietnam at the time.

Sue Hajdu, “a little blah blah”, Ho Chi Minh City

We were renting this small apartment on Nguyen Trai (District 1) and we built a mezzanine for our bed and let the rest be totally empty. It was here that Atelier Wonderful was born ... We had no incomes at all ... We had big pots of white paint and every week we would repaint the apartment. Everyone coming from a mix of the creative communities of architects, designers, composers, artists, art students understood that we were doing this for the community and that we had no money.

Sandrine Llouquet, Atelier Wonderful, Ho Chi Minh City

Throughout the world, cultural expression—its objects and rituals—is experienced via particular social gatherings, and the transference of so-called traditional languages into contemporary modes of being has given rise to some of the most dynamic artistic production in the 20th century, particularly (such as the influence of *wayang* puppetry on the art of Indonesian artist Heri Dono and the re-engagement of Ming Dynasty architectural techniques in the art of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei). In tandem with this transfiguration of tradition (particularly across the Asian region from the 1970s onwards) was a grappling with the socio-political changes of the time as the industrialisation of economy wrought tension with understandings of cultural identity and its representation. Thus, for example, following the demise of the Cultural Revolution in China where visual art was largely a propagandist vehicle, “Apartment Art”⁴⁰ became a trend whereby experimental artists took to turning their domestic spaces into one-night exhibition spaces. Elsewhere, such as in Indonesia, artists were inspired by the New Order regime’s propagandist cinema sites which they turned into their own artistic zones, such as Ruangrupa’s public programme “The Gerobak Bioskop (Cinema Cart) Network”⁴¹ in 2013. Such strategies of survival are what energise cultural languages, reminding us that “tradition” is an evolving language, its transformation into contemporary modes (such as through usage of contemporary media and subjects) one means of ensuring, and testing, its social relevance.⁴²

Thus it is not surprising that artistic communities in Vietnam which do not satisfy the criteria for commercial or official opportunities—and thus often feel very much the minority in a society that largely does not acknowledge their creative worth—have similarly striven for strategies to remain visible to a dedicated few. This has been partly in order to give hope and purpose to their need to be artists; partly, also, it reflects a belief that their ideal community can be found—and many of them did succeed in finding or creating this community, anchored in spaces that were unconventional and unexpected.



FIGURE 11: Artists participated in March: Art Walk, 2015. Photograph taken after a screening session at studio #1 Lê Công Kiều, D.1, Ho Chi Minh City, one of the public programmes associated with the exhibitions. Photograph courtesy of Sao La

As Sue Hajdu and Sandrine Llouquet describe above, their desire to create their respective entities/projects was in response to having identified a collective need for it.

In the Strategies of Survival section of the Spirit of Friendship exhibition, a collection of documentary material lines one wall. Including photographs, video, a website blog and a printed handmade book, this display shares candid shots and, at times, humorous footage of artists daring to challenge the definition of “public” through the repurposing of domestic, commercial and spiritual spaces.

Whether it was due to limited funds (as in the case of the Atelier Wonderful project of Wonderful District), a critical need to engage public community spaces (as for “a little blah blah”); a desire to create a “journey” in the experience of art (as in the Art Walk project by Sao La⁴³); the partnering with foreign government initiatives in an effort to maintain artistic experimental autonomy (via the “occupation” of the Japan Foundation by Nhà Sàn Collective with the festival of exhibitions and other projects titled “Skylines With Flying People 2”, 2012); or the conversion of a hostel lobby into a gallery space (as with the project and group Chaosdowntown⁴⁴): these are artistic strategies without commercial imperative. They are strategies that have arisen



FIGURE 12: Guests and artists Nguyễn Phương Linh (in white hat) and Tuấn Mami (in pink top) inside Tuấn Mami's MAC-Hanoi (Mobile Art Center), as part of *Skylines With Flying People 2*, Japan Foundation, Hanoi (December 2012)

in response to a broader social scene's unawareness of the existence and value of such innovative creative spirit, this experimental community with next to no promotional space in the public eye.⁴⁵ Thus rental of property continues to predominantly cater to commercial purposes, with minimal private investment in culture (a situation made all the more complicated by an official landscape that is suspicious of independent non-commercial activity). Whilst there have been commissioned reports and forums⁴⁶ aimed to encourage public debate of the positive and lucrative value of culture to economy, Vietnam is yet to see sustained and committed interest in alternative models of support for experimental contemporary art.

Artists Looking at Artists

In a community with few art historical archives, suffering a lack of institutions critically collecting and cataloguing artistic production⁴⁷—a result of political instability, economic limitations and ideological directives—whereby access to living expertise and experience is limited due to the dispersal of much of this intelligence in 1954, and then in 1975, it is increasingly prevalent that independent creative talents have sought to research and document influential figures of Vietnam's past and present artistic landscape. In the Artists Looking at Artists section of the Spirit of Friendship exhibition, a select



FIGURE 13: An artist talk by Tuan Andrew Nguyễn about graffiti art during a weekend dedicated to graffiti. Photograph courtesy of Atelier Wonderful

number of films were screened in a loop, showcasing particular artistic communities and individuals of notable aesthetic impact. The Propeller Group⁴⁸ provided a documentary (2013) on the graffiti scene of Ho Chi Minh City via the perspective of American graffiti extraordinaire El Mac, whose visits to Vietnam have been of mutual influence. Nguyễn Quang Huy (of Hanoi Triad) explores the legendary poet Dương Tường's creative processes of performing, writing and translating poetry in the experimental video "*Le soir est tout soupirs*" (2005). The young filmmaker Tạ Minh Đức traces the history and celebrates the pioneering spirit of Nhà Sàn in the documentary *15+*, made on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of Nhà Sàn in 2013. Also included was *Essence of Spring* (1996), a documentary by filmmaker Trần Mỹ Hà, showcasing the art scene of South Vietnam in the 1990s after Doi Moi. As a complement, this exhibition premiered the filmic documentary *Nguyễn Trung* (2017), also by Trần Mỹ Hà, revealing the art practice and life of artist Nguyễn Trung, an influential figure within Group of 10 who is increasingly attributed as the leading pioneer of abstract painting in South Vietnam.

Concluding Remarks

The attempt in this text, and in the exhibition that it accompanied, to collate, notate, reflect and archive the history of artistic friendships as "group" activity across Vietnam would not be considered credible were we not also attempting to provide access to these unique facts, thus a dedicated bilingual website has been created—www.spiritoffriendship.org—which offers the beginnings of an archive documenting the artistic friendships presented within this physical exhibition, and which is also envisaged as an ongoing curatorial platform for The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, whereby future projects related to the memory of this experimental community are commissioned and recorded.

To accompany this exhibition which inaugurates the ongoing "Spirit of Friendship" project, an essay by art historian and critic Lee Weng Choy has been commissioned, which shares his perspectives on the role and process of friendship as an influential negotiation in the frame of artistic production. Moreover, curator and researcher Đỗ Tường Linh has written a personal letter to an alter ego, reflecting on her own involvement in and observation of the local art scene of Hanoi. Finally, Zoe Butt offers a philosophical pondering on the nature of "friendship" in the structure of the global art world today, questioning the level of curatorial care for motivation, method and means behind artistic production today.

It must be reiterated that our ambitious desire to create an exhibition as a window onto this landscape of friendship in the experimental arts of Vietnam constitutes the first attempt by any institution or individual in this country. It is motivated by a sense of responsibility, on the part of The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, as the first purpose-built space for contemporary art, to raise public awareness about the significance of this artistic community. The decision to include these 22 “artist groups” was based on a particular set of questions we posed to each group, seeking personal reflections on the kinds of spaces and activities they created, and their acknowledgment of friendship as the basis of their mutual encouragement of artistic production.

While other recent exhibitions held in the region, such as *Concept, Context, Contestation* (hosted and commissioned by Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, 2014) and *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* (organised by the Japan Foundation and ASEAN in 2017, and hosted by Mori Art Museum and National Art Centre, Tokyo) have (partly) focused on the idea of the “collective” in contemporary artistic production of Southeast Asia, the term “collective” is deliberately not used for *Spirit of Friendship*, as many of the participants included in this exhibition and referred to in this text did not conceive themselves as a branded group identity. For example, the Gang of Five came to be referred as such due to the reviews and critical support of art historian Nguyễn Quân while the artists of Then Group in Hue have suggested that the promotion of a collective independent identity as experimental artists would draw unwanted official scrutiny of their activities, and thus they are promoted as a business.

By providing a threshold into this landscape, it is hoped that “*Spirit of Friendship*” brings greater awareness of the particularities of artistic relationships, and their impact on furthering the development of experimental artistic thinking in Vietnam. The exhibition and text do not, however, have the capacity to do justice to the immense labour, commitment and contribution of the diverse set of players involved. “*Spirit of Friendship*” seeks to highlight the role of friendship as a space of trust, in which artistic integrity is cultivated and nourished, despite a political environment that stifles diversity in creative expression. We have conducted this research, mounted this exhibition and written this text with a spirit of respect and awe at the growth of experimental thinking that has arisen as a dynamic, and increasingly internationally recognised, scene in Vietnam. The support between friends has motivated the conception, production, display and distribution of these experimental practices. It is in this community that the methodologies of artists stand as a particular framework with which to re-categorise and re-interpret an art history for Vietnam.

BIOGRAPHIES

Zoe Butt is a curator and writer based in Vietnam. Currently Artistic Director of the Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, she formerly served as Executive Director and Curator of Sàn Art, both in Ho Chi Minh City. Her curatorial projects include interdisciplinary platforms such as *Conscious Realities*; the online exhibition *Embedded South(s)*; and group exhibitions of Vietnamese and international artists at various venues locally and abroad. Butt is a member of the Asian Art Council for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and a Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum since 2015. In 2019, she presents *Journey Beyond the Arrow*, one of three exhibitions, as part of the 14th Sharjah Biennial.

Bill Nguyễn is an artist-curator interested in developing an alternative, locally-driven method and platform for curation in Vietnam. After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University (UK), Nguyễn returned to Hanoi, re-entering the scene through multiple trajectories in the art community: engaging as an artist, curator and educator. In 2012 he co-founded Manzi Art Space, and started collaborating with Nhà Sàn Collective as guest curator. Nguyễn is an alumnus of the 8th Berlin Biennial Young Curators Workshop and a participant of the CuratorsLAB, and is currently curatorial assistant at The Factory.

Lê Thiên Bảo is a self-taught curator, who moved from Communications into the Fine Arts to pursue her curatorial passions. From 2010–15, she focused on observing and developing her own artistic approach in a diverse community of local artists, concentrating her attention on the role of the artist as well as the investment in art in today's society. Since April 2016, she has become Curatorial Assistant at The Factory and been actively involved in arts projects and critical discussions. Some of her recent curatorial projects include *Chain* (2017), a solo exhibition by Lê Hoàng Bích Phượng, The Factory, Ho Chi Minh City; co-curator of *I, Me, Mine* (2017) with Saigon Artbook 7 publication, a group exhibition of five artists, The Factory, Ho Chi Minh City.

NOTES

- ¹ This article was commissioned for the Spirit of Friendship exhibition, which was organised by, and held at, The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, from 29 Sept. to 26 Nov. 2017. For more on The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, see www.factoryartscentre.com.

This text was first published as part of the Resource library of the Spirit of Friendship online platform, an ongoing programme and research website initiated in 2017 by The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, at www.spiritoffriendship.org. The text has since been edited by the editorial collective of *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*. Its authors submitted the text for publication in order to reach a wider international audience, and also in the interests of posterity, so that this text and the materials it refers to may be more readily available as a resource for further research in future. Diacritics have been used for names of people only. Should you have any enquiry regarding this project and its research or activities, please contact: info@factoryartscentre.com.

We refer to “artist groups”, as opposed to “collectives”, as we recognise that many artists who gathered to work together in Vietnam (particularly in the 1980s and 1990s) did not label themselves with a specific name, mission or vocalised purpose. Rather, we chose to acknowledge how friendship was what brought about a furthering of testing and encouraging ideas. Where possible, in this curatorial text we will indicate how an artist group came to be given an actual name.

- ² This group of artists—Hong Việt Dũng (b. 1961), Phạm Quang Vinh (b. 1960), Đặng Xuân Hoà (b. 1959), Hà Trí Hiếu (b. 1959) and Trần Lương (b. 1960)—came to be known as the Gang of Five, named by supporters (and friends) Dương Tường, Thái Bá Vân and Nguyễn Quân who encouraged their practice at that time. From e-mail conversation between Lê Thuận Uyên, a researcher of Gang of Five, and Zoe Butt, July 2017.
- ³ The use of the word “independent” in this endeavour refers to artists who sought to challenge their ideas and concepts beyond the national educational curriculum: an inherited interpretation of the “plastic arts” from the French colonial era (1887–1954) that was then fortified as an ideological vehicle (which continues to prevail today), with the establishment of the entire country as a communist state in 1975. Nora A. Taylor comments on the colonial education system of Vietnam:

The EBAI [Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine] officially opened in 1925 ... [This institution] had helped to base France’s presence in Indochina not only on economic and administrative authority but on educational and cultural interest. Through [this institution], France convinced itself that it cared for the education of the local Indochinese and for the preservation of the cultural heritage of

ancient Indochina. At the time of the EBAT's inauguration, the policy that the colonial administration adopted toward the school fell along those lines and was known as the policy of association. In spite of some reluctance on the part of more conservative colonial officials, the administration believed that in building an art school it would help local "artisans" become educated in the "fine arts"... The school curriculum followed that of l'École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, founded in Paris in 1973, and included classes in anatomy, composition, life drawing, and art history. The course load was rigorous, with classes being conducted over the course of a forty-hour week ... The choice of subjects varied depending on the interest of both the students and the teachers, but predominant themes included peasant women, farmers at work, village temples, and rice fields.

See Taylor, Chapter 2, "Orientalists or Occidentalists? 'Indochinese' Artists under Colonialism" in *Painters in Hanoi. An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), pp. 27–9.

- ⁴ Interview between Trần Lương and Zoe Butt, June 2017.
- ⁵ On 27 Apr. 1954, the Geneva Agreement was signed, with the French relinquishing any claim to territory in the Indochina peninsula. Vietnam was divided into northern and southern zones into which opposing forces were to withdraw. Elections in 1956 were supposed to take place to unify the country; however, this never occurred, with the divide between north and south instead exacerbating ideological tensions and ultimately giving way to civil strife that became internationally known as the Vietnam War. Within Vietnam, it is referred to as the American War.
- ⁶ With the closing of World War II and the weakening power of France in Indochina, Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) seized power in North Vietnam in 1945. With his Viet Minh army (formally known as the Vietnam Independence League: a coalition of communist and Vietnamese nationalists), a socialist society was thus adopted. South Vietnam remained under French control.
- ⁷ "Rarely were the works of artists who fled to the South ... selected and hung, particularly during the second Indochina war. The history, as well as the art history is written for the 'just cause'." See Bội Trần Huynh-Beattie, Chapter 3, "Vietnamese Socialist Realism: The Arts of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (The North) 1945–1975)" in "Vietnamese Aesthetics 1925 Onwards", unpublished PhD thesis, (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2005), p. 175.
- ⁸ "... artist-lecturers were removed from teaching and detained in camps for two or three years. Upon release, many found it difficult to recommence creative

activities ...” See Bội Trần Huỳnh-Beattie, Chapter 5, “The Construction and De-Construction of Vietnamese Aesthetics of the Post-War Period 1975–1990” in “Vietnamese Aesthetics 1925 Onwards” unpublished thesis (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2005), pp. 274–6.

- ⁹ The Group of 10 comprised: Nguyễn Trung (b. 1940), Ca Lê Thắng (b. 1949), Đào Minh Tri (b. 1950), Nguyễn Tấn Cường (b. 1953), Nguyễn Thanh Bình (b. 1954), Hứa Thanh Bình (b. 1957), Nguyễn Trung Tín (b. 1956), Đỗ Hoàng Tường (b. 1960), Trần Văn Thảo (b. 1961) and Vũ Hà Nam (b. 1962).

- ¹⁰ ... when the country faced economic crisis, at the 6th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986 the Vietnamese government launched a bold new policy of social, economic and political reform under the rubric of *doi moi* (“renovation”), aimed at transforming the old command economy into a market-based one. Since that time free enterprise has been encouraged and foreign investment and dollar-spending tourists welcomed ...

See Tim Doling, “Arts Management Curriculum Development: A Case Study of Viet Nam in a Market Economy”, *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management* 1, 1 (Dec. 2003), University of South Australia International Graduate School of Management, p. 35.

- ¹¹ Nguyễn Trinh Thi, “Discourse on the Moving Image in Vietnam in the 21st Century”, in *Moving on Asia*, ed. Jinsuk Suh (Seoul: Alternative Space Loop, 2013), pp. 414–9.
- ¹² Hoa Nguyễn (co-founder of HanoiLink) recalls acquiring her first digital device in 2002—the Panasonic Lumix F150 (2.0 megapixel)—with such machinery being a particularly important (and affordable) tool for experimental artists in Hanoi at that time. Conversation between Hoa Nguyễn and Bill Nguyễn, July 2017.
- ¹³ HanoiLink was established in 2006 with Hoa Nguyễn, Nguyễn Hoài Văn, Nguyễn Trần Nam, Trương Thiện and Nguyễn Ban Ga as its core members.
- ¹⁴ In 1997, Internet access was enabled in Vietnam (as comparison, it arrived in Japan in 1984), an era when Chinese contemporary artists were particularly gaining international attention (Harold Szeeman curating 20 Chinese artists in his 48th Venice Biennale in 1999—one of the first curators to give art of contemporary Asia such prominence). The engagement of conceptual ideas of chance, exploration of existential questions of mortality through material, and the usage of the body as site of resistance (of reference to the work of artists Xu Bing and Zhang Huan and in turn their looking towards the art movements of Fluxus and Dadaism through such work as Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp) deserves more research of its impact on the development of conceptual art practice in Vietnam in the early 2000s.

- ¹⁵ Vũ Dân Tân's father Vũ Đình Long was a well-known playwright and translator and, already during his time, the front room of this house had been a popular "hangout" for intellectuals in Hanoi.
- ¹⁶ The first official abstraction exhibition was organised at Hong Hac gallery, 20–31 May 1992 (No. 2 Le Duan Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City) inside the South East Armed Forces Museum, organised by the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Culture & Information, Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association and South East Armed Forces Museum—a conversation largely facilitated by Colonel Phan Oánh, art historian Nguyễn Quân and Group of 10 artist members Ca Lê Thắng and Đào Minh Tri. Interview between artist Nguyễn Trung Tín and Lê Thiên Bảo, July 2017.
- ¹⁷ Established in 2006 by artists/*Nom* scholars Trần Trọng Dương, Nguyễn Đức Dũng, Nguyễn Quang Thắng, Phạm Văn Tuấn and Lê Quốc Việt. *Nom* is the system of writing Vietnamese using Chinese characters, which was starting to be replaced by the modern system of romanisation in the early 1900s.
- ¹⁸ Established in 1993, Hanoi Triad comprises of Nguyễn Minh Thành, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Nguyễn Văn Cường.
- ¹⁹ Interview between Nguyễn Minh Thành and Bill Nguyễn, June 2017.
- ²⁰ These foreign NGO cultural institutes should not be underestimated for their role in furthering experimental concepts of art-making in Vietnam. As foreign government entities, they were able to host activities of a more challenging nature (that is, an "eased" license process with the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture) and thus stand-out initiatives occurred such as the renowned group show Green - Red - Yellow (Goethe Institut Hanoi, 2003), celebrating the works of 16 artists who were said to have marked the transformation of art from modern to contemporary; the series of seminars, workshops and performances in Open Academy (curated by Veronika Radulovic and Andres Schmid, in collaboration with Goethe Institut Hanoi, 2010–11); the first performance art festival Lim Dim (co-organised by the British Council, Goethe Institut Hanoi and Nhà Sàn Studio, 2004–05); and the Performance Art Young Talent Prize (initiated by Cultural Development and Exchange Fund, 2008) to name but a few.
- ²¹ The term "Viet Kieu" literally means "Vietnamese sojourner" or "overseas Vietnamese" and, in the 1990s, when the term was first in usage, it referred primarily to the Vietnamese community of boat refugees. Today it is a regularly used phrase with differing connotations: from those who lived outside Vietnam before 1975, to those who fled after 1975, and to those who studied/worked abroad and returned. For further information, see <https://www.asialifemagazine.com/vietnam/face-face-viet-kieu/> [accessed Jan. 2018].
- ²² For example, the performance-based artist group Project One by Ly Hoàng Ly, Ngô Thái Uyên, Bùi Công Khánh, Richard Streitmatter-Trần and Nguyễn Phạm Trung Hậu was formed in 2003 as the result of the project "Pushing through

Borders” (initiated by Anida Yoeu Esguerra [now Anida Yoeu Ali] and Ly Hoàng Ly, hosted by the Blue Space Contemporary Art Centre). The group disbanded in 2005.

- ²³ The majority of overseas Vietnamese returning to Saigon had been “boat refugees” from South Vietnam, thus it is to the former south that these “Viet Kieu” returned home.
- ²⁴ For further reading see Việt Lê, “Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists-Organizers in Ho Chi Minh City”, in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2012), pp. 85–115.
- ²⁵ Originally launched by three artists, “a little blah blah” was directed by Sue Hajdu and Motoko Uda through its most active years.
- ²⁶ Wonderful District was co-founded by Sandrine Llouquet and Bertrand Peret.
- ²⁷ Plum Blossoms Gallery organised the group exhibition *Uncorked Souls* in 1991 in Hong Kong, featuring the work of 15 Vietnamese artists. One of the first international showcases of Vietnamese contemporary art to take place in a non-communist country, it included works by Bùi Xuân Phái, Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm, Lê Công Thành, Phạm Việt Hải, Trần Lưu Hậu, Trịnh Cung, Nguyễn Trung, Hoàng Đăng Nhuận, Đỗ Thị Ninh, Bửu Chi, Nguyễn Quân, Nguyễn Thân, Bùi Suối Hoa, Đặng Xuân Hoà and Trần Trọng Vũ. See Jeffrey Hantover, *Uncorked Souls: Contemporary Art from Vietnam*, exh. cat. (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Gallery, 1991), <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/586406> [accessed Jan. 2018].
- ²⁸ For further information, see the video installation by artist Đinh Q Lê, “Vision in Darkness: Trần Trung Tín” (2015), featuring an interview with Sherry Buchanan.
- ²⁹ See the ongoing series of workshops and group exhibitions for young emerging artists and students organised by Nhà Sàn; and the Sàn Art Laboratory residency programme (2012–16) and Conscious Realities series of talks and other programmes (2013–16) organised by Sàn Art.
- ³⁰ In 1992, Nguyễn Tấn Cương designed the catalogue cover for the third Recent Works exhibition by the Group of 10 Artists. Since then, the community called them Group of 10 and they took it as official name for the group with ten core members: Nguyễn Trung, Ca Lê Thắng, Ngô Đồng (who withdrew from the group in 1993 and was replaced by Đào Minh Tri), Nguyễn Tấn Cương, Nguyễn Thanh Bình, Hứa Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Trung Tín, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Trần Văn Thảo and Vũ Hà Nam. Other artists known to subsequently exhibit with them were Bùi Suối Hoa, Kim Bạch, Hoàng Minh Hằng, Phan Gia Hường, Quỳnh Hương, Hồ Hữu Thử and Lê Kim Thư.
- ³¹ Ca Lê Thắng and Đào Minh Tri were part of the Red Seed movement (they were educated in Hanoi before 1975, and appointed to come south post-1975 to teach at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art University). In contrast, Nguyễn Thanh Bình,

Nguyễn Trung Tín and Vũ Hà Nam were born in the north, moving to Ho Chi Minh City for living and to complete their studies; while Nguyễn Trung, Nguyễn Tấn Cường, Hứa Thanh Bình, Đỗ Hoàng Tường and Trần Văn Thảo all grew up and studied in the south.

- ³² It is important to remember that, since 1954, the Communist Viet Minh dominated the north, while the south was precariously controlled by French and American backing of Ngô Đình Diệm's Republic of Vietnam. Artistic communities of north and south were thus in little contact in the 21 years before 1975. Additionally, the influence and presence of French and American political ambitions brought economic openness to the south, thus greater employment opportunities. Art historian Bội Trân Huỳnh-Beattie states,

While southern artists put up with losing the war, northern artists, especially in Hanoi, benefited from reunification ... Northern artists appointed to administrate culture in the South, were fascinated by the expressive vitality and variety of southern arts ... These friendships [eg. Ca Lê Thắng, Đào Minh Tri as members of the 'Group of 10'] and the social context of de-colonization of the South influenced art practices.

See Bội Trân Huỳnh-Beattie, Chapter 5, "The Construction and De-construction of Vietnamese Aesthetics of the Post-War Period (1975–1990)", in "Vietnamese Aesthetics 1925 Onwards", unpublished PhD thesis (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2005), pp. 284–7.

- ³³ For example, Ca Lê Thắng was appointed Deputy General Secretary of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association (1988–2000). Interview between Ca Lê Thắng and Lê Thiên Bảo, July 2017.
- ³⁴ See Nguyễn Trung Tín, "Trừu tượng trên đất Sài Gòn" [Abstraction in Saigon], *The Fine Art Information* (Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Art, Sept. 2010), pp. 17–8.
- ³⁵ Interview between Đỗ Hoàng Tường and Lê Thiên Bảo, June 2017.
- ³⁶ Interview between Natasha Kraevskaia and Zoe Butt, June 2017.
- ³⁷ The name Nhà Sàn (which translates as "stilt house") refers to a group of artists who originated from, and have forged close connections with, Nhà Sàn Studio and Nhà Sàn Collective. Simultaneously, it refers to an actual space for artists to gather, labour and exhibit over the last 20 years at the private home of Nguyễn Mạnh Đức (who, together with Trần Lương, founded Nhà Sàn Studio in 1998 at Buoi Street, Hanoi). In the minds of many, Nhà Sàn Đức is the original name of Nhà Sàn Studio. Continuing the spirit of Nhà Sàn Studio, the young artists associated with it founded Nhà Sàn Collective in 2013, co-run by a community

of Nhà Sàn Collective supporters' including managers, assistants and volunteers. The collective rented a space at Zone 9 (Tran Thanh Tong street), relocated in 2014 to LACA–Ly Quoc Su Art and Culture Area (Ly Quoc Su street) and, since Aug. 2015, has been based at Hanoi Creative City (Luong Yen street), Hà Nội.

- ³⁸ Sàn Art was co-founded in 2007 by artists Đinh Q. Lê, Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn, Tiffany Chung and Phunam. Zoe Butt was Executive Director and Curator from 2009 until 2016.
- ³⁹ Trương Công Tùng's e-mail response with Bill Nguyễn, June 2017.
- ⁴⁰ For further information see Minglu Gao, "Apartment Art", in *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*, Minglu Gao (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 269–310.
- ⁴¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-jyE0qDPiw> [accessed Dec. 2017].
- ⁴² See Apinan Poshyananda, ed., *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, exh. cat. (New York, NY: Asia Society Galleries, 2003).
- ⁴³ Sao La was founded in 2014 with the sponsorship of Galerie Quynh; its original core members include artists Tùng Mai and Nguyễn Kim Tổ Lan; later the group extended to include Nguyễn Đức Đạt, Đỗ Thanh Lãng, Đỗ Sỹ Tùng, Đào Duy Tùng, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu and Trần Phương Thảo (Sunny).
- ⁴⁴ Chaosdowntown was established by Thanh (Nu) Mai and Xuân Hạ in 2016.
- ⁴⁵ Across Vietnam today, there is no regular print or online magazine, newspaper or journal that caters to critical comparative writing and review on experimental contemporary art in Vietnam. The official *My Thuat* magazine, published bi-monthly by the Vietnam Fine Art Association, covers a limited range of practices with next to no international perspectives on the history of art. Credit should, however, be given to the influential online platform www.talawas.org [published 2001–10, accessed Dec. 2017], which published articles and discussions on the arts, culture and politics of Vietnam, including contributions by well-known Vietnamese and foreign authors, writers, researchers and scholars from inside and outside the country. Credit is also due to www soi today [published 2010–17, accessed Dec. 2017], who attempted to translate select foreign materials and provide some critical reviews of local artistic practice.
- ⁴⁶ See the British Council's commissioned reports from 2014 to 2017 on the creative industry of Vietnam: <https://www.britishcouncil.vn/en/arts/resources> [accessed Dec. 2017].
- ⁴⁷ Vietnam is yet to possess a museum with purview to critically collect the diversity of Vietnamese contemporary art.
- ⁴⁸ The Propeller Group was established in 2006 by Phunam, Matt Lucero and Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn.

REFERENCES

- British Council. Commissioned reports from 2014 to 2017 on the creative industry of Vietnam. <https://www.britishcouncil.vn/en/arts/resources> [accessed Dec. 2017].
- Doling, Tim. "Arts Management Curriculum Development: A Case Study of Viet Nam in a Market Economy". *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management* 1, 1 (Dec. 2003): 35–41. Adelaide: University of South Australia International Graduate School of Management.
- Duara, Prasenjit, David Teh, Nalini Malani, Chitra Ganesh, Inrasara, Walter Benjamin, Andreas Huyssen, Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In *Conscious Realities—Reader 1*, ed. Zoe Butt (Ho Chi Minh City: Sàn Art and Hoa Sen University Press, 2016).
- Ferrian, Elijah. "Face to Face with Viet Kieu", *AsiaLife* (Mar. 2017). <https://www.asialifemagazine.com/vietnam/face-face-viet-kieu/> [accessed Dec. 2017].
- Gao, Minglu. "Apartment Art". In *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.
- Hantover, Jeffrey. "Uncorked Soul: Contemporary Art from Vietnam", accompanied an exhibition held at Plum Blossoms in Hong Kong, 1991. <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/586406> [accessed Dec. 2017].
- Huynh-Beattie, Bội Trân. "Vietnamese Aesthetics 1925 Onwards", unpublished PhD thesis. Sydney: University of Sydney, 2005.
- Nguyễn Trinh Thi. "Discourse on the Moving Image in Vietnam in the 21st Century". In *Moving on Asia*, ed. Jinsuk Suh. Seoul: Alternative Space Loop, 2013.
- Nguyễn Trung Tín. "Trừu tượng trên đất Sài Gòn" [Abstraction in Saigon], *The Fine Art Information* (Sept. 2010). Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Art, pp. 31–2.
- Poshyananda, Apinan, ed. *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, exh. cat. New York, NY: Asia Society Galleries, 2003.
- Taylor, Nora A. *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009.
- Việt Lê. "Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists-Organizers in Ho Chi Minh City". In *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2012.