

Founder's Note

Muchun Niu

Aristotle wrote in the *Poetics* that art is truer than history, for history records what happened, while art reveals what could. Two millennia on, the insight has lost none of its force. We live in an age that expands the boundaries of possibility at unprecedented speed — and art remains the most honest place from which to explore those possibilities. It was this conviction that brought ARTIFACT into being.

ARTIFACT takes its name from the oldest human impulse: to make something that lasts. We have given that impulse a new form — a platform, a field of inquiry, where thinkers and makers from across civilisations gather around the questions that matter most: about creativity, about cultural continuity and change, about what it means to be human when artificial intelligence and emerging technology reshape the very ways we perceive and express ourselves. It speaks through publication, convenes through forums, and grounds itself in research — at the intersection of art, ideas, and the forces remaking our world.

Three years ago, I set out with little more than a set of questions and the company of people willing to pursue them. We wanted to look carefully, and to record faithfully. Art grows differently in different soils — we understood that from the beginning. We approached it with patience: through fieldwork, studio visits, long conversations with scholars, slowly making contact with things that existed but had not yet been named. There are no shortcuts in this kind of work. What it gave us, in the end, was something beyond price: trust, and the genuine understanding that grows from it.

What has honored us most, across these three years, is how many people chose to walk alongside us.

They came from academia, from the arts, from positions that resist easy description but matter enormously. They gave time and intellect — and sometimes something harder to name: a deep, settled belief that this work was worth doing. That belief, offered at the right moment, is worth more than any funding or platform. VAC is not the achievement of any single person. I say this on behalf of the whole team: without these companions, this journal would not exist; without them, the journey would never have begun.

ARTIFACT Journal grew, naturally, from this slow accumulation of trust.

Su Shi, the great Song dynasty poet and statesman, wrote that one should observe broadly, accumulate quietly, and release only when the moment is ripe — distilling years of gathering into something essential. Looking back at our time together, this feels like a fair description of what we have been attempting. Across both issues, we have explored how art carries memory and identity across cultures; how artists, in a world increasingly measured by efficiency and algorithm, insist on leaving a mark that remains stubbornly, irreducibly human. That mark, precisely because it is hard-won, is all the more worth preserving.

The Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du wrote, in his *Tale of Kiều*: "Heaven has preserved us to this day." The line, which has moved readers for two centuries, carries a profound gratitude: for the chance to continue, for the fact that we are still here. It is, I find, also the truest description of how we feel having brought these two issues together. We have travelled a long way, and learned a great deal. What heartens me most is that we are still here, still together, and still certain that this is worth continuing.

The fourteenth-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, in his *Muqaddimah*, offered one of history's most searching accounts of why civilisations rise and endure. Reading it today, one idea stands out with particular force: that a culture's capacity to narrate itself - to tell its own story with vitality and purpose - may be as essential as its survival as any economic or political power. Seven hundred years on, that idea feels urgently alive in today's global cultural landscape. We live at a moment when narrative power is being rewritten on a global scale — when every voice has the possibility of being heard, every experience the possibility of being recorded, every imagination the right to participate in shaping our shared future. Art, culture, and ideas speak from the very heart of these possibilities. A platform committed to cross-civilisational dialogue is, in such an age, not merely an aspiration. It is a responsibility — and a privilege.

The years VAC has spent in the field of art have offered early — and humbling — evidence of what sustained commitment can begin to achieve. Residency programmes, research publications, exhibitions and collaborations across cities and borders: none of it accomplished alone, and all of it still very much in progress. Together, these efforts have given us some reason to believe that an institution grounded in the humanities might play some small and useful part in conversations larger than itself. In the years ahead, we hope to meet scholars, thinkers, and decision-makers of varied disciplines, cultures, and traditions at the sites where such conversations most need to happen — and to build with them, the dialogues that only genuine listening makes possible. Art is where we began, and it remains the ground beneath everything we do.

Looking back across these three years, what stays with me is not what we have made, but whom we have met. To walk with thinkers and borrow light from those who came before us; to work beside practitioners and make, together, things that did not previously exist; to hold a conversation with the future and keep a space open for voices not yet arrived — this is a privilege I have never taken for granted. Behind every page of this journal stands a person, an encounter, an act of generosity. I am under no illusion about the direction of the debt.

This combined edition is at once a retrospective and a departure. Three years have been, above all, an education in how to do something worth doing. The “we” in these pages is not rhetorical — it is the entire team, the scholars who contributed their thinking, the artists who opened their doors, the partners who extended their trust at the moments it mattered most, and every reader who has brought their own questions to ours. This journal has never belonged to any one person. It belongs to all who have had a hand in it — and to all who will.

Thank you for reading this far. The road ahead is long, and we look forward to walking it with you.

Greetings From Artists and Friends

Trương Uyên Ly

To the team and community of the Vietnam Art Collection (VAC),

Happy Anniversary! Your presence and contribution to the Vietnamese art scene are meaningful and timely.

I have the honour to visit your “home” many times. Thanks to your openness, we have created meaningful collaboration together, from organising insightful talks to VAC becoming one of Hanoi Grapevine’s Selection key sponsors. Over the years, we brainstormed ideas, shared our views, and together built our networks and contacts. I believe we have more to do together, since the prospect of art from Vietnam and about Vietnam is bright.

In the current context, I think your residency programme is especially valuable. Artists are given time, space and professional support to focus on their work. It also opens opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning.

Liên Phạm

Congratulations on a very successful year. I’m very grateful to have worked with your team and to have had the opportunity to meet and learn from Vietnamese artists. Thank you for everything you are doing to nurture and grow Vietnamese art. Wishing you many more exciting years ahead.

Mifa

“Collaborating with VAC in 2025 has been one of the most important milestones in my career, and I’m forever grateful for that. Your generous and thoughtful support helped me turn something deeply intimate and long held into reality. During the residency, your warmth, respect, and sincerity gave me the courage to express more hidden parts of myself and

I also very much appreciate that VAC is bringing Vietnamese modern and contemporary art to audiences outside Vietnam while documenting, publishing, and fostering dialogues. All of these help construct a trusted value system. You are actively shaping and setting the standards of how Vietnam is seen and valued in the international art market.

You clearly have a vision. You made a home, you built a community. You offer artists both visibility and support inside and outside Vietnam. This combination is powerful and unique.

I believe your work will continue to grow in influence and impact. I wish you success, and I am happy to be your friend.

With sincere appreciation,
Trương Uyên Ly

even the strength to move beyond my usual slow rhythm of working into a completely new state of being. I’m truly proud to have been part of VAC’s three-year journey. You will always have a friend in me, and I can’t wait to see the beautiful direction VAC continues to grow into. Happy 3rd anniversary, VAC!

Sébastien Ly

Happy 3rd anniversary to VAC. I was very happy to collaborate with you and Florian Nguyen on his exhibition last year. I love the team, the energy, and what you are doing, and I’m truly glad we were able to work together.

Đào Thảo Phương

Since the early days of VAC, having had the chance to interact and work with the team, my first impression was how youthful, enthusiastic, and supportive everyone was. After collaborating on the exhibition in Shenzhen, I felt even more reassured by VAC’s professionalism, dedication, and strong support for artists. I truly appreciate that, because it makes me feel that my work is respected and valued. On the occasion of

VAC’s 3rd anniversary, I would like to thank Sophie and the whole team—especially Vi, Trang, and Linh, whom I had the chance to work with. Thank you, VAC, for creating opportunities and platforms for the art community, both in Vietnam and internationally.

Koa Phạm

Happy 3rd anniversary, VAC! Thank you so much for all the support you’ve given us over the years. I wish you all the best, and I look forward to seeing you again soon and working together in the near future.

Võ Huỳnh Phú

Congratulations on your 3rd anniversary! Wishing you continued success and growth. I also hope to see VAC open more branches in the future—perhaps even one in Ho Chi Minh City.

Vũ Thuỳ Mai

Congratulations on your 3rd anniversary! Three years marked by passion and meaningful moments. Wishing VAC continued growth as an important space for art, further strengthening its presence both in Vietnam and internationally, and continuing to serve as a bridge bringing art closer to the public. Wishing all members of the VAC team good health and endless creative inspiration.

Nhi Lê

It takes me a while to get used to the place. I live where I work so it makes my senses active all the time. In the beginning, I kept dreaming about the show, I had so many site-specific art ideas. I tried to find a new routine at a new house. I started sharing my ideas with Mai and the team, working at the quiet top floor where the laundry room is, reading books. I think it helps. At night you can hear the wind blowing through the walls in the kitchen, it makes you feel like you are in a mountain. At night, the light

also becomes so gentle. At night, I find peace in my new home.

No doubt that the show and artworks are important, but the experience, the people I had met, the images I had seen...they are more significant. When the residency is done, I’ll miss the team for sure.

KV Duong	Hello from London! Wishing everyone a happy 3rd anniversary. My time at VAC last summer was truly amazing—just two months of my life, yet I often find myself thinking back to the time I spent there with all of you. It was a very formative moment in my artistic journey, and I'm deeply grateful to Muchun and the whole team for your support during my residency. I hope to see you all again very soon.		Nguyễn Tú Hằng	There is something about VAC that makes me feel like home. A foreign home in a country you know so well. And yet strange things happen. Strange, wonderful things happen.	
Florian Sông Nguyễn	Congratulations on your first three years, VAC! Wishing you all the best for the years ahead. Sending love from Marrakech.		Đặng Thùy Anh & Lại Diệu Hà	It's Thùy Anh. And Lại Diệu Hà! Right now, we're standing in the exhibition space of our latest collaborative project, developed during our residency at VAC. Working here with all of you has been such a meaningful experience—we've felt so much support and encouragement from the team.	I'm also very grateful to Thùy Anh for inviting me to be part of this residency. It's been wonderful getting to know everyone—even if it meant putting you all to work! Happy 3rd anniversary, VAC! Full speed ahead for the year to come!
Nguyễn Thị Thu Hiền	I'm very happy to have accompanied you during your early days in Vietnam. It has been wonderful to witness your growth. I wish VAC continued success and a bright path ahead, and I wish all members of the team good health and renewed creative energy. I look forward to seeing you again soon.		Lâm Na	As you celebrate your 3rd anniversary, we truly hope the journey ahead brings even more success and growth. My dearest VAC, Three years filled with encounters, new ideas unfolding, and artistic paths being heard and respected.	
Trịnh Cẩm Nhi	I'm very grateful to have joined the VAC residency as the first artist. Since I already live and work in Hanoi, doing a residency here felt like an interesting beginning. I had never joined a residency before, and at first I wondered why I would need another studio when I already had everything I needed. But once I started the residency, I realized how important it is to have people to discuss your work with, people who support your process, and a studio separate from where you live. A change of location can be very meaningful for an artist.	One of my favorite aspects of the residency is its location near West Lake. Every day on the way to the studio, I would pass by the lake and feel the breeze and the presence of nature. I think the water and the movement of the wind influenced my work. I often work with water-based color on Dó paper, and the flow of water, the humidity, and even the sudden summer rains around the neighborhood seemed to resonate with my process. In many ways, I feel that my work was unconsciously shaped by these natural changes.	Nguyễn + Transitory	I feel grateful and warmed by the time we've shared together. I hope that, in the future, art will continue to connect us. Thank you, with much appreciation and affection. Lâm Na	Happy birthday, VAC! We're very happy to see VAC celebrating three years. It has meant a lot for us to get to know you, and we wish you many more years ahead.
Tra My Nguyen	"I wanted to create a work that could only be made here. The idea came naturally from the setting—the surrounding nature and the atmosphere of the country—which I could absorb into the work. Of course, I could also have made sculptures, but this approach felt like the right way to respond to why I am here. It allowed me to bring together different visual and sound elements while collaborating with a team based here, which was both challenging and deeply meaningful.			We're also grateful to have been part of these first three years. It was wonderful to return to Hanoi and present our work with you last year, and we hope to see you all again very soon.	

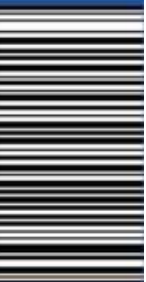
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ARTIFACT

ISSUE No.1

COLLECTIVITY *and*
ALTERNATIVE FORMS *of* KNOWLEDGE



ARTIFACT Journal Inaugural Issue

Editorial Note

To You, and to the Things We All Care About

Xin chào, friends,

Finally, we have a publication to call our own - a space where we can truly speak about Vietnam. But the Vietnam we hope to explore here is not the steaming bowl of phở at dinnertime, nor the golden afternoon by Hoàn Kiếm Lake, nor the lilting melody of "Biển Nhớ" on a tipsy evening. Instead, we turn to things that beat closer to the heart: acts of creation, pull of memory, moments of struggle, quiet curiosity, ideals yet unshaped - and the many ways we each try to speak back to the world.

We call it ARTIFACT Journal. You might find the name evocative of history - and rightly so. The word "artifact" traditionally refers to relics and archives preserved through time. But what we wish to offer is a different kind of archive: one made of stories still in motion, of overlooked but truthful artistic encounters, and of a generation finding new languages to stitch the word "Vietnam" into the fabric of the present.

In these pages, you'll find art and architecture, cultural heritage and digital worlds. You will find voices that question how long a space can stay "alive," and others that wonder whether an exhibition deserves to be forgotten. You'll read about diaspora, gender, cartography, imagined futures, the alleyways of Hanoi, and the quiet, shared ache of longing and hope.

The contributors - artists, cultural practitioners and members of the VAC team - are not conventional media professionals. We are, in essence, memory workers: using words, images, sounds, and even silence to piece together the stories of Vietnam. These aren't grand national epics. They are stories that live close to the skin - tender, fractured, and real. Much like life itself.

We know the word "archive" can sound clinical, distant. But lean in, and you'll find its warmth. It speaks of the spaces, bodies, histories, and identities you hold dear. It is someone sharing a story. And it is you, listening, wanting to understand.

ARTIFACT Journal doesn't set out to declare what matters. Rather, it asks - with you - what matters to us. Each contribution is born of a love for making and observing: some from within the studio, others from daily life. These are voices not always heard. That's why we want to make space for them. And why we hope you'll take the time to listen.

Let me take this moment to say, from the heart: thank you.

To our friends and artists across Vietnam - thank you for your welcome and your trust. You've helped us take root here, grounding our work and lives in something honest and true. To our peers across Asia, the Americas, and Europe - your recognition and support have given us the courage to keep going. And to the VAC team in Hanoi and beyond, led with care by Sophie Huang - thank you. Your focus and passion are the reasons these words and projects could come to life.

And finally - to you, dear reader. Thank you for opening this journal. It is still growing, still learning. But it is sincere. It is quietly stubborn. A little idealistic. And brave enough to meet your gaze. We hope it becomes a companion in your days - something you return to, again and again.

Because in the end, what we hope to leave behind isn't just an archive. It's the trace of something that carries warmth.

May ARTIFACT Journal be one such trace.

Muchun Niu

VAC Founder /
Publisher of ARTIFACT Journal

ARTIFACT

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Spring—
Summer

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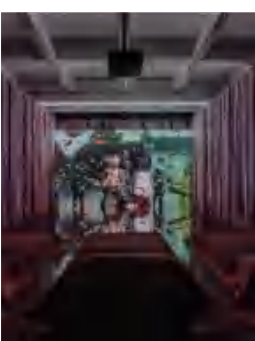
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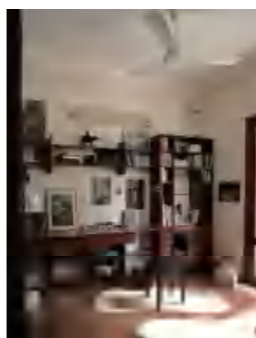
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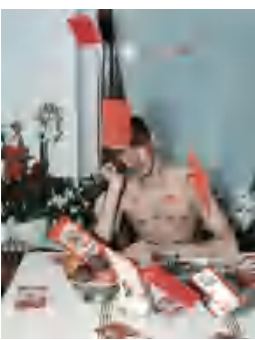
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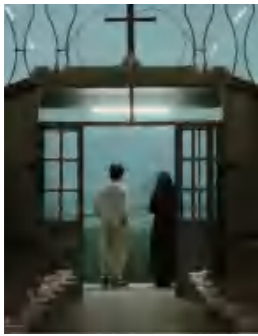
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CONVER- SATION

From Hanoi train factory to Venice Grid

In conversation with Trung Mai about the architectural paradox of ephemerality and eternity

Emma Feng

Looking into the map of Hanoi, it is easy to recognize that the urban fabric is imprinted in an amalgamation of elaborate zone planning and the obvious sprawl of informalities. Roads are congested with the squeak of motorbikes, which makes it hard to imagine how this once walkable city has transformed into one that embraces the hustle and bustle of modernity. Hawkers, peddlers, and casual laborers are witnessed and expanded into the thinnest veins of the city, while slum-like settlements and

pollution are seen as the repercussions of economic development, impacts from external regimes, colonial stigma, and warfare. As one of the integral forces, industrialization has shaped and is continuously shaping the city fabric, the socio-economic dynamics, Vietnamese cultures, identities, memories, and the subjectivity of its people.

Vietnam's industrialization

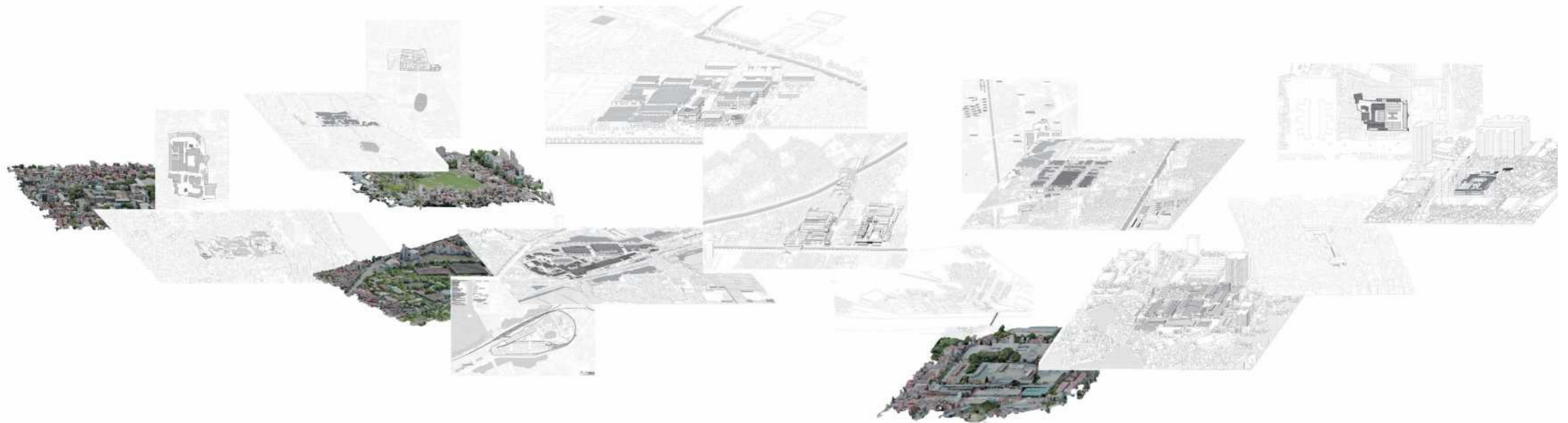
Tracing the history of Vietnam's industrialization, it began in the 1890s with the rise of extractive and manufacturing industries, especially coal mining. As Tonkin's coalfields were heavily exploited, Indochina became the East's leading coal exporter by the century's end. During this period, Hanoi, under French colonial rule, emerged as a hub for industrial activity designed to serve colonial interests in extraction and wealth accumulation. Early factories, primarily European-founded, fell into three categories: resource processing (e.g., electricity and chipboard), infrastructure and population support (e.g., railways, repair shops, construction materials), and consumer goods (e.g., distilleries, soap, sugar, cotton, tobacco). Urban planning, intended to create the "Paris of the East," reinforced segregation between colonial and indigenous zones. Yet, these developments stimulated economic growth, population booms, and factory-adjacent settlements.

With Soviet influence beginning in 1955, industrial and urban planning adopted socialist principles. The state led production, supported by foreign aid, while urban expansion was limited to control population growth. Many factories were relocated to rural areas during the Second Vietnam War after widespread bombings. Soviet-

style housing blocks, known as "khu tap the" (KTT), remain as remnants of this era.

Following reunification, development shifted under Doi Moi reforms, prioritizing market-driven growth. Hanoi experienced rapid urban change, including population surges, increased motorization, and a transforming housing market, alongside persistent social and environmental issues such as poverty, overcrowding, and pollution.

Amid Hanoi's rapid urban transformation, in recent years, state policies have initiated the relocation of hundreds of factories from inner city areas to the outskirts, prioritizing real estate expansion and urban beautification. However, many of these sites are not simply industrial remnants. They are physical testaments to the country's modernization efforts and lived experiences of its people. Gia Lam Factory is one of these threatened sites. Its story offers a unique lens through which to examine Vietnam's industrial past and the challenges of preserving industrial heritage in a rapidly urbanizing present.



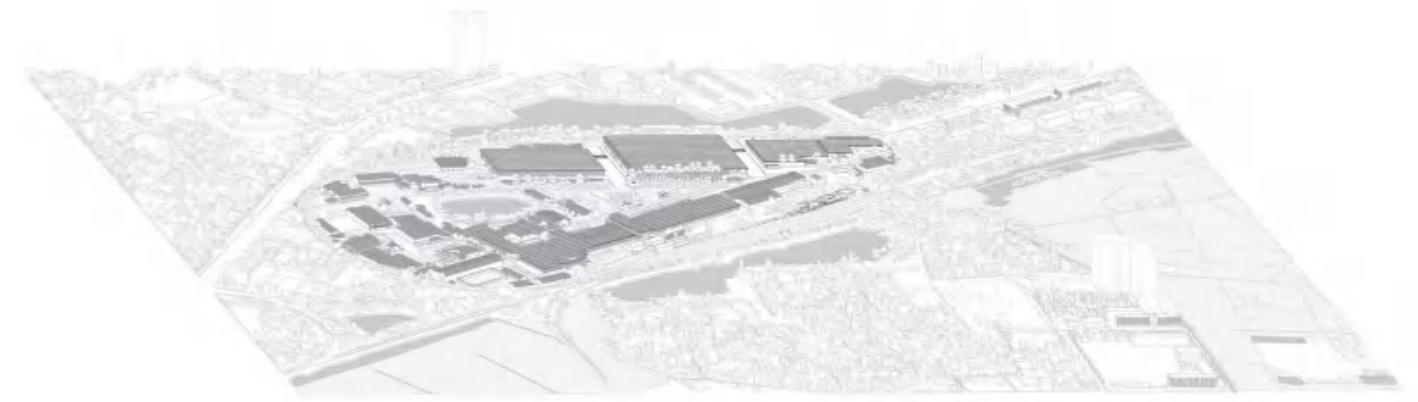
Hanoi's Industrial Landscape,
Hanoi Ad Hoc



Industrial Map of Hanoi,
Hanoi Ad Hoc

Gia Lam factory

Gia Lam Factory, located in the northeast of central Hanoi, is a living relic of the century's historical transitions. It is considered one of the three great colonial railway works built during the early 20th century, according to historian Tim Doling. Strategically situated at the junction of four prominent railway lines, including Gia Lam–Dong Dang (163 km), Hanoi–Hai Phong (102 km), Hanoi–Lao Cai (296 km), and Hanoi–Ben Thuy (326 km), Gia Lam Factory was initially built as a mechanical depot for the repair and maintenance of steam engines and wagons by the French. It was later repurposed to produce bombs and weapons during the Japanese occupation. Over its lifespan, it has witnessed strikes, revolutions, regime changes, bombing damage, and multiple reconstructions. Although Gia Lam has survived historical turmoil and its production continues to the present day, it is currently facing relocation as a result of urban redevelopment.



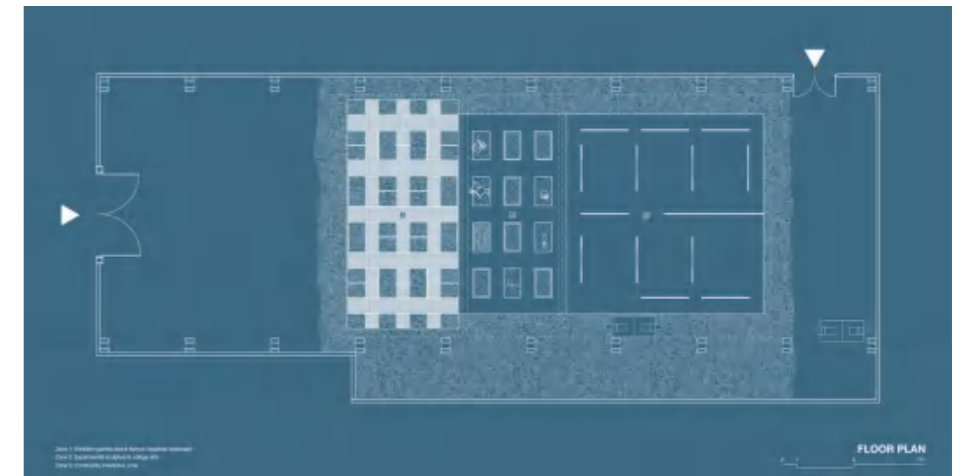
Gia Lam Train Factory, 2021.
Axonometric Drawing,
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The Grid Project: Conception

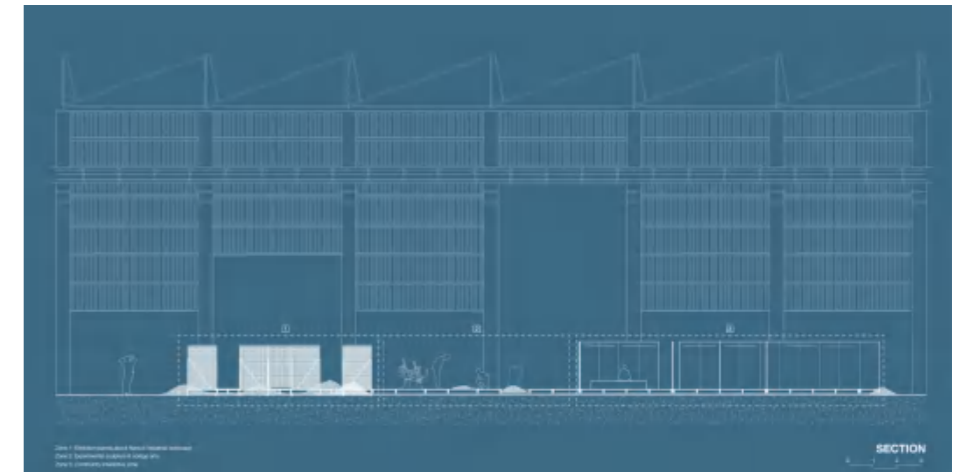
According to Trung Mai, the architect of the Grid Project, the concept is conceived at this intersection of an unknown future and potential loss of the historical legacy, interrogating the central paradox between ephemerality and eternity. Trung resonated with Aldo Rossi's idea that the power of architecture lies not in its lifespan, but in its ability to connect people to place, to one another, and to the shared rhythms of history—that a structure can be ephemeral in material, but eternal in memory. The physical stance and functions of the factory were shaped by demands, decisions, and powers, while in turn, it constructed the culture of mobility, housing and urban planning, ideologies, lifestyles, and most importantly, collective memories for the people who have worked, lived, and passed by this land and its buildings for generations. This also echoes with Michael Schiffer's concept of "behavioral archaeology," focusing on understanding the relationship between human behavior and material culture.

By intervening and repurposing this industrial site, not for material use, but for the accumulation of its memories, material and cultural impacts, and the revivification of its functional and architectural legacy, the project connects people to the space and to the non-linear memories of past, present, and future. As mentioned by Trung, it invites an examination of the site's structure and its possible future through community efforts. The Grid Project is, therefore, able to transform the material stand into a memorial center, coupled with a contemporary sustainable design approach, attempting to preserve and prolong its impact permanently.

Floor Plan 3, Hanoi Ad Hoc



Section, Hanoi Ad Hoc



The Grid Project: Reconstruction

“The grid layout takes its form from two distinct sources. It resonates with the existing intricate ceiling structure of the factory warehouse, reviving and paying homage to its architectural imprint. Additionally, it draws influence from the 19th century urban planning of Ildefons Cerdà for Barcelona’s Eixample district, which employed a grid design of streets and blocks to achieve equitable city access and efficient circulation—principles that still support urban life today.”

— Trung Mai



Photo by Trieu Chien

The grid in Gia Lam Factory embraces similar ideals of equality and efficiency: each spatial section aligns with the overarching grid, creating a sense of rigid order and organization while allowing for fluid traffic and movement.

On the production level, the intervention and reconstruction process aims to minimize the carbon emissions embedded in traditional construction. Materials used in the project include metal grating repurposed from leftover steel originally used to fabricate trains in the factory. Furniture featured in the exhibition was constructed from ammunition boxes once used for anti-tank weapons during the Vietnam War, discovered on-site. Additionally, art objects were assembled from reclaimed fragments found in the warehouse, such as industrial ventilation ducts and other salvaged components, giving new form and meaning to the factory’s remnants.

Photo by Trieu Chien



Photo by Trieu Chien



The Grid Project: Impact

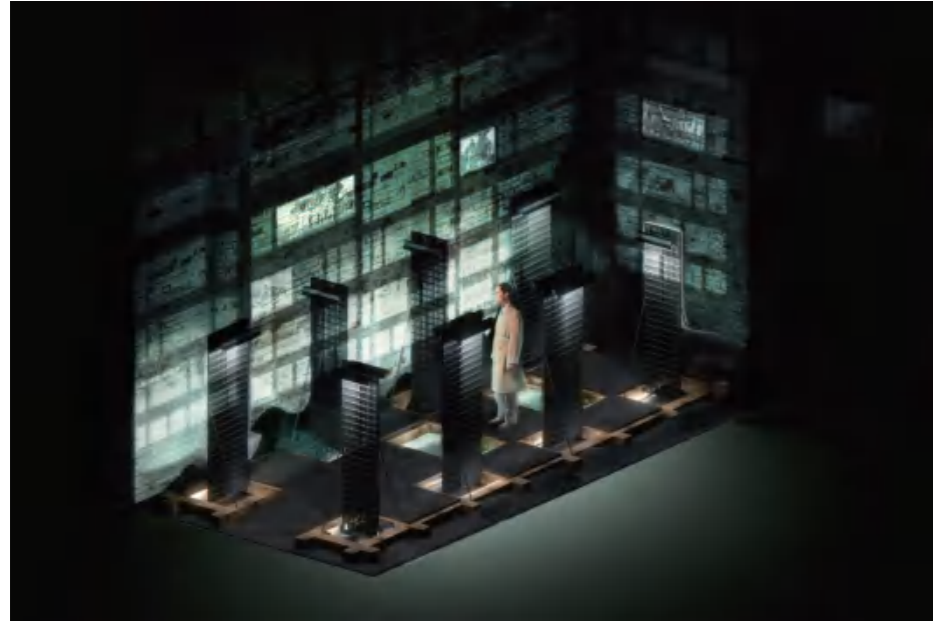


Photo by Hanoi Ad Hoc

The impact of the Gia Lam Grid Project exhibition has been profound in Hanoi. Former factory workers were able to reconnect both on-site and remotely, sharing untold stories of the past. Planned student tours helped build dialogues materially and conceptually, transcending limitations of time and space. However, due to the factory's relocation, the exhibition itself is ephemeral and dismantled after one month of public opening. Having seen it in person in 2024 and now working as part of The Reincarnated Grid project curatorial team, I personally feel that the purpose of the grid has been fulfilled: elevating the factory to a dynamic memorial role—preserving, examining, and researching it with a permanent stance.

By recontextualizing The Reincarnated Grid project within the framework of the Venice Biennale, new meanings and interpretations are invited by global spectators.

"The methodology and philosophy behind the project essentially serve as a manifestation and testimony of the greater collective intelligence embedded in Vietnamese culture — Adhocism."

Adhocism as Collective Intelligence

"Adhocism is not about the final image, but about showing how you can adapt and adjust in the future. Architecture doesn't need to be permanent. It should be an infinite process of making and unmaking, responding to the context as it evolves. We always ask architects to create something forever, but actually, the ability to change is more important than the initial design, because the future you predict is an assumption that will never truly arrive."

—Trung Mai

Here, the narrative turns against the consumerism of endless production and resource waste, and instead advocates for an alternative, adaptive, sustainable, and feasible way of living.

Adhocism is a concept introduced by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver in their 1972 book *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*. According to Jencks, "As a design principle, adhocism begins with everyday improvisations: a bottle as a candle holder, a dictionary as a doorstop, a tractor seat on wheels as a dining chair. But it is also an untapped force in our way of approaching almost all activities, from play to architecture, including urbanism and political revolution."

While consumerism, fueled by mass media and technology, has prevailed for centuries, embedding the desire for happiness and identity in endless consumption, it has led to reinforced class divisions, long-term debt-driven instability, planned obsolescence, overproduction, and ecological crisis. In contrast, the concept of adhocism offers an alternative path to sustainable living, emphasizing reuse, repurposing, and the ethic of "doing with what you have" instead of waiting for a perfect top-down solution.

Adhocism as Alternative Solutions

Despite being one of the top 20 fastest-growing economies in the world, Vietnam's lifestyles are surprisingly rooted in the spirit of adhocism rather than traditional hierarchical structures. This cultural trait dates back centuries and is manifest in every aspect of Vietnamese life—from the scale of object to architecture and urban planning.

This ethos of flexibility and improvisation begins at the most intimate scale—everyday objects. Furniture such as tables and chairs are among the most versatile items. In Hang Trong painting, a traditional Vietnamese folk art that captures scenes from everyday life, we see the "cai sap" (a wooden platform bed) appear in diverse settings: used by emperors as a tea table, by students as seating in school libraries, or as an altar in temples. In modern Vietnam, the plastic stool has become the most obvious modular system of seating and tables. People combine and disassemble them freely to fit different needs, which is an embodiment of flexible, user-driven design.



Hàng Trống painting



Photo by Trung Mai



A line of Buddhist monks walks barefoot along a rural road, most clad in or carrying vibrant patchwork robes. Their journey embodies the humility, simplicity, and communal spirit at the heart of Buddhist practice.

Photo by Nguyen Van Phuoc



Photo by Bettmann/CORBIS

The same improvisational spirit applies to public infrastructure. During the Tet Offensive in 1968, a massive assault by North Vietnamese forces and the Viet Cong, Hue was one of the most heavily affected battlegrounds. The Truong Tien Bridge was severely damaged during the fighting. In response, locals rebuilt it by linking together boats, creating a floating bridge that functioned effectively for years afterward.

Adhocism is not only visible in physical structures but also in spiritual and ethical practices. Thich Minh Tue is a Vietnamese Buddhist practitioner who popularized walking meditation in both Vietnam and on the global stage. One of his core spirits from Engaged Buddhism, meaning Buddhism in practice, encourages not only personal mindfulness but also helping others become aware of their own capacity for compassion and generosity.

In line with this spirit, Thich Minh Tue intentionally uses discarded textiles to make his robes, imbuing them with multiple meanings: resisting consumerism, deterring theft or commodification, and emphasizing pure human virtues. He asks for food offerings not out of personal hunger, but as a call for compassion. His minimalist and mindful practice has inspired many in modern Vietnam to follow in his footsteps.



Photo by Trung Mai

Photo by Trung Mai



Hàng Trống painting



At the scale of the city, adhocism becomes a defining characteristic of Vietnam's urban fabric. Vietnamese cities serve as both containers and reflections of the collective mindset and spirit of their people. Much of the urban landscape has been shaped not by centralized planning, but through the bottom-up ethos of adhocism. While the chaotic appearance of some city areas might make it difficult to apply a blanket label like "intelligent design," what emerges clearly is a powerful logic of adaptation and resourcefulness that keeps cities functioning despite challenges like climate change, resource scarcity, and historical upheavals.

Zooming in, a single sidewalk in Hanoi offers a time-lapse of functions over the course of a day: it becomes an extension of domestic life in the morning, a commercial space for street food at night, and an overflow lane for traffic during rush hour. Boundaries between public and private space are blurred, flexible, and needs-driven—a pragmatic stopgap in a context of limited resources.

From a bird's-eye view, the vernacular urban morphology of Hanoi is a tangible expression of ad hoc behavior, composed of a mix of improvised solutions and systematic decisions that fill even the smallest vessels of the city.



Photo by Tristan Ruark
on Unsplash

In the face of climate and ecological crises, the ability to improvise, adapt, and use what's on hand, in tandem with top-down planning and policy, makes it possible to bridge the gap between vision and execution. Adhocism presents an alternative model of problem-solving, one where the imperative lies in the actions of individual units, which collectively form a greater network of intelligence.

The archive, too, bears witness:

In dialogue with Salon Natasha's co-founder

Time makes even the most important things fade, and stories about artworks are no exception. With each passing moment, the context, voices, and memories surrounding creative works slip away, making preservation an urgent imperative for cultural heritage worldwide. This reality is especially apparent in Vietnam, where modern history has been profoundly shaped by wars, social reforms, and political movements.

This is where the importance of archiving comes in, carefully immortalizing stories of the past. Archives can take myriad forms, whether physical collections of documents and artworks, digital databases accessible with a single click, or even intangible spaces of memory and dialogue. But what exactly constitutes an archive, and what role does it play in preserving and understanding contemporary art in Vietnam?

To explore these questions, I recently had the honor of speaking with Natalia Kraevskaia [1], commonly known as Natasha. She co-founded the legendary Salon Natasha [2] in Hanoi in 1990 and recently established the Vu Dan Tan Foundation [3], dedicated to preserving and promoting the artistic legacy of the late Vũ Dân Tân [4], one of Vietnam's pioneering and most influential contemporary artists. Natasha has dedicated decades to documenting, preserving, and promoting Vietnamese contemporary art, and our conversation offered valuable insights into the nature of archives, their challenges, and their potential.

The essence of archives

Regardless of time and era, the concept of an archive has a precise definition with deep historical roots. Natasha points out that while archives have existed for centuries, the 17th century marked a turning point, particularly in Germany and across Europe. It was then that people began theorizing about archives, discussing their power, the control of information, and the right to access their contents [5].

Natasha emphasizes that while archives may take many forms—physical, digital, or even intangible, they always share two essential components: records and metadata. She stresses that simply collecting materials does not create an archive. An archive, she explains, requires metadata to verify the originality and authenticity of its records, ensuring they haven't been altered or forged.

This definition resonates with my own experience managing archives. Working with family collections, I've learned that without proper documentation, even the most beautiful painting becomes just another pretty picture on a wall. The magic happens when you know that the artist painted it during wartime, using materials salvaged from military packaging, or that it once hung in a secret exhibition accessible only by invitation. It's the historical, artistic, and contextual layers that give an object its true value, just like the many layers it takes to create a precious painting.

In her work with Salon Natasha and the Vu Dan Tan Foundation, Natasha practices meticulous documentation. Exhibition invitations, photographs, letters, and personal notes are carefully preserved, each annotated to provide context. Through these materials, simple objects transform into historical witnesses, telling stories not just of individual artworks but of the community that cultivated them.

Navigating gaps in documentation

Yet, archival work in Vietnam often faces significant challenges. Limited resources, fragmented historical records, and conflicting information can complicate preservation efforts. Natasha acknowledges these difficulties: "Indeed, there are notable gaps in the documentation even of the relatively brief history of contemporary Vietnamese art. They stem from both the restricted resources (lack of cameras and particularly video cameras among artists until the 2000s) and the artists' disregard for the need to document events."

Her solution is methodical and holistic: "To address these deficiencies, comprehensive research is essential, which should involve thorough reading, interviews with individuals from that era, and careful verification of all newly acquired information to avoid any intentional alteration of history."



VDT - 01 - Vũ Dân Tân.
Festival banner (from series).
Gouache and ink on newspaper,
58 x 84 cm, 1992.

Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.

Perhaps we can think of it as a historical detective story. When reconstructing early contemporary art exhibitions in Hanoi, one might encounter mysterious guests on old invitation lists: names without faces, dates without certainty. By combining oral histories, personal recollections, and careful research, these gaps can be filled, creating a richer, more complete picture of Vietnam's art history.

I've grappled with similar puzzles in my own archival work. For instance, a photograph labeled "Spring 1979" gives a general timeframe, but recognizing a distinctive building in the background, perhaps one decorated for a festival in April can help pinpoint the exact month. Likewise, a letter signed only with the initial "T" can be attributed to the right person when cross-referenced with other documents. These detective-like methods help transform scattered fragments into coherent and meaningful stories.

Archives as alternative narratives

Beyond preserving objects and documents, archives often inspire fresh questions and ways of thinking. Natasha highlights how archives can uncover alternative narratives: "The widely held belief that contemporary art emerged in Vietnam in the latter half of the 1990s, following the end of the American embargo and the swift influx of Western cultural influences, can be challenged by the evidence of innovative works of Vũ Dân Tân and Trương Tân in the early 1990s, along with the experiments conducted by Nguyễn Văn Cường, Nguyễn Minh Thành, and Nguyễn Quang Huy during the middle of that decade."



VDT - 03 - Vũ Dân Tân. *Untitled* (Russian Poster series). Gouache on printed poster, 97 x 67.5 cm, 1993. Exhibited at "Between declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century", National Gallery Singapore, Singapore, 2015. Published in the catalogue of the exhibition. Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.



Invitation to the 1987 Exhibition of 40 Tapestry Paintings by Bửu Chi and Hoàng Đăng Nhuận. Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia. This invitation announces the joint exhibition of 40 tapestry paintings by renowned Vietnamese artists Bửu Chi and Hoàng Đăng Nhuận, held at 19 Hàng Buồm, Hanoi, from June 25 to July 25, 1987. Organized by the Hanoi Association of Literature and Arts and the Bình Trị Thiên Association of Literature and Arts, the exhibition highlights the innovative use of tapestry as a new artistic medium in Vietnam. The invitation features introductory texts outlining the significance of collaboration, the artists' creative philosophies, and a comprehensive list of exhibited works, reflecting themes of peace, childhood, and the human condition. The document also includes biographical notes and images of selected artworks, offering a rare glimpse into the vibrant art scene of late-1980s Vietnam.



VDT - 02 - Vũ Dân Tân. *Devil. Series "Monsters, devils and angels"*. Transformed cigarette package, ink and acrylic, 29 x 9 x 5 cm, 1993. Exhibited at the 2nd APT, Queensland Art gallery, Brisbane, Australia, 1996. Published in the catalogue of the exhibition. Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.

She offers a concrete example of how seemingly mundane materials can reveal significant insights:

"Over a decade ago, I worked with Dr. Nora Taylor from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the late art historian, Dr. Boitran Huynh-Beattie, for the Vietnamese archival section of the Southeast Asia Digital Library of the North Illinois University and contributed a collection of exhibition invitations from 1984 to 1995. What tales can these straightforward papers reveal! It is interesting to examine the titles of the exhibitions, which artists showcased as collectives and under what names, which art venues were present at various periods, among other details."



VDT - 04 - Vũ Dân Tân. *Astrology* (from transformed and deformed records series). Acrylic on vinyl LP record, D - 30 cm, 1993. Exhibited at "Vu Dan Tan and Music", Goethe-Institut, Hanoi, Vietnam. Published in the catalogue of the exhibition.

Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.



Invitation to Trương Tân's 1994 Painting Exhibition. Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.

This invitation announces a solo painting exhibition by Trương Tân, held at 14A Ngô Quyền Street, Hanoi, from February 20 to March 2, 1994. The cover features a sequence of three minimalist, provocative line drawings depicting a human-animal hybrid figure, reflecting Trương Tân's signature style that challenges social norms and conventions. The exhibition was organized with the assistance of Gallery Ecole de Hanoi, and the invitation credits associates Đinh Báo Long, Nguyễn Hồng Quang, and photographer Quốc Toàn. The bold, experimental imagery and the collaborative spirit captured in this invitation mark a pivotal moment in the emergence of contemporary Vietnamese art in the early 1990s.



Invitation to the 1990 Painting Exhibition at Gallery 7 Hàng Khay, Hanoi. Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.

This invitation announces a group painting exhibition held at Gallery 7 Hàng Khay, Hanoi, in September 1990, organized by the Vietnam Fine Arts Association and the Institute of Fine Arts Research. Featuring works by young artists Việt Dũng, Đặng Xuân Hòa, Hà Trí Hiếu, Trần Lương, and Phạm Quang Vinh, the exhibition commemorated the centenary of Vincent van Gogh's death (1890-1990) and looked forward to the 1990 National Fine Arts Exhibition. The invitation includes a bilingual introduction by art critic Thái Bá Vân, reflecting on the spirit of youthful creativity and the enduring influence of Van Gogh. It also lists the participating artists, their birth years, and the titles and dimensions of their exhibited works, offering insight into the dynamic and evolving Vietnamese art scene at the dawn of the 1990s.

This demonstrates that archives can be seen as the historical equivalent of reading someone's diary rather than their polished autobiography, where you get the unfiltered reality complete with messy contradictions and unexpected revelations. This also reminded me why preserving diverse voices matters so much. Official histories often showcase only the winners and the famous, while archives can capture whispers from the margins, the experiments that didn't make headlines but quietly shaped everything that followed.



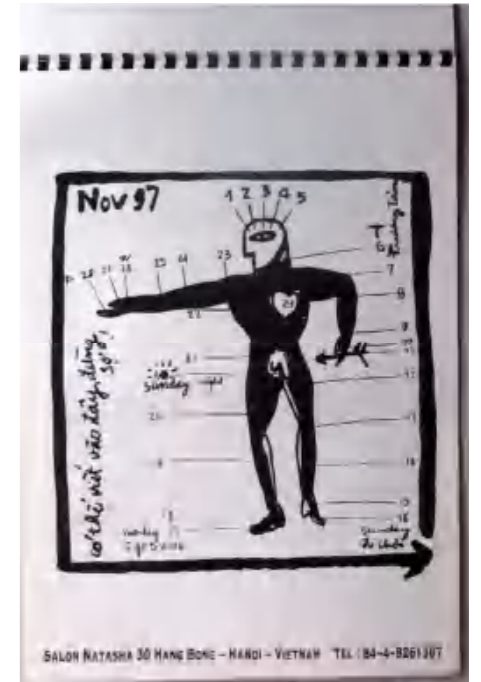
At the opening of the exhibition "Red and Yellow", Salon Natasha, November 5, 1994. The painting by Truong Tan is on the left.

Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.



The artists make clocks in Salon Natasha for the collaborative project "Artists' Clocks" initiated by Nguyen Van Cuong in December 1997.

Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.



A page from the "Artists' Calendar" for 1997 with a drawing by Truong Tan. The calendar was produced for the group exhibition welcoming the coming year in December 1996. All pages were designed by different artists.

Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.

Archives, collectivity, and alternative knowledge systems

Salon Natasha wasn't just a gallery with white walls and hushed voices. It buzzed as a creative laboratory where artists gathered to exchange ideas, support each other, and dream up new possibilities. Events like the collaborative exhibition "Crosscurrents" in 1997 brought Vietnamese and international artists together, sparking friendships that crossed borders and cultural divides.

When building the Salon Natasha archive, Natasha preserves these invisible connections alongside physical artworks. She records oral histories capturing memories of late-night discussions, saves informal notes exchanged between artists, and documents the evolution of ideas through collaboration. The archive becomes a social network map from the pre-Facebook era, showing how creativity flowed through personal relationships.

However, Natasha maintains a rigorous approach to definitions when it comes to archives and art. She elaborates:

"To me, the notion of an archive is rooted in the sphere of sciences rather than the arts. While I am a strong advocate for the preservation of Vietnamese art via archiving, I do not particularly appreciate what is typically labeled as 'archive-based art,' a term that has become fashionable over the past decade, as I have come across many uninspiring examples."

She draws a clear distinction:

"I recognize that an archive as a knowledge source can also ignite inspiration; however, I think that 'creativity' and 'factual information' exist in distinct realms."

In my own archival practice, I've found these connections reveal the most fascinating stories. It's like discovering that your favorite song wasn't written in a moment of solitary inspiration but evolved through jam sessions, friendly arguments, and borrowed influences. The archive shows us not just what was created but how creativity actually works.

Looking forward: The Vũ Dân Tân Museum

As Natasha prepares to open the Vu Dan Tan Museum in Hanoi, archives will play a central role in shaping public understanding of Vũ Dân Tân's work and Vietnamese contemporary art more broadly. She describes the depth of materials being prepared: "The archive comprehends a wide range of materials which serve for scholarship and research, such as catalogues of Vũ Dân Tân's solo and group exhibitions, scholarly essays, and journals and newspapers articles, photographs taken at exhibitions and art events, a robust collection of photographs of his works."

The collection extends beyond visual arts: "Beside the documentation associated with the visual art, the archive includes manuscripts of Vũ Dân Tân's stories, novels and poems, musical compositions for the piano (classical genres and songs). Additionally, the archive incorporates sound and video files (interviews, documentary films etc.) linked to the artist's creative course."

The goal is to make these resources widely accessible: "We will make the archive accessible to all interested researchers, including students."

Imagine standing before a sculpture made from everyday objects and then seeing photographs of the artist collecting these materials in Hanoi's changing streets, or reading his notes about transforming the mundane into art. Suddenly, the work speaks with a much richer voice.

This approach transforms the museum experience from passive viewing to active discovery. Rather than simply admiring objects, visitors can follow threads of influence, understand artistic choices in their historical context, and connect personal expressions to broader cultural movements.

Archives as living heritage

Through this dialogue with Natasha, I've come to perceive archival work as a form of time travel, creating portals that allow powerful dialogue between past, present, and future. We're not just hoarding objects; we're encapsulating vessels of memory that continue to nourish new growth. Those who preserve historical memory must look beyond mere maintenance of the past, striving to keep it alive, relevant, and engaging for future generations.

The clocks by Dinh Thi Tham Poong and Nguyen Van Cuong at the exhibition of the artists' clocks "12 o'clock", Salon Natasha, 1997.

Image courtesy of Natalia Kraevskaia.



About the author

The author is currently based in Hanoi, managing a family archive dedicated to preserving and digitizing Vietnamese cultural heritage. Sincere gratitude is extended to the researcher from the National Archive for their valuable input regarding archives in Vietnam.

Footnotes

[1]

Natalia Kraevskaia, Ph.D. in Philology, an associate professor, conducts multidisciplinary research related to Vietnam in art, culture and ethnography. She is the author of *From Nostalgia towards Exploration. Essays on Contemporary Art in Vietnam* (2005) as well as a contributor to exhibition catalogues and international art magazines. In 1990, together with the artist Vu Dan Tan, she established the first independent space of contemporary art in Hanoi - Salon Natasha and since then has organized and curated numerous exhibitions of Vietnamese art in Vietnam, Australia, Canada, Germany, Finland, Macao and Russia.

[2]

Salon Natasha, founded in 1990 by the late artist Vũ Dân Tân (1946–2009) and his Russian spouse Natalia (Natasha) Kraevskaia, was the first private contemporary art space in Hanoi. Located in their home and Vu Dan Tan's studio at 30 Hang Bong, it introduced emerging, experimental, and non-commercial artists, serving as a hub for creatives and intellectuals. Over the years, Salon Natasha has organized approximately one hundred artistic events, ranging from curated exhibitions to collaborative projects, impromptu performances, and international exchanges. Numerous prominent contemporary artists in the country began their careers at Salon Natasha.

[3]

The Vu Dan Tan Foundation, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and study of the artist's work, was created in name in 2012, initiated by Vu Dan Tan scholar Dr. Iola Lenzi in collaboration with the artist's widow Dr. Natalia Kraevskaia, and with the involvement of his daughter Vu Thi

Nhusha. The Foundation was established with the aim of preparing the formation of the Vu Dan Tan Museum (scheduled for Autumn, 2025), which will disseminate Vu Dan Tan's private art heritage to local and international communities for social, scholarly, educational, and entertainment purposes.

[4]

Vũ Dân Tân (October 3, 1946 – October 14, 2009) was a prominent Vietnamese artist recognized as one of the pioneers of contemporary art in Vietnam. He created works across various media, though he gained greater recognition for his art objects and installations. Most of his life, he resided in Hanoi, where in 1990, he and his Russian wife, Natalia Kraevskaia, established Salon Natasha, the first private venue dedicated to contemporary art and an independent forum for creative individuals.

[5]

Friedrich, Markus. *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge*. Translated by John Noël Dillon. University of Michigan Press, pp. 139–165.

Seeing beyond systems: representation, identity, and resistance—

In conversation with Diane Severin Nguyen about a new way of seeing

Emma Feng

As people run into the mess of reality, trapped by overloaded mundane tasks that never seem to end and consumerism that promotes everything as exchangeable goods, have people still upheld the sensibility and capability to be alert to the external environment—and, in essence, the connection and relationship between oneself and the outer world? How have we been shaped by our cultures, societal structures, institutional powers, architectures that we live in and pass by every day, objects that we use or interact with, and consumerism and the socio-economic and political valuation systems that we may have been born into and lived inside for generations—systems we now take as reality, like *The Matrix Resurrections*? Should we settle for what we are told, letting it become an unconscious habit that bypasses our dialectical thinking net or fight against the "truth" for oneself?

Contemplating these things may not significantly change how we live and interact with the external world. But it brings air, awareness, connection to a broader world and timeframe, where human history is an ephemeral pop-up. Knowing oneself and one's relation to the world should never be paused. As we become more aware of the causes, complexities, and conflicts that have shaped and continue to shape ourselves, our families, and our surroundings, the essential takeaway should be: how do we respond to these and make decisions on a daily basis? Are we willing to feed into and reinforce the existing power systems, or do we want to remain clear on our right to be both insider and outsider?

In conversation with Diane Severin Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American artist who works with photography, video, and installation, we delve into these concepts - how they have impacted her artistic evolution, shaped her methodologies and works, and opened up a new realm of possibilities for seeing.

In a world of authority and manipulation, how do we break free from hierarchical confines?

Definition Trap: What it is and what it is not

In the classic episteme era, knowledge has been shaped by representation, which uses language, taxonomy, classification to make things (object and being) recognizable, understandable, and speakable. This episteme believes language is transparent and that it is capable of mirroring reality. Differences are used to classify groups and identity. Things are defined by what they are not, such as a dog is defined since it is different from a cat, horse, and anything else.

Languages are controlled by power. Sadly, institutional powers decide what can be named, categorized, and defined, such as the calibration of normality, standards, and science, which have all shifted to serving different power dynamics.



In Her Time, 2023-2024,
Still, 67min.,
4K Video with Sound

The Cost of Representation: Why not take a side

"By taking a side and choosing a representation, people naturally reject all the opposite possibilities. It sounds safe and purified to agree to be represented, but it comes at a cost of loss and transfiguration."

— Diane Severin Nguyen

To create a purified symbol or representation, it usually involves violence and guilt in the political realm. Relating to Diane's work *In Her Time*, it captures a fragment of Chinese history during the Nanjing Massacre. The purified image of the Chinese woman was built and reinforced in contrast to the evil acts of Japanese soldiers who coerced and enslaved Chinese comfort women during the anti-Japanese war in the 20th century.

A New Way of Seeing

"The limit of the language is the limit of the world."

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

To know a thing, one can name it, describe it, define it. As discussed earlier, our languages are shaped by power, and attention is chased and manipulated by economic and political interests, creating a perfect information cocoon. For instance, photography becomes an agent of consumerism, where people seek photos that are aesthetic, rare, viral, and consumable, reinforcing the existing power and valuation systems in every detail of our lives.

But what about the unspeakable? When no word exists to provide certainty or safety, only sensations float and linger in the air. These sensations may escape the mainstream valuation system, allowing for the creation of a new way of seeing and feeling.

When Diane once thought she would work in politics, she found herself engaging with people through the lens of categorical labels—identities shaped for the convenience of governance. But rather than reducing individuals to such administrative abstractions, she came to seek the deeper, ineffable threads of human connection that elicit mutual recognition beyond classification.

Living and working with the concepts

WHAT IS ART?

"Art is what it's not. It is not a solution, not a function, not something with exchange value. Art exists outside of systems that seek to solve problems or assign utility. Instead, art creates a 'rupture in time'. It makes certain things sacred and profane, shifts our attention, and transforms meaning. Art is about 'seeing the entire world in a strand of hair'—it's a radical reimagining of perception. Its power lies in its ability to exist beyond logic, beyond use-value, challenging how we understand and experience the world. The true essence of art is not to provide answers, but to create a space of complexity, contradiction, and profound transformation."

— Diane Severin Nguyen

WHAT IS ARTISTIC INSPIRATION?

"Artistic inspiration emerges from the landscape of inner conflict. I make art from a space of lack and desire, from the paradoxical tensions within myself. My work springs from conflicting feelings, from the spaces of 'I want this, but I also want that.' It's about the desire for something I do not have, the impulse to expose hypocrisy, to reveal the violence inherent in making meaning. Sometimes, I am driven to prove a point—to show how meaning is created through exclusion, how taking a position requires denying everything else. Art becomes a way to pull out life's contradictions, to make it acceptable to live with complexity. My inspiration is not about creating comfort, but about confronting the painful truth that everything is always changing that things can mean multiple things at the same time. It's about resisting the human tendency to seek safety in a single, pure perspective."

— Diane Severin Nguyen



*Against the sun, 2021,
Lightjet C-Print,
custom steel frame,
63.50 x 50.80 cm*

WHAT IS AN ARTWORK?

"An artwork is not a representation, but a resistance. The artist does not illustrate an idea, but creates a space of radical openness. A strong artist holds their concerns while allowing multiple points of entry, embracing misunderstanding as a form of truth. Artwork resists consumption, challenging viewers to engage deeply rather than passively absorb."

My work is anti-representation. I don't believe truth can be captured in an image. Instead, I'm interested in how an artwork can shift perception, create tension, and refuse simple interpretation. The artist's role is not to provide answers, but to increase complexity, to make people think, to confront the violence of fixed meaning."

— Diane Severin Nguyen

*Reunification Palace, 2023,
Lightjet C-Print,
custom steel frame,
76.20 x 60.96 cm*



*Kill this love, 2021,
Lightjet C-Print,
custom steel frame,
63.50 x 50.80 cm*



Democratic medium

It is controversial and hard to make art out of photography due to the democratic character of the medium—it is affordable, accessible, and everyone can take photos of everything. Yet it is also a major enforcer of existing power systems, reinforcing orthodox standards such as beauty, identity, and status. It promotes consumable values central to the socio-economic playground—values that are too good to be true, escalating power even at the cost of misfortune.

These conflicting, harsh sides of the medium are precisely why Diane adopts it. Given its messiness and ease of slipping into unintended realms, how to work against these hazards is a core subject of her research and experimentation.

The concept: meaning construction

A central subject of Diane's work is researching how meaning is constructed through language, cultural codes, and visual systems, and how meaning shifts with context, power, and interpretation. This resonates with Roland Barthes' theories of structuralism and post-structuralism. From this perspective, it's not just about how a subject is seen or felt, but about the backbone coding system. Emotion is treated as material, shaped through translation, representation, and cultural coding.

When someone tries to communicate their experience through words, pictures, songs, etc., there is always an inherent translation loss. As long as one tries to communicate, some content will be lost forever. Many people are unable of handling this gap, thus it would be easier for them to claim object A is same as object B — my experiences equals my words. We see this everywhere in our lives — two people say "I love you", but it may mean entirely different things—I love you because you keep me company, or I love you as a habitual response.

Viral memes function in a similar way, offering a prosthetic language where sharedness is more comforting than accuracy. These socially pre-validated codes provide easy solutions for dealing with translation loss, but at the cost of reinforcing persistent power structures.

There is a huge grief in this translation loss, and that is where Diane's work resides.

"If I had to say my work was about one thing—I thought about this because someone asked me yesterday—if it was about one thing, if you want to die and be remembered as one thing, what would it be? I actually think my art is about semiotics, which is the structure of language and meanings. Even though my work is so emotional, I think I just play with emotion as a material."

— Diane Severin Nguyen

As Diane articulates, she sees photography not as direct representation but as a complex language, where meaning is created through repetition, interruption, and contrast. Purity construction was something she mentioned often during our conversation. The aesthetics of beauty and perfection in her work—the flawless forms, the delicate feminine figures—signal the impossibility of full representation, questioning the void of translation loss, underpinned by violence and guilt.



In Her Time, 2023-2024,
Still, 67min.,
4K Video with Sound

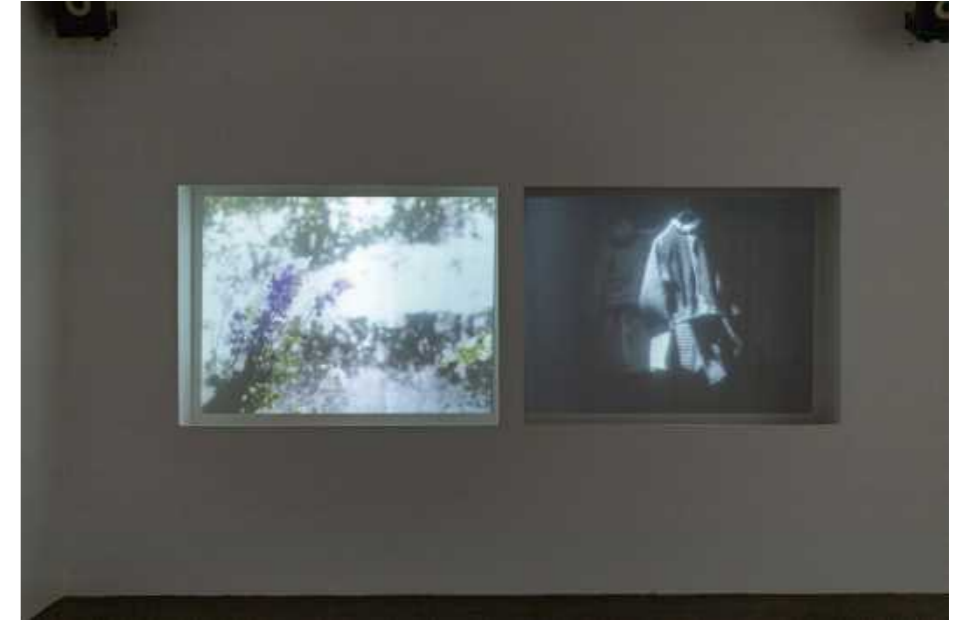
For instance, in *In Her Time*, there is an importance for Chinese women to be so pure that after the sexual violence during the anti-Japanese war, China can reclaim its dignity as being a victim. The pure and perfect symbol is essentially a response to the inability to process violence and guilt. Within this historical context, purity construction has also been weaponized by institutions to reinforce female gender roles, framing women as pure and virginal in opposition to transgression, a dichotomy known as the "virgin and whore complex," especially influential in Asian cultures.

By manipulating form, texture, and context, Diane creates a semiotic system that challenges viewers to look beyond surface representation and engage with the layered complexity embedded in each image.



Installation View,
In Her Time,
Rockbund Art Museum,
Shanghai, 2023

Installation View,
Spring Snow,
Vietnam Art Collection,
Hanoi, 2025



Recent Works in Vietnam

Diane joined the VAC Residency in Hanoi as a way to step away from her routine life in New York and take time to focus on her work in a new space. It wasn't about discovering something totally new, but more about changing her surroundings and getting the support she needed to create. What stood out to her about working in Vietnam was how close she could be to the materials around her.

"I think I just let myself absorb everything around me and work from that space. Being in a place like Vietnam inspires me endlessly on a material level. In New York, making work often means ordering all your materials online. But in Vietnam, I can literally gather things from my immediate environment. They interest me, and they help me access certain memories—sometimes deeply personal ones. That process feels much more appealing to me."

— Diane Severin Nguyen

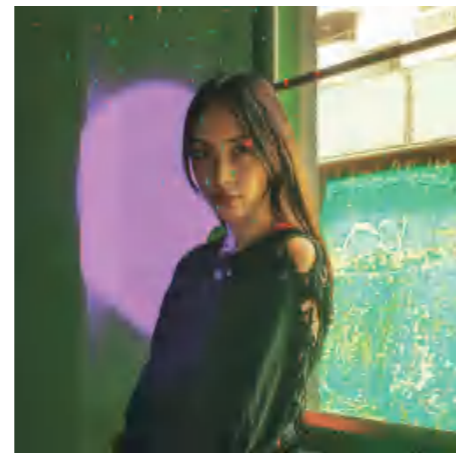


For her open studio following the residency, Diane presented two photographs alongside a two-channel video installation featuring a forest's snowscape and a rotation of little girls' dresses. These pieces reflect on the idea of purity, especially how it is shown in times of war. Inspired by memories of visiting orphanages as a child and thinking deeply about current events like the violence in Gaza, she looked at how children are often seen as symbols of innocence, and how that image can be used in powerful ways.

The videos play in an eternal loop, following no clear beginning or end. Instead, they suggest cyclical time, moving forward and backward like a time machine, showing the artist's wish to change or control painful memories. In the video, it is snowing in a tropical jungle, strange and dreamlike, showing something that isn't real but still feels emotionally true. Through these works, Diane explores how we try to express loss and pain through images, and how that act always leaves something behind.

About the Artist

Diane Severin Nguyen works with photography, video, and installation. Through material and sculptural experimentations, Nguyen approaches the photographic moment as one of transformation. The artist is particularly interested in exceeding photography as a mode of documentation, and engages with it rather as a set of conditions shaped by desire and speculation. Her video work narrativizes these tensions by examining the histories of power, victimhood, and forms of propaganda that underpin cultural (and self) image-making. She has exhibited her work internationally, in places like SculptureCenter, The Renaissance Society, the Rockbund Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, MoMA PS1, the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Schinkel Pavilion, Jeu du Paume, the Hammer Museum, and many others. Her films have been screened at film festivals such as the New York Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, and Berlinale. Nguyen is a recent recipient of the 2023 Guggenheim fellowship and lives and works in New York.



All images courtesy of the artist.

FEATURE

Haegue Yang

&

TEAROOM

Based between Seoul and Berlin, Haegue Yang [1] works with installations, sculptures, and multimedia that often explores themes of cultural displacement, identity, and community. Her oeuvre embodies abstraction hovering between life and poetics, combining quotidian domestic found objects, traditional craft elements, and urban materials into idiosyncratic sculptures and multi-sensory, immersive environments. Little known is that Yang, alongside her class from Städelsschule [2], Frankfurt, initiated in 2021 an experimental project TEAROOM, transforming classroom into tea room hosting various events and happenings, such as poetry reading, meditation, screening, concert, talk, and other forms of performances.



Slow Signal (Tea Room Prelude),
the FutureSchool, Korean Pavilion,
the Venice Biennale of Architecture,
12 November 2021

Sophie Huang

[1] Haegue Yang (Korean: 양혜규) is a South Korean artist primarily working in sculpture and installation. After receiving her B.F.A from Seoul National University in 1994, Yang received an M.A. from Städelsschule, where she now teaches as a professor of Fine Arts. She currently lives and works in Berlin and Seoul.

[2] Städelsschule is an art school in Frankfurt am Main. Since 1817 it has been committed to provide equal, international, experimental, and independent artistic education.

Slow Signal (TEAROOM Prelude), the FutureSchool, Korean Pavilion, the Venice Biennale of Architecture, 12 November 2021

reading performances line-up

Alex Thake,
Taxonomy of a Meal

Sylvester Vogelius,
log book: travel anxiety

Thuy-Tien Nguyen,
Consider the Oyster

Zishi Han, *Stone Soup with the
Lilies of Eastern Asia*

Moritz Tontsch,
Resistance I

Alicja Wysocka,
Sandy Water

Aerin Hong,
Airborne

Ian Waelder,
Here not today

Arnaud Ferron,
Score for Sensual Drowning

Elisa Diaferia,
Spilled Milk

Emmilou Roessling,
When Penelope waited



TEAROOM Gasthof 2022, Staedeschule, Frankfurt, 4-11 July 2022

Aerin Hong,
Frontispiece,
sound activation of space

Amelie Lorentzen,
Pregnant Pause
(two hours of quietness)

Moritz Tontsch and
Sophia Schach,
Eiscafé Libelle

Launch of
Poop Fiction zine

Emmilou Roessling, *something
with plants but somatic* (2017)

Thuy-Tien Nguyen, *Shhhhhhhh*
(massage workshop)

Asad Raza, Talk + discussion on
Glissant's concepts

Punch Viratmalee,
potato is a lost cause (reading)

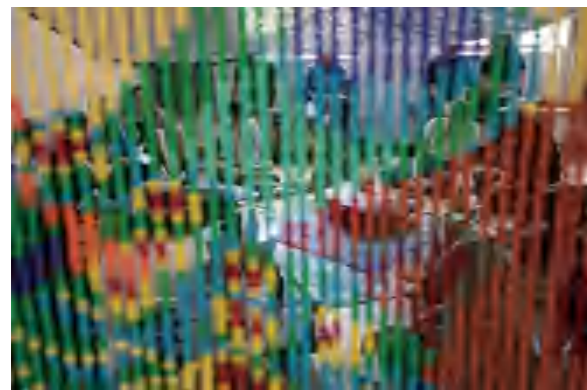
Rashiyah Elanga,
What the coral said (screening and
reading)

Arnaud Ferron,
Chance (concert)

Antonis Magoulas,
David Moser and Alex Thake, *Tea
Burn* (conversation)

Sleeping Beauties,
screening event curated
by Hee Jae Kim and
Elisa Diaferia

Alicja Wysocka,
Water Session (listening
and water healing)



TEAROOM Relay Andante, Staedeschule, Frankfurt, 14 June 2023

Moritz Tontsch,
listening session of WAG5s most
recent radio show

Zishi Han, arena of mist -
the draft of a lecture and visual
thesis

Augustine Paredes,
reading of *The Love Motel*

Antonis Magoulas, reading of
excerpts from Michelet's book *the
Sea*

Thuy-Tien Nguyen,
Ultimate Karaoke Marathon

Elisa Diaferia and Juri Simoncini,
workshop + screening of *Xavier:
Renegade Angel*

Imaan Satter,
pithu game

Hangping Yang,
screening of *Lettre de Sibérie*



TEAROOM Relay PitStop, Delfina Foundation, London, 11 November 2023





TEAROOM Relay Colloquial, Vietnam Art Collection (VAC), Hanoi, 10-11 March 2025

Ian Waelder, impersonation of Norm Macdonald telling two jokes

Moritz Tontsch, *how to potentialize your resonance* - a performative recording of a singer in voice-training exercises

Arnaud Ferron, *Complications* - an audio recording

Imaan Sattar, *The Question of Function* (lecture)

Thuy-Tien Nguyen, participatory grain-sorting game

Etienne Le Coquil, *Untitled* - video loop

Yu Yang, performance featuring a childhood game

Emmilou Roessling, *Bruce* - a staged reading of selected texts written collaboratively with Lucas Eigel

Eden Sebban, *Untitled* - A video and sound installation

Zishi Han and Wei Yang, *Hairpin beneath* - performative reading

Aerin Hong, *A Script for Ventriloquist* - an acousmatic performance with Stina Fors

Ludvig Wilén, *A96630* - A single-channel video

Ian Waelder, *Moth Joke and You who are the stranger* (Moth Joke) - print and installation

Elisa Diaferia and Juri Simoncini, multi-part intervention

Augustine Paredes, *Obliterations* - a reading performance

Coline Gouriou, sound piece and reading performance

Imaan Sattar, *Meditation* - a guided breathing and meditation

Moritz Tontsch, *Amid Five Leagues of Mist* - an acoustic performance

Yu Yang, *Untitled (a dialogue)* - a dialogue between a sentence in Vietnamese and one in French

Emmilou Roessling, *Bruce* - a staged reading of selected texts written collaboratively with Lucas Eigel

Eden Sebban, *Untitled (And I had to tell myself that story)* - a prose piece

Chengyu Wu, *An experimental sound performance*

Hangping Yang, *River Light* (performance)

Thuy-Tien Nguyen, a virtual tarot reading with a special guest and soundtrack for the mood

Etienne Le Coquil, performance

Ludvig Wilén and Arnaud Ferron, *The Carriage Horse* - a screenplay

Elisa Diaferia and Juri Simoncini, multi-part intervention

Against A Glass Wall - video screening programme curated by Elisa Diaferia, Imaan Sattar, Moritz Tontsch, Ludvig Wilén and Duy Anh Nguyen

Farhanaz Rupaiddha, *Rice Walk* - an audiovisual performance

Augustine Paredes and Aerin Hong, *Love You* - a reading performance



[3] Moritz Tontsch works with the logics of systems and deviations from them.

[4] Elisa Diaferia is part of the artist duo whose practice straddles sculpture, drawing, and time-based media. Making use of an injective research approach as a tool for fantasy and speculation, they look into the phenomenology of worldbuilding and storytelling.

[5] Imaan Sattar is working through endurance across mediums; a practice which originates in her duo collaboration with Yuxiu Xiong. Find out more at anthrotubes.cargo.site.

[6] Ludvig Wilén currently lives and works in Frankfurt am Main.

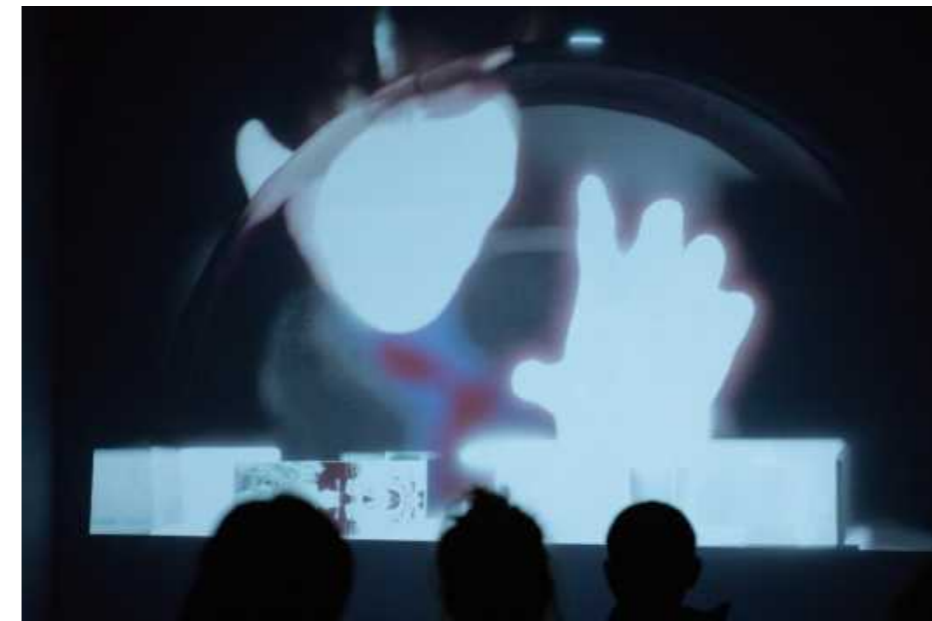
[7] Nguyen Duy Anh is a queer moving image artist based in Viet Nam. He graduated with a degree in Film Direction from a 4-year exchange program between the Hanoi Academy of Theatre & Cinema in Vietnam and INSAS in Belgium. His work explores and questions the domination of larger systems to the expressive freedom of individuals in contemporary social contexts. As a director, screenwriter, producer, editor, and organizer, Nguyen Duy Anh has produced many different works, including fictional short films and documentaries, video installations, and music videos, which have been screened and exhibited at various venues and film festivals such as Singapore International Film Festival, Bali International Short Film Festival, Kunsthalle TRAFÖ, and more.

Recently, I had the chance to experience first-hand the two-day TEAROOM events hosted by VAC Hanoi. Overall, the TEAROOM feels like a mobile, loose structure where experimentation and collaboration can take place and be intervened with spontaneity, precariousness, and unpredictability. Thanks to this event-based structure, TEAROOM naturally becomes a platform that focuses on community, artistic exchange, and collective work while encouraging intervention and transformation afforded through in-situ practice. As shared by Moritz Tontsch [3], who has been part of the TEAROOM project since the beginning, "many of us use TEAROOM to try out a different way of working. It is a way to realize a project in a professional context with the support of classmates. It's quite helpful for everyone to see each other's work and give feedback."

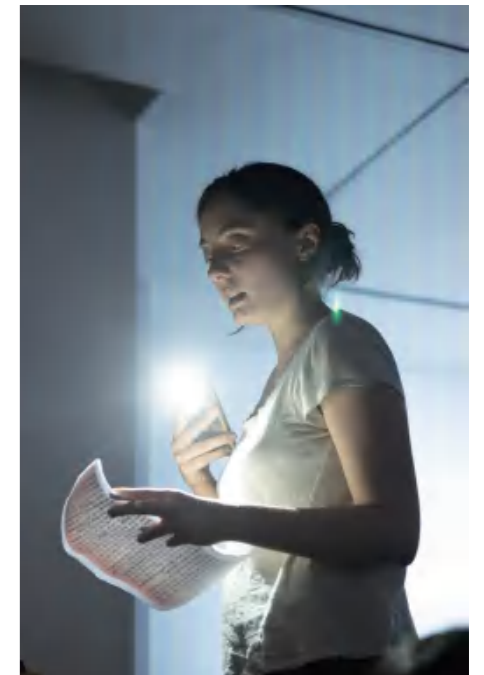
At TEAROOM, the artists of Haegue Yang's class are not only participants but also organizers. Tontsch explained that, for each iteration, "we usually come up with an idea for a city where there is an interesting art scene and then, we try to collaborate with an institution in this city to host the event." In a way, TEAROOM allows them to travel to places and learn more about the local art scene and the cultural context there. When organizing a screening event for this iteration in Hanoi, artists Elisa Diaferia [4], Imaan Sattar [5], Moritz Tontsch, and Ludvig Wilén [6] proposed an open call for works that engage experimentally with the medium of video and its socio-technical framework. To engage with the local context, artist and filmmaker Duy Anh [7] was invited to curate video works of Vietnamese artists while the class selected works from artists of the Staedeschule community and their larger network.



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AGAINST A GLASS WALL OPEN CALL

Flying assists birds with feeding, breeding, avoiding predators, and migrating. It includes several types of locomotive maneuvers, including hovering, taking-off, and landing. When flying, birds undertake numerous intricate and complex movements. The movements performed are strongly influenced by the medium through which they travel. According to the variation in atmospheric conditions, they recursively adjust their movements constantly. Updrafts of warm air are used to glide elegantly over long distances. While downdrafts of cool air are used to descend again to the ground. Rather than being a constant, these updrafts and downdrafts are caused by the dynamic relationship between temperature, energy, and entropy of the atm-osphere. These material configurations are co-constructive in the movements birds perform when flying. Hence, a symbiotic relationship is constituted between the technique of flying and the bird's environment, the medium through which they fly, and air.



TEAROOM Relay Andante,
Staedeschule, Frankfurt,
14 June 2023

On March 10th, 2025, the screening, hence, took place in two sessions, featuring nine video works from artists Do Van Hoang [8], Tran Quynh Nhi [9], Dao Thu Uyen [10], Jo Ngo [11], Kimvi Nguyen [12], Nguyen Duc Huy [13], Tram Anh Nguyen [14], Le Xuan Tien [15], Quynh Dong [16], Vu Ha Anh [17], and Siu Pham [18] during the first session, and ten works from artists of Staedeschule and beyond during the second session, including Adrian Q. Vardi, Eva Vallania, Aerin Hong [19], Hemansingh Lutchmun, Danny Choi, Yuxiu Xiong, Louis Hay, Samuel Georgy, Jisoo Seo, and Thuy-Tien Nguyen [20] & Wanwen Zhang [21]. It offered a glimpse into the minds of artists who live and work on different continents - through the medium of video, the ways in which they experiment interestingly reveal their artistic concerns: technological vs. sociopolitical, language of abstraction vs. the power of narrative, universality vs. locality. In this sense, the screening event facilitated a cultural exchange between artists across borders.

[8] Đỗ Văn Hoàng (b. 1987) is a filmmaker and writer based in Hanoi. He explores his creative language in the echoes of social transformations, moving across the boundaries of cinema, poetry, theater, and visual art. Hoàng's practice delves into and distills the scattered fragments lingering on the margins of contemporary life, transforming them into surreal imagery.

[9] Trần Quỳnh Nhi, born in 2000 in Quang Ninh, Vietnam, is a multidisciplinary artist whose work explores diverse experiences through fashion, visual art, performance art, and writing. Nhi's practice delves into the depths of the human psyche, focusing on themes of existence, identity, art, and the world. Her work functions as a form of journaling, an intimate collection of psychological evidence drawn from lived experiences. Nhi graduated in fashion design from the London College of Design and Fashion. She is the founder of 143Dress, a digital fashion brand established in 2021. In 2023, Nhi participated in the Roots & Worlds program by ICVL (UK) and Matca (Vietnam).

[10] Đào Thu Uyên graduated in Directing from a four-year exchange program between the Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema and INSAS Film School in Belgium. Since 2016, she has directed several fiction and documentary short films portraying urban life in Vietnam, with a consistent focus on the representation of women on screen. In 2017, her short film Buffer Zone won first prize at the FY Film Festival – Saigon and was screened at various film festivals across Southeast Asia. Her short film A Mother's Burden, which she wrote and directed, was selected as one of the five outstanding works in the CJ Short Film Project Season 3.

[11] Jo or Ngô Kỳ Duyên is a Saigonese multi-disciplinary artist whose work is associated with moving images, virtual reality, augmented reality, new media art and recently sound art. She aims to reach more audiences in a stronger and appealing narrative form with high-tech support and advocate for the creative community to go beyond the traditional mediums. Her main focus is healing art, meditation, and spreading positive energy for a safe mental outlet which is even more crucial than ever after the COVID-19 pandemic.

[12] Kimvi Nguyen, a British-born, Vietnamese site-specific performance artist, has immersed herself in the international art and design scene, participating in prestigious organizations and festivals worldwide. These include Art Central Hong Kong (China), Territori Festival (Spain), International Theatre and Art Festival (Spain), Eugenio de Almeida Foundation (Portugal), National Centre For Contemporary Arts (Russia), la JUAN Gallery (Spain), Central Academy of Fine Arts (China), and CIFF Design Expo, Guangzhou (China). Various institutions have honoured her with awards, such as the Architecture & Design Film Festival in Winnipeg (Canada), she emerged as a Finalist in Música x Arquitectura (MxA) from The Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia (Spain), and she received

a Special Mention at the Golden Pear Award at the 'Cine Plus Performance Art festival' in Buenos Aires (Argentina) for her filmed performance 'Aunties Tiles'. Since 2022, she has been residing in Suzhou, China, serving as the artist-in-residence in the Department of Architecture at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, represented by BFM Art Center (Suzhou) and C-PLATFORM Institute (Xiamen), and recently awarded the Netherlands government Scholarship to attend Fontys Academy of Arts in the Netherlands to study Performing Public Space.

[13] Nguyễn Đức Huy (b. 1995, Hanoi) is a visual artist whose practice primarily revolves around painting, illustration, digital art, installation, and animation. His aesthetic is characterized by vivid colors, with dominant shades of red, blue, and green in his illustrations, paintings, and animations—reflecting the influence of digital aesthetics. Huy's works are meticulous in detail and composition, balancing humor and strangeness while simultaneously evoking a sense of disorientation and alienation. He has participated in several exhibitions and film screenings, including Voices On SCREEN (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Germany, 2022), This Is Not a Love Song (Like the Moon in a Night Sky 3, Hanoi, 2022), Running on the Golden Road (A Space, Hanoi, 2021), Private Virtual Realm (Manzi Art Space, Hanoi, 2021), Consultation (Manzi Art Space, Hanoi, 2019), and The Limping Pedestrian (Nhà Sàn Studio, 2016).

[14] Trâm Anh Nguyễn (he/him) is an interdisciplinary artist specializing in filmmaking and photography based in Vietnam and Canada.

[15] Hanoi, during the Hour of the Monkey on February 7, 1995, the Year of the Wood Pig, a person was born. That person was given the name Lê Xuân Tiến. That person spends a part of his life on art practice, using video as his primary medium.

[16] Quỳnh Đông (b. 1982, Hai Phong, Vietnam) is a performance and video-based artist based in Switzerland. She creates hyper-real video works, sculpture and performances to provide an innate platform upon which she deliberately challenges cultural stereotypes. Often referencing various literature, iconography and history from Vietnam and Asia, she brings attention to the notions of identity and the diaspora through the corporeal. Her works have been exhibited internationally, notably including the Kunsthalle Bern, Galerie Perotin in Paris, Rijksakademie van beeldende kunst in Amsterdam, and Galerie Bernhard Bischoff & Partner in Bern. Dong has also performed at Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique Paris; Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts Lausanne in Switzerland; LISTE 17, the Young Art Fair in Basel, Switzerland; the Emily Harvey Foundation in New York, USA; and YAP 15, The Twinkle World, Exco 1F, Deagu, South Korea; among others. She studied Fine Arts at Bern University of the Arts, and completed her MA in Fine Arts at Zurich University of the Arts.

[17] Vũ Hà Anh is a musician/multi-disciplinary Artist. With personal practice characterized by its fluidity and adaptability, evolving in tandem with her expanding worldview, Hà Anh constantly strives to innovate centered by the key principles of love-freedom-liberation. Born and raised in a lower-middle-class family in Hà Nội, Hà Anh's socio-economic background profoundly informs her artistic perspective and fosters deep empathy to the music of BIPOC communities all around the world. The mother's unfulfilled dream of becoming a singer has also significantly contributed to the development of Hà Anh's passion & embodiment of a Diva from an early age. In 2024, she founded DEVOUR - a self-run music label, with the aim to advocate for voices of femme & women independent musicians in Viet Nam.

[18] Siu Pham is a Vietnamese filmmaker, artist, and performer, recognized for her contributions to contemporary cinema and theater. Born in Hanoi, she pursued higher education in Switzerland, studying Art History and Film Critique at the University of Geneva. Additionally, she obtained a degree in Dance and Drama, specializing in Butoh—a form of Japanese dance theater. Throughout her career, Siu Pham has been actively involved in contemporary theater and has collaborated with her husband, Jean-Luc Mello, on various documentary projects. Her filmography includes several notable feature films Here... or There? (2011), Homostratus (2013), On the Endless Road (2017), We Come Into Life (2023). Siu Pham's work is characterized by its exploration of human conditions and societal themes, often blending elements of fiction and documentary to create thought-provoking narratives."

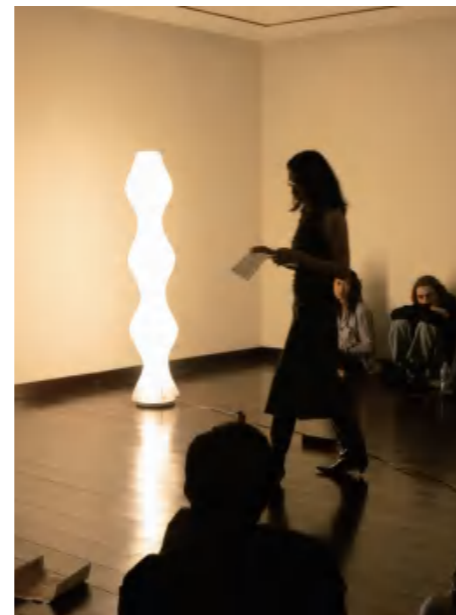
[19] Aerin Hong's works delve into the psychological compulsions related to themes such as beauty, femininity, discipline, occidentalism and drama.

[20] Thuy-Tien Nguyen explores the deformation of personal and collective memories, particularly emphasizing notions of home and homeland. She works with sculptures, installations, photography, and situations, often marked by deliberate clumsiness and accidental happenings.

[21] Trained in traditional silk painting and digital art, Zhang Wanwen currently lives and works as a multidisciplinary artist between Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and her hometown, Mount. Emei, in Szechuan province, China.

Ahead of the screening, as the host's representative, I briefly introduced the artists and organizers from Haegue's class. During preparation, as I naturally referred to them as students, Haegue immediately corrected me and politely asked if I could introduce them as young artists from Frankfurt instead. This speaks to the relationship between her and those young artists - rather than learning and teaching, it is more about mentorship, comradeship, and collectivity. As we spoke later, I discovered that, when these young artists come and go (it usually takes about three to five years for them to graduate from Staedeschule), the class itself has become a diasporic community fostering a long-term and organic connection between one another.

On the following day happened what I'd like to call a performance marathon. Each artist of the class presented a work/project that they felt relevant to the context. Some prefer to bring their practices to a new context which opens up new perspectives and meanings while others engage in local contexts, like Hangping Yang's [22] installation work. Instead of doing a performance or screening a video work like the rest did, Yang staged an installation on site at VAC by sourcing local materials from street vendors in Hanoi. As Tontsch points out, TEAROOM has so far happened in places that are all very distinct from each other and have different requirements which allow different modes of working. For example, in Venice, the performances were open to people walking in and out, while at Gasthof, the TEAROOM events stretched over two weeks and included ceremonies, artist talks, and live music.



TEAROOM Relay PitStop,
Delfina Foundation, London,
11 November 2023

In this sense, TEAROOM is rather a spontaneous community gathering, an artistic conversation in a fresh setting, a social and cultural engagement across communities, as if a travelling collective residency in itself. What matters lies in observation, behavior, and practice. Wherever TEAROOM goes, there comes a temporary, autonomous vessel that holds the happenings, be it performance, screening, poetry reading, meditation, concert, etc. Interestingly, within such a community, everyone comes from varied backgrounds, ranging from fine art to science, engineering, and communication. It's as much about learning from each other as from their mentor. Much like Haegue's genre-defying works, TEAROOM affords artists to question the given and try out new modes of practice.

[22] Hangping Yang mainly works with sculptures and installations. His practice presents immediacy among productive landscapes.

TEAROOM Relay Colloquial,
Vietnam Art Collection (VAC),
Hanoi, 10-11 March 2025

*All images courtesy of Haegue Yang and the Class,
especially Moritz Tontsch.

3năm:

Temporary Shelter, Lasting Imprint



(2022.09)
Lantern Workshop

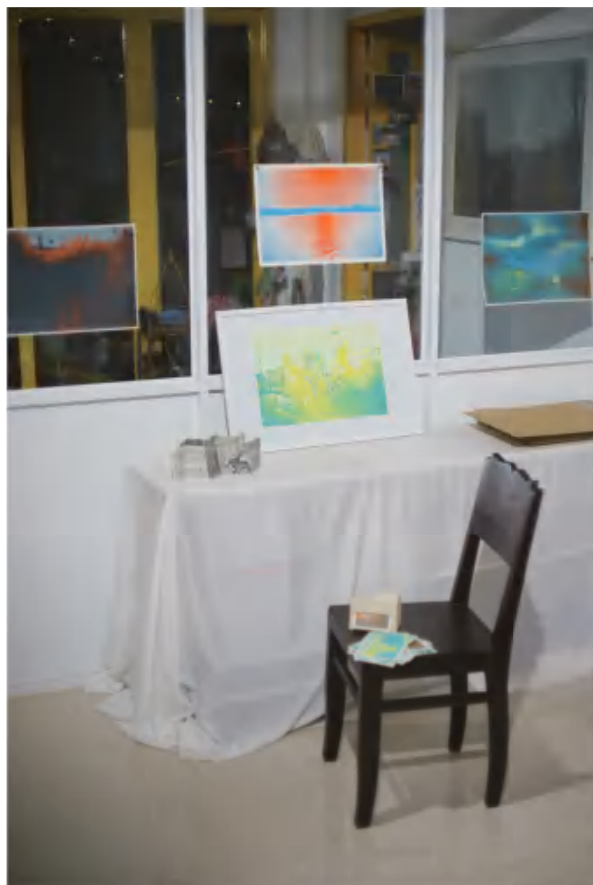


From the beginning in the summer of 2022, members at 3năm studio had decided on a time frame for three years of their existence, while given an opportunity to house-sit properties in transition. Under the sunshine of Saigon and after the pandemic, three founding members, including Dat Vu (1), Lien Pham (2) and Kai Nguyen (3), established the studio without a concrete plan for its future activities, embracing the idea of impermanence. From the initial need for studio space, they have grown over the limited duration to foster a spirit of collaboration, co-living, gardening, and art-labouring. Their story is linked with many other creative practitioners in the community and is exemplary of self-organised collectives in the contemporary Vietnamese context, specifically Saigon ~ Ho Chi Minh City.

At their first house, Dat resided there full-time while Lien and Kai came every week to work on their own projects. Occasionally, they would hold events together, with the first being the Lantern Workshop in September 2022, around the Mid-Autumn Festival.

As time passed, "our friends would visit and see the potential of doing things here, so we thought of opening it up to see how we could work with others", Dat recalled. From one activity to another, more friends and strangers reached out and the space gradually became geared towards creative pursuits of varied forms, mediums and collaboration.

Hong Vu



A presentation of Lien Pham's work during her residency time at Wedogood - risograph studio happened at the end of 2022, which was also the first show they hosted at 3năm Studio.



(2023) Exhibition view of Hợp Xưởng Tạm Tật I Works by artist Đỗ Hà Hoài



(2023.03)
A small concert called Miet Vuon Liveshow



(2023.04)
A screening by artist Sarah Trouche



In August, 2023, to mark a farewell to their first house, they organised an open studio in collaboration with A Space (6) showcasing artworks by three Vietnamese artists Đỗ Hà Hoài, Rab, and Ngô Đình Bảo Châu.

After a year and a half, they had to return the first house and relocated to a vacant garden villa.

The location change came at the right time, as their team expanded from three members to five members, with Vanessa Drummond and Thai Tuan joining the collective. Such expansion had a serendipitous connection to their name, as "năm" means "years" and also "five" in Vietnamese, thus the "3 years" also coincides with the collective growth of members.

For 3năm, hosting events and supporting artists were natural outgrowths of the members' practices. A DIY (do it yourself) mindset permeated all projects and tasks, from basic setup like drilling and lighting to more complex installations like hanging fabric between trees. Without a rigid hierarchy, whoever identified a task took ownership, and larger challenges were tackled collaboratively. Much like 3năm itself, the artists they worked with were often resourceful, developing a creative hands-on approach to their practice.

3năm took on projects that were not limited to specific art forms or stages of creation. They welcomed artists to host exhibitions, performances, and also to function as a workspace to develop ideas. This flexibility fostered lasting relationships, such as their partnership with Chử Cháy - a project led by Cát Nguyễn and Nhat Huynh-Vu dedicated to building community and space for writers. Starting in 2023 with the zine launch and poetry reading of Cát Nguyễn, titled 'returning to where i've never been,' they worked together again in 2024 for Chử Cháy's first birthday party. The celebratory event unfolded with a performance by Cát Nguyễn and Linh Than in the garden courtyard, while the living room offered a more intimate setting for the open mic session.



(2023.12)
returning to where i've never been
by Cát Nguyễn



Lien Pham, Thai Tuan and other artists at an impromptu photo-critique session at 3năm

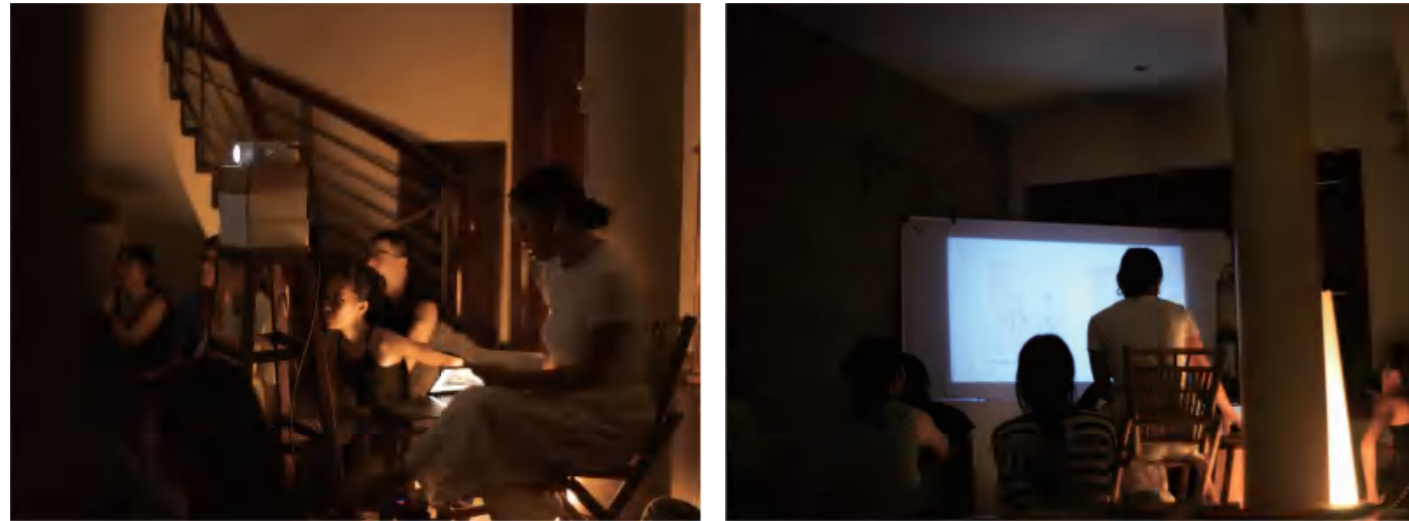


People in 3năm garden during an exhibition opening



(2024.12)
Chử Cháy 1-year anniversary





(2024.08)
God and Rothko by Mai Ta

"Everyone really wants to make things happen, and they will pull resources together to make it happen.", shared by members of 3năm. Collaboration makes things possible. Each one brings themselves to the table, and through the process of working and sharing knowledge, they create a new form of knowledge.

For the team members of 3năm, the experience of living and working so closely together led to reckoning with one's own flaws and personal growth. Over time, they say that it cultivated a greater sense of self-organisation within each person.

When 3năm were approached to host events or activities, their natural intentions were to always find solutions and make things happen. Their process of working often involves open discussions, and making adjustments so that the project is a success for all involved. They are driven by a desire to empower artists to fully realise their visions and take ownership of their work.

The supportive environment of 3năm was a fitting venue for Saigon-based artist Mai Ta, a friend of Lien Pham, to host her talk "God and Rothko." There, she engaged the audience in a discussion about contemporary art and the artist's position by drawing on art history, and her personal book collection, to inspire artists to explore the significance of faith in their own creative processes.

Aside from hosting events and activities, 3năm holds a library of artist books, zines, poetry and critical theory texts that were passed on to them from their friends at Bay Library (7) and Hanoi Zine Library (8).

"These collections have led long, beautiful lives. We are so happy to play a part in continuing the journey of these books, to make them free and available to anyone who would like to read them" - Shared on 3năm Instagram post.

Library at 3năm



With their lush gardens, 3năm offered a rare shelter to wild animals, including insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, fish, and mammals, who sought to escape the urbanisation of Saigon.

With all of those beautiful things that they built and had, 3năm still had to end. In this regard, they find themselves similar to other collectives and independent artist-run organizations, such as 289e (9) on Nguyen Cong Tru street, Bay library or Tiệm cà phê Sài Gòn hẻm and Saigon Life (10), all of which lasted for 3 or 4 years.

After all, their whole experience was a self-guided path; a long residency in which the outcome, knowledge and skills they gained were their own. The timeline has allowed them to move on to their own personal endeavours, hence the three years felt right.

If the beginning thought was that there were few spaces and opportunities for artists in Saigon, the realisation after running 3năm was otherwise. There are always happenings in the Saigon art scene.

Rùa the dog (left) and a visiting snake at 3năm studio





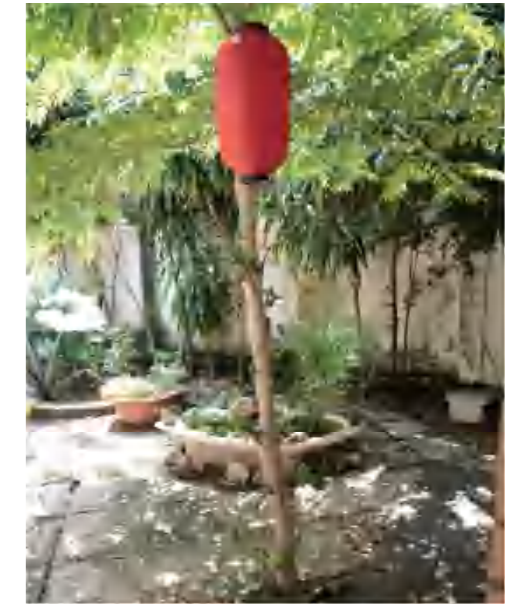
(2022)
Dat Vu and friends on a bamboo bed perched on a wall between trees.



(2022)
Garden of the first 3nãm house.



(2024)
Back courtyard of the second 3nãm house.



(2024)
Front garden of the second 3nãm house, with a bathtub fish tank

"Looking around, people find ways to make things work. When we're not around anymore, there are other spaces for art and artists. People have exhibitions in their homes, and personally, I also enjoy working on projects in different locations with others." - Lien Pham

What makes 3nãm special is perhaps the temporary nature of it, with all the adaptations made by its members to live and to work creatively. For a short-term project, they experimented pragmatically and found ways to realise things with other artists and practitioners.

As we bid farewell to 3nãm, I am grateful for what they have done. While some people may evaluate a project's longevity as a success or failure, the Saigon art scene is vibrant and robust because of such communities like 3nãm. They set examples and create opportunities for artists to pursue their visions, to gain practical production skills and experiences. The connections they have fostered will last beyond these past 3 years, and for many more years to come.

"The first house was kind of idyllic and romantic in a way", shared by Vanessa Drummond, a member of 3nãm.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Born in 1991, Dat Vu is a multidisciplinary artist and photographer with a background in Earth & Environmental Science and Art Studio from Wesleyan University (Connecticut, USA). His work has been exhibited globally in the US, France, Cambodia, Australia, Singapore, and Vietnam. With extensive experience in visual storytelling, he has served as a photo editor (VnExpress), art handler (Galerie Quynh, Institut Français de HCM), and remote researcher (École cantonale d'art de Lausanne, Switzerland). Beyond photography, he has contributed to major international productions, including Netflix's Da 5 Bloods and CNN's Trump-Kim Summit coverage. A recipient of multiple grants and fellowships, he continues to explore the intersection of art, environment, and culture through his projects.

[2] Lien Pham (b. 1997) is a Ho Chi Minh City-based artist and arts organizer. Graduating from SMFA at Tufts University in 2021, her artistic practice centers on first-person points of view, and human needs for intimacy and belonging. She has also worked in art education and publishing with Wedogood and co-founded 3nãm studio. Notable exhibitions include "peace is a white room" (VAC, Hanoi), "Imaging Rhizome" (RABA, Tokyo), and "Love is Hard" (The Factory, Saigon).

[3] Kai Nguyen is a visual artist currently living and working in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Using various mediums such as (moving) images, poetry, installations, Kai's practice focuses on plants, memories, and their connections to everyday life. As a queer artist, Kai views his "gentle and sentimental" practices as a "soft strategy" that weaves through violence and heteronormativity. Kai's poetry has been published by Ajar Press, Asian American Writers Workshop, and Parthian Book. Some of his installations have been exhibited at The Factory Contemporary Art Centre and Goethe Institut Hanoi. Kai's photographic works have also been featured by Matca, C4 Journal and Nope Fun.

[4] Vanessa Drummond, a conscientious textiles designer maker, artist, community support and facilitator based in Ho Chi Minh City, who brings an expertise in conceptual art-making, materiality, tradition and craft. Having lived in Vietnam for several years, she has built meaningful connections with local creative communities and was part of the transitory collective 3nãm Studio.

[5] Thai Tuan (b. 2003) is a Vung Tau-based photographer exploring ambiguous histories and harsh social realities. His debut photobook, "Castle," was shortlisted for the SIFP Photobook Award 2024.

[6] Á Space is an independent space for experimental art practice in Hanoi

[7] Bay Library was first established in 2017, as a traveling exhibition in Europe of artist books and zines from Vietnam. It opened its first space in Saigon in 2020, in the cozy living room of its founder Maria Sower. Her living room became a place where people could come to read books and see contemporary art mixed up with life. Performances, workshops, and things like Bla Bla Saigon, an alternative conversation club, also took place.

[8] Hanoi Zine Library started humbly as Ed Weinberg's personal collection of books, magazines, and zines, that then accumulated as it made its way through several art spaces in Saigon and Hanoi. A true community project, the library was nurtured by collaborators such as Red and Bex Hughes, and built from donations by zine collections such as the Barnard Zine Library and DITKÓI Zine Library. Bex had been taking care of the library and brought it with her when she moved to Saigon. She has shared the books and zines with audiences through dedicating a corner to it at her art space Qua, organizing workshops and events to activate the collection, and through adding to it by way of collaborating with artists to create the Made in Vietnam Zine issues.

[10] Tiêm cà phê Sài Gòn hẻm and Saigon Life were coffee shops where many local photographers convened to share their works, held photo-critique sessions and more. (<https://www.facebook.com/SaigonLifePhoto>)

A "ngách" of Hanoi's Art Scene



Illustration of Artist Mr. Snood Beanie, drawn by the author

*ngách: a path in a residential area that leads to an alley, not directly to a main road or street.

You can find everything here, on this street, in this store, but sometimes you need to let "everything" find the way to you

- anonymous artist Mr. Snood Beanie said.

Phi Trang

If you have recently met someone who just stepped into the art world - especially becoming part of the art production team, let's congratulate them, they have officially signed up for the race of finding "everything".

This article gives you a glimpse into the minds of a niche yet growing community of young people and artists who share (anonymously) their experiences of making and producing art in Hanoi. Some quotes have been sourced from public settings while identities remain respectfully anonymous.

Producing Art in Hanoi is ... tough!

Finding the right direction and the right medium is always the first challenge for young artists. Mr. Snood Beanie graduated from one of Vietnam's most prestigious fine arts universities, once carrying many sparks of promises. He began to build his reputation through watercolor paintings exhibited at regional art camps, group shows, and art competitions. Like many young artists, he chased the footsteps of his idols, experimenting with their methods in search of his own path.

"I thought that was the way," he recalls. But a transformative moment came when he finally had a chance to directly confront a masterpiece by his idol. "That was when I realized - we were all born to return to ourselves, not to become a mirror of someone else." The journey from "returning to oneself" to "finding everything" for Mr. Snood Beanie also began since then.

Photo of Đông Xuân Market, Hanoi





Photo of No. 42 Yết Kiêu Street, Hanoi

Living & Making Art in Hanoi:

A Practice of Balance & Flexibility

How would you react if you have only a few days left until the opening and the pre-drilled holes for hanging a painting do not match the frame?

- A. Zone out and have a sip of coffee
- B. Call the vendor and find solutions
- C. Improvise within the time allowed

The answer is that you will probably go through the above answers in turn, and end up either solving the issue or walking away with a hard lesson learnt in production logistics.

'Everything' may start with silk and watercolor

Making art in Hanoi means being resourceful and endlessly curious. There is a story of Mr. Snood Beanie combing through the chaotic alleys of Đồng Xuân Market on a hunt for the ideal silk or fabric. He bought, collected, stored, experimented. He even learned to sew by hand to create his unique patterns. Some of the places that Mr. Snood Beanie will recommend to young artists to find "everything" include the familiar no. 42 on Yet Kieu street, shops near the gates of art schools, and fabricators who make custom frames only 30km from Hanoi. The hardest part is not about finding a reputable vendor but someone willing to go a little "insane" with the idea to understand the artist's vision and commit to it.

Building a signature style comes with experience. Speaking to Mr. Snood Beanie in person, you might likely be impressed by his humor, humility, and sharp knowledge. He can probably talk about ancient Asian court painters in Vietnam, China, or Korea, who often had to hide their artistic gifts from royalty due to politics, tradition, and feudal suspicion... just to explain why many parents today still hesitate to support an artistic path.

His studio rules are clear, but poetic: respect the work and wash your hands before entry. Visitors might find themselves not only welcomed but immersed in captivating stories that no single clean hand could hold.

Such small rituals reveal how an artist's carefulness can become a lifestyle, shaped by his creative environment.



Installation view, peace is a white room, open studio of Mai Ta, Nhi Le, Mr. Bambii, Lien Pham, November 2024, Vietnam Art Collection, Hanoi

The Art of Balance



Photo of Pho Thin, Hanoi

Photo of Pho Thin, Hanoi

Before diving head-first into artmaking in Hanoi, it would be nice if you had time to look around and let the city's rhythm shape you. Sip a cold brew at Là Việt Coffee. Enjoy a full bowl from Phở Thìn. Befriend with a handy neighbor and his power drill. Practice yoga on a fifth-floor balcony facing West Lake. Wander Thống Nhất Park and return with 100 new pictures on the phone. Watch the city from an aged rooftop bar on Tràng Tiền Street. Lose yourself in a vintage market in Hà Đông district.

Anonymous artist Ms. Melodic Voice enjoyed walking her pet by the lake, observing the elegant movement of West Lake which opened her to new artistic rituals she had never imagined.

It was like my mother, even though she was busy in life, she always found time to arrange flowers. They were chosen with care and it's never enough for me to admire their beauty.

- Ms. Melodic Voice.



Illustration of Artist Ms. Melodic Voice, drawn by the author

The Power of Flexibility

Photo of Van Phuc Market, Hanoi



When things go sideways, in addition to knowing "everything", it is better to find someone who knows someone who has "everything".

Those with a contact list of fabricators, art handlers, galleries, film crews, and architects are able to hang the paintings when the pre-drilled holes say otherwise. These are lessons you will not find in textbooks or on the internet. A sharp plan and an open mind might lead you to the gatekeeper.

Want to explore more of Hanoi's "ngách" for artists?

Check out **Ctrl + Hanoi** in the Index section

Trà Đá with

Thuy-
Tien
Nguyen

Trà đá means ice tea in Vietnamese. It's commonly associated with ice tea stands where Hanoian people hang out, engage in organic conversations and exchange information at lightning speed.

Inspired by such phenomenon, tradasociety is an ongoing journey of random explorations, one cup at a time.

Here, a trà đá session is an experimental survey on how people

perceive certain things through free association methodology, a psychological technique used to explore thoughts, feelings, and perceptions by encouraging participants to respond spontaneously to a given stimulus, such as a word or image.

*trà đá with Thuy-Tien Nguyen:
an attempt to diagram the artist
by counting from 1-to-5, in one
trà đá session*

1

1 Sentence about your current state? (can be anything that you'd want to talk about, work related or non-work related)

Jet-lag, after coming back to Vietnam for the residency after 5 years studying in Germany, I've been feeling "jet-lagged"-like a state of disorientation, displacement, and perhaps a feeling of being between two worlds.

2 DREAMS

I don't usually remember my dreams, but I have two unforgettable ones - one from childhood and a recent one.

Dream 1:

As a kid, I was playing with my sister when we accidentally broke a vase. Just as someone was about to come in, I felt an overwhelming fear. That moment is etched in my memory.

Dream 2:

Recently, I had a dream where I was alone and pregnant with twins. I didn't worry about who the father was, but I panicked about having smoked before knowing I was pregnant. I feared it would harm the babies. Thankfully, the twin girls were born healthy, with long black braided hair.

3

WORDS

Association: (I'll say 3 words and please tell me the first things that come to your mind when you hear these words)

Memories



Melt

Dreams



Hand

Regret



Language

Dissociation: (And then, please tell me 3 words that have been on your mind lately?)

Hunger

Romance

Glitch

4

ANGLES

Using a SWOT Analysis to provide a structured look at Thuy-Tien's artistic practice through her own assessment of what Tien perceives as her:

Strengths: Material & Time

Twist elements.

Stubborn and Determined

Weaknesses:

Emotional & Priority issues.

Financial Instability

Challenging subject matter (time)

Opportunities:

Overcoming challenges

Institutional shows between Germany and Vietnam

Threats:

Self-critique

5

PREMISES

Main Premises: "Personal memories speak to collective memories" —This is the core of Thuy-Tien's artistic exploration. Tien uses her own experiences to connect with broader, shared human experiences.

Supporting Premises:

1. **Material:** Explores the physical properties of Tien's chosen media (duo group, temperature, condition, humidity, time) and how they relate to memory and experience. This is very grounded and tangible.

2. **Performativity:** Incorporates elements of performance, emphasizing the role of time and the staging of her work. This adds a layer of ephemerality and presence.

3. **Romance:** Explores themes of love, hope, tragedy, and possibly the interplay between them, often through songs. This adds an emotional and narrative dimension.

4. **Rules and Discipline:** This suggests a structured approach to Tien's creative process, a counterpoint to the more fluid aspects of memory and emotion.

About Thuy-Tien Nguyen

Thuy-Tien is an artist based in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and Hanoi, Vietnam. Tien's artistic practice revolves around the transformation of personal and collective memories, examining how they are distorted, translated, and reconstructed over time. Her recent works explore the concept of home and disciplines, often portraying fragmented and ambiguous impressions of domestic objects and how their relationships manifest within and beyond ordinary daily life. Whether through the use of objects, installations, photography, or situations, her practice often takes on the appearance of accidental occurrences or their remnants, leaving behind hints and a sense of disorientation in the spaces she engages with.



About the author

A. Nguyen is just A random Nguyen.

MONOLOGUE

Empire of Light

The house is silent.

Light emanates from the windows, the orange glow casts itself upon the grass. Trees whisper among themselves while somewhere in front, a rock sits still, stoic. You can almost hear it, the deafening sound of night. But in spite of this nocturnal serenity, the sky is lit up, a clear blue. White clouds roll in from some undetermined places, creating a dramatic backdrop for our speculative drama. What hovers is the question. Nothing, comes to mind.

I have been at fault. I confess to knowing nothing. I do not want to declare any kind of philosophical stance for one, there have been so many. And two, whatever it is I have to say will circle back to my lack of a backbone eventually. I'm sorry, this is a terrible way to start an essay. Should we continue talking about Magritte? Because I was describing a Magritte painting just now. *Empire of Light*, to be exact. But I felt this terrible need to address my own ignorance before I proceed to imbue you with my feelings. Because feeling is anathema to intellect. And what is art without intellect anyway?

I initially wanted to start with Picasso. With *Guernica*, one of the most recognizable political paintings of all time. But whether it was my own disdain for our revolutionary cubist or the tired contrarian attitude that he often teased out of me, a Magritte painting seems more appropriate. The surrealists, in their most earnest attempt to revolutionize our consciousness, have given us not a revolution in a physical sense but an aesthetic one. This, in the eyes of their contemporaries, was a miserable disappointment. But art, to me, always disappoints. Like how religion disappoints, how philosophy disappoints. What is hidden amid this disappointment, the sparkle of which rests our human spirit and its inexhaustible drive for freedom, is where my curiosity lies. Let us then begin our journey towards reconciliation, between what is possible and impossible, the real and surreal.

It was 1924, six years after the end of World War I, and God, in the European consciousness, was dead. In truth, He's been dead for a while. Ever since Sade decreed libertine debauchery. Ever since Nietzsche discovered opium. A void looms in His place, and it was the attempt to fill this void, that Existentialism manifested.

Existentialism, at its core, despite the profound disagreement among its disciples, tried to do good by the human subject. It offered answers in the face of nothing, and acknowledged the malaise inherent to existing in this newfound godless world. It would not be alone in this endeavor. For in 1924 post-war France, another movement would be birthed alongside it. A movement forged by Freud's groundbreaking dream analysis and the last dregs of the Romantics. A movement called, Surrealism.

Conceived by the writer and poet André Breton, Surrealism was defined, in its first manifesto, as "Psychic automatism in its pure state." It was also defined, as a philosophy, to be "... based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought." You will soon learn that Breton was not brief. Brief would also not describe what him and his cohorts dubbed "automatism", a creative practice they've employed for its purported capability of freeing the mind from its own pitfalls. "I resolved to obtain from myself... a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possible, akin to spoken thought." It was essentially free association. Thus by this free association, the user would reveal to themselves their own subconscious, in which absurd truths would be brought forth. Truths that will then, as the surrealists believed, lead to liberation — *la révolution de l'esprit*.

The technique found life among the writers and visual artists who'd joined the movement, leading to one of the most ecstatic periods in art (though the visual artists did not employ automatism for there is nothing automatic about the labor of creation). Groundbreaking in their uncompromising nonconformity, the surrealists succumbed fully to an irrational creative process. "We are specialists in rebellion", said Breton¹. And rebellious, they were. One need only think of Luis Buñuel's *An Andalusian Dog* or Erik Satie's composition for the ballet *Parade* to conclude that they have certainly triumphed over rationality. But upon closer inspection, one can observe, that hidden within their defication of the irrational, was a longing for innocence. "The mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood." Here, Breton underlined the essential drive of the movement: the nostalgic affirmation of life.

This affirmation, however, did not satisfy the political fervor that dominated the French intellectual class at the time. With the ending of both World Wars and the beginning Cold War as backdrops, many of the surrealists' contemporaries felt their revolutionary aims frivolous and ineffectual — art for art's sake. In his 1988 essay *What is Literature?*, Jean-Paul Sartre brutalized Surrealism, declaring its followers and their spiritual revolution impotent. "He adopted psychoanalysis because it presented consciousness as being invaded by parasitical outgrowths whose origin is elsewhere; he rejected the bourgeois idea of work because work implies conjectures, hypotheses, and projects, thus, a perpetual recourse to the subjective." It is of no surprise that Sartre, a man for whom action leads the path towards liberation, would consider symbolism as a revolutionary act futile. He reserved an especially acidic tone for Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?* and Dalí's critical method, bemoaning how "surrealist painting and sculpture had no other aim than to multiply these

local and imaginary explosions, which were like holes through which the entire universe would be drained out." Sartre then cried out in frustration, "All this without even starting a single real destruction." Sartre rejected the surrealists, believing them to be not revolutionaries, but "parasites on the human race". That the only thing they achieved, was "... a surrealist quietism. Quietism and permanent violence; two complementary aspects of the same position." To him, they were only bourgeois intellectuals; revolutionaries without revolutions, destroyers that never destroyed.

Yet Breton did destroy something. Not tyranny or injustice, but his own credibility. In trying to justify Surrealism's revolutionary intent he had, on numerous occasions, contradicted himself. The most noted example of this contradiction, the most audacious, came from his second Surrealism manifesto, in which he'd proclaimed, "the simplest Surrealist act consists, with revolvers in hand, of descending into the street and shooting at random, as much as possible, into the crowd." This insane remark, perhaps conceived during an automatism trance, carved into stone Breton's proceeding downfall, making him persona non grata, disavowed by even his fellow surrealists. In his 1951 essay, *The Rebel*, Albert Camus dedicated a section specifically for Surrealism and its creator. In Camus' eyes, Breton's "demand for absolute freedom" was simply a rhetoric employed to explain away inconvenient truths. "... one hesitates to remind André Breton that his movement implied the establishment of "ruthless authority" and of dictatorship, of political fanaticism, the refusal of free discussion, and the necessity of the death penalty." If Breton thought Surrealism "asserts our complete nonconformism", Camus saw them only as nihilists. If Breton thought Surrealism a brother to Marxism, Camus saw them to be the antithesis of each other. "It explains nothing, even though it justifies everything." The surrealists' antics and Breton's convoluted monologues desecrated Surrealism, shot to death its revolutionary aims, and laid waste to the idealism artists have never escaped from.

But the aesthetic lives on, and even Camus can't help himself. He was, after all, an artist; and artists rarely live up to the principles they've created for themselves. After demonstrating art's inclination toward formalism (which would allow it to be used as propaganda), Camus, nevertheless, reveled in its romantic logic, its ability to create a world he'd described as: "where suffering can, if it wishes, continue until death, where passions are never distracted, where people are prey to obsessions and are always present with one another." For Camus, art encapsulates reality imagined, for "we want love to last and we know that it does not last." This contradictory nature, the disappointment that follows when one's confronted by its futility, is the essential quality of art itself. In all of its vain frivolity, art lifts for us the curtain that separates our crude, human soul from the physicality of life, the rationality of thought. "... for us who have been thrown into hell, mysterious melodies and the torturing images of a vanished beauty will always bring us, in the midst of crime and folly, the echo of that harmonious insurrection which bears witness, throughout the centuries, to the greatness of humanity." There exist within us this need for beauty in the face of terror. For while we know that terror exists and that we sometimes are the ones who dispense it, beauty transcends it only for a moment, allowing us the reprieve from which we can ignore our own hateful nature. Though only for a moment in time, for eventually it will, once more, depart.

Sartre knew this. *What Is Literature?* was his passionate defense of the art of writing and its role within the revolutionary context. Though secondary to action, writing, to Sartre, was still action. "In so far as literature is negative it will challenge the alienation of work; in so far as it is a creation and an act of surpassing, it will present man as creative action."

This action, writing as an intellectual exercise on the quest for an all-encompassing knowledge, reconciled Sartre's gap between himself and the world, and banished from within himself, alienation. "My ambition is myself alone to know the world... And, for me, knowledge has a magical sense of appropriation. To know is to appropriate." He reserved this sentiment for Picasso, a friend and an artist who, in his view, was asking "awkward questions"². Upon examining Picasso's *Guernica*, Sartre professed, "... does anyone think that it won over a single heart to the Spanish cause? And yet something is said that can never quite be heard and that would take an infinity of words to express." He was not immune to art's ability to encapsulate the irrational, the invisible, displaying a clear preference for Picasso's brutal, real, cubism. But this would make his criticism of the surrealists a matter of taste. Does it then matter, especially within such a frivolous context, what form revolution takes? Shouldn't we be allowed a moment of respite, indulgence in whichever aesthetic suits best our political interests? Isn't art always something akin to salvation, a salve for the open wounds left gaping by life's inherent horrors? I'd argue yes. But I am biased in that I sympathize greatly with the surrealists' idealism — an idealism which, in our current horrifying political landscape, rings much truer and more faithful to me, than the rebellious appropriation of Pablo Picasso.

Breton had written, in the first Surrealism manifesto, regarding the realistic attitude: "I loathe it, for it is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit." Was it of any surprise that this man, who'd worked at the neurology ward during World War I, would feel this way about rationalism? "It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer — and, in my opinion by far the most important part — has been brought back to light." God was dead, and in His place lived not rationally, but blown up corpses and disfigured innocents. God was dead, and in His place lived, a void. Surrealism assisted Breton's journey back from this void. "Thanks to Surrealism, it seems that opportunity knocks a second time... Thank God, it's still only Purgatory." In truth, this was what the surrealists meant to express, but failed to. For they were, after all, idealistic and conceited artists. They were, in other words, completely human.

To be human is to create myths. And you need myths in order to sustain a lie. The lie spoken at this moment comes from the mouths of the damned, the lost. But you need good figures, idols worthy of your worship — monks, priests, philosophers, artists... You need them to exist, so that you're allowed within yourself this belief in goodness. For it seems goodness does not exist and even if it does, its existence is woven with misery. One can do good deeds under the heat of prayer, but one can do bad deeds just as well. So the burden rests on your choices and sometimes, you do choose well. But then other times, your selfishness triumphs, when all you're left with is this savagery of which you've proven yourself capable. What I'm trying to say is, that I've committed acts I wish I never did, felt things I wish I never felt, and acted upon instincts where my ego rests too happily. I've derived pleasure from other's suffering, and inflicted suffering even when it brought me no pleasure. In short, I have sinned. But I must say, that while life is meaningless it is also full of meaning. And you should try to be as moral as you can but at the end of the day you're so completely human, that the only temple worthy of your salvation, is the one that lays bare all of your mistakes.

I don't know where this salvation complex of mine came from. Was it the moment my ancestors cut off their long hair, converted to Catholicism, and married French people? Or was it when the French descended upon us on their maiden voyage and recreated us in their own image? It is not lost on me that most of the names I've mentioned in this writing have been French, and that the origin of my creative drive have been primarily invigorated by French sensibilities. Being a descendant of colonialism permeates my existence. A contradictory existence that one can devise by telling, at the same time, a lie and a truth. Safely cloaked by the revelatory silence of reverie, the house sits still while the sky's bathed in enlightenment. Would you allow me this final place of refuge, where I submit to a perpetual slumber, of which my innocence would be retained? I long for the eternal protection of dreams, dreams in which I know nothing, want nothing, be nothing... Dreams in which I submit to my own inertia, poison myself with malaise, and alienate the self that upon waking up in the morning, have to confront its past, present, and future. Surrealism is not the antidote to an unjust, godless world. But it is, the opium — a remedy for someone without a backbone. A remedy for someone like me.

¹Surrealism and Revolution, *The Rebel*, Albert Camus

²Introduction to Sartre's *The Age of Reason*, David Caute

Empire of Light, René Magritte, 1951



Dynastie Tran

Cartography of Memory, Queering the Archive

Kianuë Tran Kiêu

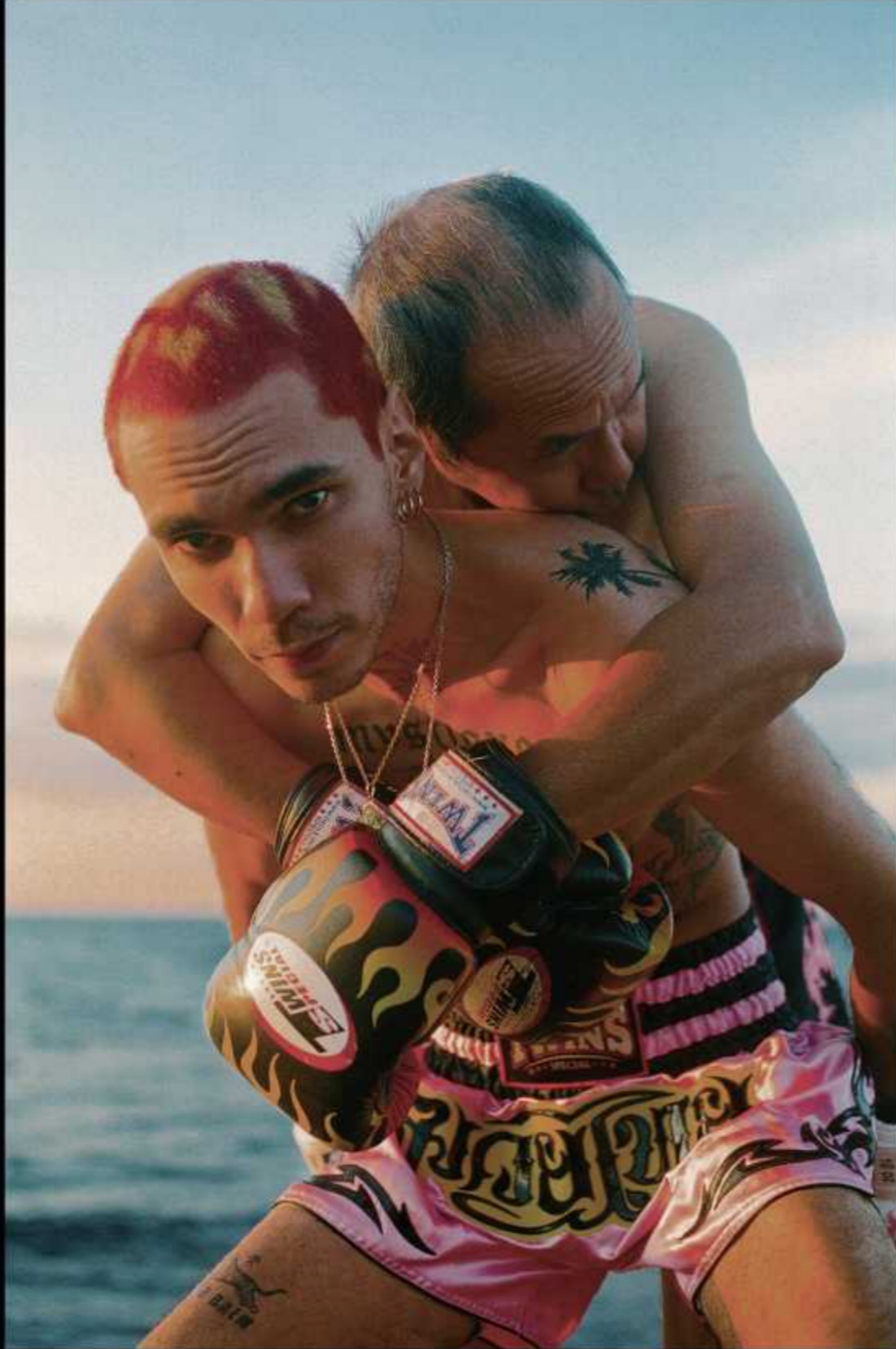


Their works emphasize the importance of breaking transgenerational curses, fostering collective memory, and reclaiming the power of their own narrative.

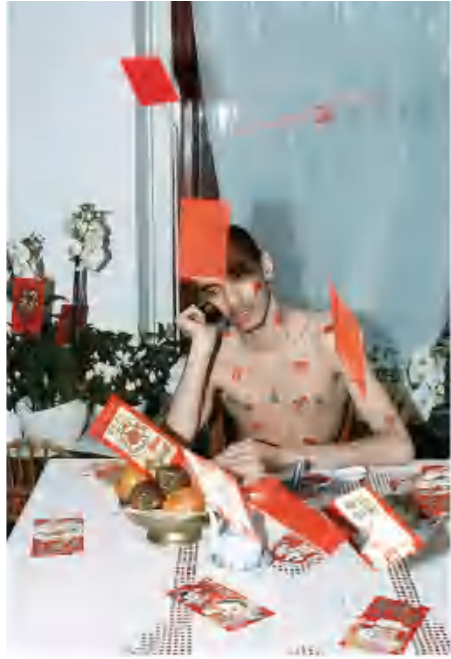
Kianuê Tran Kiêu is a solarpunk, asiofuturist, transdisciplinary artist. Their organic and cosmogonic practice is rooted in childhood resistance rituals, which they confront with their relationship to violence. Through poetry and dreamlike imagery, they weave emotional sanctuaries into reality, conceived as true dissociative utopias where environmental and social justice resonate with one another. Guided by queer spiritualities, emotions are elevated as a force of revolt. Disobeying dominant narratives then becomes a promise of love that their protagonists make to themselves, to the collective, and to nature.

Kianuê's work has been showcased in France at La Villette as part of ZUT, at Les Magasins Généraux for the Utopi-e prize, at the 67th Salon de Montrouge, at Montparnasse galleries, Sans Titre, Praz-Delavallade; in London at Guts Gallery and Ugly Duck for the Queer East Festival; and in Brussels at That's What X Said gallery.





"*Dynastie Tran* is a constellation of images, a fragmented palimpsest where personal and collective memory intertwine. This ongoing photographic series emerges from the fissures of my family's history—ruptured by war, migration, and silence—where the photographic record abruptly ceases, mirroring the unspoken traumas that shaped our diasporic existence."



"Through the medium of analog photography, I reconstruct an emotional geography of reconciliation, traversing France to capture the vestiges of an affection long thought lost. This project subverts the heteropatriarchal gaze inscribed within family archives by unveiling a fluid genealogy—one where tenderness defies inherited violence, and queer subjectivities reclaim space within an ancestral lineage that once sought to erase them. In its essence, *Dynastie Tran* enacts a counter-memory, a visual act of resistance against imposed amnesia."



"The series exists as both an intimate dialogue and a collective ritual of reclamation. Through staged group portraits, I orchestrate moments of reconnection, where estranged relatives are invited to re-inhabit a shared past through the gestures of the present. This process, at once performative and documentary, is a gesture of defiance: to hold a family together through the act of witnessing."

Lake Side Hotel



Song Nguyen

Song Nguyen (born 2002, Hanoi) is an artist exploring visual storytelling through photography and experimental filmmaking. He approaches his work as a voyeur, questioning the ethical implications of observing everyday life scenes and pornographic materials. His work often delves into themes of voyeurism, extending beyond the realm of sexual gratification.

In 2023, he participated in Imaging Rhizome (3nam Studio x Raba Gallery, Ho Chi Minh City and Tokyo) and Anima Directory (online) as part of the Wrong Biennale. He also exhibited in Remission (Manzi and The Outpost, Hanoi) and was an artist-in-residence at Wedogood.riso (Ho Chi Minh City).



"During the Yagi typhoon crisis, a hotel next to my apartment had one of its roof blown away.

its roof

blown

away.

I ended up documenting the entire construction process, from scouting to the newly built roof.

NPCs

"I explored the the theme of voyeurism through the act of documenting human behavior in public spaces to see how we, as social animals, behave in a group. Within the series, there are staged photographs blending in with unstaged ones, and by mixing these scenarios together, I aim to examine how a person shares their personal space with the public sphere. A girl sitting contemplatively next to a fisherman, a half-naked man lying freely on the roof, not minding the pedestrians below, or KOLs posing cringely for videos in an open space. All of these examples, staged or not, show individuals occupied in their own worlds while participating in society.

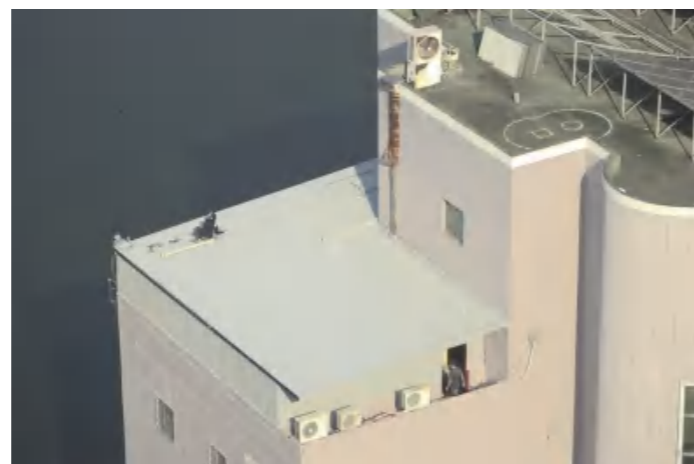
While I do not want to go into details about technicality, it is a crucial part of how the series is told or communicated towards viewers. The series is photographed with a telezoom camera; it allows me to see things in detail without having to move closer.

This 'lazy' and 'passive' method makes me feel omnipotent, like a game player controlling characters in a virtual world. Similarly, when photographing, the act of framing itself is, in essence, an act of control: trimming out, adding in, and later on, photoshopping.

So, the people in the photographs are like non-player characters, doing their own things, minding their own business, not knowing their world is being observed and alternated to suit the photographer's desire."

It only took a week or so for the construction workers to rebuild it anew."





"I admired that collectiveness. The harmony in labor. A conscious rhythm.

Together, the workers make a stage play where everybody understands their part.

When the performance came to an end, the roof shed its new skin."

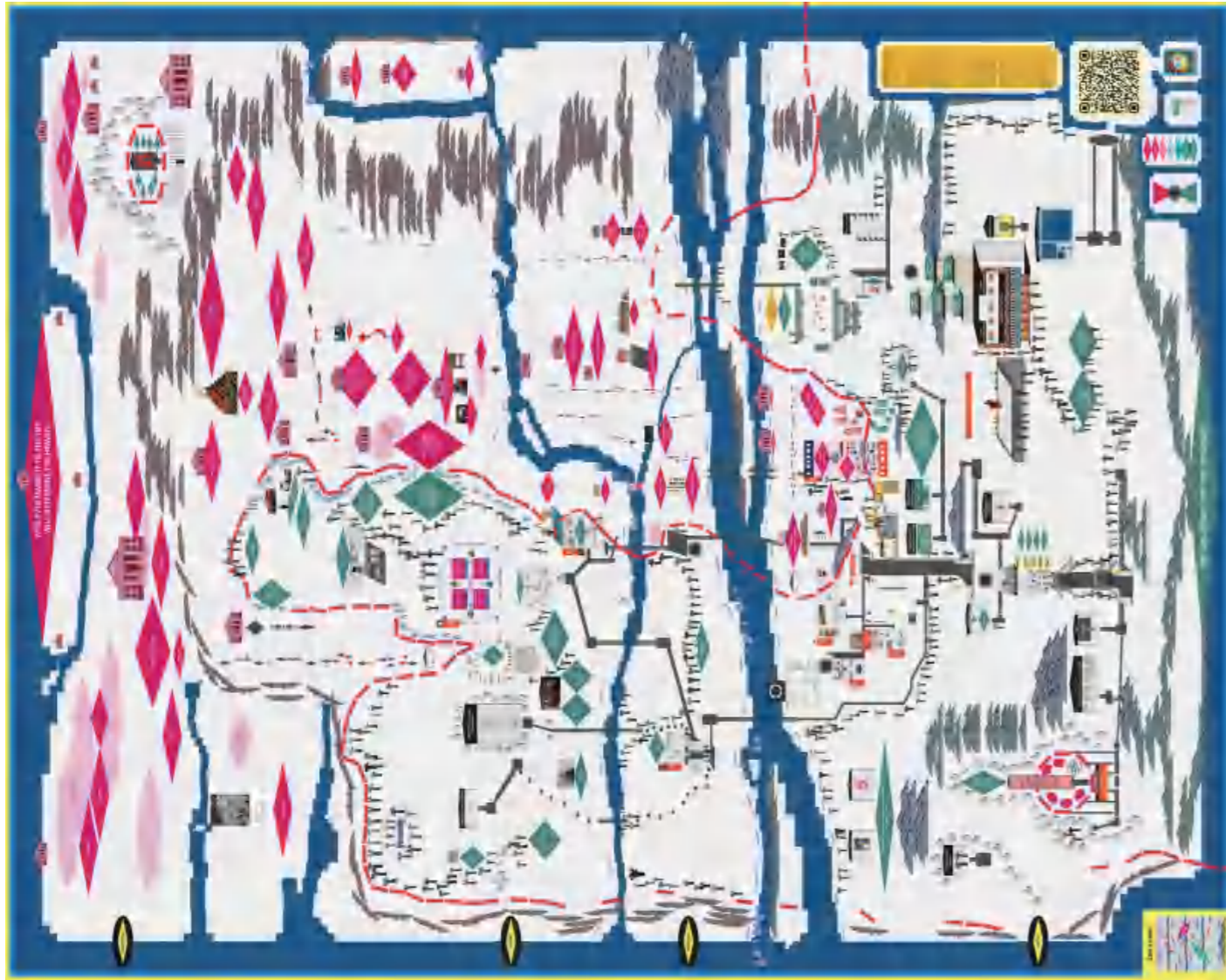
Country X – Metaphysical Cartography for the Future



Taken by Kusuma Pandu Wijaya
Courtesy of Hà Ninh Pham



Hà Ninh Pham



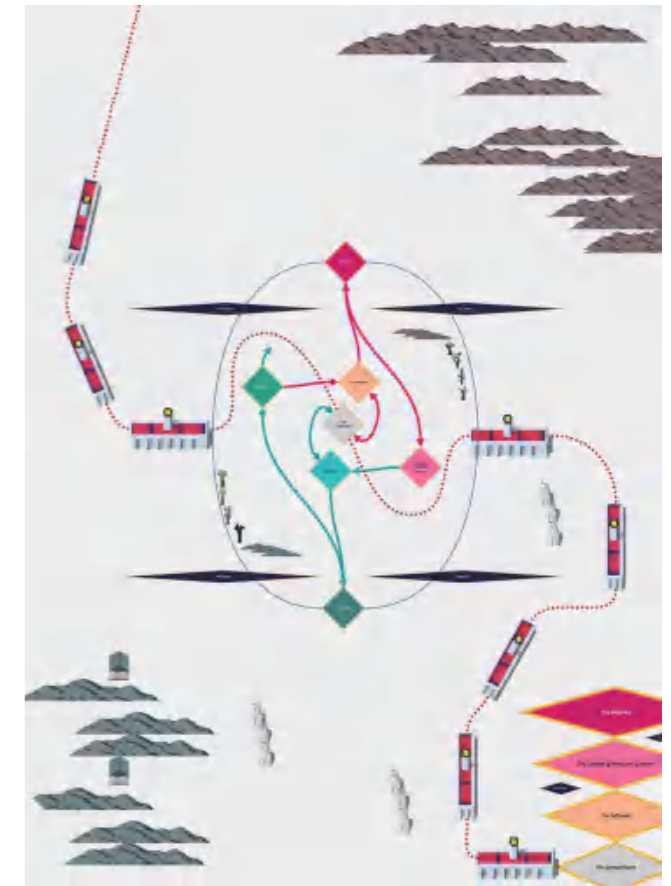
Country X - Second Map,
digital map on Miro platform,
free size,
2023

Hà Ninh Pham's project *Country X – Metaphysical Cartography for the Future* is a research-driven artistic exploration that reimagines how individuals map, communicate, and navigate ideologies in a world where physical borders are less defining. Through the creation of *Country X*, a fictional nation representing ideologically independent people, Hà Ninh employs metaphors, architectural cartography, and speculative city planning to transform abstract concepts into tangible forms.

The project encompasses digital and hand-drawn maps, creative writing, installations, and exhibitions, all serving as artifacts that probe paradoxes of belonging, identity, and ideological independence. By situating his work at the intersection of art, architecture, and political thought, Hà Ninh's practice invites viewers to reflect on the complexities of place-making and the construction of meaning in contemporary society.



Country X - Propaganda flyer,
marker on printed A4 paper,
29 x 21 cm,
2023



Country X - Third Map at J2,
digital map on Miro platform,
free size,
2025

Hà Ninh Pham (b. 1991, Hanoi, Vietnam) is an artist whose work investigates how we construct our understanding of territories and belonging from a distance. He holds an MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and a BFA from the Vietnam University of Fine Arts. His work has been featured in international exhibitions and publications such as *Hyperallergic* and *New American Paintings*, and he has participated in prestigious residencies including Skowhegan, Yaddo, and Cité Internationale des Arts. Currently represented by A+ Works of Art in Kuala Lumpur, Hà Ninh is also an Associate Lecturer at RMIT University Vietnam and a curatorial board member at A Space Experimental Arts in Hanoi. His multidisciplinary practice spans drawing, sculpture, installation, and writing, consistently engaging with themes of imagination, identity, and the politics of space.

Nhà Sàn Collective



The name Nhà Sàn signifies the Collective's foundation which is rooted in the spirit of Nhà Sàn Studio, an artist-run space founded in 1998 in Hanoi.

About NSC

Nhà Sàn Collective (NSC) began operating as an independent artist collective in Hanoi in 2013, when a group of friends set up their publicly accessible space. With or without a physical base, NSC has worked with fellow companions and collaborators to organize exhibitions, workshops, film screenings, talks and other activities as a supporting platform for artists in the community. An initiative for exchanges, expansions and connections. A place that's also open toward works-in-progress and the unexpected, a just-do-it attitude which doesn't always yield answers. Some of the Collective's main projects, which have been held on numerous occasions, are Skylines With Flying People, IN:ACT Performance Art Festival, Queer Forever!, Emerging Artists program, among others. The Collective board consists of Trương Quế Chi, Nguyễn Phương Linh, Nguyễn Quốc Thành, Vũ Đức Toàn, and Tuấn Mami.

Documenta 2022

For *Documenta fifteen*, Nhà Sàn Collective traces a metaphorical connection from a Vietnamese bến (harbor) to the Fulda. By the river in Kassel, two performance installations stage the arrival of the playground installation, transporting the architectural materials, along with its community and their lived experiences. The collective also invites visitors to join them in cultivating a garden of migratory plants and narratives, joyful companionship inside a queer house with a sauna, offering haircuts, homemade wine and hosting discussions, workshops, as well as parties. Throughout the summer a series of events takes place in Ngọc Thụy, Hanoi, by the Red River, concluded by Nhà Sàn Collective's open house party.

(from <https://documenta-fifteen.de>)

Immigrating Garden

—Tuấn Mami

A member of Nhà Sàn Collective, Tuấn Mami, together with the Vietnamese community living across Germany, created this garden as an extension of his research into the history and society of the Vietnamese diaspora. "Vietnamese Immigrating Garden" continues Tuấn Mami's ongoing exploration of the lives of Vietnamese migrants in various countries, from Asia to the West.



This transnational project seeks to reflect on human migration history through Vietnamese communities, including refugees, imported workers, students, and many other groups.

The garden is composed of many Vietnamese plant species, some of which have been passed down through generations — a collection gathered from informal gardens that have sprung up across Germany, where foreign plants and seeds have been banned in recent decades. The garden provides a safe and shared refuge for the Vietnamese community. They need Vietnamese plants and herbs for cooking, traditional medicine, emotional nourishment, and maintaining spiritual ties with their homeland.

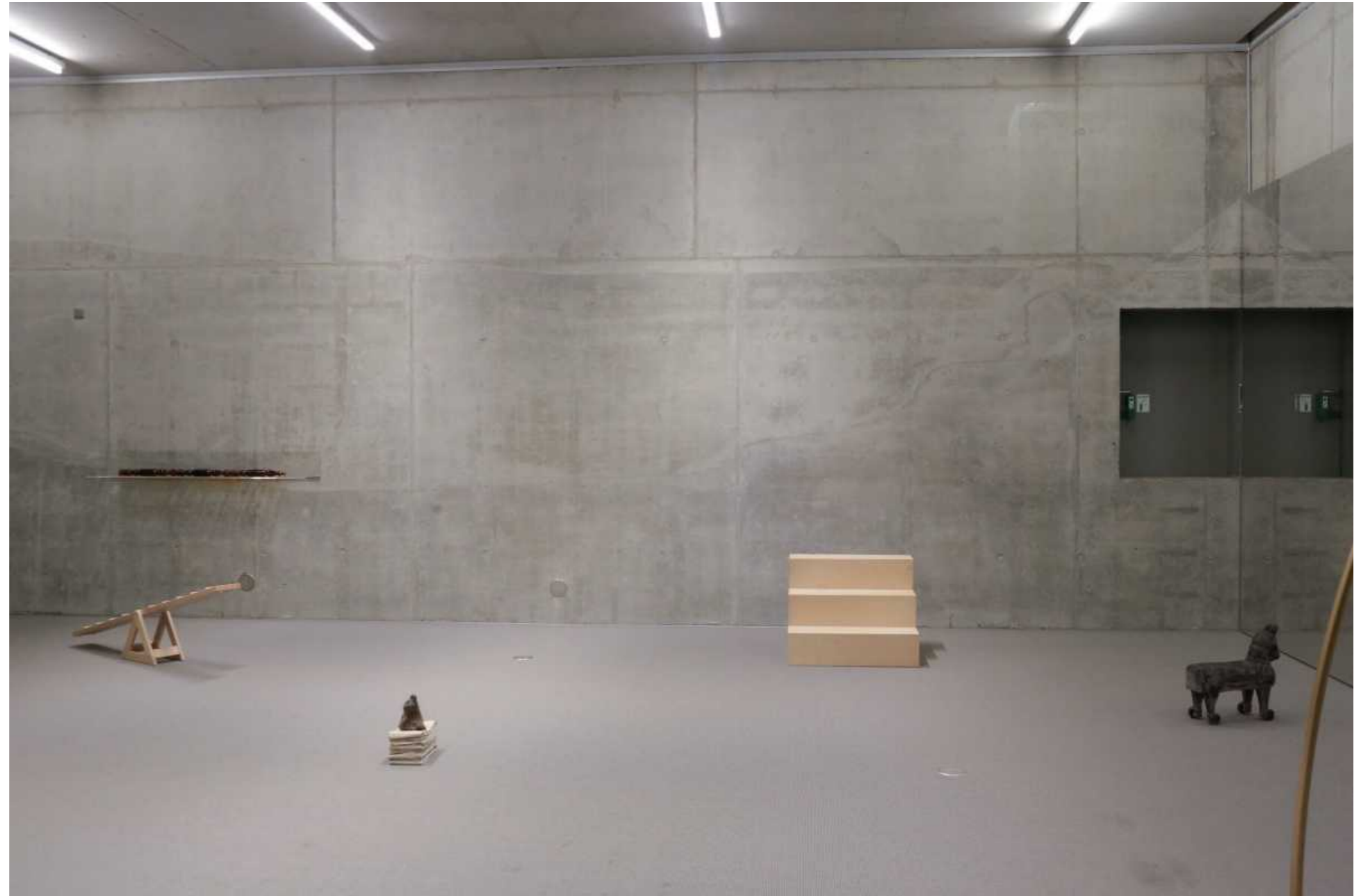


The garden functions as a social platform — a place where people from different communities can meet. Conceptually, it represents hope, a cultural bridge, and a contribution to building a multicultural society. It is a social connector and a form of emotional expression.

Through the garden, the stories of people and plants are collected and shared. It prompts us to question definitions of the natural world, human history, and social inequalities. It raises questions about sociopolitical issues that influence and shape our contemporary social behavior and mindset.

A Mangrove Apple Tree

—
Phương Linh Nguyễn,
Trương Quế Chi,
with guest artists
Nguyễn Thủy Tiên,
Nguyễn Trần Nam



Acrylic mirrors; curvy pole; wooden stairs; printed wallpaper; motor & bamboo stick; various children's toys: the wooden horse, the balance board, the balance seesaw; the ceramic pots with plants from the Immigrating garden of Tuấn Mami.



Under a mangrove apple tree at Trường Phước, Quảng Trị in 1972, Mr. Nguyễn Mạnh Đức* buried his father's letters. This marked the most enduring memory he shared with his father, a soldier-writer who had participated in the Anti-French Resistance War nearly thirty years earlier, in Northern Vietnam. His story became the inspiration behind the title of a collaborative installation comprising of objects, sculptures, and prints by two artists - two friends and colleagues from Nhà Sàn Collective (founded in 2013) - Nguyễn Phương Linh and Trương Quế Chi. Mr. Đức, Phương Linh's father, founded the art space Nhà Sàn Studio in 1998.

A slice of Vietnamese art history not detached from the artist's personal lives. Objects within this installation are imagined as drifting fragments of a stilt house structure and items from Mr. Đức's private collection; they are the silent witnesses of people, stories, and corners of the larger art landscape of Vietnam. Sculptures and installation pieces conjure up visceral sense of the weights, heights, and breadths of legacies in an exploration of the complexities and depths of intergenerational and interpersonal relationships behind that scene.



An automated bamboo cane strikes periodically onto the floor, bamboo being the traditional measuring stick in northern Vietnamese villages' house construction. Complemented by its own mirror reflection, a metallic curve gestures a bow, a simultaneous instance of passing on and being upheld, in parallel worlds. Friendship as another way to reflect. Intergenerational relationships, especially that between the father and the child is one of the recurring themes among works by artists in the community of Nhà Sàn. Continuation, inheritance, loss, circulation, new possibilities.



urhuh22

Skylines with flying people 3

2016

2017

Skylines With Flying People 3 (hereafter SKYLINES 3) is an interdisciplinary art project showcasing a sample of the diversity of artistic practices among young artists in Việt Nam today.

— Nguyễn Quốc Thành, in collaboration with Đinh Thảo Linh and Kieu-Anh Nguyen (ba-bau AIR)

Following the success of SKYLINES 1 (2010, London) and SKYLINES 2 (2012, Hà Nội), SKYLINES 3 was initiated in 2014 and takes as its starting point notions of “journeying” and “border”.

The project’s title references a poem by Trần Dần – a key figure in Vietnamese avant-garde poetry – about a place with no room for imagination and freedom, written in 1988, the early years of Đổi Mới (the economic reform policy leading to Việt Nam’s ‘socialist-led market economy’):



Nguyễn Quốc Thành is an artist, curator and co-founding member of Nhà Sàn Collective. His collaborative project "urhuh22" offered free lodging located in WH22, with kitchen, performance, discussions, parties, and a free queer wedding party.

The project was a continuation of Queer Forever! festival, which he founded in 2013, and which has become an on-going project, a pop-up cinema, zine workshop, kitchen, space of queer gathering, listening, watching, and loving.

“I cry for skylines which do not have flying people

cry again for flying people who do not have skylines”

SKYLINES 3 commences with its participating artists “flying out” of their comfort zones to go on journeys that reflect on and explore issues regarding the country’s complicated history, fragmented culture, migration, exploitation of humans and nature, urbanisation, gender norms, etc. Central to the project is an attempt to foster connections and collaborations between contemporary art and other disciplines. *SKYLINES 3* brings together artists and experts and scholars from different branches of social & human sciences. Through a process of dialogue, different modes and methods of knowledge production are unveiled and exchanged, which opens up new possibilities for working and creating.

The final outcome is expected to portray the landscape of contemporary Việt Nam through the lens of artists who were born and have grown up in the period of *Đổi Mới*. 11 sub-projects have been realised across the country and 6 solo, duo and group exhibitions will take place consecutively between October 2016 and January 2017 at different locations in Hà Nội: the Japan Foundation, Nhà Sàn Collective, MAM-Art Projects by CUC Gallery, the Goethe Institut and Heritage Space.

Within the framework of the project, KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE – a series of public seminars given by artists and scholars of history, literature, anthropology, archaeology and sociology from Việt Nam, Hong Kong, Denmark, Germany and the US – is taking place between March and December 2016. Understanding that different systems of knowledge can simultaneously relate them to and separate them from each other, KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE offers insight into both creatives’ and academics’ thought processes and work approaches, revealing their similarities as well as their differences.

SKYLINES 3 is inaugurated & realized by Nhà Sàn Collective.
(from <http://swfp3.org>)

Across the forest

—Trương Công Tùng



Across the Forest continues Trương Công Tùng’s deep-rooted fascination with the history and culture of the Jarai, the largest ethnic group in Việt Nam’s Central Highlands where the artist comes from. Fusing folklore elements with his personal observation of the landscape and the lives of the modern Jarai people, Công Tùng’s video installation work paints a bleak portrait and contemplates the state of a community confronted with numerous upheavals.



Remote Viewing

— Sung Tieu
2017

REMOTE VIEWING is the first solo exhibition by the Vietnamese-born German artist Sung Tieu in Vietnam from 8 September – 23 September at Nhà Sàn Collective.

REMOTE VIEWING traces the shifting relevance of oral stories and spiritual rituals in past and contemporary Vietnam. After several visits to Hà Nội, Huế and Hồ Chí Minh City from 2015 to 2017, the artist's forthcoming exhibition investigates how Vietnam's nationhood is shaped through tales, colonialism, war and the global market economy. As part of the generation born in north Vietnam after the war during the political renovations of Đổi Mới in 1986 and as an artist who is raised in Germany after its reunification in 1989, Tieu's artistic practice has been in constant negotiation not just in terms of geography but also between the past and the present, the fictional and non-fictional, the rational and the spiritual.

Combining documentary footage and folktales from the mountain Ba Den (Black Virgin) in the southern province of Tay Ninh and Mo Cay in the southern province of Ben Tre, *REMOTE VIEWING* examines the layered historical resonance of places and their stories.

The exhibition is supported by Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, curated by Đỗ Tường Linh.

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Vietnamese Collective Memory in

Diasporic Narratives

Evelyn Pan

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In Vietnamese literary and cinematic works, the family is not merely a continuation of bloodlines but a vessel of history and memory. The image of the family is often portrayed as a resilient mother and an absent father. Vietnamese diasporic families in foreign lands bear irreparable fractures caused by war, colonialism, and displacement. Behind it all, the mother's presence and bodily memories become the only reliable family archive, while the father's absence serves as a constant reminder of historical fissures left incompletely recorded. This index recommends two novels and two films that document these raw and weighty memories from different

perspectives—seeking the past in the palm lines of mothers and reflecting on the reconstruction of diasporic identity through the silhouettes of fathers.

BOOKS

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, written by Ocean Vuong

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vietnamese-American poet and novelist (born in Saigon, 1988). Winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize for his poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* became a bestseller in 37 countries. Awarded the MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 2019, his works explore themes of migration, queerness, and the legacies of war.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Written in the form of a letter, this novel recounts a family history spanning war and diaspora. The author addresses his mother, sharing his struggles with growth and identity. As a survivor of the Vietnam War, the mother immigrates to the United States with her son, enduring dual pressures of language and culture. Through delicate prose, the novel depicts the calluses and scars on the mother's hands, symbolizing her toil and sacrifices for the family. The father's absence becomes a void in the protagonist's heart, driving him to seek self-identity through poetry and memory.

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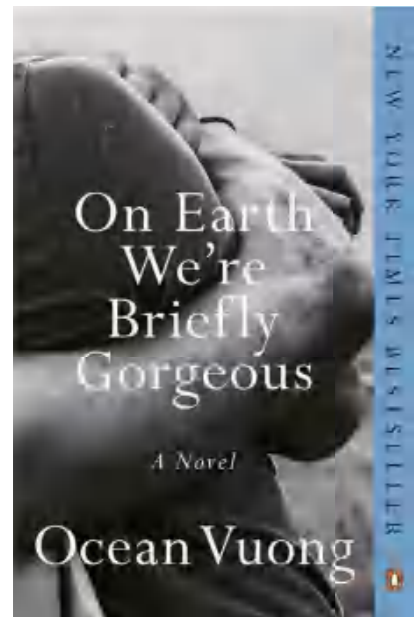
Man, written by Kim Thuy

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

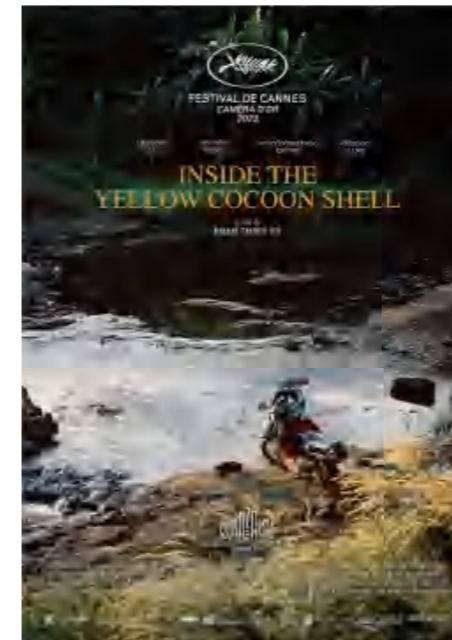
Vietnamese-Canadian writer (born in Saigon, 1968). Fled Vietnam as a boat refugee at age 10. Her debut novel *Ru* intertwines her family's diasporic history with the trauma of the Vietnam War, winning the Governor General's Literary Award.

ABOUT THE BOOK

With concise and poetic language, Kim Thúy narrates fragments of life for Vietnamese immigrant women in a foreign land. The protagonist Mãn runs a Vietnamese restaurant in Canada, channeling her nostalgia for her homeland through cooking traditional dishes. Food in the novel is not merely a means of survival but a medium for cultural inheritance and emotional connection. The mother figure embodies the guardian of tradition, while the father's image remains nebulous.



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FILMS

Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell, directed by Pham Thien An

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Emerging Vietnamese director (born 1989). Transitioned from information engineering to filmmaking. His debut feature *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell* (2023) won the Caméra d'Or at Cannes, praised as a "fusion of Tsai Ming-liang and Apichatpong Weerasethakul's styles" for its silent long takes capturing Vietnam's urban and rural solitude.

ABOUT THE FILM

After his sister's death, Thiên returns to his hometown with his young nephew Đạo to search for his missing elder brother Tâm. Through long takes and natural lighting, the film portrays the tranquility and beauty of rural Vietnam. Thien constantly reflects on faith, mortality, and existential questions during his journey. The film's profound philosophical reflections and delicate portrayal of human emotions have garnered widespread acclaim.

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The Vertical Ray of the Sun, directed by Tran Anh Hung

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

French-Vietnamese director (born in Đà Nẵng, 1962). Immigrated to France after the Vietnam War. Known for his poetic cinematic language, his works include *The Scent of Green Papaya* (Cannes Caméra d'Or winner), *Cyclo* (Venice Golden Lion winner), and *The Pot-au-Feu* (2023 Cannes Best Director winner).

ABOUT THE FILM

Set in Hanoi, the film captures the daily life of a family during a sweltering summer. Sisters busy themselves in the kitchen preparing traditional Vietnamese dishes for their mother's death anniversary, with food serving as a bond for familial emotions. Conversations revolve around their mother's youthful anecdotes and the search for her first love. The father's role is deliberately muted. Through authentic depictions of mundane details, the film reveals Vietnamese culture's profound understanding of family, tradition, and feminine strength.

In Vietnamese literature and film, the transmission of history often bypasses official records, flowing instead through a mother's whispers, the taste of food, the scars on skin, and those unspoken silences. And through it all, the figure of the father remains vague and absent—a ghostly presence just beyond reach.

In Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Kim Thúy's *Man*, Pham Thien An's film *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell*, and Tran Anh Hung's *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, we find the same narrative pattern: the mother is far more than a nurturer—she is the guardian of knowledge and the weaver of history—while the father, like a shadow eroded by time, disappears into the fissures of war, exile, and memory.

This absence is no accident but a collective historical metaphor. In Vietnam, the trauma of war, the ravages of colonialism, and the forces of modernization have gradually dissolved the father's presence, whereas the mother—and, more broadly, the community of women—has become the silent bearer of history. In these stories, knowledge is no longer handed down through books and texts but is passed on through maternal bodies, taste, memory, and silence in a manner at once more fluid, gentler, and yet more resilient.



Mother's Whispers: Knowledge as Intimate Transmission

A mother's body is a living archive, her labor, her wounds, her voice—and her silence—all mediums of alternative knowledge. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the narrator's mother teaches him to survive in a rough yet profound way: she never guides him to books, but her anger, her work in a nail salon, and the occasional memories of war she shares become the only history he can touch. Her body itself is a record: scars, calloused hands, the anxiety of exile—forming a history that needs no script.

In *Man*, the protagonist's upbringing feels like a gradual absorption—she does not learn to become Vietnamese through classroom lessons but through her mothers preparing meals, recounting old stories, and gently stroking her hair. Her knowledge is born of perception, of a silent and tender immersion rather than logical discourse.

In Pham Thien An's *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell*, the mother's absence becomes another kind of presence.

After the protagonist's sister-in-law dies in an accident, the orphaned boy keeps asking, "Where is mother?"—never once questioned his absent father. On his journey to find his brother, the protagonist remains enveloped by maternal memories—of village life, of faith, of women's watchful care—which continue to shape the story even in her physical absence.

And in Tran Anh Hung's *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, the film opens with preparations for the mother's memorial feast. Her direct absence heightens the bond among her daughters as they reminisce about her youthful first love and her cooking. They seek the missing warmth in one another, and through their bodies, their words, and the rhythms of daily life, they carry forward the worldview their mother left behind.

The mother is the whisperer of knowledge—and this knowledge is not rational but perceptual, experiential, and embodied.



The Vertical Ray of the Sun, directed by Tran Anh Hung (2000), film still at 0:06:26.

Screenshot by author.

Father's Absence: The Historical Rift and Vietnam's War Memory

If the mother is the bearer of history, then the father's absence symbolizes an even greater historical loss. In these four works, the father is often vague, absent, even unnamed.

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the father is a distant signifier—war strips him from the family, leaving only a few blurred memories of his occasional violence toward the mother, without a clear face. In *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell*, after his sister-in-law's death in an accident, the protagonist sets out for home in search of his brother—but this quest feels more like a pursuit of something that doesn't exist: he is seeking not just a person, but the father-brother-husband role that time has consumed. In *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*, the father's image is likewise almost entirely absent; the family's original emotional structure is formed solely by the mother and her daughters, with male figures relegated to the periphery, even as bystanders.

Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell, directed by Pham Thien An (2023), film still at 00:34:16.





Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell,
directed by Pham Thien An (2023)

film still at 1:17:57.

Screenshot by author.



The Vertical Ray of the Sun,
directed by Tran Anh Hung (2000)

film still at 1:42:09.

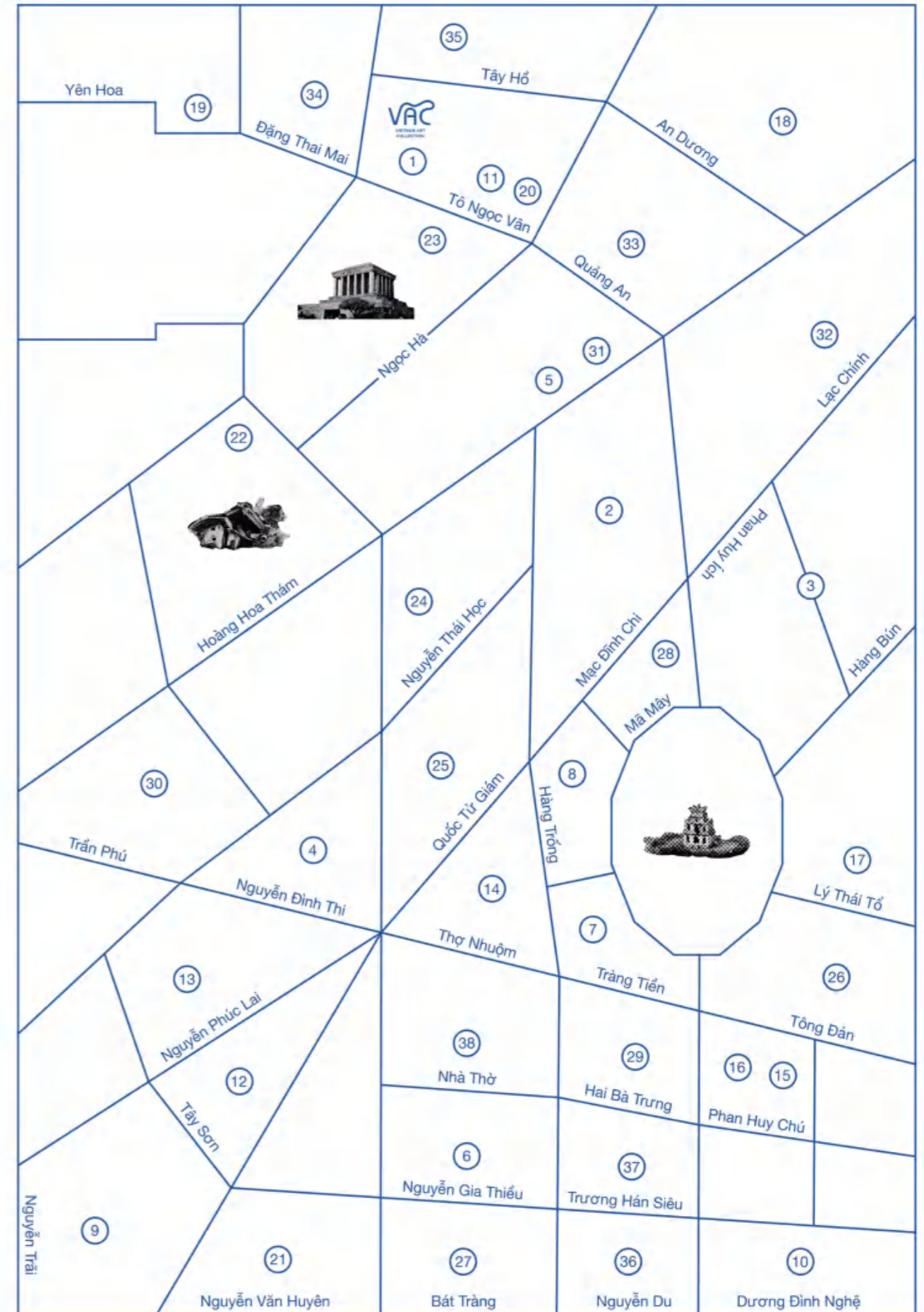
Screenshot by author.

This retreat of patriarchy reflects Vietnam's historical reality: war destroyed not only bodies but also the male presence in many families. During French colonization, throughout Vietnam—U.S. War, and in the post-Đổi Mới waves of emigration, men were conscripted, driven into exile, or alienated by foreign labor. What remained were mothers single-handedly upholding households, a feminine knowledge system, and an alternative history rooted in emotion and memory.

The father's absence is more than an emotional void; it is a historical erasure—symbolizing a generation's blank spaces in the national narrative, while mothers become the only voices still speaking history.

These four works together portray how women become bearers of history even as fathers vanish into their fissures. Through in-depth depictions of mothers and explorations of paternal absence, they reveal the complex emotions and cultural identities that have evolved in Vietnam amid historical upheaval. They are not merely personal or familial stories; they are poetic renderings of Vietnam's collective memory.

This constitutes a gentle knowledge system—unrecorded by official history, but alive in a mother's gaze, in a sister's comfort, in the warmth of food. As fathers disappear in war and exile, mothers stand guard over memory. Their whispers are among the oldest histories on earth.



Ctrl + Hanoi

In a city where even Google Map needs a second opinion

Thảo Linh Trần

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Artsy F&B

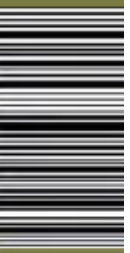
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ARTIFACT

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Số 2

迁徙 流动 韧性
MIGRATION, FLUIDITY, RESILIENCE
Di Cư, Uyển Chuyển, Vững Bền



Editorial Note

Sophie
Huang

Editor In Chief of
ARTIFACT Journal

This second issue of ARTIFACT traces a map of modern identity - a map that is constantly being redrawn. Its lines are not fixed borders but pathways of movement, memory, and becoming. The theme that binds this issue, *Migration, Fluidity, Resilience*, speaks to fundamental conditions of our time, particularly within the Vietnamese context and its global diaspora. Together, these ideas challenge static notions of place, heritage, and self, inviting a dynamic understanding of culture as a process, not a possession.

Migration marks the physical and psychological journeys that define so many lives. It is the crossing of oceans and the navigation between cultural worlds. We witness this passage, both literal and metaphorical, in our conversation with artist KV Duong, whose work explores the legacy of war and the refugee experience, and in the archival inquiries of Adeena Mey and Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, who ask what it means to locate a home within "Uncatalogued" histories. This movement extends into the Index section, where the journey of Dundun from Dameng to New York, Ném's *New Comfort* from Saigon to Shanghai, and the films of Truong Minh Quy viewed through the lens of Nguyen Dinh Ton Nu, together encapsulate the complex routes of cultural exchange.

Where migration creates the path, *Fluidity* is the state of being along it. It is the capacity to adapt, to blend, and to thrive in a state of in-betweenness. This fluidity manifests in the artistic practices we feature: from Lai Dieu Ha's hybrid of art and scientific inquiry to Lêna Bùi's interrogation of the porous boundary between human and machine in her recent work *dream(machine, human)*. It is present in the modular, adaptable spaces of modern Vietnam discussed by Thu-Trang Pham, in Ryan Nguyen's architectural proposition

for a wet market shaped by the life currents of Hoi An, and in the evolving hybrid beats of Vietnam's hip-hop scene, revealed through conversations with Suboi and Nodey Nguyen. This fluidity is not a loss of form, but a new way of forming - a creative resistance to rigid categorization.

From this constant state of movement and adaptation emerges *Resilience*: the quiet, tenacious force of preservation and the bold act of re-creation. It is the "resistant archiving" found in the everyday objects of the diaspora, as Frida Chen elucidates, and the "para-archive" that Linh Le constructs from Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's ongoing project about a Vietnamese community at the Cambodian border. We see it in the transformative power of a single detail in handmade textiles, as noted by Monique Gross; in the intrinsic connection between ancestor worship and image-making uncovered by Dr. Nicolas Henni-Trinh Đức; and in the community-focused work of Phu Lang Sa Collabative in France, alongside artistic negotiations with the "walls" in Hanoi. Finding resonance in each other's works, artists Ngoc Nau and Huong Ngo discuss how family stories have shaped their mutual interest in femininity and technology. This resilience is not merely about enduring, but about thriving - forging new connections and sustaining culture against the tides of erasure.

Finally, the Monologue section offers intimate access to the internal landscapes shaped by these forces. Here, the themes become deeply personal. The voices of artists Yasmine Anlan Huang, Koa Pham, and Mai Ta articulate inner dialogues of displacement, memory, and the ongoing search for a "national feeling" or sense of belonging. Veronika Radulovic's more than a decade of living and working in 1990s Vietnam culminates in a diverse body of work

that travels through time and space, recently shown in Berlin. Seminal projects by artists Alvin Luong, Minh Duc Pham, and Kvet Nguyen uncover neglected histories through poetic and symbolic gestures. Together, these contributions form the vital, emotional core of this issue, reminding us that the grand narratives of migration and resilience are always composed of singular, human stories.

In its entirety, this issue is a testament to the vibrant, complex, and ever-evolving discourse surrounding Vietnamese creativity and beyond. By bringing these diverse voices - artists, curators, writers, and scholars - into conversation, ARTIFACT continues its mission to elevate these essential perspectives and place them firmly at the forefront. In partnership with design /delight of the West Bund Art & Design, we will release this issue in November in Shanghai. We invite you to explore these pathways, to sit with the discomfort and the beauty of the in-between, and to witness the remarkable resilience that flourishes there.

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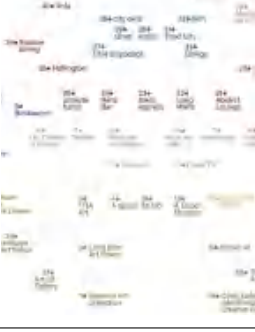
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CONVERSATION

Uncatalogued: Vietnam and Archives of Visual Culture

Some Reflections

Adeena Mey &
Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen
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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the end of the American War in Vietnam, a milestone that has inspired commemorations and documentary projects both within the country and abroad. This anniversary creates a crucial opportunity to examine overlooked visual legacies, particularly Vietnam's cultural and historical connections with the UK, which is home to a significant Vietnamese diasporic community. Building on this moment of reflection, the symposium *Uncatalogued: Vietnam and Archives of Visual Culture* (June 27–29, 2025) took place across two London venues — the MayDay Rooms and the Dalston CLR James Library — and was conceived as a continuation of *Sensing Photography*, a series of talks, exhibitions, and workshops organized by Trâm Lương and Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn (February 21–28, 2025, at Fulbright University Vietnam and other satellite locations in Ho Chi Minh City). [1] *Uncatalogued* is a collaborative initiative between Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn and Adeena Mey, organized in conjunction with the exhibition *Võ An Khánh: Mangrove Theater* at IC Visual Lab in Bristol, curated together with Dogma Collection. [2] [fig.0] The exhibition marked the first solo presentation of photographer Võ An Khánh outside Vietnam and included a commissioned transcription of a conversation between the photographer and scholar Thy Phu, conducted in Bạc Liêu, Vietnam, on May 13, 2013. This text reflects on the London symposium, tracing how each panelist creatively engaged with the challenges of uncatalogued, uninventoried, and incomplete archives, and offered new ways of imagining what an archive can hold.

The year 1975 in Vietnam signals both the reunification of the country as well as the massive exodus of large parts of its population. This sudden political reorganization inevitably disrupted family lineages, scattered belongings, and fractured collective memory. Along with the fall of Phnom Penh on 17 April and Pathet Lao's rise to power the same year, one of the leitmotifs behind *Uncatalogued* was the relationship between exile, the fragmented nature of the documents discussed, and the potential archive-form most suited to sustain both the memory function and its activation of these archives. In contexts such as those we discussed, the archive — understood with Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe as both a collection of documents and the architectural or institutional container that houses them — must be conceived beyond archival normativity. That is, the scatteredness and dispersedness of personal or para-institutional archives emerged as defining traits and, detached or without prior material home, these archives resist the conventional logics of state or museum custody, carving space for other modes of remembrance. Questioning the colonial desire to acquire, conserve and classify in order to control, the presentations reflected on archival practices that attempt to imagine models beyond the consolidation of nation-state narratives. In this regard, *Uncatalogued* made a case for the archive as the site of the uncontainable difference of singular narratives in a global context.



[fig.0] View of exhibition
Võ An Khánh: Mangrove Theater, IC Visual Lab,
from 24 June to 14 September, 2025.
Photograph Alejandro Acín.
Courtesy of IC Visual Lab.

The first day of the symposium, titled *Vietnamese Revolutionary Art in Global Context*, was led by Dogma Collection curator Minh Nguyễn and featured original hand-painted propaganda posters from Vietnam, presented alongside related materials from the same period held in the MayDay Rooms archive. These colorful, hand-painted posters—ubiquitous during and after the American War—served as tools of mobilization, urging citizens to remain vigilant against enemies and to participate in the collective rebuilding of the country with slogans such as *Lúa mì, ngô, đậu mạch, hoa. Vụ đông thắng Mỹ, vùng ta càng giàu* [‘Wheat, corn, beans, flowers. Winning over the US in winter crops, our regions grow richer as a result’]. [Fig.1] Regarded as “resistance art,” these public images were dismissed for decades as unworthy of preservation, these works were fortunately safeguarded. Their juxtaposition with international materials highlighted the shared struggles across contexts and underscored the enduring importance of visual culture.

The fragmentary nature of minor anecdotes was further discussed on the second day of the symposium. In his reformulation of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s work on Kafka’s “minor literature”, art historian Branden Joseph offers a variant of this model, with the potential for radical shifts: if we focus on the multiple and winding trajectory of a figure who is not central to a particular art movement, which we

believed we had clearly identified, it becomes possible to defamiliarize an entire landscape. [3] Here, we would like to combine Joseph’s thinking about the minor with the late Cambodian writer and academic Y-Dang Troeung’s take on the term in the context of the media representation of refugees, as discussed by curator Bopha Chhay. For Troeung, the image of the “rescued refugee cast the refugee as an inspiration, a model of determination, a ‘minor anecdote’ Chhay writes.” But as she further suggests, “[Troeung’s] writing inverts the idea of the ‘minor anecdote’ as the supporting act, crucially emphasising the dissonant tension caused by allowing personal stories and narratives to be rendered as ‘minor’ in relation to the ideological narratives of the ‘nation-state.’” Operating in the minor mode, such an archive seeks to vernacularize dominant traditions, amplifies the *petits récits*, and makes audible those voices structurally cast as marginal. Below are some of the main ideas and thoughts from the presentations on the second day of the symposium.



[fig.1] Dương Ảnh, *Lúa mì, ngô, đậu mạch, hoa. Vụ đông thắng Mỹ, vùng ta càng giàu* [Wheat, corn, beans, flowers. Winning over the US in winter crops, our regions grow richer as a result], 54 x 39 cm. Courtesy of Dogma Collection.

[fig.2] Tạ Thu, *Xem Tranh Vẽ* [Looking at Paintings], 1970. Pen on paper, 24.8 x 16.2 cm. Courtesy of Sophie Hughes.



Titled Scattered Evidence: Working with Dispersed Documents, it brought together cultural workers engaged in the preservation of visual culture in various forms, from architectural drawings and Vietnamese painting to the safeguarding of cultural heritage within the diaspora. Amongst the invited speakers, curator and artist Sophie Hughes, architect Duc Lê, visual artist Duong Thuy Nguyen, visual artist Lynn MacRitchie, Afterall editors David Morris and Wing Chan, and members of the An Việt Archives shared methodological strategies to recompose non-linear histories based on fragments and scattered documents.

Curator Sophie Hughes spent a decade in Vietnam (2009–2019) researching Vietnamese art history, work that led to the creation of art tours and public talks. Her current focus is on how to engage with the extensive material she collected, now housed in London. Hughes first joined Galerie Quynh, then a small contemporary art gallery, and developed a method of learning Vietnam’s complex history by visiting artists’ homes, often meeting their parents and documenting their stories. She describes this approach as a form of living history, where art is a potent container for both the personal and the political. Her research combined oral histories, academic texts, archival work, antique hunting, and conversations with artists, scholars, and local families. Informal settings—studio visits, shared meals, and evenings at *bia hơi*—became important spaces for gathering these

narratives. For Hughes, oral histories are one part of a larger puzzle, helping situate art as a vessel for the fears, desires, and political pressures of each generation. Echoing Viet Thanh Nguyen, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his debut novel *The Sympathizer*, Hughes reminds us that “[art] is crucial to the ethical work of just memory. After the official memos and speeches are forgotten, the history books ignored, and the powerful are dust, art remains.” [4] By 2011, after two years of research, she launched an art tour in Ho Chi Minh City that introduced modern and contemporary art through the lives of artists, moving between private collections, the Fine Arts Museum, and independent galleries. Later, a similar tour in Hanoi was created with the help of curator Bill Nguyen, situating it within the growing field of cultural tourism due to Vietnamese cultural policies. Her decade of research has resulted in a rich two-part archive: a physical collection of books, catalogues, maps, song sheets, and artworks—including combat photographs and sketches [fig.2]—and a digital archive of scanned texts, essays, and documents meticulously organized into folders. While never intended as an academic source guide, the curator-artist now asks how this material can be activated. While fragmentary in nature, Hughes has begun opening her archive to researchers and is exploring collaborations with Vietnamese partners to expand public access through a digital platform.

Working within a collective of architects, Duc Lê pursues a non-linear approach to researching the origins of Vietnamese modern architecture. Facing urgent concerns about demolition and preservation, scholarship on Vietnamese architecture has grown over the past decade. Moving away from traditional frameworks, Lê layers data with the smallest units of architecture—what he calls dust, pixel, and point cloud—to map and construct. First, dust addresses the transformation of architecture through destruction, revealing its fragile relationship to the built environment of Hanoi. In recent years, waves of demolition have rapidly erased significant buildings. The Government Guest Home on 2 Lê Thạch Street in Hanoi, designed by Diêu Công Tuấn, for example, served as the backdrop for an installation during the Design Creative Festival in November last year; within sixty days, it was demolished during Tết. Demolitions often occur at night, leaving no witnesses. What qualifies as “heritage” is ambiguous. Buildings with recognizable modernist features may mobilize public outcry and gain protection, while others, factories in particular, vanish without notice. In response, Lê and his collective have begun mapping modernist buildings of the twentieth century across Vietnam, categorizing their vulnerability as green (safe), red (under threat), or white (unknown). When demolitions occur, they document the process on film and salvage fragments of the structure as traces. The second method centers on scanned architectural drawings, which in Vietnam have historically been undervalued. [fig.3] Drawings do not merely function as instructions;

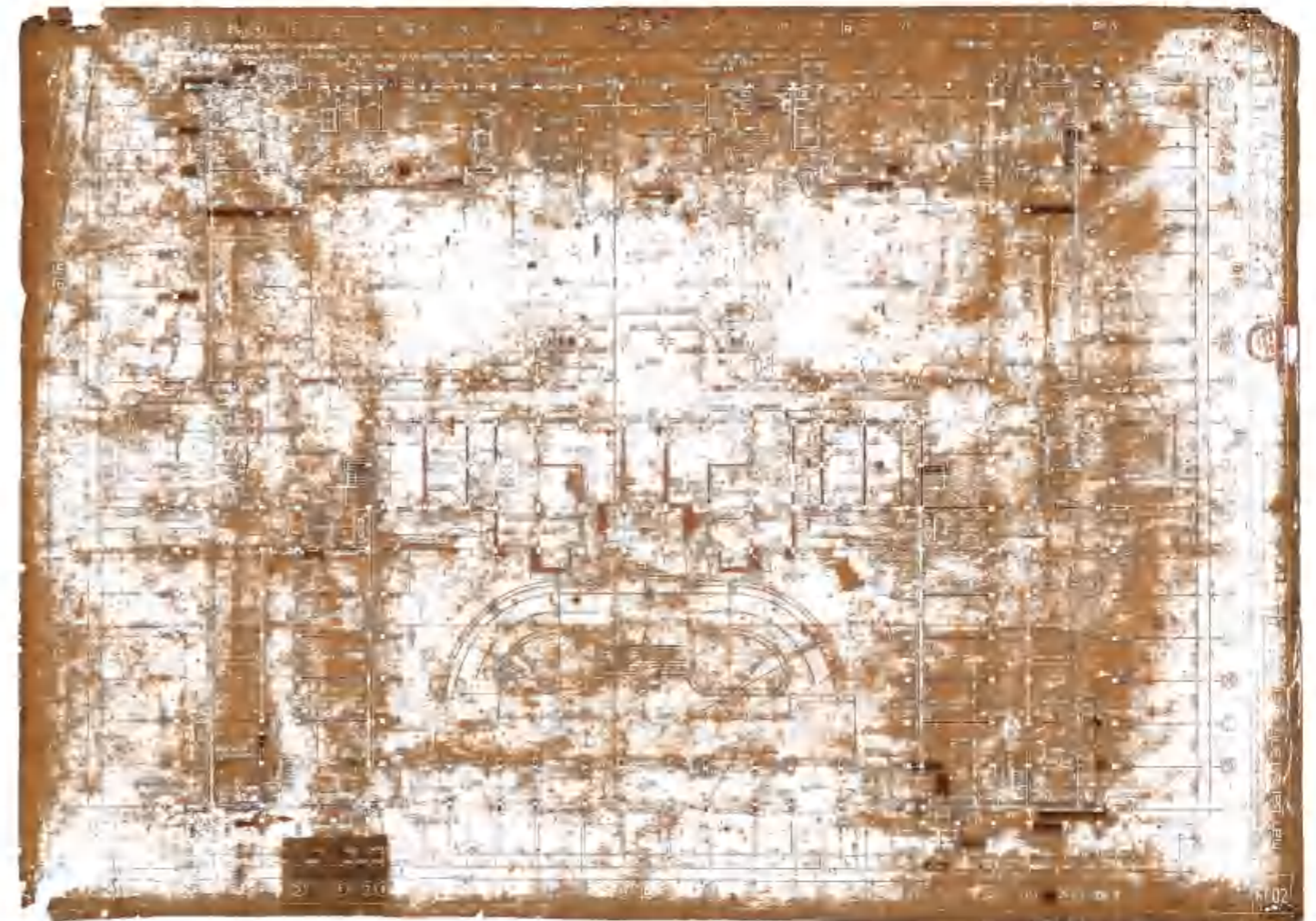
they record the abstract thinking, negotiations, and compromises behind construction. The Hanoi Headquarters for the People’s Assembly, nicknamed “the Guillotine” and built after the 1979 border war with China, exemplifies this. [5] Unlike other state buildings that took a U-shape to serve both administrative and defensive purposes, its design reflected a distinct approach. One of the four architects involved preserved his drawings in a basement, each sheet bearing the distinct hand of its author. Scanning these drawings preserves not only their content but their materiality: mold in the corners reveals repeated handling, while tears and punctures mark the places where an architect pressed hard with a pencil or the finger to resolve a structural problem. The third method, point cloud, uses photographic scans to recreate buildings in three dimensions, producing 1:1 digital models. Together, these practices form an alternative archive of Vietnamese modern architecture. They acknowledge memory’s instability yet demonstrate how systematic recording can slowly assemble a framework for understanding modernist heritage—an archive that interweaves personal and collective memory, material traces, and digital preservation.

[fig.3] Duc Lê, “Dust Drawing” for the Hanoi Headquarters of the People’s Assembly, 2025, based on original design by architects Nguyễn Tuấn Thuận, Trần Xuân Đỉnh, Bùi Quý Ngọc, and Tạ Trường Xuân from June 1986. Courtesy of the Grids of Vietnamese Modernism collection.



IMM PRES | DUC LE | POST-PRES | SUPERVISION | 05 FEB 2025

MODERNITY SUPPASE 6 ARCHIVAL MEMORY 10





[fig.4] Duong Thuy Nguyen, *If They Survive, They Are Refugees*, 2024; Microcrystalline wax, aluminum, perspex, wood, 35 x 23 x 5 cm. Photograph by Studio Adamson. Courtesy of SLQS Gallery and the artist.

Visual artist Duong Thuy Nguyen developed the project *If They Survived, They Are Refugees*. [fig.4] The title, taken from a poster displayed in a refugee camp, remains an open question for her. The photographs at the center of the project were taken by photojournalist Joan Wakelin in 1989–1990, commissioned as part of the mission *Save the Children*. [6] They are now housed in the V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum) in London, where a friend of Nguyen was cataloguing them. The series depicts children inside detention centers for Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. The photographs gained attention at the time: Wakelin received the Kodak Prize, and three works from the series were exhibited in Amsterdam in 1990. Yet when the exhibition traveled to London, those same images were withdrawn, as Hong Kong was still a British colony. For Nguyen, the phrase “If They Survived,” taken from a poster hung in the refugee camp and captured in a photograph, carries significant rhetorical weight. Who are they if they did not survive? The conditional “if” renders survival itself an unstable category, pointing to an unspoken history. Nguyen positions her role as an artist not to “repair” what is missing, but to remain in the unfolding of the photograph, echoing Ariella Azoulay’s idea of photography as an ongoing event. [7] She is less concerned with what is visible in the images than with what lies behind them: the structural violence embedded in their making. What happens if we return to these photographs not as outside observers but as those who own the story? The context is crucial. The late 1980s were a turbulent period in Vietnam, following Đổi Mới reforms and long after the end of the war in April 1975. Between 1975 and 1977, around 200,000 Vietnamese arrived in Hong Kong by boat. In 1979,

the British colony declared itself a “port of asylum,” initially allowing boats to land and refugees to move freely. By 1982, however, new arrivals were confined to camps on the island’s periphery. In 1989, the United Nations instituted a screening process to determine who qualified as a refugee. Those denied status were forced either to repatriate or to relocate to a third country. Local hostility was widespread: in 1991, the New York Times published a letter by Fred C. Shapiro citing polls that 90 percent of Hong Kong residents opposed the refugees’ presence. [8] Vietnamese were even given a derogatory nickname—*Bắt đầu từ nay* (“beginning from this point forward”)—a phrase borrowed from the radio announcements broadcast inside the camps and overheard by local residents. Rather than presenting these images as illustrations of suffering, Nguyen interrogates their conditions of production, circulation, and preservation. Her works reproduce the photographs as embossed aluminum reliefs, creating monochromatic, ghostlike impressions of what once existed without being exact copies. The tactile quality resists forgetting, while the metal recalls both the violence of enclosure and the fences of the camps. Each work is framed ornamentally, delaying recognition and questioning what constitutes an archive. As Derrida wrote, history often returns in spectral form—a condition all the more acute for refugees, whose lives are absent from official records. Nguyen’s work forces us to ask: who wants to see these images? For her, the obligation to retell these stories is urgent, especially in today’s political climate.



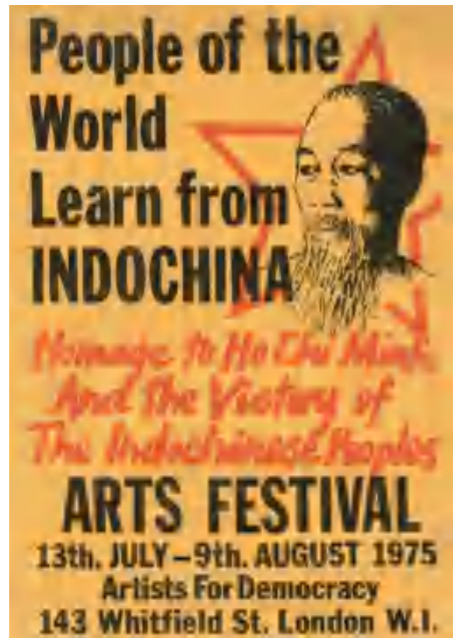
[fig.5] Demonstration celebrating the victory of the North Vietnamese over the South Vietnamese and their US allies, Paris, April 1975. Photographer: David Turner. Courtesy Lynn MacRitchie.

In 1975, artist and writer Lynn MacRitchie took part in People of the *World Learn from Indochina*, an arts festival in London organised by the radical artists group Artists for Democracy. Fifty years later, images and concepts from work she prepared for the festival still resonate within her practice. MacRitchie presented a personal memoir reflecting on Vietnam’s enduring presence in her imagination. Beginning in the 1960s, the Vietnam War shaped the worldview of young European radicals, including the artist herself, who participated in protests such as the 1968 Grosvenor Square demonstration and later engaged in politically motivated art. [fig.5] By the mid-1970s, involvement with Artists for Democracy led to participation in festivals and celebrations of Vietnam’s victory over U.S. forces. Although early artistic attempts around Vietnam faltered, journalism and criticism became the author’s focus in the 1980s. In the 1990s, a return to art practice was inspired by rediscovered photographs originally intended for a 1975 Vietnam installation. Works like *Right on for the Darkness* (1999) reinserted Vietnam’s war imagery into contemporary contexts, while encounters with artists such as Trần Trung Tín (1933-2008, Vietnam) deepened the exploration of war’s human impact. Subsequent works—*Facing Medusa* (2004) and *The Towers of Ilium* (2012)—expanded this inquiry, drawing connections between mythology, fashion, history, and recurring cycles of violence. Over fifty years, MacRitchie’s journey demonstrates how Vietnam served as a catalyst for both political awakening and artistic practice, continually probing how art can expose the persistence of war and human folly.

David Morris and Wing Chan discussed the *Afterall publication Artists for Democracy (1974–1977)*, an account of the artists’ collective that Lynn MacRitchie joined in the 1970s alongside David Medalla, Cecilia Vicuña, John Dugger, and Guy Brett, which Morris and Chan co-edited and published in 2023. [fig.6] They focused on a particular event, the *Festival for Vietnam* (1975), organized by the collective. [fig.7][fig.8] Much of the material presented comes from MacRitchie’s personal archive. Artist-archivists are rare, and *Artists for Democracy* was itself a messy and unruly entity—something reflected in the archive as well. Morris and Chan first encountered the group while working on a previous *Afterall* project exploring artist-organized exhibition ecosystems, para-institutions, and other initiatives in Southeast Asia. During their research, they discovered that many of the improbable-sounding stories about the collective were in fact true. [fig.9] There was a sense of play and fun, even while dealing with urgent political struggles, and the project became a way of tracing how cultural ideas emerge and circulate. Their presentation offered a walkthrough of the collective’s existence, enriched by the voices of different members. Together, they pieced together a speculative timeline of *Artists for Democracy*, which is patchy, incomplete, and fragmentary. The aim was not to produce a definitive account but to attempt a better story, one that embraces uncertainty. The book represents an effort to take up that challenge.



[fig.6] Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy 1974-77 (Afterall, 2023).



[fig.7] Poster for "People of the World Learn from Indochina: Homage to Ho Chi Minh and the Victory of the Indochinese Peoples Arts Festival, 1975". Poster design: Lynn MacRitchie/David Turner. Courtesy Lynn MacRitchie.



[H.8] Poster for "People of the World Learn from Indochina Arts Festival: Women's Events", 1975. Courtesy Lynn MacRitchie.

To conclude the day, The An Việt Archives (AVA) shared their experience as a collective stewarding the materials of the An Việt Foundation (AVF) and led a workshop exploring multiple ways of accessing knowledge through uninventoried documents. Founded in East London in 1981 to support thousands of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugees, AVF provided meals, housing assistance, English classes, health outreach, and mother-tongue education for those scattered across the UK under Margaret Thatcher's "dispersal" policy. [9] Between 1975 and the 1990s, around 19,000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Britain. [10] The AVF collection includes resources gathered by the late Mr. Vũ Khánh Thành, AVF's former director, who envisioned a Southeast Asian Research Centre and library. Today, the archives are housed at Hackney Archives, ensuring their long-term preservation and accessibility. AVA reflected on archival gaps, questioning the necessity of material completeness and proposing that archives can also hold immaterial and precarious histories, with imagination and social connection as vital components of archival practice. Phương Anh Nguyễn

emphasized the dual role of archives: not merely as repositories preserving documents but as living spaces that respond to the needs of communities, particularly refugees and immigrants. Meanwhile, Cường Minh Bá Phạm and Georgina Quach led the hands-on workshop on describing as-yet-uninventoried documents. [fig.10] Ultimately, AVA framed archives as sites of imagination, essential for navigating present-day realities. Their intervention encouraged participants to reflect on how the meaning and relevance of archives are ultimately shaped by the subjective experiences of those who engage with them.



[H.9] Front page of Nhân Dân, Hanoi, 20 July 1975 [Headline reads: "EXHIBITION: People of the World Learn from Indochina and pay homage to President Ho Chi Minh - IN ENGLAND"]



Finally, the role of the orphan photograph took center stage on the third day, building on the groundwork laid during the previous days' sessions. Orphan images, as defined by distinguished Professor of Race, Diaspora, and Visual Justice Thy Phu, "are materials whose provenance is unknown and whose hallmark, accordingly, is a seemingly irretrievable sense of loss, particularly when it comes to contextualizing information." [11] Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn led a workshop *Against Erasure: Dinh Q. Lê, Photography and the Everyday*. Dinh Q. Lê was a central figure in the Vietnamese contemporary art scene, active both as an organizer and as a practicing artist. His work is deeply invested in photography, often contrasting mainstream images with found photographs from Vietnam. After returning to his home country following more than a decade in the United States as a refugee, he scoured

antique shops in Ho Chi Minh City in the hope of recovering family photographs left behind during his family's sudden departure at the end of the war. Although he never found images of his own relatives, he amassed a large collection of other family photographs, many of which later became integral to his artistic practice. Nguyễn's workshop was an exercise in close reading of found photographs, exploring methods of engaging with images stripped of their original context. [fig.11] The aim was to challenge participants to look closely, even in the absence of prior knowledge, and to consider how meaning might still be deciphered. Spending time with a single image at length, Nguyễn argued, fosters an intimate relationship, one that transforms from familiarity to attunement.

[fig.10] Workshop led by An Việt Archives at Dalston CLR James Library, London, on Saturday, June 28, 2025. Photograph Alejandro Acin. Courtesy of IC Visual Lab.

Taken together, these contributions over the course of three days underscored the core ambition of *Uncatalogued: Vietnam and Archives of Visual Culture* to question how archives are constituted, to open space for fragmented and overlooked narratives, and to affirm the archive as a living, contested site where memory, politics, and cultural practice converge.

[fig.11] Orphan photograph, date unknown, from the workshop *Against Erasure: Dinh Q. Lê, Photography and the Everyday*, Dalston CLR James Library, London, on Sunday, June 29, 2025. Courtesy of Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn.



The authors gratefully thank all the speakers for their generous contributions and acknowledge the British Council's Connections Through Culture program, whose support made these exchanges between Vietnam and the UK possible.

Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn is a research-based artist whose work explores photography, archives, and histories of resistance. She is the 2025–2026 guest researcher at Dogma Collection while completing her PhD in Art, Technology, and Design at Konstfack and the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, where she is writing her dissertation *Perspectives from the Darkroom: Vietnamese Photography and Unprocessed Histories*. Her writing has appeared in *Ouvrir l'album du monde: Photographies (1842–1911)* (Actes Sud & Musée du quai Branly, 2023), *Journal of Visual Culture* (2022) and *Crating the World* (Athénée Press, 2019). Nguyễn's work has been exhibited internationally at Borås Art Biennial (2021), Bonniers Konsthall (2021), Musée d'art de Joliette (2021), MA*GA Museum (2021), and Sharjah Art Foundation (2018).

Adeena Mey, PhD, is a writer, curator and educator. His work explores contemporary art and visual cultures in East and Southeast Asia, artists' moving image, and exhibitionary contexts in relation to cosmopolitical and cosmotechnical thoughts. His curatorial projects have been presented at KCCUK (London), Medrar for Contemporary Art (Cairo), Centre d'Art Neuchâtel (Switzerland), and Post Territory Ujeongguk (Seoul), among others. He is the co-editor of several anthologies on artists' films, videos and exhibitions histories, including *Exhibiting the Moving Image, History Revisited*, and *Cinema in the Expanded Field* (both with JRP Editions, 2015). Since 2021, he has been co-convening the workshop series "Writing and Publishing Art in Southeast Asia" supported by the British Academy. He is an Editor of *Afterall* journal and a Research Fellow at the Afterall Research Centre, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, and a visiting lecturer at HEAD-Geneva University of Art and Design in Switzerland.

Minh Nguyen is a writer and curator based between New York City and Ho Chi Minh City. She is the curator of Dogma, a collection and gallery in HCMC focused on art and political graphics, and managing editor of e-flux journal. Her book *Memorial Park* is co-published by Art Metropole and Wendy's Subway.

Sophie Hughes is an artist, researcher and educator. She began a research project in Vietnam in 2011 exploring the lives and work of Vietnamese artists. This research became the foundation for an art tour that ran in Saigon and Hanoi until 2019. She currently lives and works in London. Her personal practice includes storytelling, poetry, movement, photography and film. She is also co-founder of the Walking Trees Collective, an ecological art collective that organises workshops where art provides a vehicle for rethinking ecological relationships.

Duc Le is an architect and director at CO-NX. His work engages with architecture in both practice and theory. He has contributed to the Plakat research platform and advised the Hanoi Ad Hoc initiative. He initiated *Grids of Vietnamese Modernism*, a project focused on the historiography and critique of 20th-century Vietnamese architecture. Duc is currently a PhD candidate in the Practice Research Symposium programme at RMIT University, a founding member of the Gian Giua collective, and a Co-Director at the Architectural Association Visiting School Hanoi.

Duong Thuy Nguyen is an artist and writer working between Hanoi and London. Her interdisciplinary practice engages with memory, displacement and overlooked histories. Through experimental strategies, she reshapes knowledge production and fosters critical dialogue around colonial legacies, marginalisation and industrialisation. Recent exhibitions include *New Art Exchange Open 24* (Nottingham), *Enigma of Arrival* (RCA, London), *No Place Like Home* (Museum of the Home, London), and *The Space Between* (TMLighting Gallery, London, 2023). She is currently artist-in-residence at the Museum of the Home as part of the Vietnamese Archives Artist Residency: Library of Ancestral Knowledge.

Lynn MacRitchie was born in Glasgow. She studied art history at Edinburgh University and drawing and painting at Edinburgh College of Art. As a student, she attended Joseph Beuys' famous lectures in Edinburgh and organised the controversial *Participation Art Event* at Edinburgh College of Art, featuring the Artists Placement Group and David Medalla. After moving to London, she became a founding member of the Poster Film Collective and of Artists for Democracy. She later completed a postgraduate degree in architectural studies at University College London. As a writer, she contributed to many art magazines and edited *Performance Magazine*. She also worked as a business journalist for Financial Times Business Publishing and was a regular contributor on contemporary art for the *Financial Times* newspaper. She returned to art making in the late 1990s.

Wing Chan is an editor at Afterall Research Centre. She also moonlights as a translator. Her publications include *How to Pin Down Smoke: ruangrupa since 2000* (co-edited with Arianna Mercado and David Morris; Afterall, 2025) and *Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy 1974–77* (co-edited with David Morris; Afterall, 2023).

David Morris, Research Fellow and Editor at Afterall. Morris work explores approaches to artistic research, education and exhibition, with a focus on experimental and collective practice. With Helena Vilalta, he leads a research master's programme in Exhibition Studies at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, where he is also a trade union organiser.

An Việt Archives is not just a collection of materials to be cared for by today's dutiful descendants, but also a site for conversations and collectivity - a way to imagine tomorrow's ancestors. They are an ongoing exploration of archives, alternatives, memory work, and community history. They believe that an archive is not just a collection of materials; rather, these mediums are forms of meaning, memory and knowledge-making.

Footnotes

[1] MayDay Rooms serves as an archive, resource space, and safe haven for social movements, experimental practices, and marginal cultures and their histories while the Dalston CLR James Library—named after the Trinidadian Marxist and Pan-Africanist whose legacy embodies a hidden history of resistance to racism—offers access to a vast and varied range of online archives and resources relevant to its local community.

[2] IC Visual Lab is a non-profit visual arts organisation based in Bristol, working between visual culture and socially engaged practice. We are dedicated to exploring the role of images in today's world, particularly how photography is used to construct narratives that shape society. Located in Ho Chi Minh City, Dogma Collection is a private collection and exhibition space dedicated to archival and contemporary art. It comprises three separate but connected programs: Collection, Research, and Prize.

[3] See Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage: A "Minor" History*, New York: Zone Books, 2008; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

[4] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 12.

[5] Within the architectural community, the Hanoi Headquarters for the People's Assembly is nicknamed "the Guillotine," referencing both its bulky appearance and a tongue-in-cheek critique of authority, hinting at how politicians sometimes "get axed." The origin of the nickname remains unknown, but it is a story frequently shared among architects.

[6] In 1969, Joan Wakelin documented Vietnamese boat people in detention centers in Hong Kong and Singapore while on assignment for NGOs, including *Save the Children*. Established in the UK in 1919, *Save the Children* is dedicated to improving the lives of children around the world, a mission closely aligned with Wakelin's compassionate photographic work.

[7] See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

[8] Fred C. Shapiro, "Letter from Hong Kong," *The New Yorker*, June 29, 1992, p. 74.

[9] Having accepted the refugees, the British government sought to house them with minimal central involvement, reflecting the Conservative government's commitment to limiting state intervention.

[10] See Wilkins, Annabelle. "Vietnamese Refugees in Britain: Displacement, Home and Belonging." *Refugee History*, 3 Feb. 2020, refugeehistory.org/blog/2020/2/3/vietnamese-refugees-in-britain-displacement-home-and-belonging. Accessed [September 14, 2025].

[11] Thy Phu, "Photos Unhomed, Orphan Images, and Militarized Visual Kinship," *Trans-Asia Photography Review* 9, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1215/215820251_9-1-108

The Artist as Scientist:

Resilience and Healing in Lai Dieu Ha's Practice

Vi Bui



Lai Dieu Ha, "Hurt in Here", 2010.
Video documentation, 7 minutes.
Filmed by Nguyen Ban Ga.
Edited by Nguyen Long/Bill Nguyen.
Performed at Nha San Studio, Hanoi, Vietnam.
Image courtesy of the artist.

In the intimate, overcrowded space of Nha San Studio [1] on a December evening in 2010, Lai Dieu Ha (b. 1976) pressed a hot iron against pieces of pig skin, the smell of burning skin filling the room as audience members shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Some fled; others watched in horrified fascination. This is "Hurt in Here," a performance that would later become one of the artist's most significant works, marking both a culmination of her early confrontational approach and, paradoxically, the beginning toward what Lai now calls "soft politics."

Since graduating from Hanoi Fine Arts University (now Vietnam University of Fine Arts) in 2005, Lai has established herself as one of Vietnam's most compelling performance artists, using her body

as what she calls "a material, a living archive." Alongside "Hurt in Here" (2010), her work spans from the provocative "Flying Up" (2010), where she appeared unclothed, covered in feathers and glue, and seemingly tried to swallow a bird alive but only for a few seconds before releasing it from her mouth, to her current practice, which increasingly incorporates painting and "soft sculptures" as means to extend and reflect upon her performative explorations. These tactile, organic forms, sometimes wearable designs under her independent brand RAI, embody a softer, more reflective dimension of her exploration of the body, memory, and resilience.



The foundation for this artistic journey was laid early. Her father, Lai Thanh, was a propaganda painter during the subsidy period, creating works that celebrated "Workers, Farmers, Soldiers" and their labor and production. Lai grew up surrounded by his propaganda posters that marked the early period of development in Northern Vietnam. She recalls not just drawing everything she saw, but mischievously scribbling mustaches on Soviet leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev and Lenin in her father's magazines. At age eight, she used a Soviet magnifying glass to study hydra by the pond, creatures that would later become a childhood obsession appearing in her projects "Clinging Hybrid" (2012) at the Goethe Institut, Hanoi and "Conservation of Vitality" (2015) at Cuc Gallery, Hanoi. Where her father's work served clear ideological purposes, her practice has always embraced what she

calls "psychological blurriness," a deliberate ambiguity that forces viewers to confront their own assumptions about art, the female body, and creative expression.

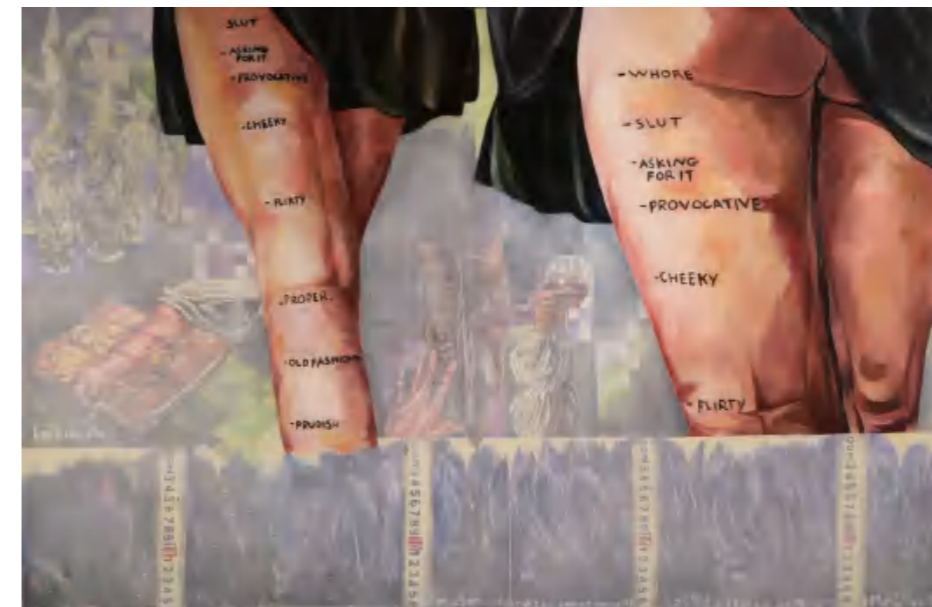
Lai's painting practice is deeply intertwined with her performance work. Rather than treating painting as a separate medium, she uses it to prolong the psychological impact and material presence of her performances. Her canvases often depict or reference moments from her own performances and those of her peers, transforming ephemeral actions into lasting visual narratives. Through this process, painting becomes a form of archival research and reflection, allowing her to explore the body, memory, and trauma in a new, layered dimension.

Lai Dieu Ha, "Flying Up", 2010.
Performed at Nha San Studio, Hanoi, Vietnam.
Photograph by Gabby Miller.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Lai Dieu Ha, "Magnipapillata / CaLa Lai Tan (Who We Are)", 2024, fabric (double-sided elastic), cotton, B40 steel mesh wrapped in fabric, 100x70x155cm.
From the "Soft Sculpture" series, presented in the exhibition "Interweaving Perspectives: Lai Dieu Ha & Rosemarie Trockel". Exhibited at The Outpost and the Vietnam Women's Museum, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Photo: Huong Mi Le.



Lai Dieu Ha, "Social Scenario", 2022,
oil on canvas, 155x100cm.
Exhibited as "Passport Empty / Blurred Identity"
in "Cong An Cong, Thang An Thang", curated
by Tran Luong at APD Center for Art Patronage
and Development, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Photo: APD.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Lai Dieu Ha, "Bending Down is Flower", 2020, oil on canvas, 155x100cm. Photograph by the artist.

Lai Dieu Ha, Kim Chi Bac "Extended", 2018. Performance, 45 minutes. Documented by the artist through video; photograph by Dang Hong Anh. Presented at A Space, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Image courtesy of the artist.



Lai Dieu Ha, "Beautiful", 2011. Video still (detail) from performance documentation, part of the program In Act 2, Nhà Sàn Studio, Hanoi, Vietnam.

Performance materials: mini stage draped in black; black Italian leather jacket; handmade oversized skirt; 36 eggs; pliers; needle; fishhook.

Photograph and video by Nguyen Quoc Thanh and Nguyen Ban Ga. Edited by Nguyen Ban Ga.



Now, as she prepares for a solo exhibition at Galerie Quynh in Ho Chi Minh City in December, Lai describes herself as undergoing what she calls a deliberate "reset" of her entire career. "I'm becoming a scientist researching my own practice," she explains, approaching her artistic legacy with the analytical distance of a scholar. She's currently painting approximately twenty new works while systematically reviewing her archive of videos and documentation, seeking to understand not just what she has created, but why, and what it means for the broader landscape of Vietnamese contemporary art.

This shift represents more than artistic evolution - it's a fundamental reimagining of performance art. Where her previous work tested the limits of physical and psychological endurance, her current approach seeks to create what she calls "conditions for

healing" rather than spaces of shock or discomfort. This transformation reflects broader questions about the role of performance art: Can it serve therapeutic rather than purely aesthetic functions? And how does an artist maintain a critical edge while embracing healing and community?

This painting is derived from the performance video "Beautiful" (2011), originally staged at Nha San Studio. In the performance, when the artist bent down it was toward thirty-six eggs; in the painting, the gesture transforms into flowers. By shifting the symbolic material, the work reimagines the act as one of personifying beauty and symbiosis, extending the performance's ephemeral action into a lasting pictorial form.



In this silent performance, the artist used a compass needle (kim chi bắc) to trace and locate coordinates, reinterpreting the phrase "kim chi nam" (guiding principle) as "kim chi bắc" (North compass), extended toward the North. The work explored subtle gestures of self-orientation, mapping, and re-mapping history through the body.

Lai Dieu Ha, "Kim Chi Bac: Extended", 2018. Performance, 45 minutes. Documented by the artist through phone screenshots and video. Photograph by Dang Hong Anh. Presented at A Space, Hanoi, Vietnam.



Lai Dieu Ha, "Identity", from the series "Identity Paintings", 2018-ongoing. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the artist.

Currently, Lai Dieu Ha has taken this philosophy even further, integrating performance art into her everyday life and work, blurring the boundaries between art, artwork, and personal existence. "My teaching, my studies [2] - everything is performance. I myself perform small social reflections within a larger social context, something that any individual or institution finds extremely difficult to grasp in today's shifting times," she shares. In the near future, she plans to expand her practice into healthcare contexts, collaborating with children to explore the therapeutic potential of art.

I spoke with Lai as she prepared to join VAC's November 2025 residency program as a guest artist alongside artist-in-residence Dang Thuy Anh. Through our conversations, I've come to understand an artist who has learned to wield ambiguity not as a weapon, but as a tool for creating space for reflection. "I want to become someone wise and objective enough to examine my entire body of work," she says, describing her current state as fundamentally different from the "passionate, tormented" artist who made those performances more than a decade ago.

Derived from video stills of earlier performances, this painting series revisits and reinterprets the artist's personal actions through the visual language of propaganda posters. Emphasizing symbolic qualities and declarative urgency, the works inherit the spirit of performance while extending it into painting. In doing so, they trace a continuity between ephemeral bodily acts and the enduring, rhetorical force of poster art - bridging performance and propaganda across time.

Q&A between the artist and the author

Q You've spoken about becoming "a scientist researching my own practice." What led to this shift in how you see your role as an artist?

A After "Hurt in Here," I was burned, both physically and emotionally, and realized I was causing myself real harm. I remember going backstage and meeting artist-curator Tran Luong. I immediately said: "I will stop the pain performances, stop cutting my body here. I am really in pain." Some people regretted it, saying I'd lost my edge, lost my energy.

But I wasn't afraid. I wanted to go deeper and ask: where does that "pain" come from? Is it the female body under tradition and social prejudice, or am I an independent individual observing societal psychology? Today, I can step back and analyze my work with greater objectivity.

Q Your relationship with materials seems central to your practice. How do you know when a material is "speaking" to you conceptually?

A I look for what I call "the intelligence of the material" combined with the reflection of context, personal and social circumstances at each moment. Take pig skin, for instance. In "Hurt in Here," I became "The Pig," empathizing with the pig by dissecting layers of skin: dry, fresh, scraps, slimy pieces. I was like an anatomist, but actually, it's about empathy and respect for the pig. Over time, the material migrated from performance to painting to soft sculpture. Pig skin is slippery and full of contradictions, like the judgments society makes about what is clean or dirty, acceptable or shameful. It holds resilience within it, and it keeps asking questions.

Q How do you translate the ephemeral nature of performance into the permanence of painting?

A Most canvases are 1m x 1.55m (that's my height), corresponding as a metaphor for a living, performing body that can be doubled or multiplied. Smaller paintings usually depict personal performances, moments I want to slow down, pause, or examine from my past work. When I double the size to 2m x 1.55m, I project outward to Psyper/Lab [2] and broader social contexts, where my individual performance plays one role among many. These larger paintings address current events and social cases that catch my attention. The paintings not only document but also investigate past performances; the viewers can recognize scenes from the original works while I add new layers of the present, about who I am now.

Q The interdisciplinary group Psyper/Lab seems to have transformed your practice. Can you tell us about that experience?

A Psyper/Lab was an extremely difficult but profoundly rewarding journey. I "lived and died" for it. We followed the original method of Psycho Drama Therapy developed in the 1920s by Jacob L. Moreno - the Romanian-American psychiatrist, psychosociologist, and educator. This form of therapy uses role-play to release repressed emotions. In our case, we weren't patients, but a collective determined to question existence and development at their deepest levels. For three years we worked continuously, no public events, no celebrations, only training and relentless questioning of one another.

Seven core members including Tran Quynh Trang, an actress and geisha; Nguyen Hong Nhung, a journalism student; Nguyen Ha Thanh, a trained psychotherapist; Pham Manh Duc, a martial artist; Pham Trung, an architect and writer; Tony, a Vietnamese-Australian filmmaker; and myself. Afterward, I felt like I was the one who needed a psychologist. Seemingly, it opened me up and inspired me to shift my performance practice from pursuing shock effects toward creating conditions for healing.

Psyper/Lab, group portrait.
From left to right: Sabo Dang Thu Anh, Nguyen Hong Nhung, Tran Quynh Trang, Lai Dieu Ha, Nguyen Ha Thanh, Pham Manh Duc.
Photograph by Nguyen Hong Nhung.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Q You've developed a practice of "covering", or in other words, reinterpreting historical pieces and works by your peers. What drives this approach?

A I am extreme and resolute in this - fearless. I approach it as both re-enactment and dialogue, always grounded in the context and history of the original work. Context is the key. This is not an act of intervention but a continuation of performance, both physical and psychological, through painting, extending the life of the original as a form of documentation. I choose specific works to paint and perform, pro-longing them historically while reactivating them in the present. I perform consciously, without erasing or distorting any original work, always with absolute respect. My intention is to study and honor the multiple layers of history embedded in earlier works. This approach allows me to explore the many strata of Vietnamese performance art history while questioning its origins: how to sustain a balance between citation and creation. I keep asking: Does performance inherently carry social commentary? And how can we continue to build upon that artistic heritage today?

Q With so much documentation from your performances, how do you decide what to preserve and what to let disappear?

A It's not simple to draw a clear line. In the studio, a piece belongs to me; in an exhibition, it belongs to the public. With communal works like Psyper/Lab, the boundaries become even more complex as they're absolutely open to the world. As a scientist studying my own practice, I preserve what continues to generate research questions. I'm interested in materials that allow a work to live multiple lives, to keep asking questions about society. I want to extend the psychological life of the performance beyond the moment it ends.

Q Your upcoming solo exhibition at Galerie Quynh seems to represent this new phase. What are you hoping viewers will experience?

A I'm digging deeper into my paintings, objects, videos and other archival materials to make this exhibition about documentation itself. I'm preparing around twenty paintings and reviewing my entire system of videos and materials to see what should be exhibited. I want to reveal everything, to show my work evolving from individual trauma to community healing. I hope viewers will participate and enter the work, to see and touch the pieces. I want to make the past present, so people can see more about performance art and understand this journey of transformation.

Q With residencies coming up in Switzerland and New York, how do you think these international contexts will affect your work?

A I'll spend two weeks in Switzerland in September 2025 for performance work, then a month in New York in 2026. I keep questioning my role: What is performance? Should I perform? What impact does it have on contemporary life? Do I have the courage to take on roles that benefit the community? Time abroad will test my theories, letting me focus and push, perhaps more extreme, more self-aware, yet still determined.

Q After nearly twenty years of practice, how do you see your role as a Vietnamese performance artist today?

A I remain committed to "psychological blurriness," a deliberate ambiguity that asks viewers to confront their own discomfort and assumptions. My aim is to address the complexities of contemporary Vietnamese society while remaining legible internationally. I continue to ask: What is the essence of performance? Can performance be a form of social commentary? Those questions are what keeps me moving forward.

Editorial Note

This interview was originally conducted in Vietnamese and has been translated into English. The text has been edited for length and clarity.

Lai Dieu Ha, "Social Scenario – Bac Cau No. 6", 2020.
Oil on canvas, 155 x 100 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Conceived within the framework of Psyper Lab, this painting reflects a process in which artists examined and mirrored one another's practices in the group's unique working space at Bac Cau, Ngoc Thuy – GiaLam. The composition brings together multiple scenes like fragments of a residency, marked by an interdisciplinary commitment that combines martial arts training with psychodrama therapy. It evokes performative interactions that unfolded in local spaces with local residents—individuals who were not artists themselves, yet whose presence and participation became integral to the work's exploration of community, embodiment, and healing.

My deepest thanks to artist Lai Dieu Ha for her generosity, time, and insights, shared across multiple conversations both in person and online.

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"Appropriation – Nghe thuật chuyen dung." *Soi.vn*.

Various interviews with Lai Thi Dieu Ha, 2010-2025.

Footnotes

[1] Nha San Studio, founded in 1998, is one of Vietnam's pioneering independent art spaces.

[2] At the time of the interview, Lai Dieu Ha is concurrently teaching art theory courses at a high school in Hanoi while also participating in an art course in the city.

[3] Psyper/Lab (2013-2016) was a collaborative interdisciplinary research project that marked a significant transition in Lai's practice following the intense public reactions to her earlier solo performances "Flying Up" and "Hurt in Here" (both 2010). The project represented a shift from individual body-based trauma exploration to collective psychological investigation, utilizing therapeutic methodologies in an artistic context. The group's three-year intensive process, conducted entirely in private without public presentations, established the foundation for Lai's later concept of "soft politics" and her

current approach to performance as a tool for healing rather than confrontation. The project's influence can be seen in Lai's subsequent paintings on the 1.55m x 2m scale, which she describes as addressing "broader social contexts" beyond her individual performances.

艺术关于活着 与探索—— 对话唐建荣

Art is to Live and Explore - In Conversation with KV Duong

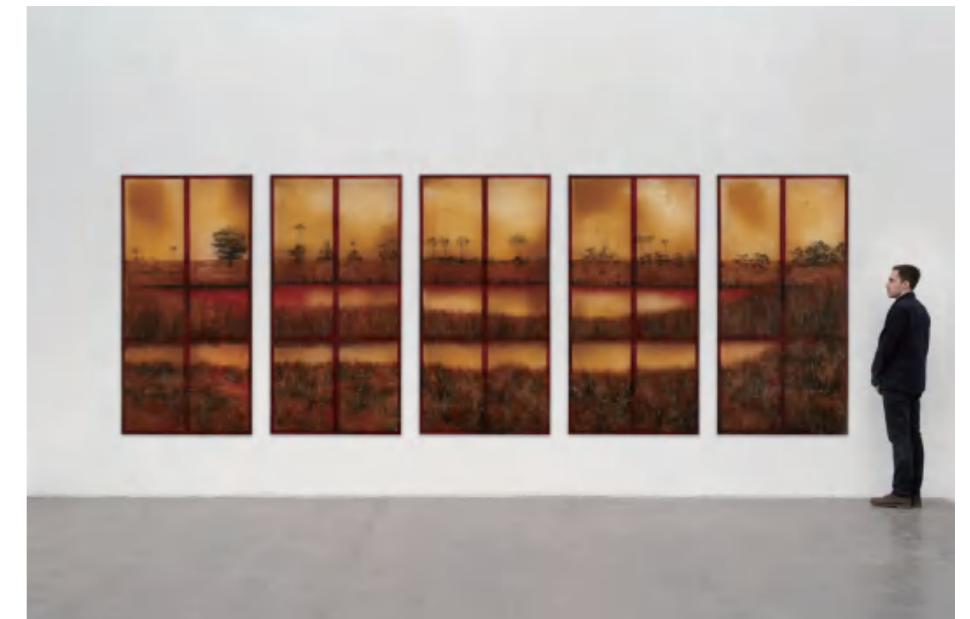
An Uncommon Thread, Hauser & Wirth,
Somerset UK, 2025.

Photo by Damian Griffiths.
Image courtesy of Hauser & Wirth

KV Duong, an ethnically Chinese artist, was born in Vietnam, raised in Canada, and now lives as a queer person in the UK. He paints, sculpts, makes installations, and performs. He had been a part-time artist with a day job in structural engineering long after he had already received recognition in the art world. Until recently, in February 2025, he began his full-time artistic journey, with his first residency unfolding in the upcoming summer in Hanoi, Vietnam.

This conversation took place two weeks after his arrival in Hanoi for a two-month residency. The heat, humidity, noise, and the disruption of familiar routine in the new city

presented Duong with the unknown—fears, challenges, and excitement. As a "returned" diaspora artist, the feeling of "too foreign for home and too foreign for here" was manifested in the lived nuances. Our conversation swung from Duong's childhood to his current age of 44. We talked about his first exposure to art, artistic impulse, reality, balance, realisations, and life in general.



EF

If 25-year-old KV met 44-year-old KV, what would they say to each other?

KV

I didn't come out until I was 28, so at 25 I was still really uncomfortable with myself. If I could speak to my 25-year-old self, I'd tell him to stay true to who he is and not be afraid to take risks—advice I still try to live by today. What I wish most, though, is that back then I'd had someone like the person I've become now, to guide me along this path.

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Childhood Zen and Creativity

Duong and his family left Saigon and immigrated to Canada in 1987. He recalled his first painting moment at the age of seven or so, using a printer box, pencil, and paper to draw on the floor of the living room, two televisions on at once, broadcasting sports and Asian sitcoms. That moment pulled him into a zen state, allowing him to escape into his own world. That's what made art so special to him.

Upon entering university and starting a career, there wasn't much freedom for Duong, who came from an immigrant family whose parents had sacrificed a lot for their children's education. The practicality of making a living was prioritised. Duong ended up majoring in applied science and engineering for both his undergraduate and graduate degrees. However, his problem-solving skills in the technical field were always connected to the right brain, where his artistic impulse never ceased to expand.

KV

With 19 years of practice as a structural engineer, plus six years of formal education, my work has always been defined by gravity—it's the constant force that dictates everything I build. But when I make art, I feel liberated from that weight. There's an incredible sense of freedom. Of course, when I create installations or structures, I still have to consider gravity and how things are supported. But creatively, the sky truly is the limit.

Realisation

EF

When did you realise you are an artist?

KV

My first public exhibition was in 2016. At the time, I called myself an exhibited artist, but I was still working full time as a structural engineer. While I was making art, it didn't pay the bills—it felt more like a serious hobby, one to which I devoted much of my free time. In 2022, I had a small solo exhibition at the Migration Museum in London. That felt like a more significant platform, and from then on I began to introduce myself as both an artist and an engineer. Completing my MA in 2024 made the title of "artist" feel more legitimate.

Duong shared that his first exhibition opportunity came from meeting a person on a dating app when he was single. The person turned out to be an artist and curator preparing a group show for later that year. He asked Duong to send some photos of his work, and that became Duong's first group show. "That's also another

way of professional development," Duong said with laughter. To him, it's more about how you lead your life. All cultural exchanges are part of life and research. That's what you carry inside when you make art.

Installation view, M.A. in Painting, Degree Exhibition, Royal College of Art, London UK, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist.

London Art Scene



In 2010, Duong moved to London out of curiosity and exploration. He believed London held a unique position in the global art world alongside New York and perhaps Paris. To him, very few cities had reached what he called "critical mass": a sufficient concentration of collectors, galleries, art fairs, and emerging artists to sustain a vibrant ecosystem. These were places where an artist could realistically build a network and launch a career.

In contrast, he saw cities like Toronto and other medium-sized urban centers as having active art scenes but limited accessibility for emerging artists. Duong felt that in order to be recognised in Canada, he first needed to "make it" in Europe. He compared this to the experience of many Chinese students who study or practice abroad and only get invited back to China for exhibitions after gaining recognition overseas. For Duong, this reflected a broader truth: many systems reward those who are already recognised internationally.

EF

What motivated you to pursue a master's degree in art?

KV

In 2023, I decided to pursue an MA in Painting at the Royal College of Art in London. It was my way of "going all in"—giving myself the best chance at this artistic pursuit and dedicating time to developing my practice, improving its quality, and deepening its criticality. In the art world—particularly in the Western context where I grew up—formal education carries weight. It enhances your CV, provides institutional recognition, and helps you gain visibility with galleries and curators. While it doesn't necessarily set you apart entirely, it does raise your profile. Ultimately, I believe there is no better investment than in oneself.

Materials

The summer before starting his MA, Duong began researching materials, specifically those Vietnam manufactures and exports. He explored a range of commodities including rubber, aluminium, tea, coffee, rice, and paper.

Having already worked with paper, concrete, found objects, and wood, Duong was accustomed to moving beyond traditional materials like canvas and felt confident to experiment with latex as a new medium. It was a risk that he didn't know how the material would behave, but he approached it methodically, testing and adapting. Eventually, latex evolved into a core part of his practice.

KV

Standing out as an artist today is very difficult. You need either exceptional painting ability, an innovative use of materials, and/or a unique perspective on the world. Latex is not a common material because it is challenging to work with and to preserve. When I began working with it, however, the material felt both distinctive and profoundly personal. For me, latex embodies the biographical history of Vietnam with the rubber plantation, my family, and my identity as an LGBTQ+ artist. It gives my work a visual and narrative clarity that feels like my own, and I believe that is what has led to its recognition.

Transitions

EF

How has coming from a historically marginalised community influenced your work?

KV

While living in England, I came to recognise the uniqueness of my background—growing up across three distinct continents and identifying as a gay man. This placed me within a marginalised community, where claiming or reclaiming space in society became essential. Standing up for oneself is crucial, and through making art rooted in my own experiences, I hope to open space for others who might share similar identities or feelings.

This family photo from 1986 in Ho Chi Minh City, taken just a year before we moved to Canada, is one of the most intimate images I own. You can't really see its details without knowing the story, but it captures my parents, siblings, aunts, grandmother, and me as a child. Over the years, I've returned to this image repeatedly in my work—as a found object, a historical archive, and a personal memory. It has appeared in performances, videos, paintings, and most recently as a UV print on latex. For me, it anchors a broader practice of working with archival materials—Vietnam War photographs, archive documents, old children's books, and declassified texts such as the Geneva Accord.



Family Portrait, 2024.
ink on latex (resin-fibreglass backing),
painted wooden stretcher, 40x30cm.

Image courtesy of the artist



Turbulence, 2017,
live body painting performance
at Concept Space,
London UK.
Acrylic on canvas, 300x300cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.



No Place Like Home (A Vietnamese Exhibition) Part I, 2022, collaboration with Hoa Dung Clerget, Canning Gallery, London UK. 150 White Plastic Stools, Variable dimension.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Duong identified several key transitions in his practice. His first live performance in 2017 at Concept Space was, in his words, "almost accidental," but it opened up a new artistic language he hadn't considered before.

Another turning point came in 2022, when he created a large-scale installation using 150 white stools in collaboration with Hoa Dung Clerget who is a French Vietnamese artist. This was his first major site-specific work and deepened his engagement with space and material in a more immersive way. Latex, as a material, was another major shift during his MA. The MA itself also shaped his process, giving him time for reflection, critique, and deeper engagement with theory and practice.

Most recently, his artist residency at VAC in Hanoi—his first extended stay in Vietnam beyond tourism—marked another shift. Living there for two months gave him a different rhythm, grounding him in a slower, more reflective way of thinking about art and place.

KV

Living and working in Vietnam had always been on my wish list. It feels a bit like being a tourist without the usual obligations or expectations of daily life. You're here in a very self-focused way—to live, to immerse yourself in the culture and history, and to create work. It's almost like a temporary working holiday.

EF

Lastly, what advice would you give to other artists who are just starting out?

KV

The advice I always give myself is simple: aim for high quality and low expectation. The only thing you can truly control is creating the best work you can. The rest—whether someone buys it, likes it, or writes about it—is out of your hands. What you can control is how you feel about the work itself. That's the essence of "high quality and low expectation." If I make an installation with the hope that it will be shown at the Tate, and it doesn't happen, I'll only end up disappointed. You can't go through life thinking that way.



Photo by Thảo Linh Trần, VAC (Vietnam Art Collection)



Video still from "VAC Residency I From Engineering to Art: KV Duong on Latex, Queer Identity & Migration" by Thảo Linh Trần, VAC (Vietnam Art Collection)

Welcome Home:

KV Duong



Home is one of those words that can hold a whole world, yet it also lives in the smallest of things. In *Welcome Home*, KV Duong explores its shifting meanings through memory, material, and his return to Vietnam. When we spoke at the close of his two months in residence, I had arrived just the night before, eager to finally see these new works in person after weeks of following their progress on screen, and to speak to him about the exhibition and his time in Hanoi. Spread across three rooms, the show weaves together childhood memories and political histories, queerness and cultural tradition, tenderness and trauma. It is at once intimate and expansive: a meditation on the stories we inherit, the materials that carry them, and the ways we continue to shape what home might mean.

Duong describes the early days of the residency as a kind of treasure hunt. "We went shopping," he says, "well, scavenger hunting in a warehouse, a whole shed with everything - hundreds of chairs, tables, doors." He chose pieces that carried lives within them: a heavy wooden door; a low table and set of chairs that read simultaneously like children's furniture and informal street seating. From their frames he cut panels, stretched latex across the openings, and reassembled them into what now forms part of this new body of work. The past still clings to these pieces, their histories intact - altered but not erased. "The found object already carries a lived experience. Not necessarily mine, but of a Vietnamese family or person here," he explains. "I intervene in the structure to create new meaning."

Latex, now a signature in his work, is a material with personality. Skin-like and translucent, it catches and gives light in ways canvas does not. In Hanoi, Duong had to relearn it under new conditions: extreme humidity; different pouring surfaces;

different chemical composition of latex. After some failed attempts at pouring it into flat, workable sheets, the VAC team suggested foam-core boards, and eventually it responded as he needed it to. "There was a bit of faffing about for two weeks," he laughs, "but it all worked out, thankfully." These early adaptations became part of the story: the latex here did not look or behave as it had in his London studio, and he had to reshape his process to suit its temperament.

In the suspended table-and-chairs piece at the centre of the exhibition, the yellow sheen of the panels reflects onto a low white plinth. Behind them, smaller, framed portraits hang a few centimetres from the wall, casting warm bands of red against it. The effect is both domestic and uncanny, like memory stretched thin; half-familiar, half-estranged. Drawn from family photographs of Duong's brother, sister, and himself in 1986, one year before the family left Saigon for Canada, these works recall a particular moment yet resist portraiture's pull toward interiority, projecting instead a luminous, outward presence. They are fragments of the past: intimate snapshots reworked into material memory. "It captures the essence of childhood, the idea of home, and the journey of returning as someone from the diaspora," he says. "This is my first time living in Vietnam as an adult, not just passing through."

Hedvig Liestøl



Photo by Nguyễn Duy Tuấn



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To the left of the room stands a deconstructed wooden door, inscribed with texts in Chinese, English, and Vietnamese - a gesture toward the artist's own layered identity. The Chinese characters spell the word 'family'. In English, the phrase "Have you eaten?", a greeting that acts as shorthand for care. The Vietnamese text includes a phone number beneath it. Duong had noticed that the city's walls are covered with stencilled numbers and short texts, usually advertisements for construction or repair work. Some are long out of date; others remain active. The number on the door is his own temporary one. The text beside it asks: "Are you looking for a home?"

On the back wall, a pair of rectangular panels refract another kind of history. They depict the entrance to Hòa Lò Prison [1], first built by the French in the late nineteenth century to hold Vietnamese political prisoners and later used by the Northern Vietnamese to detain captured US pilots during the war. The colours here are slightly warped, giving the structure an eerie quality. "That wall you see at the back is the actual original wall that leads to the cells," Duong explains. "There's only one entrance," he adds, "but I made a pair of it, to offer some perspective." For him, it's about instinct - how the space might read. The doubled entrance carries its own tension, leaving open whether there is a genuine choice or only the illusion of one.

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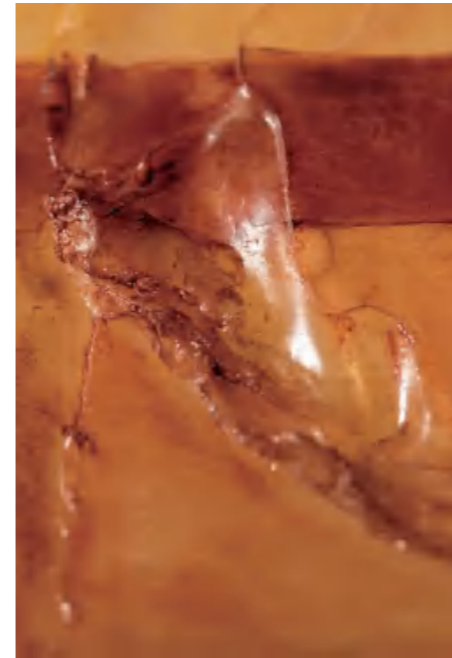


Photo by Nguyễn Duy Tuấn

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We move left into another part of the gallery, where the atmosphere shifts. A window lets in natural light, and the space feels airier. Here Duong takes a familiar icon of Vietnamese painting and reworks it. He reimagines Nguyễn Tiên Chung's 1940 silk painting Going to the Tết Market (Đi chợ Tết) [2], replacing the two women in the original with two men, creating a diptych that plays with tradition and queerness. It reads like a gentle reassignment of cultural narrative. Beside it are smaller studies: intimate latex portraits of the artist and his partner, made from self-timed photographs that he first printed in London before reworking in Hanoi. "It was a way of doing something familiar to get my juices flowing here," he says, "a place to start." Within these traces of process lies something tender and personal: what it means to be a gay person in one's own home, in a family household, and how identity threads through acceptance by relatives and community. Duong tells me he lived with his family until he was thirty; he came out at twenty-eight. This long period of silence and personal isolation seems to translate into the work itself, giving it its tension between concealment and revelation.

Materiality runs as metaphor throughout the show. Where some artists shy away from materials that shift over time, Duong embraces the changing nature of his chosen medium, treating it as an essential part of its character. Latex, which he admits can be "a real pain" to handle, also gives him effects nothing else can. "It's a natural material, like us," he says. "The colour, the transparency, the way it shifts with light, it means the work is never static. I don't see that as a flaw, but as part of its life." In recent years he has reinforced it with resin and fibreglass, making the works at once fragile in appearance and resilient in structure. He mentions Eva Hesse and Heidi Bucher, artists who pushed the possibilities of unconventional, organic materials. His own path with latex has been long and often frustrating. "It's taken months of stress, waking up and thinking, 'Oh my god, what are you doing?'" he says with a laugh, then adds "But we're good now."





Photo by Nguyễn Duy Tuấn

The smallest room of the exhibition carries a different mood. The light is low, and the floor is covered in crinkled plastic dusted with fine, black, shimmering sand, a site specific installation akin to the floor of a bomb crater. When you walk it makes a soft crackling, dry sound. The atmosphere feels closer, heavier. Two large paintings face one another across the room, their halos burning more intensely in the dim light than anywhere else in the show. The first, an untitled work, stands apart from the other pieces. It's abstract: a red latex layer draped across the surface, brushed with faint yellow traces. It resists a single reading - a bed, a door, a portal; a surface carrying layered associations of migration, shelter and intimacy. Gesturing obliquely toward national emblems, it functions not as a fixed sign but an open plane that, in Duong's words, "speaks to the whole story." Opposite hangs Bomb Pond (Reunification): a red crater dominates the foreground, giving way to a green field that rises into a pale yellow sky. He describes the series as an attempt to imagine how sites of trauma become part of the living environment. "The bomb pond series is about nature healing past scars, people healing wounds," he says. In this dialogue between the two works, grief and resilience coexist: a reminder that ruptures remain but, with time, are absorbed into the fabric of place and memory.

Throughout the exhibition, Duong's attention to site is clear. The residency has tuned his practice towards the particularities of place: how architecture, geography and local culture can be folded into the work, and how a series carries different connotations in Hanoi than it would elsewhere. Having the space to experiment here has allowed him to move beyond the limitations of his London studio, to create a new series of works that behaves as an environment. "Instead of transporting a white box exhibition to different cities, I try to use and be aware of where I am - the geography, the physical space, and the culture - and fold as much of that into the body of work," he says. This thinking also extends to the exhibition's structure. It moves between the domestic setting of home, with its memories and personal history; aerial views of a collective past; and the intimate narratives of queer life. Together, these shifting vantage points suggest that home is never fixed but always in the making, assembled from objects, memories, histories, and the lives we share.

Talk drifts back to the early days of Duong's career, a memory he recalls with a kind of disbelief. Until 2023 he was working as a structural engineer, balancing two lives, taking Fridays off to paint. A friend urged him to attend the Royal College of Art (RCA) open house. His first MA application, at another institution, had been rejected in 2019; this time, it was accepted. "I didn't even know I was going to get in," he says. "But when the acceptance letter arrived in February 2023, I felt the timing was right. I decided to give it a try — to see just how far I could push the practice." From September 2023 to September 2024, he stepped away from engineering to study the MA - a conscious investment in himself and in the possibility of another future. It was a risk, but one he couldn't avoid; chances like that don't come along often.



The commitment was serious: tuition fees, loss of a salary, and the relentless demands of an MA. Duong is honest about the toll it took: “I wouldn’t go through it again because it was so draining on everyone.” The RCA was a turning point, but “then the real world happens” he says. “And that was far more intense because this time it was real. Money was at stake. The honeymoon phase was over — you’d had that first year of savings, and now it was time to figure things out for real.” It’s a familiar paradox of any art education: you leave university better equipped to make work, but not necessarily to live off it. Managing finances, navigating expectations, and building healthy relationships are things professors won’t, and perhaps can’t, completely prepare you for. As Duong puts it with a laugh: “It’s like your parents teaching you how to date. They can tell you what to do, but you’ve got to figure it out yourself.”

After graduation, he split his time between part-time engineering and a growing studio practice, still pushing himself to keep the pace of the MA. At his 2024 degree show, a conversation set in motion what would eventually lead to his inclusion in *An Uncommon Thread* at Hauser & Wirth Somerset - an exhibition he describes as “life-changing,” the point at which he was drawn into a wider circuit of recognition and when he became a full time artist. From there, things moved quickly, and his upcoming schedule now includes Frieze London, Art Basel Miami, works from his residency heading to Westbund Shanghai and the Jogja Biennale, and a solo show at Pippy Houldsworth, London. Success, for Duong, is not a single breakthrough, but a network of persistence, peers, collectors, galleries, and institutions. “It’s about genuinely investing in each other’s careers and relationships”. It’s something I’ve noticed, too: in London, at openings and events, he consistently shows up for others, supporting his community. “I don’t live in a vacuum,” he says. “I’m aware that your greatest champions are other artists.”

Video still from "VAC Residency I From Engineering to Art: KV Duong on Latex, Queer Identity & Migration" by Thảo Linh Trần, VAC (Vietnam Art Collection)



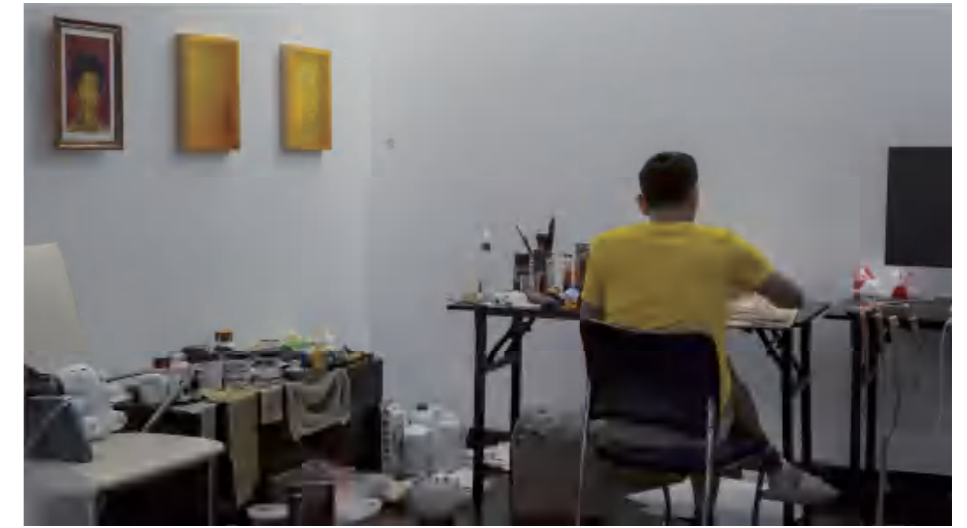
His sense of openness is rooted in identity. “When I was an adolescent, I already knew who I was but couldn’t tell anyone,” he recalls. Coming out at twenty-eight was a defining moment, one that shaped his character as much as it affirmed it. Years of holding that knowledge privately meant he had already lived through the disclosure many times in his own mind; when the moment came, both in coming out and in choosing art, it was less a leap than the outward confirmation of an inner certainty. It’s experience he carries into other parts of life. He prefers clarity over performance, directness over delay. “I’d rather you tell me now than beat around the bush for years,” he says. That candour is paired with generosity: he is always happy to share advice when asked, especially on handling challenging materials such as latex. For him, practices overlap, and conflict comes not from influence but from stagnation. Perhaps it is the long interior trajectory, the slow burn of things absorbed in silence, that now gives him his steadiness. Reflecting on the move into full-time practice, he puts it simply: “I was ready.” Then he adds: “I’m doing what I love and making a living from it, too.”

These last two months in Hanoi have reshaped more than his practice; it has deepened his relationship to history. Growing up in Canada, his understanding came through his family’s perspective; a South Vietnamese household marked by exile, loss, and his father’s political opposition. “I always referred to April 30, 1975, as the Fall of Saigon,” he says. “It came from family fleeing, family going to war.” In Hanoi, that narrative has broadened. Living here during the fiftieth anniversary of reunification and eightieth anniversary of declaration of independence, he encountered history through the people around him, “really trying to understand the different sides.” Being present for National Day, he says, made tangible the significance of half a century of peace and the importance of national unity. He adds that the sentiment in Hanoi may not be identical to Ho Chi Minh City, but the unification of the country, and the consolidation of its own identity, is deeply felt. For him, 1975 now appears as a double image: both the Fall of Saigon and the reunification of Vietnam. What he has absorbed in Hanoi does not lessen the weight of his family’s account, but reframes it as one perspective among many, layered with those he encounters in the present.



Video still from "VAC Residency I From Engineering to Art: KV Duong on Latex, Queer Identity & Migration" by Thảo Linh Trần, VAC (Vietnam Art Collection)

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When I ask how much of this he shares with his parents, he responds with honesty: they are close, but he has never told them he left engineering. "They don't know I'm here on an art residency. I told them I'm here for an engineering secondment and doing art on the side." The decision lands not as deception but as protection: a way of keeping an older story intact for their comfort. "I might bring it up next time I see them. But I'm not sure. It's very emotional for them too." He grew up hearing of war, poverty, and displacement - which, as he notes, is equally the story of the whole of Vietnam. A recent screening of a new documentary by Mai Huyen Chi, an artist-filmmaker from the central part of the country [3], and his ensuing conversation with her, highlighted how each family carries its own fragments of memory, each region its own history of conflict. "I'm not sure there's ever a clear good guy or bad guy," he reflects. "It was a complete mess. Maybe people move on because it was just so traumatic."

If family history carries one kind of inheritance, partnership and daily rituals carry another. When the conversation turns to what home means beyond geography, he answers without hesitation: companionship with his partner. The comfort of someone you love, or of something familiar, that makes you feel safe. Even small rituals like boiling water in your own kettle, pouring tea into your own cup. Absent those routines, we improvise. He tells me about a teddy bear: three years ago in Hanoi, he and his partner bought a brown bear; this time he got the polar bear version. "That's my temporary replacement for Owen" he says, laughing. "It's just a stuffed animal." And yet such objects have a way of carrying more than they seem, shaped by the meaning we allow them to hold.

Tonight he flies back to London - to Owen, his studio, his peers, and to a packed season ahead. "I'm going to look forward to the new experiences over the next few months, just soak it in and enjoy the conversations from all of the hard work, and from a lifetime of memory." Gratitude surfaces again: for community, for supporters, for Hanoi itself. "I leave feeling fulfilled," he adds, "with an exhibition that I'm very proud of, with the life experience here of immersing myself in the culture and the places and the staff. So this is my family while I was here." We make plans to eat at one of his favourite lunch spots, carefully logged in the long spreadsheet of local restaurants he keeps with meticulous precision, and which I'm now lucky to possess. Asked what he hopes visitors will carry with them from the show, he replies: "I hope they see parts of themselves reflected in the exhibition. And that it makes them think about the notion of home — in their own life, their family, even their country. Maybe it starts a conversation."

Welcome Home does not attempt to define what home is; it embodies it, inviting us to look again at the stories we inhabit. Home is never singular: it shifts with circumstance, held together by memory, by habit, by the people and things we keep close. Sometimes it is shared; sometimes it is carried within us. It is found in fragments and objects that bear traces of other lives; it is carried too in the love and trauma of those who came before - stories we can never fully know but inevitably fold into our own. And perhaps it is in the fabric of the in-between, in the way we bind these fragments together, that its essence reveals itself most fully.

Footnotes

[1] Hỏa Lò Prison: built in 1896 by French colonial authorities; today part of the site is preserved as the Hỏa Lò Prison Museum. Available at: <https://hoalo.vn/Articles/14/34/Gioi-thieu-Di-tich-Lich-su-Nha-tu-Hoa-Lo.html>

[2] Nguyễn Tiến Chung (1914-1976), *Going to the Tết Market* (Đi chợ Tết), 1940: Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi. Available at: <https://vnfam.vn/vi/hiện-vật/5aed92a0b69f1a002677a5ba>

[3] *Vietnam: 50 Years of Forgetting*, Mai Huyen Chi, 2025.

Artist quotations: All quotations from KV Duong are from conversations with the author, Hanoi, September 2025.

About The Artist

KV (Kien Vinh 建榮) Duong (b.1980 Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam) is an ethnically Chinese artist with a transnational background - born in Vietnam, raised in Canada, and now living and working in the UK. His work explores migration and cultural assimilation through personal and ancestral histories.

KV's paintings forgo more traditional materials of canvas or linen in favor of latex, which is poured onto a foam core board, then dried, painted, stretched and resin-fibreglass coated on the reverse. As a medium, latex bears fetishistic and sensuous connotations, particularly in conversation with queer identity politics, evoking sexual fantasy and intimacy. Yet it is also connected with the rubber industry, referencing the history of rubber plantations under French colonial rule in Vietnam, which lasted from 1887 until 1954.

A recurring motif in his recent work is the door or portal—symbols that navigate ideas of access and inaccessibility, particularly in relation to colonial and LGBTQ+ histories. The crossbars, set against the transparency of latex, mark spatial boundaries and divisions between interior and exterior realms. Through this visual language, Duong critiques systems of power and access, using the notion of the nation itself as both a form and a crucible for identity formation. His work draws particular focus to the charged context of rising tensions among ethnicities and nations.

On *dream(machine, human)*,

Q&A with Lêna Bùi

Frida Chen

dream(machine, human) is a sensorial drift through layered realities. It can be interpreted as machine trying to understand or predict human dreams, machine and human dreaming together, a human dreams via a machine, or any other variations of the 3 words. The story takes place in ambiguous time, unfolding as machine-salvaged fragments of human memories, or a mythology of human demise and metamorphosis.

—Lêna Bùi

dream(machine, human), single channel video, 14 min 35 seconds, 2025. Commissioned by VH AWARD of Hyundai Motor Group.

A 10-minute version of the film has been shown at the 6th VH AWARD. The complete film will be released next year.



Lêna Bui. *dream(machine, human)*, 2025 (still). Courtesy the artist and the Gallery Urs Meile.

A Q&A with Lêna Bui

1. Entering through Dream

Q

Your most recent work *dream(machine, human)* feels like both a filmic meditation and a speculative myth. The title itself suggests that the machine is dreaming us, rather than the other way around. Could you share how you arrived at this concept of "machine dreaming," and why dream logic is such a powerful way for you to approach the human condition?

A

I like the word dream. It opens up all possibilities. It's not like fantasy where the imagined world follows certain rules that you've made up, or science fiction where certain science principals have to be respected. It can jump from one logic to another, or follow no logic at all, and yet it also holds the potential for a crossover, a promised meeting point against all reasons, even if only in our sleep.

After working with video for 13 years I've come to see recorded images as a form of memory. The word "recording" itself has time embedded in it. Footages are always of the past, the medium of media itself is dated the moment it is made, so that even if we're talking of the future what we see will always be in the past as the image quality reflects the technology and aesthetics of its time, if not the actual recording of "reality" at a given moment. And so editing is a process of shifting through memories to construct something new. Whatever you're constructing, you will have to delve into memories in order to do this. So machine dreaming or machine remembering become very similar concepts to me.

AI images for me are also a type of warped memory, generated from processing countless images that are fed into the algorithms, images that are fed intentionally or wholesale scrapped from the internet and various databases. That's why certain narratives are perpetuated and amplified through AI. And so in a meta sense my film can be seen as science fiction, of machines taking a stab at constructing a reel from the prompt "human dreams," dream here meaning either that brain activity while asleep, or our conscious and unconscious desires.

2.

Q

On Dreams as a Method

Across *dream(machine, human)* and earlier works like *Circulations* and *Kindred*, dreams and dreamlike states appear as recurring strategies. Do you think of dreams as a kind of research method, an unconscious archive, or perhaps—as Freud and later philosophers proposed—a way of staging our deepest cultural anxieties and desires?

A

I agree more with Jung than Freud's analysis of dreams but I will not go into how dreams are interpreted. I'm more interested in what they can do as a method to crossover into a different kind of order and force acceptance of all absurdities. It allows both the maker and the audience to suspend their disbelief and accept certain fantastic premises. It can be lazy in this sense, because you don't need to justify why something is as is. But at the same time it allows a lot of freedom and I strive to be free.

As with any method, I'm still learning how to finetune this language, to be free but not plunge into senselessness. To dream with a sense of direction, to be absurd with purpose, and then to depart from purpose, taking flight using intuition as fuel—a kind of flight made possible only if my intuition already has enough built-in logic shaped through time and experience.

I'd also like to point out that the visual language in my film is often realistic, or documentary-ish, and not what you would expect of a dream. While it's a language that still needs refinement, I like this state of being neither this or that, of being between genres, not neatly placed.

Lêna Bui. *dream(machine, human)*, 2025 (still). Courtesy the artist and the Gallery Urs Meile.



3. Mythology and Shared Motifs

Q

In *dream(machine, human)*, you weave together images of snails, termites, and human rituals with echoes of Khmer and Tai circular dance. These gestures seem mythological, connecting human life with other forms of being. What draws you to mythology as a parallel to dreams? Do you see them as different registers of the same impulse to grapple with life, death, and renewal?

A

I will quote Joseph Campbell here because I cannot articulate myth any better.

"What is a myth? The dictionary definition of a myth would be stories about gods. So then you have to ask the next question: What is a god? A god is a personification of a motivating power or a value system that functions in human life and in the universe—the powers of your own body and of nature. The myths are metaphorical of spiritual potentiality in the human being, and the same power that animate our life animate the life of the world. But also there are myths and gods that have to do with specific societies or the patron deities of the society. In other words, there are two totally different orders of mythology. There is the mythology that relates you to your nature and to the natural world, of which you're a part. And there is the mythology that is strictly sociological, linking you to a particular society. You are not simply a natural man, you are a member of a particular group."

Which mythology you choose to borrow from reflects the world-order you want to articulate. Is it a story of belonging to the earth, or is it a story of the subjugation of nature and man apart from everything else. It is fairly clear which order of mythology I subscribe to. And in doing so I'm trying to reconcile this alienating feeling I sometimes experience in the urban landscape and with my current lifestyle. The intense disconnection with my surroundings and a deep sense of loneliness.

In mythology, there is not just harmony but often violence because life itself is inherently violent and death is an inevitability to sustain life. Myths are a way to help us grapple with life, death, and renewal, and dreams are often used as a tool within mythology to achieve this. In dreams, things important to us come in images as symbols and metaphors.

Lêna Bui, *dream(machine, human)*, 2025 (still). Courtesy the artist and the Gallery Urs Meile.



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4. On Gender and Repro-duction

Q

One striking moment in *dream(machine, human)* is the mother–daughter conversation about happiness and having children. You've spoken about your discomfort with these cultural scripts of women's sacrifice, and your choice to counterbalance them with images of hermaphrodite snails. Could you expand on this decision? How do you negotiate, in your work, between reflecting dominant norms and unsettling them?

Lêna Bui, *river*, 2025. Silk painting layered on glicée print. Courtesy the artist and the Gallery Urs Meile.



A

I don't think an average viewer will look at snails and think "ohh hermaphrodite", so this is not at all something apparent. Rather than something grand like unsettling a dominant norm, it's probably more of a joke to myself, a gentle reminder that nature has invented many other ways of being and for life to continue.

The conversation between mother and daughter was included because it causes me discomfort. It's a narrative both men and women can relate to in many parts of the world, especially Asia. To most people having kids is a natural course of life, that you should want that. Why is this? Is it our social construct, a certain kind of insurance for old age, or genetic programming? Are our children a manifestation of "Life's longing for itself" as Kahlil Gibran puts. But somehow this phrase "Life's longing for itself" is comforting in that it puts life as this all encompassing force that sweeps through everything, human and non-human.

I just read Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in it she imagines Gethen, a planet populated by ambisexuals, androgynous beings both masculine and feminine, who share equally the burden of child birthing. Who takes on the role of the mother is spontaneous with each period of copulation,

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and thus their society is not arranged in binary terms like on Earth, with clear divisions between the sexes. It's a really interesting premise and much of the book tries to elaborate on these differences but I am left with a vague imagination of another world order but not really quite a clear understanding of how that actually works.

We are firmly bound by the limitations of our body and experience and it is very difficult to imagine being anything other than ourselves. But for me it's a consolation to see other forms of life exist, to know that there are other ways to be and that we have the power of imagination to draw upon.

One other thing I like about crossing species or going beyond human is that it allows us to address certain fundamentals of life without being constrained by human constructs such as race, religion, national boundaries, and so forth.

5. From Dream to Practice

Q You alternate between making films and making silk paintings—two very different modes of working. Could you talk about how these two practices speak to one another? Is painting a way of grounding yourself after the intensive research and planning of film-making, or do you see the two mediums as exploring similar questions from different angles?

A I'm so fortunate I can switch back and forth between these two modes of working that I enjoy equally. Painting for me is a very inward and meditative process, where my body becomes a sort of medium. It's a very honest, direct, bodily activity, where I allow my unconscious to articulate itself. Of course there are certain overarching thoughts that I work with but mostly I paint without making sketches and let the work unfold as I go. So the images are directly influenced by my mood and even the weather.

Video-making is a bit more of an outward endeavor, it involves a lot of people and interaction with the world. The editing process becomes more inward, but the material, being recorded images, is something taken from the world and reassembled. So the process is a merge or collage between personal aspirations and memories of the world.

However, structurally these two very different modes of working are converging. My paintings are becoming filmic and my videos more abstract.

Ultimately I'm interested in working holistically with space. To not just contain fragments of imagination in a video, a painting or an object but to expand that idea into space, not as spectacles but in details and mood.

6.

Q

Beyond the Human

In *dream (machine, human)*, AI-generated images blur the line between human and non-human. In *Circulations*, souls are imagined as multiple beings moving through a body. In both cases, the "human" is never singular or stable. You wrote that you wish to make works that express "a worldview that is not entirely human-centric." What would you imagine such a worldview look like? And what role can art play in shifting perception away from human centrality toward a more posthumanist, entangled sense of life?

A

For me being singular is a much more strange concept than being plural. Anyone who speaks a few languages notices that your mannerism and expressions change a bit depending on which language you're using. And if you grow up in different cultures you intuitively adjust your actions depending on context. This is not to say we are fickle and constantly changing entities, but I'd say we have a wide range of being, and many thoughts that do not necessarily agree with each other. A human being is a kind of abyss, very complex and entangled. I accept this and expand on it instead of fighting for unity or purity.

It's hard enough understanding what being human means, and even more futile to try and understand anything other than human. For example, we can work out the mechanism of how trees photosynthesize or exchange nutrition through their root systems, but we can never quite imagine the language of trees, because whenever we imagine anything non-human "talking," they have to talk in our tongue, and in adopting our language they are anthropomorphized. But imagination is the first step to empathy, it is also the only mode that we can expand ourselves.

Léna Bui, *Kindred*, 2021 (still).
Courtesy the artist and the
Gallery Urs Meile.



7.

Trajectory and Future Directions

Q

Finally, looking at your trajectory—from works on animal–human relations in *Voracious Embrace*, to community-based projects like *Sacred Water*, to your more recent explorations of mythology and AI—what threads do you think have remained constant? And what directions are you most compelled to pursue now?

A

I've never worked on something that doesn't interest me. So all of the threads in my past works are still in my mind, still looping back and forth interweaving with newer works. The work that is "complete" is a product of deadlines and practical constraints, but the interests have never been resolved because what is articulated is fragmentary and unsatisfactory. I always think I can do better after I've completed a work. But it's only in making the work that I understand my thoughts and shortcomings.

So I'd say what I've always strived for is language—a language that is clear and porous, at the same time, fluid but structured.

About The Artist



摄影：张明归

Lêna Bui (b. 1985, Vietnam) lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City. She graduated from Wesleyan University in 2007 with a BA in East Asian Studies and has been based in Vietnam since 2009. Her practice spans drawing, video, and other media, often beginning with everyday anecdotes to explore the profound effects of rapid development on human relationships with nature and the environment. Her work reflects on the intangible dimensions of life—faith, death, and dreams—and how these shape human behavior and perception. For Bui, making art is a process of articulating questions and yearning, asking: how do we rely on and separate ourselves from nature? How does history shape the present, and what of the present foreshadows the future?

Her works have been shown in a number of exhibitions and spaces such as the 15th Shanghai Biennale, China (2025); Galerie Urs Meile, Switzerland (2025); the 6th VH AWARD at House of Electronic Arts Basel, Ars Electronica and Hyundai Motorstudio Beijing (2025); Bangkok Art Biennale, Thailand (2024); Galerie Bao, France (2024); Nguyen Art Foundation, Vietnam (2024); Asian Film Archive, Singapore (2023); Jeju Biennale (2022), Asia Culture Center, South Korea (2021); Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE (2018); among others.

Lêna Bui, *Electrical Impulses No.2*, 2025. Painting on silk and paper. Courtesy the artist and the Gallery Urs Meile.



The Future Loop



Ngoc Nau

Courtesy of the artist.

&



Huong Ngo

Photo: Leonard Suryajaya.

About the artists

Huong Ngo (b. 1979, Hong Kong SAR) is an interdisciplinary artist and educator. She holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in Art & Technology Studies (2004), was a Whitney Independent Study Fellow (2011-2012), and a Fulbright U.S. Scholar in Vietnam (2016). She is currently a visiting lecturer at University of California Santa Barbara. Her work traces the entanglement of colonial history, migration, language, and labor while imagining new futures from their fragments. She works across mediums, traversing borders and making connections through differences. At once intimate and political, Ngo's practice listens for what remains.

Ngoc Nau (b.1989, Thai Nguyen Province, Vietnam) graduated from Vietnam Fine Art University, majoring in Vietnam art history and criticism. Ngoc Nau is currently working with various mediums including video installation using 3D software, and other open sources on the internet to create new dimensions for video. She also works with photographic light boxes, Hologram projection and Augmented Reality (AR). In Ngoc Nau's work these techniques have been used to refer to how new media shape our view of the world. This thought in her work is related by the current context of Vietnam's development and chaos of contemporary culture. She explores the controversy surrounding what traditional values are, highlighting the multiple types of abuse of power to gain wealth and looks into the psychology of humans to adapt to scientific development. Her art practice is concerned with the social and cultural phenomenon of modern humanity.

This conversation was conducted online between August 4th and 29th, 2025.

Huong Ngo (HN):

I was wondering if we could begin by thinking through how the future is conceptualized, particularly in relation to migration, as I think that both of our work grapples with this relationship in so many different ways. We might also start to untangle how futurity is bound up with technology, labor, spirituality, language, and politics. I was wondering if you could start with a description of one of your related works?

Ngoc Nau (NN):

In my family, we believe dreams tell us something which could be happening in the future and we must pay attention to them. A curiosity about the images that I see in my dreams motivates me to create art because when I wake up, the feelings remain very strong, sometimes staying on my mind for a whole day or even months.

I wonder how the act of questioning the images in my dreams influence the way that I observe the waking world. In particular, this applies to the case of the transformation of my hometown.

NN:

I grew up in the town called Thai Nguyen, where my grandparents chose to settle after they evacuated from the U.S. bombing to Hanoi in 1964. Over the past ten years, it has changed so much since the land was sold or rented to foreign tech factories. I saw many unusual things and unfamiliar faces around my grandparent's house over this time. Meanwhile, I heard many advertisements about these developments with fancy words such as 'smart community', 'majestic islands', 'projects to bridge the future', etc... They have been replacing lands in service of the new economic program which is focused on high-tech production.

In 2014, Samsung Corporation started to build a factory complex next to my grandparents' land in Thai Nguyen. Considered one of the biggest factories in Southeast Asia, the project has modified not only the landscape but also the locals' living conditions.

Ngoc Nau, "Ritual Object 1", installation view from "Documenta fifteen", 2022, sculptural single channel video installation, HD, color, sound; found handkerchiefs, mirror, digital prints on decal. Courtesy of the artist.



The whole area is under the Vietnamese government's overall plan to transform the town into one of its centers for technology production. Nevertheless, in that ever-changing area remains the locals' reserved sites for ritual practices for the Mother Goddess, which honors their spiritual beliefs. This tradition is both a form of reminiscing the past as well as expressing the hope to be protected by gods.

In my work "Ritual object 1" (2022), I draw elements from the ceremonies in relation to the events that have happened since the beginning of Samsung's intervention. The work combines ritual objects, video footage of rituals, as well as open source content that I encountered throughout my research about the land since 2015. Through the use of light from reflective ritual material, I contemplate on the co-existence of technological development and religious preservation.

Overall, most of the raw material used for this video comes from public spaces, either physical such as the 'Hau Dong', or 'spirit possession,' ceremony, or virtual from social media and digital platforms.

And you, what motivates you to think about the future?

HN:

My family was also from the North, from Ha Noi and Hai Phong, but they left in 1979 during the border dispute with China (because my father is ethnically Chinese), and I was born en route in Hong Kong, where we stayed in refugee camps. I grew up in the United States at the tail end of the cold war era, and our cultural landscape was filled with science fiction films and books that really captured the imagination of that generation and encapsulated political preoccupations of that time. Think *Star Wars*, *The Jetsons*, *2001 Space Odyssey*, etc. I really do remember watching *Star Trek* and marveling at the multicultural utopia that it promised. There was something fascinating about how technological advancements, even just particular materials associated with space travel, became indelibly associated with the future. Technology became a stand in for all of the hope, ideals, and solutions promised in those narratives, and in turn, real technology was developed in the very image of those fantasies!

Huong Ngo, "This Space Is for Lost Time", installation
Detail from Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Chicago, IL, 2024,
electronic components, morning glory plants.
Photo: Tom Van Eynde.



HN: Throughout my childhood, my parents worked in electronics factories – making components, circuit boards, and computers that were attempting to reproduce this future that was promised. Recently moving out to California, I've met so many other people whose parents (or themselves) also worked in these factories. There was a huge percentage of immigrants, particularly immigrants from Southeast Asia, who did this kind of work. I've been puzzling over why that is the case. Part of it is obviously the timing: these industries were cropping up just as Southeast Asian immigrants arrived. But also, I often wonder whether employees were motivated or compelled by a promise to be part of an imagined future. I'm curious if they saw themselves in it and whether it helped them move on or run from a past that was difficult to return to.

In my current work, I've been collecting vintage components from those factories and making sculptures with them that can somehow speak of the labor and contributions of so many immigrants in the history of technology. I'm curious about how these tiny objects can tell the big story of all of the hands that were a part of producing them – can somehow communicate the hopes, dreams, and sheer determination of that generation. The factories that you witnessed being built in Thai Nguyen are contemporary versions of where my parents worked, so I'm particularly interested to learn about the migration of these industries back to my 'que huong'/homeland, how they have affected our people, and how you process it in your artwork.

Are your grandparents still living there and are they okay? An incredibly unfortunate byproduct of electronics manufacturing in the US is the ecological devastation. Many former factories and surrounding land are still Superfund Sites (designated by the U.S. EPA as polluted and needing remediation). Have your grandparents witnessed this on their land?

NN: My grandparents and other family members are still living there. One time, I used to ask my grandmother what she thought about the new factory built next to her land. At that time, I was surprised by her answer: "We would be poor without the factory." It is true that since the factory is located in the village, my grandparents got a large amount of money by selling lands to the project investors. At the same time, my uncle has turned most of the garden and farming land into temporary rooms for renting to workers, so they could earn money every month, which they could not earn the same amount when they were farming. They even bought a big car, which was a huge asset to their neighbors and to other farmers.

The whole landscape has changed so much compared to what I saw when I was a kid. My memories of the land was of a peaceful landscape. I remember every weekend, my mom and I drove to visit them on a Honda Dream through many curvy, small, and yellow-clay roads. My grandparents' house is almost at the end of the village road. The atmosphere is very quiet, I could only see green, smell grass and rice, and hear the sounds of birds, insects and frogs at night.

Nowadays, the big road/highway is right next to a changed land. Every morning, hundreds of big buses bring workers from different places to the factories. Rooms for rent are built on most of every farmers' arable land. The water canal, once used for rice fields, now is rarely used for farming. The direction of the stream has been changed and water is mostly used to provide by the factory for production. I can smell the strange scent from the factory from faraway. It is a typical chemical smell of the cutting fluid. When I was working inside the factory, I heard other workers talk to each other: not many workers wanted to work in that production department because it was seen as the most toxic.

In the beginning, the locals could smell it from outside, but nobody had any knowledge about what the smell is and the effect of smelling it everyday. Increasingly, it has become normal and everyone has forgotten about its presence. Nevertheless, it is still strong and unpleasant, particularly when there is no wind.

HN: Yes, when we last met, you told me about working in the factories! I was recently in conversation with Lisa Park, who wrote "The Silicon Valley of Dreams: Environmental Injustice, Immigrant Workers, and the High-Tech Global Economy" [1] with her collaborator David Pellow. Pellow actually went undercover as a factory worker for research as well. The stories shared by the other workers and what Park and Pellow discovered about the health and ecological effects of the factories are truly horrifying and still not very well known about the industry. They also track the struggles of factory workers in advocating for themselves and their health and the regulation of this industry.

Can you tell me a bit more about your experience? Where were the workers coming from and what was the typical demographic? How long did you work there and how did it change your perception of the factory and your project? There's a scene from "Ritual object 1" where the factory appears to be burning and the workers are outside. Can you give us some context for that event?

NN: I still remember very well the feeling and the whole process of working for the factory. I applied for the work through a third party (an agency). The process for applying for the job and starting took two days. The rules were very strict, workers could not bring anything inside and we could only go through two gates for body scanning. So, I could not film or take any pictures to document the experience. Everything stayed inside my memories.

My days working in the factory felt so long because everyday I had to work about 10.5 hours indoors with no windows, so I could not feel anything from outside, only white fluorescent lights everywhere. There were two break times: one for ten minutes and another for one hour and 15 minutes for lunch or dinner. I worked for two departments. First I was sent to a department for CNC cutting where my work was cleaning machines and gathering waste from the cutting materials.

I remember the first time I entered the department, I was shocked by the noise and smell. It made me dizzy, and I had a headache for the whole day. After two days, my body started to get used to it. Very strange and amazed by how the human body could quickly adapt to these conditions. In the long term, I feared for my health being exposed to that level of noise and the chemical smells. I left after seven days for another department to assemble electronic components. I worked there as a cleaner as well, collecting electronic component trays. I felt a bit relieved of the noise and smell, but the work required me to keep standing for the entire time, my legs getting very heavy as if I was wearing shoes made of iron. I realized it was caused by blood under pressure. Many workers experienced the same feeling, some of them fainted. Sometimes we had to hide in the toilet just to take some rest.

In each department, I worked with a group of workers all above 30 years old. Some of them are from neighboring towns and many of them live faraway. The group was a mix of different ethnic minorities. I asked some of them why they chose to work in the factory. Some wanted to pay their debts, had no more land to farm, or just preferred the toilets in this factory, which were cleaner than other factories.

I remember some moments that were lovely that broke through the boring atmosphere of the factory. We sneaked some snacks into the factory and shared some plums or candy with each other to help us feel awake during the night shift. We gathered in the restrooms to share our feelings of the working day. Working inside the factory, I felt like there was no one protecting us, only the workers shared sympathy with each other. Many times we were asked to work extra hours, totalling twelve, and we were not able to refuse.

In the end, I decided to quit the job as I felt so exhausted, and I didn't receive any salary (a month's salary required six weeks of work, which is why many workers are effectively stuck). I respect workers who can sacrifice themselves to work in those conditions just to send their money back home. I know there are thousands of workers who have been working like that. Many of them might work like that for five to seven years right after they finish high school.

NN: The scene in my video "Ritual object 1" was a protest of the Samsung workers against the security guards. In 2014, when the factory was still under construction, some workers brought sticky rice for their lunch (which was against the rules). When security guards found out, they beat and insulted the worker. The issue happened several times to many workers. One day, one worker fought back, which incited others who shared the same anger. They started to throw rocks and burn the room of the security guard. Later, police became involved but it took a lot of time to control the anger of the workers. The incident raised concerns about rules in the factory which were not familiar to farmers who were used to being more free.

In your family, or in the families of your friends who moved to the US, how have you seen traditional Asian values change like the concept of community, family ties, spiritual beliefs in nature, and the important role of mothers or women when living in a capitalist, consumer driven society in America? And more specifically, how do these changes appear in an environment that is governed by machines and technology?

Huong Ngo, "We Are Here Because You Were There", installation view from DePaul Art Museum, 2016, hectographs and hand-cut paper. Photo: Tom Van Eynde.



HN: Growing up in the US, I always noticed a gap between the reality of what women and mothers experienced and how that is represented in popular culture. This is slowly changing, but in the past, mothers were often represented as happily laboring for the family, enduring hardships in silence. I also noticed how Asians were presented as enthusiastic, pliant workers. Understanding these types of flattened representations help unpack how machines and technology, particularly humanoid robots, are gendered and often racialized. This tendency persists today with examples too numerous to name of the pernicious cultural trope of the Asian robot or the servile feminine robot like Siri and Alexa, for example. I think it speaks to how Asians are expected to labor tirelessly and how women are expected to perform labor freely, particularly emotional labor.

I look to my mother often to understand the difference between her generation and mine. I see her at the intersection of many different forces telling her what a woman and mother should be and having to process those different expectations and negotiate them with her own desires. I've spoken to her about working in the factory and while it was difficult in many ways, it gave her a sense of independence and empowerment through being able to help provide for the family and finding a place where she excelled at what she did. She told me how she used to work next to a group of Hmong women who complimented her on how fast she worked. She beamed with pride when she told me the story. While I know that this demonstrates the capitalist culture of the factory, I can't help but share her joy and satisfaction.

NN:

To return to that scene that you capture of the workers burning and protesting the security guards, I'm also interested in how those histories of resistance and dissent are present in Asian history, but might have been suppressed over time or might show up in quiet ways that could be easily overlooked.

Can you talk about the female workers specifically in the factories and different expectations or motivations that they had? In your film, there is a dancing female character. I read her as somewhere between the Mother Goddess and a young worker – can you expand on how you envision this character?



Ngoc Nau, still image from the video "Ritual Object 1", 2022, sculptural single channel video installation, HD, color, sound; found handkerchiefs, mirror, digital prints on decal. Courtesy of the artist.

While I was working in the factory, I could see women workers present in many production stages (75% workers are women) for example: one production line for electronic component assembling had eight to ten workers in charge. Most of them were women. Most of the women in my team were mothers.

The Mother goddess character in my video, I think it comes from my daily life – inspired by my family, neighbors, and friends. I often see women involved in all aspects of life from production and to taking care of family and to running ritual ceremonies for the community. Moreover, I could feel their power as well as the pressure that they experienced. Through the dancing movements in the ritual, I wondered if they could somehow release and express themselves.

I often see text used as a medium in your works. How do you imagine language empowering immigration laborers? How do you connect that to the act of rewriting the English lessons of your mother?

HN:

I've used language in many of my works actually as a way to embody someone else's experience. As someone of the Vietnamese diaspora, language was one of the few ways in which I was able to reconnect with my family's history, so it has always carried tremendous weight for me.

I'm currently working on a series that takes my mother's notes from English classes taught at the electronics factories and afterwards and scales them up to large embroidered pieces. What is interesting about the notes that my mother wrote is that they were meant for her to remember English, but they've ended up being a record of that time and place in her life where I have no other record. Like the factory where you worked, my mother could not bring in a camera, so we have little evidence of her time there. These notes are a tiny snapshot into her life and subtly introduce how she takes in the culture around her. Often she is asked to write example sentences to practice. She pulls from her daily life and experiences. My mother was a self-taught poet who was never able to fulfill dreams of writing, so it's especially poignant that the record of her life be in this bizarre and very specific context, doing a completely different kind of work and writing than ever imagined. While not poetic, I see her words as poetry.

HN: Embroidering slows down the process of reading and internalizing these words, making it sometimes feel tedious and laborious like the act of learning another language. It makes me appreciate all of her labor not only as a worker having to communicate in a new language, but also as a citizen, a mother, and a wife and the expectations that those roles carried. In other works that are based on archival research, I've used language when I'm trying to understand the subjective experience of the people that I am researching or connecting with the past. It's almost a reperformance of their experiences using my own body as a medium. You highlight the use of language to sell and enact the imagined future. It capitalizes on the idea of time and development moving along an inevitable trajectory.

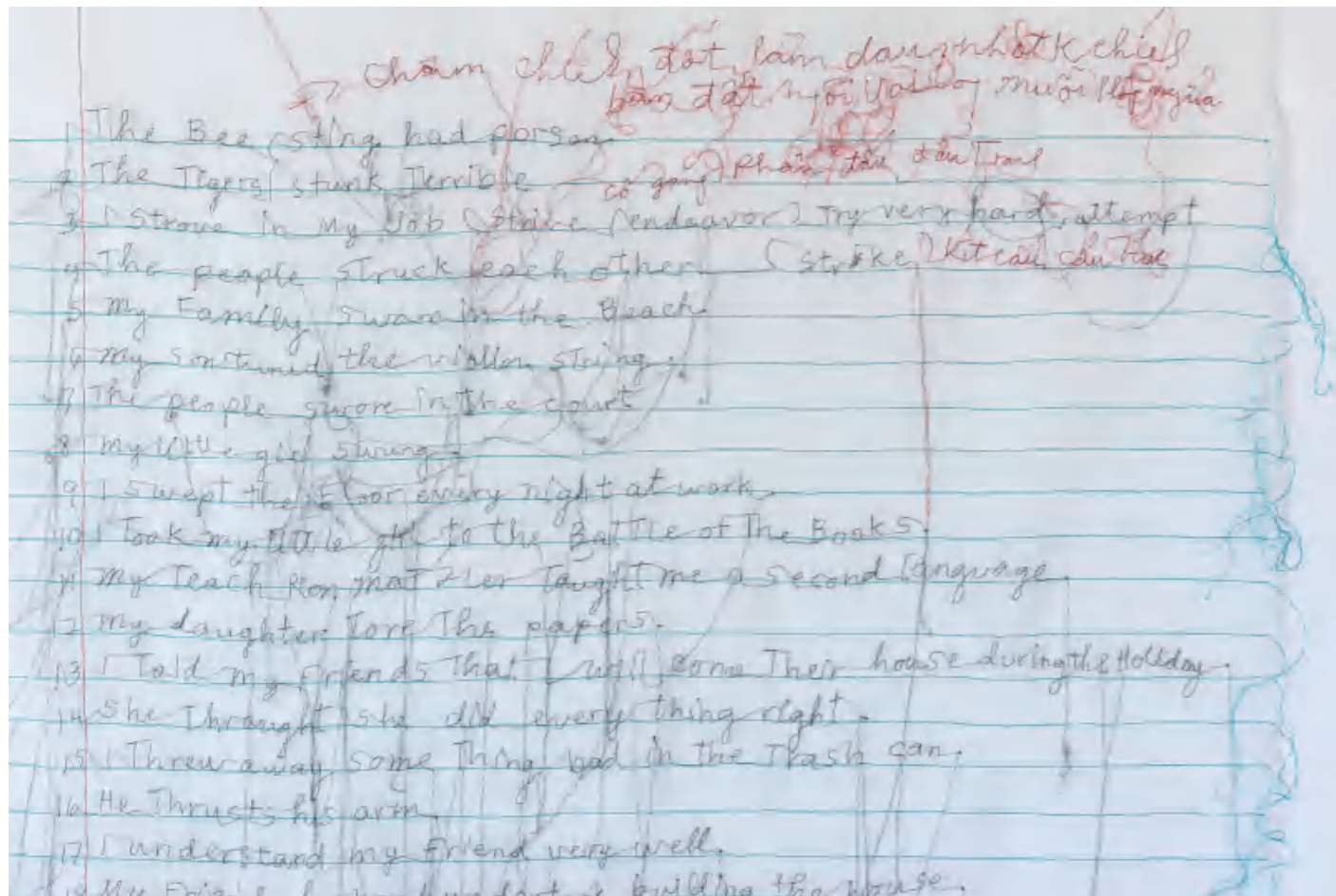
NN: It is true that the power of language can give us many thoughts about the future. The language in the working environment that I participated in, I felt was inconsistent with the reality that the workers experienced. I felt that the language that those companies used was only to promote their image and to be recognized by outsiders and the ultimate goal was to achieve benefits for the owners and not for the workers. Likewise, the language is also used a lot for new residential construction projects, making the locals mistakenly think that it has a high quality because of the use of foreign languages. But in reality, those projects do not show the real quality. The language is like a lullaby promise.

HN:

When considering how temporality is associated with development or with a people, I am reminded of Mimi Thi Nguyen's "The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages" [2], which brilliantly unpacks how underdeveloped, particularly non-white countries are associated with the past and how technological progress, capitalism, and liberal governance are associated with the present or future, and how different political realities are assigned temporalities that cannot coexist. I would add that spiritual practices by non-white people are perceived as also anachronistically 'stuck in the past,' even if they are practiced in the present.

In English, we have so many phrases that cement temporality with progress: 'looking back,' 'time marches on,' 'behind the times,' English is also specific and more rigid in the way that the past or future is expressed. Vietnamese is structured differently in that you can establish a time period that is understood by everyone, and then speak about the events in the present tense. It's a slight shift, but I think it's important in conceptualizing time. While we've talked about futurity, I believe that our work looks back and forward at the same time.

Growing up, my mother always had a statue of 'Quan Am' (Goddess of Mercy or Lady Buddha) on our mantle. I never understood her significance until returning home to Vietnam and understanding that this goddess also protects travelers. I think she is a great one to call upon for us as we take these journeys into the future, past, and back to the present again.



Huong Ngo, "The Bee sting had poison", detail view, 2025, conductive thread and cotton on silk organza. Courtesy of the artist.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Pellow, David N., and Lisa Sun-Hee Park. "The Silicon Valley of Dreams: Environmental Injustice, Immigrant Workers and the High-Tech Global Economy". New York University Press, 2003.

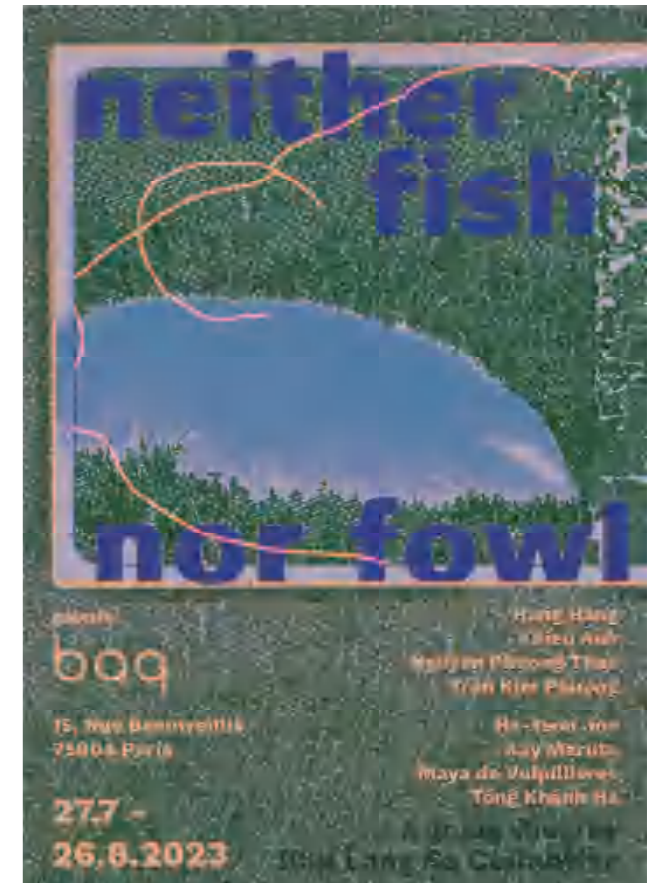
[2] Nguyen, Mimi Thi. "The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages". Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

A Conversation With Hang Hang

Founder of Phu Lang Sa Collabtive

Luu Bich Ngoc

Group exhibition "Neither Fish Nor Fowl" by Phu Lang Sa Collabtive at Gallery BAQ (Paris, France), 2023.
Photo: Phu Lang Sa Collabtive.



I first met Hang Hang on a winter afternoon in Berlin in 2021, just before she returned to Paris. We talked about art, living abroad, femininity, and Vietnam. As dusk fell, she boarded a train, leaving me with an invitation to join Phu Lang Sa Collabtive, the art collective she founded in 2018. This interview is a moment for us to reflect on the collective's practice and to share it with readers.

Phu Lang Sa Collabative members were preparing for their exhibition at Gallery BAQ (now Gallery BAO, Paris).
Photo: Phu Lang Sa Collabative.



Luu Bich Ngoc

What does the name Phu Lang Sa mean, and how did it come about?

Hang Hang
(Nguyen Thi Thanh Hang)

At the time, we didn't think too much about a name. In a conversation with comic artist Mai Xuan Bach, he mentioned that "Phu Lang Sa" was the old Vietnamese name for France. Since it reflected the group's point of origin, we decided to adopt it.

Luu Bich Ngoc

In 2023, Phu Lang Sa Collabative organized its first group exhibition, "Neither Fish Nor Fowl," featuring eight member artists at Gallery BAQ in Paris. Could you share more about the process of making this exhibition?

Luu Bich Ngoc

Hi Hang Hang! Back in 2021, you invited me to join Phu Lang Sa Collabative (then called Phu Lang Sa Collective), a group of cultural and artistic practitioners living in Europe. Could you tell our readers more about how the group began, as well as your artistic practice?

Hang Hang
(Nguyen Thi Thanh Hang)

"Neither Fish Nor Fowl" was Phu Lang Sa Collabative's first exhibition, supported by curator Le Thien-Bao and Gallery BAQ [10]. Running from July 27 to August 26, 2023, the exhibition featured works by group members including Tran Kim Phuong, Nguyen Khieu Anh, and Nguyen Phuong Thao, and myself. We extended invitations to young Asian and Asian-diaspora artists living in Europe, including Tong Khanh Ha [11] (Germany), Ha-Yeon Joo [12], Maya de Vulpillières [13], and Kay Maruta [14] (France).

Hang Hang
(Nguyen Thi Thanh Hang)

Hi Ngoc! I was trained in scenography at the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (National School of Decorative Arts) in Paris. My practice re-examines micro-histories and family narratives through sensual memory. Informed by my scenographic practice, I seek a holistic approach to art, focusing on the pivotal moment of encounter between the audience, the artwork, and the space. I want to create immersive spaces where reality, dreams, and magic converge.

In 2018, when I entered art school in Paris, I met several young artists, architects, and cultural practitioners. This prompted me to create a Facebook group so that we could stay connected, support each other, and share our interdisciplinary knowledge. Among the first members were Mai Xuan Bach [1], Tran Kim Phuong [2], Pipou Phuong Nguyen [3], Kao Thang [4], and Nguyen Khieu Anh [5].

Gradually, the group grew to include new friends like you, Nguyen Phuong Thao [6], Triet Nguyen [7], Minh Nhut [8], Nguyen Dong Truc [9], and others.

For me, Phu Lang Sa Collabative is like a train that keeps going, with many stops but no final destination. Some people get on, some get off; everyone is free to come back when they feel like "roaming the world" together. Our goal is to foster interdisciplinary exchange through events, conversations, talks, exhibitions, and screenings.

The exhibition's title was inspired by a line from the essay "Étranges Étrangers" (2010) by the French-Vietnamese writer Linda Le: "The pitfall of to be able to understand deeply two worlds is to be neither flesh nor fish, to stay in the vagueness so as not to be labeled." [15] As emerging artists in the early stages of our careers, each of us had our own reflections on identity and the social contexts in which we live, developing works from a process of cultural adaptation. The invited artists added their works to create a dynamic dialogue, continuously transforming the space. The exhibition took its final form during the last week of August 2023.

Phu Lang Sa Collabive,
"Neither Fish nor Fowl,"
Gallery BAQ (2023).
Photo: Phu Lang Sa Collabive



Luu Bich Ngoc

Besides the exhibition, Phu Lang Sa Collabive also organizes talks, lectures, and film screenings. The most recent was the talk "The Form of Information" with Fosco Lucarelli [16] from SOCKS-studio (MICROCITIES) — a platform for architectural theory, research, and practice from Italy — led by Vo Duy Kim [17] and Nguyen Triet. In 2023, the group collaborated with Artplas, an online art knowledge platform, to host the talk "Studying Art in France?" to share experiences about studying and practicing art in France. Could you tell us more about these activities?

Hang Hang
(Nguyen Thi Thanh Hang)

At first, our events were mainly for group members, such as conversations with the Appendix [18] (part of Nha San Collective), Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen [19], Truong Minh Quy [20], Pham Ha Ninh [21], Nguyen Dong Truc, Stéphane Degoutin [22] and Gwenola Wagon [23].

Over time, we wanted to expand our reach—for instance, to hold discussions about preparing applications and portfolios for art schools in France. These entrance exams are tough, and we hope more people will have the chance to study here. The interest in studying art in France is very high. Currently, our public Facebook group has more than 500 members, who regularly exchange knowledge about art education, practice, and post-graduation journeys.



The talk "The Form of Information" with
Fosco Lucarelli (SOCKS-studio, Italy) at
The Cricket Project (Hanoi). Photo: Phu
Lang Sa Collabive.



The talk "The Form of Information" with Fosco Lucarelli (SOCKS-studio, Italy) at The Cricket Project (Hanoi). Photo: Phu Lang Sa Collabative.



Luu Bich Ngoc

In a conversation among our group in 2022, we reflected on the idea of 'collective' and 'collectivity.' A group structure can offer connection, support, and a shared space for creativity. However, this process also defines who is in and who is out—who belongs to the group and who doesn't. Building a sense of camaraderie and solidarity in the art scene abroad, what difficulties or challenges have you encountered?

Even though Europe offers more resources and infrastructure for artistic practice, young artists still have to navigate issues of identity and (non-) belonging. Is this somehow reflected in the change of name from Phu Lang Sa Collective to Phu Lang Sa Collabative? And could you share a little about the group's future plans?

Hang Hang
(Nguyen Thi Thanh Hang)

As you mentioned about 'collective' and 'collectivity,' about 'belonging' and 'not-belonging', we need both closed group formats—where sharing is more intimate—and open formats—with invitations and collaborations. Phu Lang Sa Collabative expanded from the original group in the spirit of openness and interdisciplinarity, unconfined by geographical distance. Rather than a fixed entity, we operate quite flexibly, since our members have diverse practices and interests.

Looking ahead, we hope to grow from a small, close-knit group into a broader community for Vietnamese art practitioners abroad. The creative environment in France and Europe brings particular challenges: how do we create opportunities for ourselves, and other artists from minority communities living and working here? I think of Phu Lang Sa Collabative as a train—with encounters, stopovers, friends old and new, and the ever-changing scenery through the window. Thank you, Ngoc, for being on this journey with us.

Luu Bich Ngoc

Thank you so much, Hang Hang, for your insights!

ABOUT

Luu Bich Ngoc

Luu Bich Ngoc (she/her) is a Berlin-based cultural worker focusing on accessibility and empowerment in the arts with transdisciplinary and intersectional approaches. Her zine *nho nho quen quen* (2025) explores mourning and remembrance practices between marginalized communities in Central Vietnam and Berlin. She curated the film festivals *Dear Vietnam* (2024) and *Vietnam 50!* (2025), and co-coordinated workshops and screenings with institutions such as Schwules Museum (Berlin), No Cai Bum festival (Vietnam), and Linden Museum (Stuttgart). Her writings and translations appear in Art Republik Vietnam, Re-Connect catalogue, Stadtsprachen, Zzz Review, and Mo Art Space. She currently works as Fundraising Coordinator for a publication on the 50-year legacy of the Vietnamese-American War.

Hang Hang

Hằng Hằng (b. 1995, Hanoi) is a visual artist, performance maker, and scenographer working between Vietnam and Europe. She holds a master's degree in scenography from École des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Her work reexamines micro-histories and family narratives through sensual memory. Positioned at the intersection of narrative turbulence, Hằng Hằng explores the impossibility of translation. Navigating between documentary and imagined landscapes, she creates immersive spaces where reality, dreams, and magic converge. She is the founder of Phu Lang Sa Collective and was awarded the 2025 Dogma Prize, with a solo exhibition at Galerie BAO (Paris). Her work has been shown at the Setouchi Triennale, Linden Museum, POUH, and Documenta 15 with Nha San Collective.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Mai Xuan Bach is an illustrator. He completed his diploma at the Delcourt Comics Academy. His first comic book is entitled "Le passage intérieur" (2022), in collaboration with Maxime de Lisle.

[2] Tran Kim Phuong (pseudonym) goes with different identities when it comes to artistic practices. They were born and raised in Hanoi for 23 years and later lived in different cities.

[3] Pipou Phuong Nguyen is a storyteller, director, scriptwriter and animator working in cinema d'animation in Paris. She directed several short films and music videos, including "Goodbye Robin!" (2020) and "The Boy Who Cheated Death" (2023), which were selected in numerous international festivals.

[4] Kao Thang: graphic designer, graduated at Ensad. His artworks juggle between art and design through an immersive exploration for memory, culture and nature of imagery, seeking to convey their multi-sensory nuances through graphic representation.

[5] Nguyen Khieu Anh has been working on a Ph.D. thesis since 2019 at Aix-Marseille University. Her research mainly focuses on French theatre in Indochina and its reception by Indochinese newspapers written in French during the colonial era (1887-1945).

[6] Nguyen Phuong Thao is an artist and filmmaker currently working in France, Germany and Vietnam. Her works have been projected and exhibited in institutions such as the Centre Pompidou (Paris, 2024), Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (Spain, 2024), Casino Luxembourg (2023), and Piccadilly Circus (London, 2023).

[7] Born and raised in Saigon, Triet Nguyen is an architect, product designer, self-taught programmer, librarian, and translator. He is the founder of multidisciplinary practices such as tantâm, sicLib, and PLATEAU.

[8] Nguyen Le Minh Nhut holds a Master of Architecture degree from The Bartlett, UCL (London). He is the co-founder of Gian Giua and currently works as an architect in Vietnam.

[9] Nguyen Dong Truc is a graphic designer. After graduating from EsadType (Amiens, France), she immerses herself in linguistic research to create a Vietnamese text typeface.

[10] Galerie BAO is located at the address of 15 Rue Beautreillis, 75004 Paris. As the co-founding partners launch their individual projects, Galerie BAO is evolving. While Quinnie TAN continues to run the space at 15 rue Beautreillis, LE Thien-Bao founded Galerie BAO.

[11] Tong Khanh Ha is a visual artist from Hanoi and graduated in Communication Design at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences Hamburg.

[12] Ha-Yeon Joo is based in Seoul, South Korea. She entered Korea National University of Arts in 2019. She is currently studying at Beaux-Arts de Paris for an exchange, at the studios of Emmanuelle Huynh and Götz Arndt. She practices various media, including performance, installation, painting, and sculpture.

[13] Maya de Vulpillières is a French-Khmer artist and currently in her fourth year at L'École des Arts décoratifs Paris, specializing in Space Art, as well as writing a thesis. She works with photos, drawings, ceramics, paintings, and installations; she introduces herself through drawings and the space where they took place.

[14] Kay Maruta is currently completing a Master's degree at L'École des Arts décoratifs Paris. Originally a photographer, he continues to challenge and produce works in diverse fields of expression, including installation, video, sculpture, and music while emphasizing a sense of balance between concept and technique.

[15] Translated from French by Nguyen Khieu Anh.

[16] Fosco Lucarelli is an architect (University of Rome 3, ETSAM Madrid), teacher and scientific curator based in Paris.

[17] Vo Duy Kim is a PhD candidate in Architecture, Landscape, and Urbanism at Harvard University (USA).

[18] Founded in 2010 by six artists, the Ha Noi-based performance art group The Appendix is currently made up of four core members: Nguyen Huy An, Vu Duc Toan, Nguyen Song and Ngo Thanh Bac.

[19] Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen is a researcher and visual artist using archives and a broad range of media to investigate issues of historicity, collectivity, utopian politics, and multiculturalism via theories.

Walls you have heard about

When asked about the word "wall," people usually describe something hard, big, rough, and immovable—a symbol of rules, restrictions, or obstacles. However, from another perspective, the "wall" is not as crude as it is often imagined.

A "wall" can be a mark of hardship and evolution. A "wall" has hidden stories and memories from a long time ago and is waiting to be discovered. A "wall" represents identity which continues with what already exists, at the same time, records all the new and creative shifts.

This article weaves metaphors and the lived experiences of artists in Hanoi today, drawing on conversations with artists Lam Na[1], Zunng Zunng[2], and Dao Thao Phuong[3] working in the field of paintings and visual arts. The wall becomes a symbolic object that makes resilience and fluidity tangible - how artists root themselves while staying open, balancing steadiness with wandering. Through their voices, the wall becomes less of an obstacle and more of a guidance, shaping the rhythms of contemporary art in Ha Noi - a city that is constantly shifting.

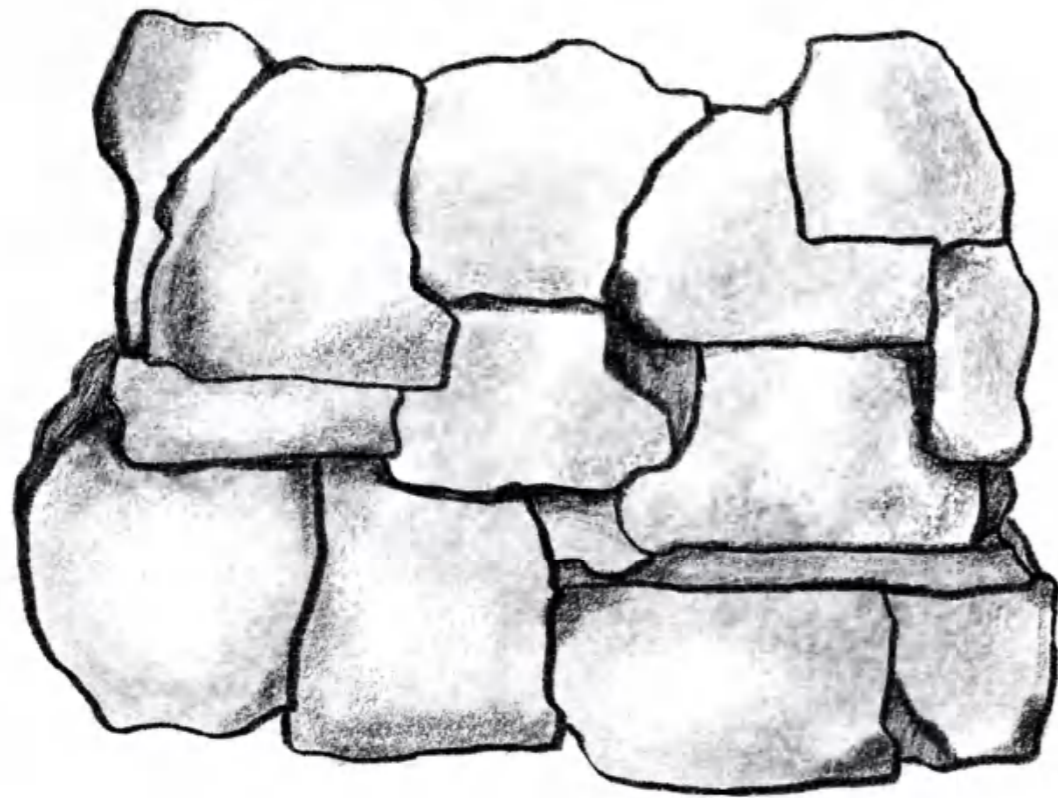


Illustration of the wall by the author

Phi Trang

The Wall As Challenge

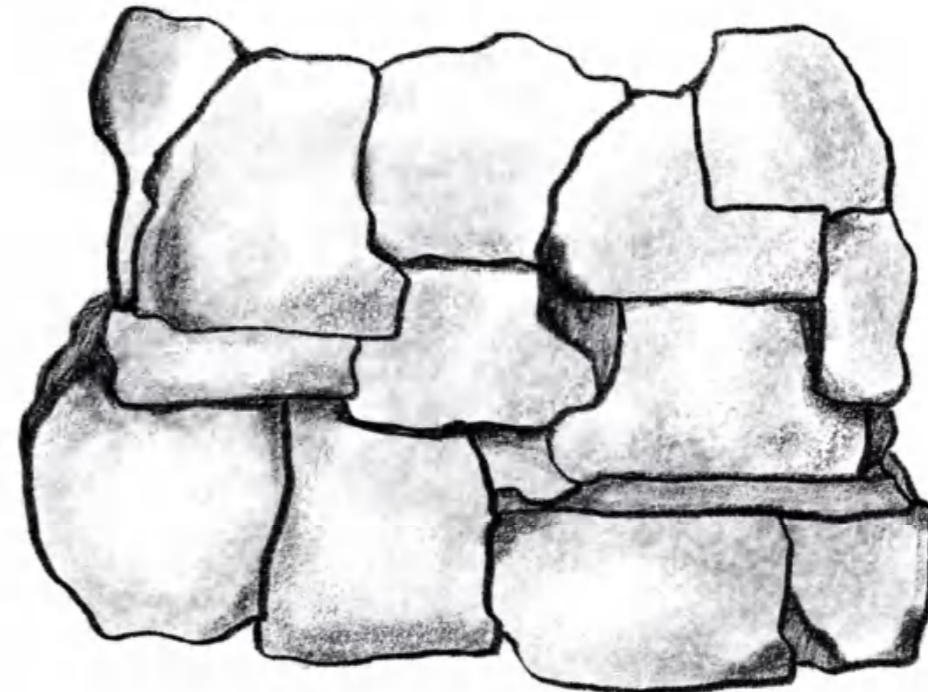


Illustration of the wall by the author

Through the stories and experiences of diaspora and local artists, as well as the art production teams, the challenges of artistic practice in Vietnam and particularly in Hanoi come into view. In the landscape of contemporary art in Vietnam since Đổi Mới (1986)[4], Fine Arts Magazine (2022) noted that the past two decades have witnessed striking breakthroughs and bold innovations in artistic expression. Yet, a lingering question remains: why is the audience for contemporary art still so limited? Why does the public hesitate to engage with the contemporary art scene, sometimes even feeling skeptical? Artists long to work in public spaces and share their works with a wider audience rather than being private or hidden away behind closed doors.

The Confrontation

For many diaspora artists, returning to or stepping into Hanoi's art scene brings a double collision. On one hand, they are amazed by the resilience and adaptability so deeply tied to Vietnamese identity. On the other, the cautiousness and privacy that shape contemporary art here become a kind of "wall" full of real challenges. It demands flexibility and patience to understand the rhythm of the art scene here.

Networks and Circles

From the era of Truong Tan[5], Tran Luong[6], Ly Tran Quynh Giang[7] to Tuan Mami[8], Nguyen Trinh Thi[9], Do Hiep[10]... among others, we can clearly see the imprints of networks and circles of artists. Collectives and organizations like Nha San Collective[11], San Art[12], Heritage Space[13], A Space[14], Art Patronage & Development (APD)[15], Vietnam Art Collection[16]... keep the conversations alive, opening rooms for experiments and collaborations. The "heartbeat" of Hanoi's art scene is steady and stubborn, pounding at its own tempo which is sometimes slow, sometimes irregular but always promising something new for the one who stays long enough.

Installation view, "A Beginning - Launching VAC Shanghai", 2024



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Lam Na's Open Studio "It's been many years since we last met", VAC Hanoi, 2025.
Photo: Tran Tuyet Nga

The People

Alongside artists is a whole team of directors, producers, architects and art handlers who help to shape the space, handle the materials, hang the works, and make sure the artist's vision reaches the public intact. They, too, face their own "walls": limited materials, space constraints, the weight of "seeing things through to the end." And in this grind, quiet creativity often speaks the loudest.

Imagine the preparation for a group or solo exhibition: sketching the first draft, sourcing materials and vendors, negotiating and balancing the exhibition space, coordinating until opening day, and exchanging with partners to seek connection. Every step has its wall: production budgets, mechanical licensing procedures, conflicting perspectives... Yet, pushing past that wall can open up entirely new ways of working and sharing, and can seize new opportunities for both artists and their teams.

So the "wall" in contemporary Vietnamese art is not just a barrier. It can also be a test, a way to measure patience, openness, and adaptability from artists. And once we learn to face it together, hesitation might slowly give way to connection.

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The Wall is Ever Present



Illustration of the wall
by the author

For artist Lam Na, the "wall" is the embodiment of layers upon layers of heritage, memories, and meanings as if waiting for her to uncover each layer.

Lam Na once wrote: "I do not heal, I do not explain, I just stand there." A short line, yet it instantly bounces back at whoever reads it. For Lam Na "the wall" is not an obstacle to be broken down; it is a silent witness, always present and urging us to pause and listen. The wall does not explain or ask questions; it just stands there, watching life's cycles unfold.

As the author conversed with Lam Na, the artist often spoke of "presence" as something as natural as breathing. Materials are like a wardrobe; you do not just pick anything - there is a hidden closet where the right thing already exists, waiting for you to reach out and feel its truth. She laughs and admits her belief in spirituality: just let the earth and sky lead the way, Heaven - Earth - Human. Working with soil feels completely different from painting: no rigid compositions, only unexpected connections, an original flow where even a single gesture can hold the weight of a thousand answers.



Lam Na's Open Studio "It's been many years since we last met", VAC Hanoi, 2025.
Photo: Tran Tuyet Nga

Lam Na placed "The First Creature"(2023)
at Imperial Citadel of Thang Long wall in
Hanoi. Image courtesy of the artist.



When installing her solo exhibition “Đã từng - Tiếp diễn” (Have Been - Eternally) at Hanoi Studio Gallery, as she placed patches of terracotta sculptures across the floor, she suddenly noticed there were 88 of them, a number tied to the bát quái (I Ching trigrams), a symbol of cyclical movement. Coincidentally (or not), 88 is also the exact number of constellations charted by the International Astronomical Union (IAU). For her, each of these moments feels like a quiet reply from the universe, like placing one more brick on an invisible path that reveals itself step by step.

While working, Lam Na often sets her rational side aside. Reflecting on her residency with Vietnam Art Collection (VAC) in the past months, she described it as “switches and signals”: everything flowing with its own rhythm, from Phung Nguyen[17] dynasty skins to the starry sky of Sa Huynh[18], which later appeared in her open studio “Mấy mươi năm rồi mới gặp lại nhau” (It’s Been Decades Since We Last Met) at VAC Hanoi. Today, she continues to experiment with her “universe”: moving skins, primal life forms, evocations of the collective memory we all share.



“The First Land” (2023) shown at Lam Na’s solo exhibition “Have Been - Eternally” exhibition at Hanoi Studio Gallery. Installation day with support of Hanoi Studio Gallery Curator (Hoang Hoang), Studio 42 and friends. Image courtesy of the artist.



Lam Na and her son deinstalling her artwork at VAC Hanoi. Photo by the author.

Sometimes, it takes extraordinary circumstances such as the experience of motherhood for people to truly encounter art and awaken their primal instincts. For Lam Na, becoming a mother feels surprisingly close to her artistic practice: there’s no set script, no sketch to follow, only earth and body leading the way. Her mission is simply to allow each collision, each kneading, each moment of shaping to surprise her.

“Art is everywhere and it belongs to everyone. The question is not whether art exists in our lives but whether we are willing to notice its presence.” - Lam Na said. Indeed, there will always be “a wall” for you to uncover, a story waiting for you to bring the final piece that connects the entire journey.

Wall - Companionship and Support

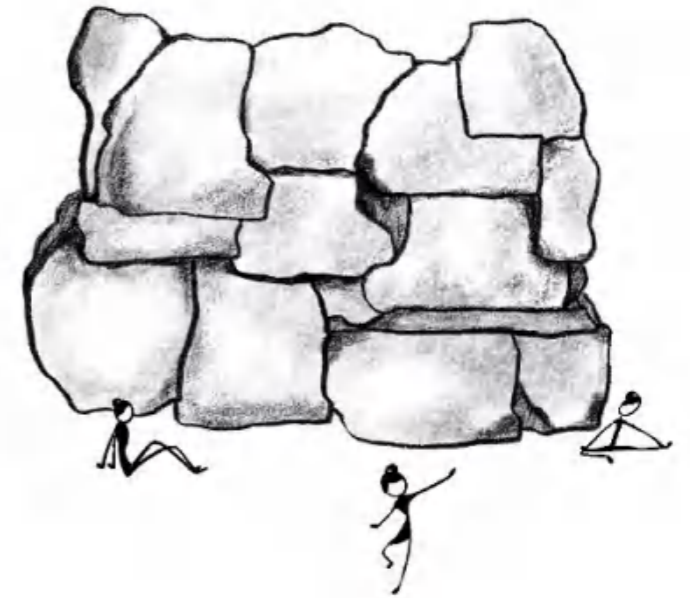


Illustration of the wall by the author

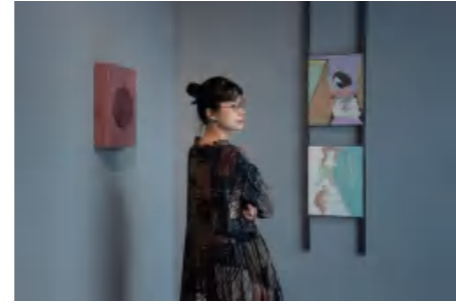
The wall signifies the bond of companionship and the sustaining support of souls who love art, narrated from the perspective of the two artists Zunng Zunng and Dao Thao Phuong.

In conversation with the author, artist Zunng Zunng often reminds that: “truth matters.” This sense of truth has followed her quietly yet persistently, from the very first sketch to her ongoing work in building an art community in Hanoi. The artist shared how naturally her artistic path and her philosophy weave together. For Zunng Zunng, authenticity is not just for her own paintings, but it is something she hopes anyone can encounter, a resonance they can step into and recognize within themselves.

"Family!"- Zunng Zunng admits "is the first crossroad and the deepest root of my art". For over a decade she has returned again and again to the motif of the "staircase". "At first, it was simply a square, rigid object, my earliest memory of being taken by my dad to a half-built house". Zunng Zunng did not try to rationalize this special obsession, leaving it as an open-ended question. This image resurfaced when she became a mother. A simple moment when her father walked upstairs with her son triggered her first "staircase" painting where human figures finally appeared.

The "I" here is not her own but borrowed through the eyes of her child, continuing the story of family bonds. "This way of stepping aside and letting another's gaze speak has become a signature of my practice". Perhaps it also explains why Zunng Zunng naturally plays the role of connector, a "wall" to rely on in Hanoi's art community.

"I want to be a good individual within a community, not just a good individual on my own." - she said. Studio 42 was built from a shared passion for painting through countless quiet sacrifices; we thrive as a group bound by sincerity. Every week, the group hosts live drawing sessions at the studio, open to everyone. You might bump into familiar names in Hanoi's art scene, an enthusiastic beginner, an independent artist or someone from an entirely different field who simply loves to draw. In this mix of different materials, backgrounds, and perspectives, Studio 42 has become a community where individuality is not forgotten but respected and nurtured.



Artist Zunng Zunng at the exhibition Home in Manzi Art Space, Hanoi. Photo: Ca.



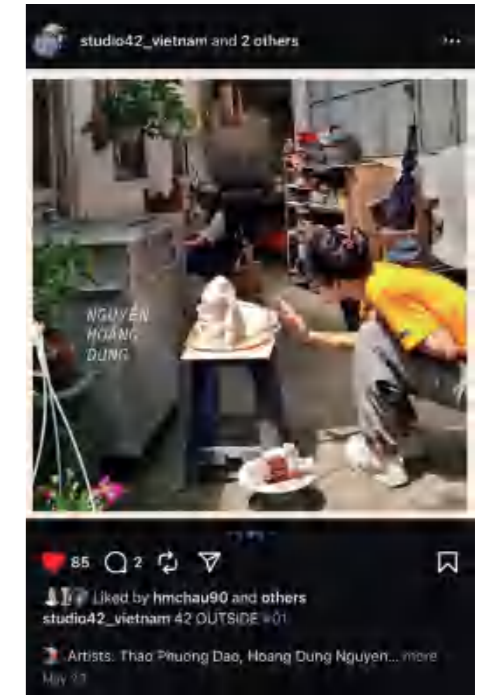
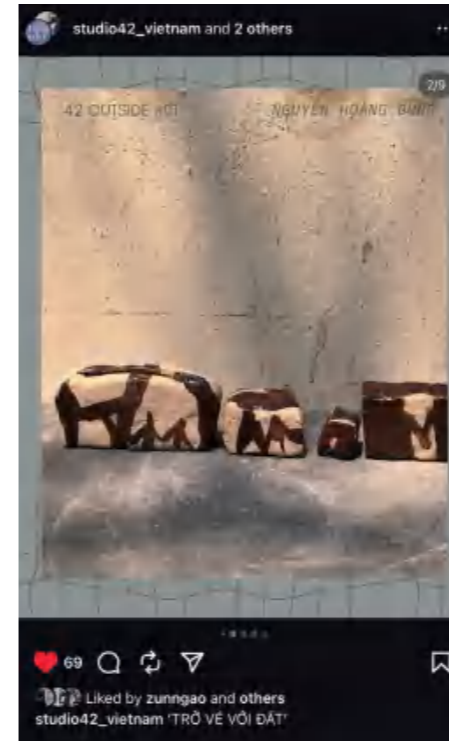
Artist Lam Na (on the left) and Artist Zunng Zunng (on the right) at Zunng Zunng's solo exhibition "nhân (thân)" at Hanoi Studio Gallery. Photo: Tran Thao Linh.



(from left to right) Artists Dao Thao Phuong, Artist Nguyen Yen, Artist Zunng Zunng, Artist Quyet Duong, 42 OUTSIDE activity at Quy Nhon, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.



Artist Zunng Zunng and her son at her solo exhibition "nhân (thân)" at Hanoi Studio Gallery. Photo: Tran Thao Linh



42 OUTSIDE (2025) organized by artists Zunng Zunng and Dao Thao Phuong at Studio of Pham Quang Duc architect. They were testing Samot soil, Red soil, etc.

The Catalyst



Artist Dao Thao Phuong.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Artist Zunng Zunng (on the left) & Artist Dao Thao Phuong (on the right) during the trekking trip to Pu Ta Leng mountain, 2023. Photo: Artist Cao Thuc.



(from the left to right) Artist Cao Thuc, Artist Quyet Duong, Artist Zunng Zunng during the trekking trip to Pu Ta Leng mountain, 2023. Photo provided by Artist Cao Thuc.

Dao Thao Phuong began with portraits in 2021–2022 and her focus on this subject lasted for nearly two years. Her works were not about elaborating the composition, but about the emotion. She emphasized, "It is always emotion". At that time, for her, people were the most natural vessels to carry and reflect feelings because, after all, she herself is human too.

Everything shifted in early 2023 during a mountain trek with Studio 42. Her long-standing love of nature suddenly came alive in a new way. The forest, the rhythm of life outdoors, the friends she shared the moment with, left a remarkable imprint on her. Out of this came her series "Into the Wild" where she began painting people and nature together: friends, daily life, all nestled in different landscapes. Gradually, she let the figures slip away as though answering to an overwhelming pull, a call from nature. Recently, her work focuses entirely on trees, plants, and wilderness without figuration.

Studio 42 during the trekking trip to Pu Ta Leng mountain, 2023. Photos provided by Artist Cao Thuc



Recognition and Devotion

"For me, painting is a way of transmitting emotion; color is the most direct way. I did not study in an art school and did not go through the typical basics. My path into painting was simply from looking at great masterpieces. I was deeply moved by their color palettes; from that point, I knew that I wanted to devote my life to living within those feelings." She digs deep into color intuitively, not following any set of curriculum. "There is no fixed harmony; I just love placing bold colors right next to each other. Nature has taught me all I need to know about color."

For Dao Thao Phuong, experimenting and experiencing are essential steps to discover both herself and her artistic language. Only then can she fully commit, take it all the way, until art becomes a mirror and a companion to her true self. Artist Zunng Zunng describes her friend's art: "Dao Thao Phuong's paintings have this raw power; they are direct, uncompromising with a fierce conviction in the essence of painting itself. You can tell right away if it's her work."

For Dao, Studio 42 has been a lifeline and a relay station that fuels her journey. There, Dao Thao Phuong and other young artists sharpen their skill, exchange ideas and countless art topics without being interrupted.

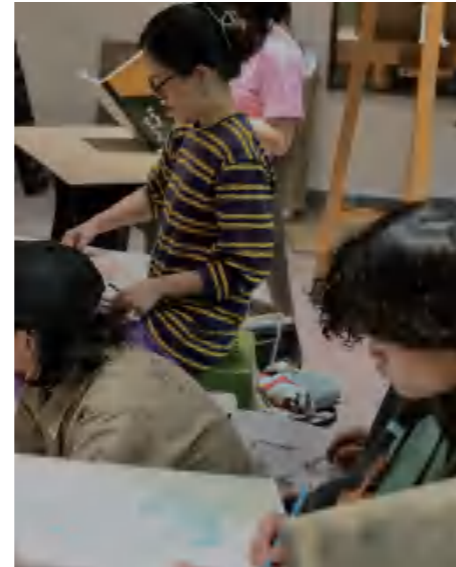
The walls change when our perspectives change. What once seemed like a barrier could turn into a threshold of flexibility, creativity, and a story that begins again from the start. There will always be walls—the challenges, the companionship, the support, and many others. Perhaps what is important is not to overcome any wall at all, but the way we let it always present, allowing it to shape, reflect, and renew the ways we do.



Dao Thao Phuong, "Pineapple Island", 2025, oil on canvas, 80 x 180 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Artist Dao Thao Phuong at Studio 42. Image courtesy of the artist.



FOOTNOTES

[1] Lam Na: Born in 1987, Lam Na graduated from Huế University of Fine Arts in 2011 and later pursued her MA in Fine Arts at Mahasarakham University in Thailand. Her works have since appeared in various exhibitions in Vietnam and abroad: Hanoi Grapevine's Finest (2024), Seoul Art Festival (2016), Grapevine Selection – Volume 2 (2015), ASEAN Contemporary Art Exhibition in Bangkok and ASEAN Art Festival in Hua Hin (2014), and Vietnamese Painting Exhibition organized by the Danish Embassy in Hanoi (2013). Yet her true turning point came in 2022, when she arrived at the ceramic village of Bat Trang, Gia Lam. Touching the soil, learning the traditional handcraft process, she calls that encounter a kind of fate, one that led her closer to raw, primal materials and opened up a whole new chapter in her practice.

[2] Zung Zung: Born Nguyen Hoang Dung in Hanoi in 1995, Zung Zung graduated with a BFA in Painting from the Vietnam University of Fine Arts. In her own words: "My works always aim for one thing—returning to the roots, honoring human beings, and awakening that eternal compassion within us." Since 2020, she has walked alongside Studio 42. Every Saturday, the studio becomes a gathering ground for sharing artistic experiences. Alongside with these activities, they also develop other community projects: 42 OUTSIDE(17), 42ART(18), group exhibitions, fundraising activities under STUDIO42's Selection(19).... As a core member, Zung Zung has taken part in exhibitions like "Tôi là chúng ta" (2021), "Open Studio 42:2" (2022), "GÔI-MO" (2023), and "Nhịp bởi sỏi" (2025).

Beyond Studio 42, her works have appeared in major group shows such as "Thật khó để mơ về" (It's Hard to Dream About) at the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum, "Người làm vườn" (The Gardeners) and "Hanoi Art Connecting 5" at VCCA(20).

[3] Dao Thao Phuong: Born in 1992 in Hai Phong, Dao Thao Phuong is a self-taught artist. She graduated from the Academy of Finance and is interested in painting, especially nature and trees. Her works draw on the deep meaning of connection between people and nature. She is currently an active member of Studio 42, and participates in organizing Studio 42 exhibition.

[4] Doi Moi (Renovation): a series of economic and political reforms in the 1980s that marked Vietnam's transition from a centrally planned economy to a "socialist - oriented market economy." The policy opened the country to global trade, foreign investment, and greater cultural exchange, creating significant shifts in Vietnamese society, including the arts.

[5] Truong Tan : Born in 1963, the artist is one of the pioneers of contemporary art in Vietnam, known for his provocative performance and boundary-pushing installation works, which made lasting influences on younger generations of artists in Vietnam.

[6] Tran Luong: Born in 1960, Tran Luong is an artist, independent curator, and pioneering activist in Vietnam, known as co-founder of Nhà Sàn Studio and the APD organization.

[7] Ly Tran Quynh Giang: Born in 1978, the artist is one of the most prominent female contemporary artists in Vietnam, known for her works ranging from oil paintings and woodcuts.

[8] Tuan Mami (real name Nguyen Anh Tuan): Born in 1981, Tuan Mami is a Vietnamese interdisciplinary artist, known for his conceptual-based work employing installation, video, performance to explore the meaning of life, social interaction, and cultural and social issues through research-based projects.

[9] Nguyen Trinh Thi: Born in 1973, she is an independent filmmaker and visual artist based in Hanoi.

[10] Do Hiep: Born in 1984, Do Hiep is a contemporary visual artist of Vietnam, known for his abstract works that deeply reflect social issues and emotions.

[11] Nha San Collective began operating as an independent artist collective in Hanoi in 2013, when a group of friends set up their publicly accessible space (Source: Nha San Collective).

[12] San Art, founded in 2007 in Ho Chi Minh City as an artist-led platform, has since grown into a leading independent arts organisation in Vietnam and the region. Maintaining a commitment to grassroots support for local and international artists and cultural work, Sàn Art is also a site for critical discourse with regular educational initiatives (Source: San Art).

[13] Heritage Space, established in 2014, is an independent art organization situated in Hanoi, Vietnam, operating as a social enterprise (Source: Heritage Art Space).

[14] A Space is an independent non-profit art space and a community of art practitioners engaged in experimental practices based in Long Bien, Ha Noi. A Space was established in 2018 by Tuan Mami, Rory Gill, and Le Dung Hiep with the mission of supporting and developing independent local artists in Vietnam, a place where the conditions for the arts are often challenging and infrastructures and resources limited (Source: A Space).

[15] APD Center (Center for Art Patronage and Development) is a social enterprise established in October 2020 with the aim of supporting artistic creativity and promoting cultural and social development.

[16] Vietnam Art Collection is a non-profit, research-driven art organization based in Hanoi, New York, and Shanghai.

[17] The Phung Nguyen culture of Vietnam (c. 2,000 – 1,500 BC) is a name given to a culture of the Bronze Age in Vietnam which takes its name from an archeological site in Phung Nguyen, 18 km (11 mi) east of Viet Tri discovered in 1958 (Source: Wikipedia)

[18] Sa Huynh Culture is an ancient civilization in southern Vietnam whose origins are variously dated by scholars between 1000 BCE and 200 CE, existing in parallel with Dong Son culture in the north.

[19] Studio 42, founded in 2020, is an art community founded by young artists passionate about life drawing. They meet every weekend to practice and exchange valuable personal artistic experiences.

[20] 42 OUTSIDE refers to a self-operated activity, where small groups within the 42 community come together to develop ideas and carry out the creative process in a context outside the familiar studio.

[21] 42ART co-founded Studio 42 and is a group of young painters working together, with the desire to strengthen team spirit in a context where artists often choose to work individually.

[22] STUDIO42's selection: each quarter, the 42 group organizes an online Selection and at each Selection, the group presents to viewers selected paintings at Studio42 by group members, thereby promoting the practice and dedicated working process of each painter.

[23] VCCA (Vincom Center for Contemporary Art) is a non-profit art space funded by Vingroup, one of the largest conglomerates of Vietnam, focusing on technology, industry, real estate development, retail and services from healthcare to hospitality.

FEATURE

A Wet Wet-Market

Collage By Hand



“A Wet Wet-market” is a proposed wet-market in Hoi An Ancient Town, a UNESCO World Heritage site at the mouth of the Thu Bon River on Vietnam’s coast. The thesis asserts that architecture can serve as both signifier and meaning-maker, bridging the gap between image and reality in Hoi An, where climate and ecology hasten life, while tourism and preservation suspend time. The enforcement of Hoi An’s preservation is expediting its death. In response, I propose an architecture infused with, and representative of, the living spirit of Hoi An: a town, a market, and a field that keeps growing and changing. It negotiates between water, people, economies, and identities through responsive forms and tectonic variations.

Ryan Nguyen

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Big Drawing
Plan and Section

“A Wet Wet-Market” engages the tension between architectural preservation and the dynamic flows of water, products, and people. The new market introduces three dynamic layers, allowing vendors to adjust spaces for daily routines and changing water levels:

- The Groundscape** An infrastructural field that organizes different modes of traffic and spatial arrangements—where water meets ground.
- The Roofscape** An architectural field that diffuses sunlight and enhances natural ventilation—where air meets light.
- The Lattice** A connective network of light structures and mezzanines providing storage, signage, and operational agency for vendors—where tectonic becomes identity.



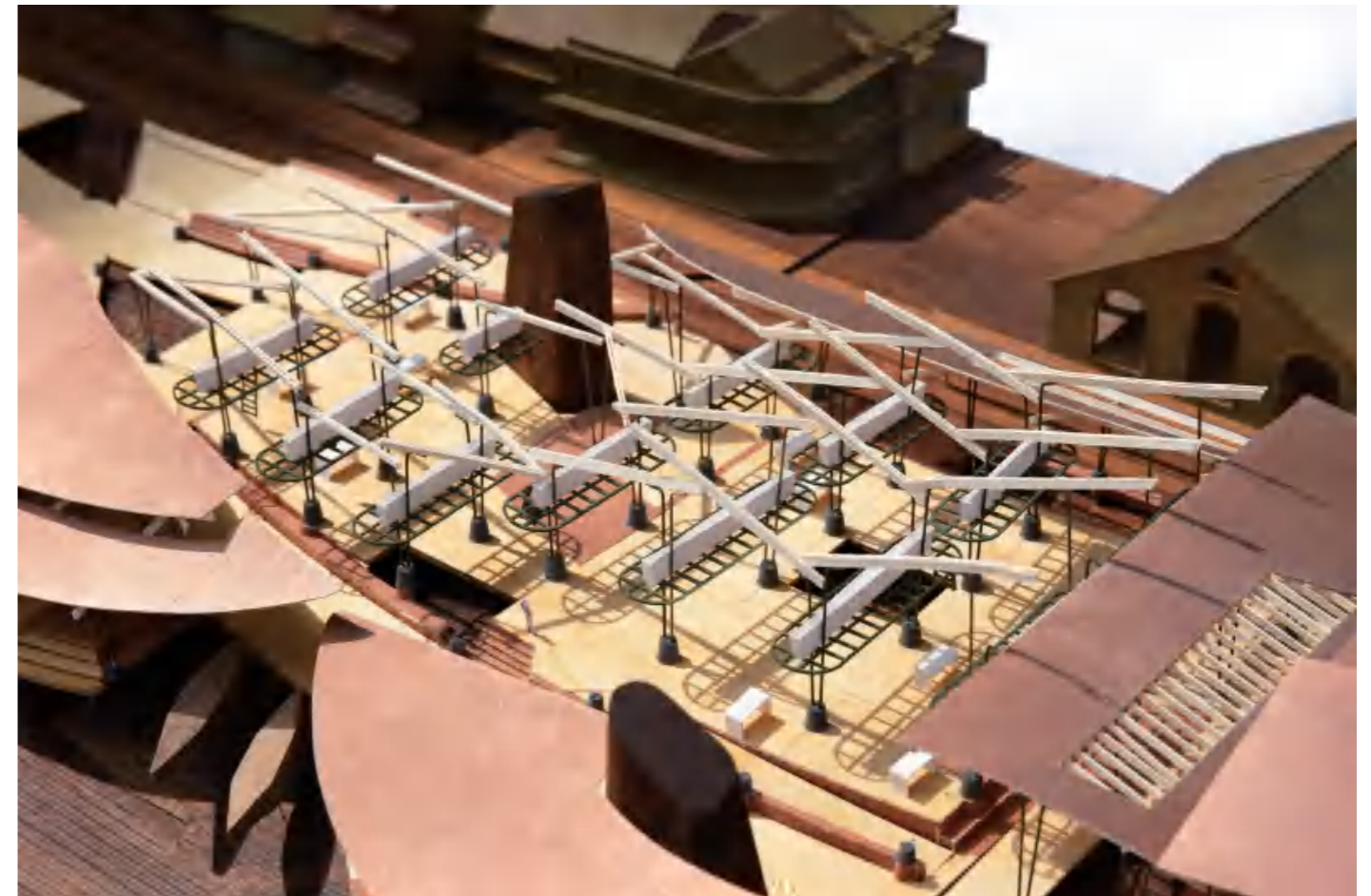
Model Picture: Groundscape



Model Picture: Roofscape



Model Picture: Platform



Model Picture: Constructability

Hoi An

Hoi An Ancient Town, initially inhabited by the Cham people, was integrated into Vietnamese territory in the 15th century. Later, Japanese and Cantonese merchants transformed it into a thriving trade hub. After enduring two wars in the 20th century, Hoi An was designated a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 1999. Since then, it has become a magnet for tourists who—along with UNESCO and local authorities—have sought to preserve it as a cultural artifact frozen in time. Yet this static vision conflicts with the town’s urgent needs to adapt to climate change, flooding, overtourism, and labor displacement.

At the threshold between architectural heritage and rising water, between UNESCO and non-UNESCO zones, and between nightfall and daybreak commerce, the rapidly decaying local wet-market remains the last place that sustains longtime residents rather than catering to visitors. Neglected by tourists, the wet market is an ad hoc and lively space. It lacks clean water and storage for vendors yet is vital to Hoi An’s heterogeneity. It denies the imagery of Hoi An, instead it is, and serves the “real” Hoi An.



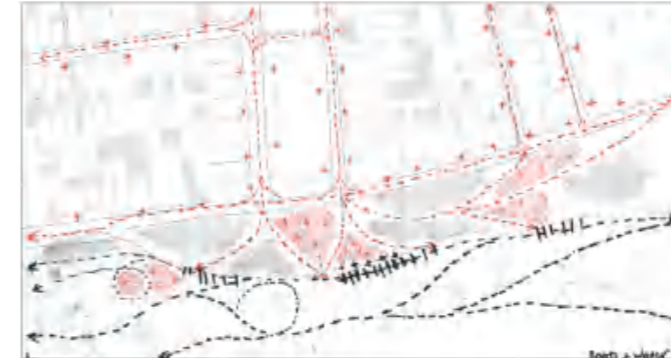
Site Picture



Sketch 1
Traffic Study of Pedestrian



Sketch 2
Traffic Study of Mopeds



Sketch 3
Traffic Study of Boats and Water



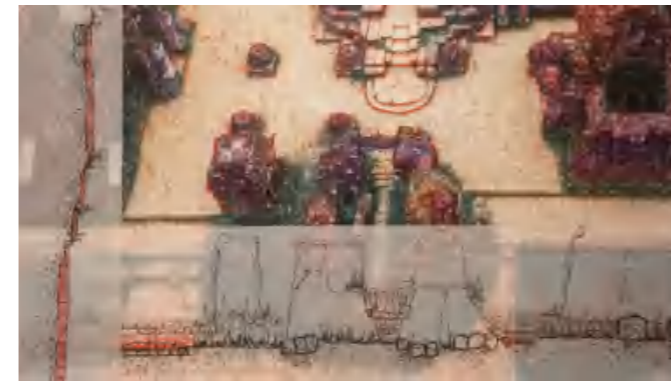
Sketch 4
Groundscape



Sketch 5
Study of My Son's Planning



Sketch 6
Study of My Son's Void



Sketch 7
Study of My Son's Groundscape



Sketch 8
Study of My Son's Groundscape

Wet-Market Typology

As an architectural typology, markets in Western countries have long been confined within enclosed form that are neither adaptive nor expendable. The logic of an enclosed form—limited—directly opposes the logic of commercial spaces—excessive, as explained by John McMorrough. Commercial spaces are meant to grow in all directions with similar systematic logic. For example, the now-demolished Les Halles market in Paris was designed with the infamous elongated arcade, with vendors assembled along the two sides. The building's colonnade, whose logic is points on a line, was not corresponding to the market's logic of spatial organization and commerce. As a result, vendors and commercial activities often happen outside of the market. As the structure was no more than a covered canopy for the hyper-functionality of the market, Les Halles slowly reduced to being only the background of such urban activity.

In Hoi An, the French built an elongated-gable market with the same logic of design with Les Halles. Since its form is so enclosed with a rigid superimposed grid, the market has slowly lost its popularity. The activities spill outside of the market. It has now been more catered to tourists who venture inside just to walk quickly through the market. It exists in the unproductive zone between inhabited and visited. Its confined formal gesture refrains it to be accepted by both the active daily lives of Vietnamese and the beautified images of the tourists' preconception, regardless of its gable roof and yellow walls.

I think markets, especially an East Asian wet-market, is not singular form but *field projects*.

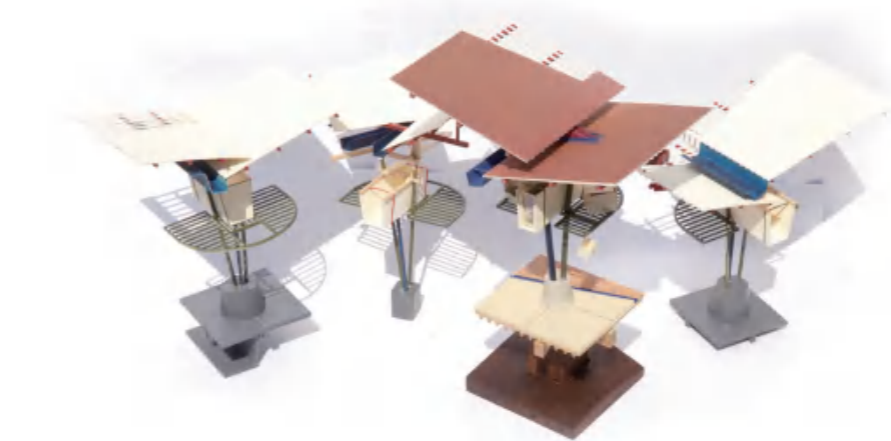
The significance of this project is, first, to reintroduce "the history of the land," particularly within the context of being designed and presented at an American Institution—Princeton University—on land that was once Native. The groundscape and platforms of "A Wet Wet-Market" was inspired by the Cham people - the first inhabitants of the southern land of Vietnam. I researched and studied their landscape and spatial intelligence to find a solution to the climate problems that humanity has escalated. The project reminds its American audience that architecture always sprouts from the land, which carries scars, memories and intelligence.



Model Picture: Missing-elevation



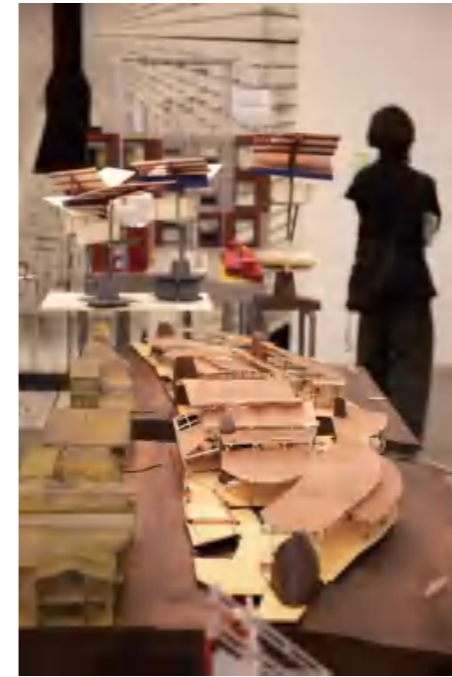
Model Picture: Closed Up



Model Picture: A Column's Tectonics Study



Installation view, "Common Ground",
A83 Gallery NYC,
March 28 - April 18 2025.



Installation view, "Common Ground",
A83 Gallery NYC,
March 28 - April 18 2025.

The second significance of this project is that it puts into questions the role of experts—UNESCO, in this case—in so-called “developing countries.” Since UNESCO is such a highly respected organization, Vietnamese people, architects, and architecture students rarely question its decisions. Yet UNESCO, along with other infamous organizations, carries biases and shortcomings, especially in foreign lands. UNESCO and the majority of Hoi An’s government have been carrying out this hyper-preservation approach towards developing the town, slowly driving the locals away, on which foreign business owners have been capitalizing. The project encourages its Vietnamese audience to critically examine the experts that are making decisions on our land and culture.

Lastly, I dedicate this project to the person that made me, my grandma. Her hometown is Quang Nam Province, and she used to be a market vendor. And I owe her everything I have today.



Site Picture
Existing Wet Market

The building is both one and many—an organism of multiple identities, drawing from the past, often ancient, and pointing towards the future—the ever-persistent challenge for architecture. Hoi An is a collage with abundant layers of history, lives and conditions. The “Wet Wet-Market” aims to be the site that accepts, harmonizes, and nurtures future emerging layers.

ABOUT

Nguyen Vinh Hung (Ryan) holds an M.Arch II from Princeton University. His master's thesis, “A Wet Wet-Market”, was exhibited at A83 Gallery in New York alongside his cohort. Prior to that, he earned a B.Arch from California Polytechnics University Pomona, where he received the Dean's Award for the class's most outstanding designer. His professional experience spans multiple offices in the United States, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, where he has worked flexibly across multiple scales and typologies.

Hung approaches architecture through empathy, craftsmanship, and ecology. His recent curiosity lingers on how architecture can actively define and construct context, rather than merely (mis)representing it through assumed imagery. At a time when the field turns into the lying “realistic” renderings, often generated by AI, his architecture prefers hands and communications as the mediums. Although educated and practiced in diverse cultures, Hung's architecture draws from and resides in where his roots were engraved—Vietnam.

All images courtesy
of Ryan Nguyen.

Modularising space, modulating lives?

Thu-Trang
Pham

In Vietnamese, there is a saying: “*Nhà nào, sào nấy*” (“Each house has its own ruler”), where the “ruler” refers to the *Thước tầm* (also known as *Rui mực* or *Sào mực*)—a modular system derived from the house owner’s body measurements. This intimate traditional practice gradually disappeared during the colonial period and, more decisively, under the influence of the Industrial Revolution, with the advent of prefabricated collective housing marking a turning point. In Hanoi, collective housing, or *Khu tập thể* (KTT), is often seen as an imported form—an unfamiliar structure transplanted during the socialist-building era and later reshaped to fit local social realities. Yet its most compelling aspect lies in the process of localization: not only in construction techniques but also in the ways residents reimagined and inhabited this new architectural type.

While the pinnacle of modern architecture is the standardized prefabricated house—seemingly at odds with the artisanal and individualistic spirit of traditional architecture—this essay invites readers to explore the dialogue between prefabricated housing and Vietnamese dwellings. In doing so, it seeks to reveal the resilience and adaptability at the heart of Vietnamese building traditions and domestic life.

Migration, Housing Shortage, and Hanoi's Aftermath

Hanoi emerged from the First Indochina War (1946-1954) as a wounded city, its ruins demanding both remembrance and renewal. When the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) took over the capital on 10th October 1954, much of its production facilities, offices, and housing lay in ruins. The historic old town of Hanoi had been devastated: of 13,191 houses in the city, 2,837 vanished; nearly 2,000 hectares of abandoned fields in the suburbs; infrastructure was left in disrepair; and more than 70,000 people were unemployed.

In 1954, thousands of soldiers, cadres, workers, and their families returned from the war zones to settle in the capital. At the same time, Hanoi embarked on the urgent task of planning a socialist capital—a project of transformation in both infrastructure and economy. Administrative facilities, factories, and enterprises sprang up quickly across the city, demanding new officers and workers; universities and schools multiplied, training a new socialist generation. As a consequence, by the early 1960s, the city’s population had increased to 530,000 people, intensifying the pressure on housing in Hanoi.

“We must grow quickly
in all aspects.”

—Vietnam's Prime Minister, Phạm
Văn Đồng, insisted (1977, 16–18)

Figure 1.

President Ho considers the
model of the Hanoi Master Plan.
November 16th, 1959.
(c) Vietnam News Agency.



First, the young government made use of abandoned French villas, dividing them among many families [1]. Next came the flat-roofed, barrack-like rows—the first experiment in wooden-structure collective housing in the Ham Tu Quan area. By the late 1950s, several collective housing projects had appeared, such as Nguyen Cong Tru, Tho Lao, and Quynh Loi. Still, the rate of construction could not keep pace with population growth, while maintenance was negligible compared to the rapid deterioration of the houses. What Hanoi needed was not just more housing, but a mass, rapid construction method resistant to weather and labor shortages: precast concrete.

Assembling a City

Inheriting techniques and support from other socialist countries, Hanoi maintained a steady pace in post-war reconstruction. To boost productivity, prefabricated methods were widely applied at new construction sites [2]. However, these technologies were only semi-assembled, relied heavily on manual labor, or involved too many components, making them suitable only for low-rise buildings. This limited the construction speed. Between 1955 and 1960, Hanoi built only 5000 apartments. In response, the Hanoi Precast Concrete Factory was established in May 1960, introducing Soviet large-panel prefabricated concrete to accelerate construction.

Chèm village, located 12 km northwest of Hanoi's center, was chosen as the site for the Hanoi Precast Concrete factory, serving as a foundation for the city's westward expansion. Standardized concrete elements were designed, molded, cured, transported, and assembled systematically to ensure efficiency, quality, and alignment with Vietnam's "many, fast, good, cheap" ("nhiều, nhanh, tốt, rẻ") slogan [3]. However, this demanding process required advanced skills and machinery, posing challenges for Vietnam's underdeveloped industry. Vietnamese engineers responded by developing efficient methods, such as manually transporting small components (<500kg, 4m) with mini-cranes and traditional joints - methods that enabled construction with limited skills while allowing structures to be dismantled and relocated.

It's worth noting that this approach relates to traditional Vietnamese manual assembly methods, emphasizing mass labor in construction.



Figure 2.
Construction site of Trung Tu
Collective housing in Dong Da. 1975.
Hanoi 1967-1975.
(c) Thomas Billhardt

Vietnamese Modular

To discuss the assembly techniques in traditional Vietnamese architecture, let's return to the Chèm village, an ancient village northwest of Hanoi. Before becoming well-known as "the Chèm Concrete" — Vietnam's first large prefabricated concrete components factory, established in 1960, this village was once famous for the story of elevating the communal house above the water level of the Red River.

The French call Chèm village "quatre colonnes" ("four-column village"), referring to the four great columns at the main gate of its communal house. Built in the 7th century and located beside the Red River, this place was often flooded during the rainy season. It was not until 1902 that the communal house was raised above the river's water level.

"The roof tiles are removed, and the columns of the communal house are tied together firmly. The technique of lifting is carried out by the lever method as follows: each foot of the column is hammered with a harrow nail, and the other end is tied with a bamboo frame (quang gánh). Each foot of the columns will be in charge of one man. When giving an order with a drum sound, the men will put a brick into the basket and so on, until it is heavy enough to evenly lift the foot of the whole communal house. These men immediately put a brick under the foot of the column and then filled it with sand to keep the foundation firm. The work continued until the communal house was the same height as the Red River dyke."

Figure 3.
The communal house of
Chèm village, 1833.
Unknown.
<https://bibliotheques-specialisees.paris.fr>



An entire block of architecture, made of hundreds of tons of wood, was raised by 2.4m using only human strength and the rudimentary tools of farmers. This was possible thanks to the flexibility of traditional wooden structures, assembled from prefabricated elements—columns (cột), beams (xà), diagonal beam (kè), and rear beam (bẫy)—joined by tenon bonds. The dimensions of these wooden components were determined by a special unit of measure: Thước tầm (Tầm ruler), which functioned as the modular system of ancient Vietnamese architecture. Thước tầm is usually a bamboo stick with carved marks on it, measured from the length of the owner's little finger — a defining and binding link between the owner and his house. Based on this ruler, a carpenter could create precise components or even repair a house many years later without any drawings.

Traditional Vietnamese houses are usually organized in the form of *ba gian hai chái* (three rooms, two wings): the central space, which sometime serves as both (1) family altar and (2) living space; (3) a sleeping space; (4) the kitchen and (5) the granary locate on either side; These often extend to include sanitary and (6) livestock barns, all oriented toward a small courtyard and sometime a pond. Circulation within such houses forms a closed loop, linking interior and exterior, daily life and production, thereby creating a private universe tailored to its owner.

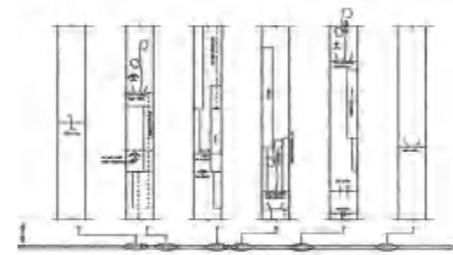
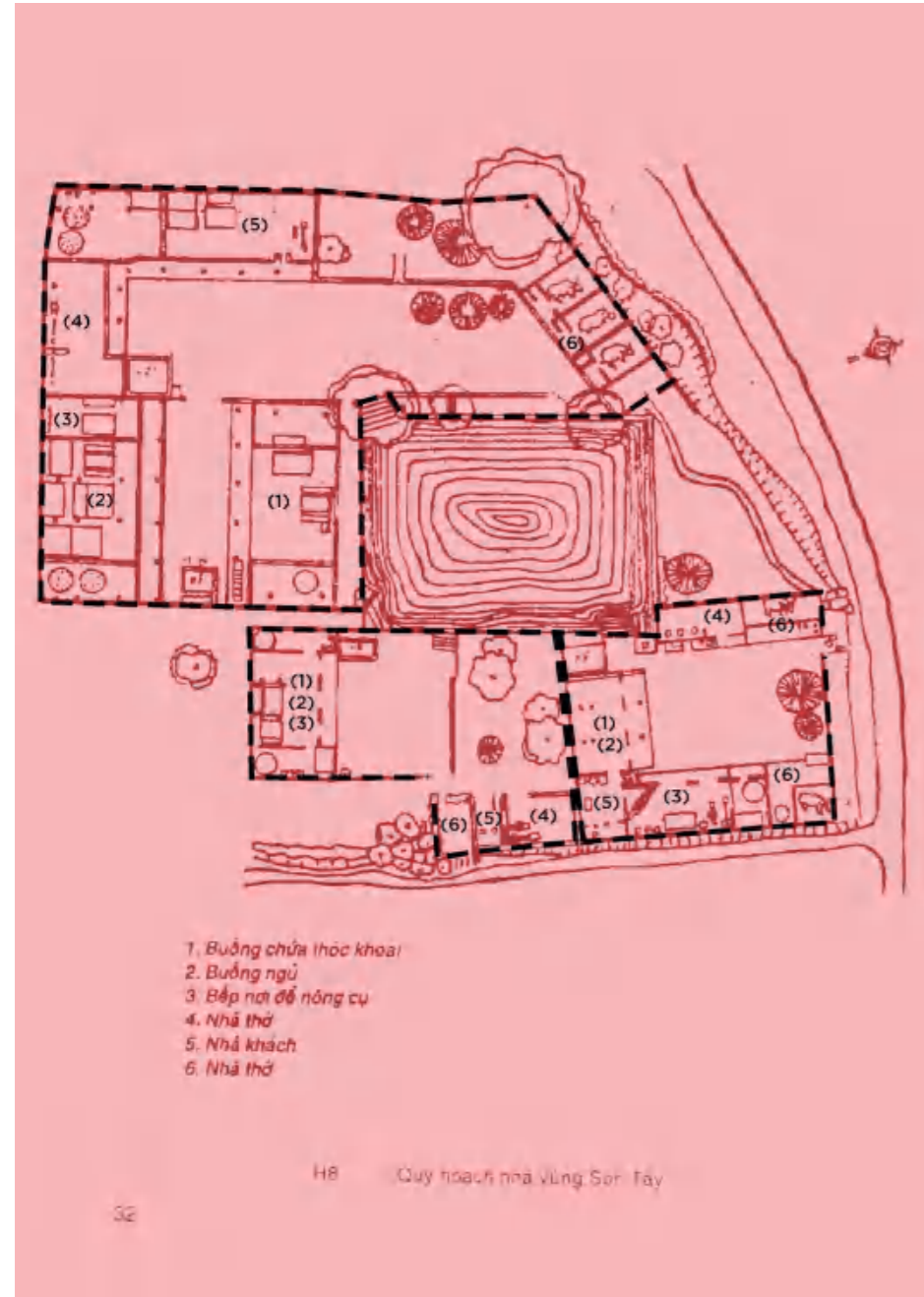


Figure 4. A Tam ruler. Source: Internet

Assembling Lives

In contrast to their tailor-made houses of earlier times, the Vietnamese in the 60s were compacted into a one-size-fits-all module. In its effort to subsidize housing for citizens, the DRV government quantified living “standards” in square meters, allocating each official or employee a unit of space according to state regulations.

“To build socialism, one must first have socialist people.” —Ho Chi Minh

Families who moved into these blocks experienced both the promise and the constraints of collective living: standardized units created new patterns of intimacy, community, and surveillance. They cooked together, shared common spaces (toilets and bathrooms), watched the same movies, and went to work together. In that era, “individualism” was equated with “egoism”. This bright prefabricated housing also aims to create a universe—but a collective one. With its high, luminous, and modern form, the collective housing of that time is a metaphor for a new model of life—a model both desirable and intimidating.

(Mother never dared to take long steps up the stairs)

(Keep greeting everyone on the way to the collective house)

—When mother was in Hanoi, Le Dinh Canh

Figure 5. Plan of vernacular houses in Son Tay. Chu Quang Tru. 1999. Vernacular Architecture. Fine Arts Publishing House. Page 32.



Figure 6.
Giang Vo Area. 1980s.
Unknown.

Ironically, inside those homogenous, box-shaped dormitory blocks lined up next to each other, individuals who had been peasants not long before still retain their peasant sentiments. Their modern lives are structured by their historic ties to the land, connections with ancestors, bonds with family and neighbors, and attachments to their villages. As Drummond notes, residents quickly re-appropriated these spaces, transforming courtyards into shared kitchens and corridors into sites of negotiation between privacy and collectivity. Even today, residents of high-rise apartment buildings in Hanoi are often pictured gathering in the hallways for parties, resembling villagers who come together to eat and drink in the yard of a communal house during festivals. In this sense, the industrialized housing blocks were as much a social experiment as a technical one, binding the modernist dream of speed and efficiency to older traditions of communal labor and shared survival.



Figure 7.
Hanoians were having a party in an apartment corridor.
Unknown.

Conclusion

Modulating the built environment responds to specific needs and cultivates particular ways of life. Yet, as the fate of Pruitt-Igoe [4] in the United States or Quang Trung KTT [5] in Vinh city suggests, mass-curated lifestyles rarely unfold as their planners intend. Concrete boxes replaced wooden frames; collective courtyards replaced village communal houses. Still, the gestures of communal life persisted—sharing meals, gathering together, remembering

the soil of origin. What endures, then, is not form but habit. While standardized modularization may have succeeded in rebuilding cities, it is far less capable of shaping lives worth living—lives that are accumulated and enriched across generations. In this sense, collective housing, in a juxtaposition with traditional Vietnamese housing, stands as visible proof of migration, fluidity, and resilience.

About the author

Thu Trang Pham is an architect based in Hanoi who turns to writing as her medium of practice. She is drawn to the lingering echoes of unsettled pasts and the ways they continue to disturb the present.

Footnotes

[1] These cases are known as forced collective housing, which happens during abnormal densification.

[2] For example: North Korea's steel-saving concrete and wing-floor technology for Trung Tư area, Cuban Sandino assembly technology for K5 housing, Ha Dong district.

[3] In March 1960, President Ho Chi Minh wrote an article titled "Many, fast, good, cheap" (Nhiều, nhanh, tốt, rẻ) published in Nhan Dan newspaper, calling for emulation in production labor across the country, promoting "technical improvement" to achieve higher productivity, ensure quality and reduce product costs.

[4] The Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri, United States (1954–1972), is often cited as a symbol of the failure of modernist mass housing.

[5] In the book *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam* (Durham: Duke

University Press, 2020), Schwenkel traces how East German prefabricated housing technologies, Quang Trung KTT (1974–2024) were adapted by local residents. Both of these cases are seen as the result of the limitations of top-down planning and the collapse of utopian architectural visions.

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Images of Memory: Insights into Contacts between Vietnamese Art & Ancestral Worship

Dr. Nicolas Henni-
Trịnh Đức

Rooted in their environment, artists inevitably absorb what surrounds them; in Vietnamese culture where portraits and ancestor worship are ever-present, these traditions rapidly found their way into modern painting. This essay offers an overview of the last century of Vietnamese art to understand how and why artists drew inspiration from ancestor worship, starting from canonical iconography of ancestor portraits all the way to interactive installations. Focusing on a number of specific examples I attempt to highlight the intentions of the artists in referencing ancestor worship and seek to reveal the various meanings given to the practice.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN VIỆT NAM

In Việt Nam - as in mainland China, Taiwan, Korea, etc - ancestor worship, the veneration of the departed, is motivated by a reciprocity of care between the dead and the living. It continues the respect and service due to the elders, despite death. As such it can be considered as a post mortem manifestation of filial piety. It takes form with prayers and ceremonies, offerings of food and drinks, the burning of incense and fake paper-money. For centuries, the ancestor to whom was addressed the ritual was made present (in the domestic space or in the temple) with a wooden tablet bearing the inscription of their name. Sometimes a portrait would also be exhibited on the altar, on special occasions and in the richest families. A shift came about in the early 20th century and it has now become more frequent to use a portrait - a painting or a photograph - instead of a tablet. The main functions of the portrait is to remind the living of the continuous presence of the ancestors in the family life, to give a visual embodiment of the clan and to help focus prayers. Hung above the altar table or placed on the table top, the portrait is never isolated but belongs to a system of objects, codified and canonised by uses and beliefs. It comprises an incense burner, trays for offerings, candles, and vases of flowers. Ancestor worship is not exclusive to one creed. Instead - as it is very common in Vietnamese culture - it brings aspects of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism together, both in practice and in representation.

While there is no definitive and explicit list of prerequisites as to what should an ancestor portrait look like, sacred iconography infused the profane world. The departed are oftentimes pictured like divinities: head to toes, seating hieratically and shown from a frontal point of view. The absence of background and decor let the viewer understand the supernatural subject of the image. The ancestor is in another realm. The commonalities of the iconography blur the line between the humane and godly nature of the portrayed, as the portrait itself blur the frontier between presence and absence. The visual culture of a society proceeds like a network of influences, responses, filiations and mutations: no images, no forms, appear independently of its environment. And in turn, ancestor worship and Fine Arts collided to give way to a new sort of artefacts.

THE HIERATIC FIGURE

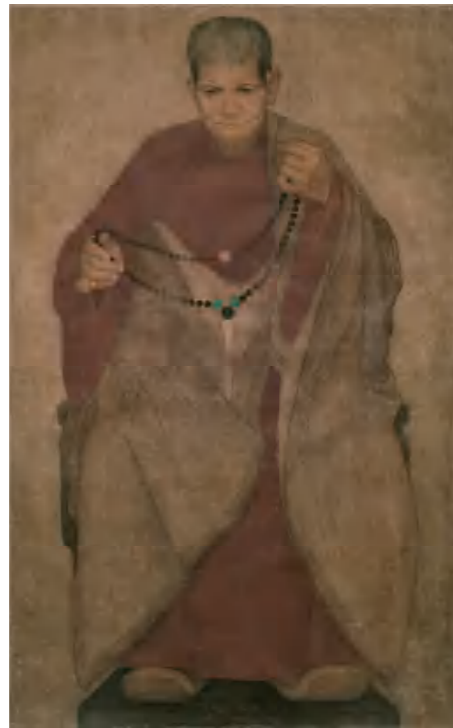
In 1931 opened in Paris the Colonial Exposition where a large space was devoted to the Fine Arts School of Indochina. Founded six years earlier, it was the first time Vietnamese modern art - heralded by the school - was introduced to the global stage. Nam Sơn (1890-1973), one of the professors, exhibited his oil on canvas painting titled *Portrait de ma mère* [Portrait of my mother]. It embraced all the elements familiar to altar portraits: head to toe depiction, frontal point of view, hieratic posture, neutral background. The painting was extensively covered in the press, praised by the critique and eventually bought by a Swiss-born lawyer. From then on, ancestor worship never ceased to inspire Vietnamese art. A few years after Nam Sơn, in 1935 at another Parisian salon Lư Văn Sìn (1905-1983) presented a painting depicting a Buddhist nun, *La bonzesse*. She's not identified by name, she is a motif and the painting is

not a portrait. But the composition is strictly the same as Nam Sơn's, therefore the same as many ancestor portraits. However, Lư Văn Sìn added a narrative dimension. The nun is not immobile or hieratic. She is fingering her prayer beads, her back is bent, and her head leans forward. All these elements soften the rigidity often found in ancestor portraiture and convey less the impression of a deliberate pose than that of a natural moment captured by the artist. Lư Văn Sìn is not the only alumnus of the Fine Arts School of Indochina to adopt the canon of ancestor portraits as an inspiration. Mai Thứ (1906-1980), Phạm Quan Hậu (1904-1994) and Vũ Cao Đàm (1908-2000) also played with the theme. The latter presents his *Portrait d'un dignitaire* in the very early 1940s. The artist chose to embrace the hieratic demeanour of ancient ancestor depictions. The official wears his court dress and faces the viewer with calm and dignity. Vũ Cao Đàm still makes the subject his. The red of the garment clashes with a background that is no longer neutral. Here it is distinctly green, a hue complementary to red on the colour wheel. The artist adapts the aesthetic to fit Western artistic concepts.

To grasp why these artists took ancestral portraiture as a reference, one must understand that they were inaugurating a new school of painting. Drawing simultaneously on Sino-Vietnamese and Western techniques, styles, and subjects, they sought to shape a new repertoire to present to the world. Indeed, Modern Vietnamese art was as much addressed inwardly and outwardly (as Phoebe Scott, curator at the National Gallery of Singapore, puts it). Silk, lacquer, blocks of colour, rural landscapes and women in áo dài all contributed to the aesthetic definition of this school, and in a sense, to a national definition as well. The artists were building a showcase for the country on the international stage. Beyond cultural illustration, the theme of ancestral portraiture also allowed the production of the Fine Arts School of Indochina to be positioned on a broader framework, both in time and space. On the one hand, the artists were continuing an ancient iconographic formula, thereby inscribing modern art into a larger history of Vietnamese art. On the other hand, by selecting a theme common to neighbouring countries, Vietnamese artists asserted their place within the broader history of East Asian art.



Vũ Cao Đàm (1908-2000), "Portrait d'un dignitaire [Portrait of an Official]", c. 1942, colors on silk, 145x71cm, private collection. Image source: Christie's.



Lư Văn Sìn (1905-1980), "La bonzesse [The Nun]", 1935, colors on silk, 114x74cm, private collection. Image source: Christie's.

TWISTING THE ICONOGRAPHY

Trần Văn Cấn (1910-1994), "Em Thúy [Little Thúy]", 1943, oil on canvas, 60x45, collection of Vietnam Fine Arts Museum. Image source: VNFAM.



The inspiration evolves from explicit to allusive. When in 1943 Trần Văn Cấn (1910-1994) paints *Em Thúy*, today listed as a National treasure, the artist twists the ancestral reference and proposes a new vision, hopeful and candid. Instead of a grandmother it is a little girl, his niece, that he deems worthy of portraiture. The eight year old girl is shown from a frontal point of view and faces the viewer. She seats on a modest Thonet chair that by contrast with her small stature, takes on the air of a ceremonial seat. Far from hieratic, Thúy does not sit upright: her back is slightly hunched, one shoulder lower than the other, and her hands are clasped together. She is a child and she is portrayed as such, freed from the formal codes of decorum. The flowered curtain behind her might recall the backdrop of a portraitist studio, yet here it suggests the intimacy of a home, underscoring the private character of the portrait. The painting slight low-angle perspective gives the impression the artist or the viewer was standing before the little girl, quietly seated in the living-room. While evoking classical

Vietnamese painting, *Em Thúy* carries within it a powerful tenderness and truth. It is as if Thúy was an incarnation of this burgeoning new age of Vietnamese art.

While in the 1930s Mai Thù favoured evoking in his paintings the canon of ancestral portraits commonly found on household altars, much like artists Nam Sơn, Lưu Văn Sơn and Vũ Cao Đàm, his approach changed in the second half of his career. This evolution in iconography also reflects a broader social shift in attitudes toward the individual and the family. The painting entitled *Portrait de famille* which he completed in 1971, in fact evokes two types of portraiture: the ancestor portrait, with the grandparents seated at the centre, depicted frontally and gazing at the viewer; and the photographic family portrait, which in Vietnamese practice appeared in the middle third of the twentieth century. This type of image shows the descendants spanning several generations surrounding the patriarch and matriarch like in Mai Thù's painting. It means that the family is finally shown as a whole. It is no longer solely embodied by the ancestors enthroned on the altar. From now on, each member has their own character, here individualised through gesture and the colours of their clothes. The artist's vision is clear: the individual gains autonomy and independence, yet without diminishing the family, which remains the core.



Mai Thù (1906-1980), "Portrait de famille [Family Portrait]", 1971, colors on silk, collection of Almine Ruiz Picasso. Image source: Ana Ditrantil / Adagg, Paris, 2024.

CONTEMPORARY MEMORY



Contemporary artist Trọng Gia Nguyễn (b. 1971) is likewise interested in family portraits. His painting *Family, Enid, circa 1981* presented by Quynh Gallery in Hồ Chí Minh City in 2015, follows the same model as that of Mai Thù: the grandparents are seated at the centre with the family extending around them. He chose to include a reference to worship practice, not through the figure of a hieratic ancestor, but by depicting an altar in the background. The family is thus shown in the most sacred space of the home, allowing the artist to capture symbolically both the living members of the family and the departed. Unexpectedly it is through the technics Trọng Gia Nguyễn used that he discusses family reverence. As I said earlier, portraiture is about memory, keeping the absent present, in space and in mind. With *Family, Enid, circa 1981* the artist dived in the intimate and personal. Memory is not an object but a feeling, traces of a fleeting moment. The forms are deprived of outlines and fuzzy: the image itself is the portrait of a memory, distant and blurry. A joyful one undoubtedly, because of the sense of unity it exudes and because of the bright colours. Trọng Gia Nguyễn tells us that ancestor worship is not only about rituals and altars. Relationships come before, remembering is already worshipping.

Nevertheless, hieratic and isolated ancestors continue to inspire contemporary artists. They go on drawing on it in their practice, to varying degrees of explicitness. Hyperrealist artist Đỗ Quang Em (1942-2021) portrayed his wife

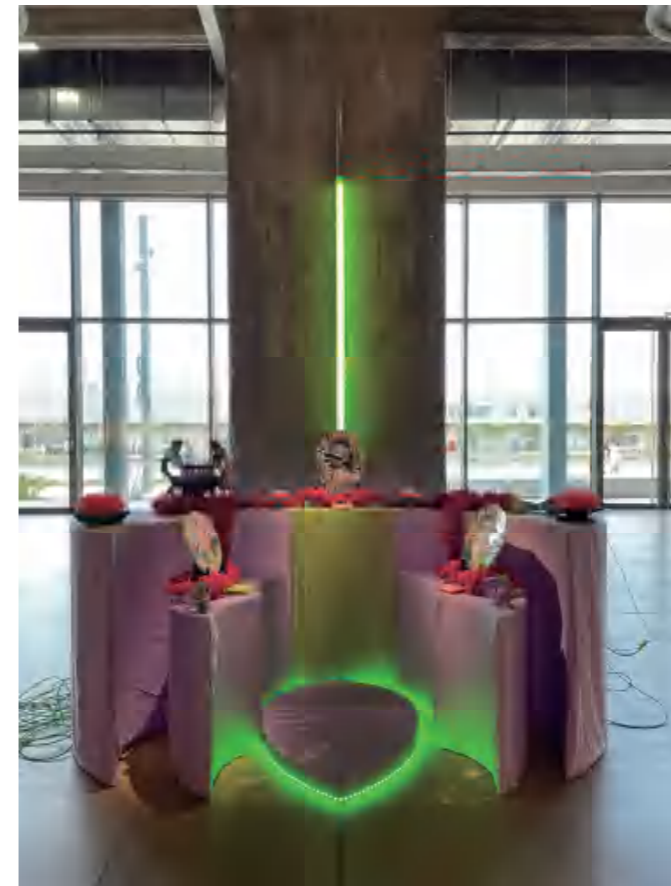
throughout his career, both as a model and as a subject, as evidenced by the title of his *Portrait of my Wife*. In this 1987 painting - today in the collections of the National Gallery of Singapore - the reference to ancestral portraiture is deliberate and unmistakable, down to the detail of the hands laid flat upon the knees, evoking the decorous quality of ancient portraits. Despite the realism of his brushwork, Đỗ Quang Em does not neutralise the spiritual character of the iconography. On the contrary, he seeks to amplify it through a surrealist compositions. Pushing to the extreme the symbolism of the neutral background as a supra mundane space, the artist shows his enthroned wife floating among the clouds. *Two Generations* by Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang (b. 1975), a silk painting introduced at Thavibu Gallery, Bangkok in 2010, is of a different tone. If the little girl in the red áo dài were absent from the image, it could easily pass for a perfectly classical ancestor portrait. The elderly woman is seated in an armchair, shown frontally, her face impassive, straight, and directed toward the viewer. But she is not alone. A little girl accompanies her, holding a teddy bear and offering the viewer a broad smile. She does not have her grandmother's composed dignity but the spirited energy of a bold young girl. She is full of life, her skin rosy. The two figures hold hands, a gesture of affection but also one that expresses the bond between the two generations. Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang offers a sensitive and moving reflection on transmission and heritage. Behind the little girl stands an incense burner like a portent: one day her grandmother will no longer be seated beside her but will appear in a frame hung above that very same incense burner.



Đỗ Quang Em (1942-2021), *Portrait of my Wife*, 1987, oil on canvas, 99x78cm, collection of National Gallery of Singapore.
Image source: National Heritage Board.



Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang (b. 1975), *Two Generations*, 2010, colors on silk, 117x78cm, private collection.
Image source: Thavibu Gallery.



Kianuê Tran Kiêu (b. 1989), *Siffler la nuit [Whistle at Night]*, 2022, installation, mixed media, collection of Les Abattoirs Museum.
Image source: Nicolas Henni-Trinh Duc.



Thom Nguyễn (b. 1987), *Xuan Dieu and Quan Am Vases*, 2025, installation, mixed media, collection of Rowan Artist Group.
Image source: Thom Nguyen's Studio.

Recently, contemporary artists have also shown a distinct interest in the practice of worshipping itself rather than focusing on the iconography of ancestor portraits. It is less about images than actions and intentions. Not only on the part of the artist but also of the viewer. For *Siffler la Nuit*, Kianuê Tran Kiêu (b. 1989) built a lotus shaped altar, covered in pink fabric and illuminated by lime neon lights. It is a futuristic installation they presented for the Utopie award in Pantin in 2023 and which has been since acquired by Les Abattoirs Museum of Toulouse. On this peculiar altar, flowers and an antique incense burner flank three portraits. The portraits are composite images the artist made out of fragments of photographs, stuck on a mirror. They are imaginary faces giving a presence to ancestors that have not been remembered. Indeed, *Siffler la Nuit* is all about honouring those who were forgotten, summoning those who were excluded. Kianuê Tran Kiêu pays a touching tribute to queer ancestors and completes a lacking genealogy. The electric cables and memory cards placed on the altar speak about the need, the urgency to archive and to remember. Thom Nguyễn (b. 1987) also seeks a form of memorial justice with *Xuan Dieu and Quan Am Vases*,

an installation which was part of his solo show *Nước-Water Resistance* held by Mot+++ and A. Farm in 2025 in Hồ Chí Minh City. A painted portrait of poet Xuân Diệu (1916-1985) is surrounded by ceramic vases and lotus flowers, mimicking the usual ancestor altar. However, the portrait is encased in a glass box half filled with water and from the vases come out intriguing hair locks. Alluding to Xuân Diệu's alleged homosexuality, the water submerging half his face symbolises the suffocating challenge to live a closeted sexuality. It is a portrait of the man as much as a portrait of his struggle. As for the vases, the artist draws on the ambiguous gender of the Buddhist divinity Quan Âm to celebrate queer lives. Pieces of gauze cinch the neck of the vases and are reminiscing of trans people's breast binding while the hair pouring out of the ceramics evoke wigs worn by drag queens. Like Kianuë Tran Kiều, Thom Nguyễn invests the altar sacred space and reframe ancestor worship. As it is frequent in the queer community to built a chosen family, here artists elevate chosen ancestors.

In the last century of Vietnamese art, ancestor worship has proven to be a steady inspiration, remaining relevant and meaningful despite changing times. Hieratic elders, gathered families, altar tables, have been absorbed as a form of vocabulary by artists in need of a sacred language. Feeding on centuries old traditions and keeping the legacy of generations of predecessors evolving, they placed memory and celebration at the heart of their creation. Questioning what is worth honouring and who should be elevated to ancestor-status, those artists and their works are also attentive to include viewers in new forms of rituals. They are telling us worshipping is not limited to prayers and incense burning, it is also about choice and appreciation.

ABOUT

Nicolas Henni-Trinh Duc holds a PhD in art history from Sorbonne University. His research focuses on the role and significance of portraiture, as well as on Vietnamese visual culture from the pre-colonial to the modern era.

Memories in the disposable:

Everyday Objects as Resistant Archiving in Vietnamese Diasporas copy

Frida Chen

Oma Totem, 2009.

Phillips television set, Gorenje washing machine, Bomann refrigerator, wooden crucifix, and personal casino entrance card, 86 5/8 x 23 5/8 x 23 5/8 inches (220 x 60 x 60 cm).

Private collection, Turin
© Danh Võ.
Photo: Jacopo Menzani, courtesy the artist and Galleria Zero, Milan



Migration, Objects, and the Living Archive

In the dim light of a Berlin gallery, a stack of seemingly unremarkable objects—an old refrigerator, a color television, an electric stove, and a crucifix—stand together in uneasy solidarity. These items, arranged by Danh Võ in his iconic work *Oma Totem* (2009), once constituted the government-issued welcome kit that his grandmother received upon her arrival as a Vietnamese refugee in Germany. Freighted with the awkward benevolence of the welfare state and the unspoken codes of social integration, they mark the paradox of state hospitality—both an act of care and an imposition of cultural and religious norms. The Catholic cross, in particular, stands not only as a symbol of spiritual comfort but as a sign of how “inheritance” is shaped by the hands of bureaucracy and assimilation.

This tension is pushed further in Võ’s *Das Beste Oder Nichts* (2010–), a body of work centered on the luxury brand objects acquired during his family’s resettlement. Võ’s careful selection and re-presentation of designer items—branded bags, watches, household accessories—speak to both aspiration and irony: the longing for security through consumption is complicated by the self-awareness of its impossibility. In Võ’s hands, these objects become critical markers of the “material choreography” required of migrants, revealing not only what is gained but also what is lost in the translation of value across cultures.

Together, these objects stage migration as a material choreography of violence and moral decision-making. What gets kept or abandoned is not a neutral act: each decision is conditioned by the logistical regimes of the state, the demands of new identities, and the silent economies of care and survival. In Võ’s work, inherited items become not just relics of loss, but charged sites where personal aspiration, systemic power, and historical trauma collide.



Das Beste oder Nichts, 2010.

Engine of Phung Vo's Mercedes-Benz 190, 26 x 40 x 81 inches
(66 x 101.6 x 205.7 cm).

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased
with funds contributed by the International Director's Council
2011.56 © Danh Vo.

Photo: Kristopher McKay © Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation

Ambivalent Nostalgia: Diasporic Objects and the Politics of Reanimating

These dynamics reach a poignant crescendo in Vō's later homage to the Martin Wong archive in *IMUUR 2* (2013). Here, Vō channels the legacy of the queer Chinese American artist by meticulously recreating a dense installation of thousands of knick-knacks, curios, and everyday items. At the Guggenheim, the work fills an entire gallery with over 3,500 objects, all painstakingly collected by Wong and his mother Florence Wong Fie over decades in San Francisco. Through such an immersive tribute, the archive resists any singular narrative of upward mobility or success; instead, it presents a "riot of objects"—ceramic figurines, novelty lamps, scrolls, paintings, salt-and-pepper shakers, and books—whose value oscillates between the precious and the trivial.

The emotional heart of the installation is a cardboard box holding a small bronze sculpture of Shiva, addressed by Wong to his mother: "to a little lady who always has her hands full." In this inscription, care and labor, devotion and burden, are folded together with humor and melancholy. The proliferation of objects grew from a clutter into an affective record of kinship and unspoken labor. Vō's strategy is not to sanitize or reclassify these objects, but to keep them in their original, often chaotic form, echoing the messy realities of family attachment and intergenerational care. This approach destabilizes conventional authorship, reflects a deep sensitivity to the agency of non-artists, and the often-overlooked labor of archiving lived experience.

Photo by David Heald ©2013,
courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation



Almost provocatively, Danh Võ once remarked that “I see myself, like any other person, as a container that has inherited these infinite traces of history without inheriting any direction.”

Such a statement seems to reject any a priori stance, presenting Võ as a passive vessel of historical residue. Yet this self-effacing claim conceals a more telling truth: Võ actively selects, rearranges, and reanimates these remnants, transforming them into what is unmistakably a symbolic archive, and such an act of curation and archiving could never be “neutral.” The very process of choosing which objects to keep—whether a welfare-issued refrigerator, a luxury-brand trinket, or a family photograph—mirrors the migrant’s fraught negotiations with identity in transit. These daily objects signal, on one hand, a deliberate aspiration toward new forms of belonging, and, on the other, an unavoidable entanglement with the value systems imposed by welfare economies and consumerist aspirations.

More crucially, Võ’s archive is saturated with ambivalent nostalgia: it mourns the incremental gains and losses that defined the previous generation’s diasporic experience: the quiet trade-offs, the suppressed desires, the silences carried across borders. Võ’s approach has been deeply resonating with the emerging ethos of “living archives,” where objects are not merely preserved but re-narrated as a way of keeping these layered histories alive in the present.



Photo Credit: Photographed by Mát Bét at the AVA workshop: *Imagining shared archives of the future.*



Activating Memory: Collaboration, Community and Participatory Practices in the An Việt Archives

This inquiry into the life and afterlife of things finds a counterpart in the practices of the An Việt Archives (AVA)—a community-based archive in London dedicated to preserving and activating the histories of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian refugees. Established in the 1980s in East London, An Việt Foundation arose as a direct response to the splintering effects of Britain’s dispersal policy. After the fall of Saigon and throughout the ensuing waves of Vietnamese “boat people” migration, British authorities sought to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves by sending families to disparate regions across the UK, including as far as Northern Ireland. This strategy, intended to hasten assimilation, instead scattered relatives and isolated refugees, fracturing networks of support and deepening the loneliness and homesickness of those struggling to adapt.

To examine the role of archiving as a form of remedy against this historical backdrop, I was fortunate enough to interview Georgina Quach, a London-based journalist at the Financial Times and a member of the AVA Committee. United by its commitment to documenting how the Vietnamese community, the committee stated in their introduction: “By shining a spotlight on the community’s contributions to cultural exchange, this work lends itself to nurturing empathy for the experiences of other diasporas and refugee movements in the UK.”

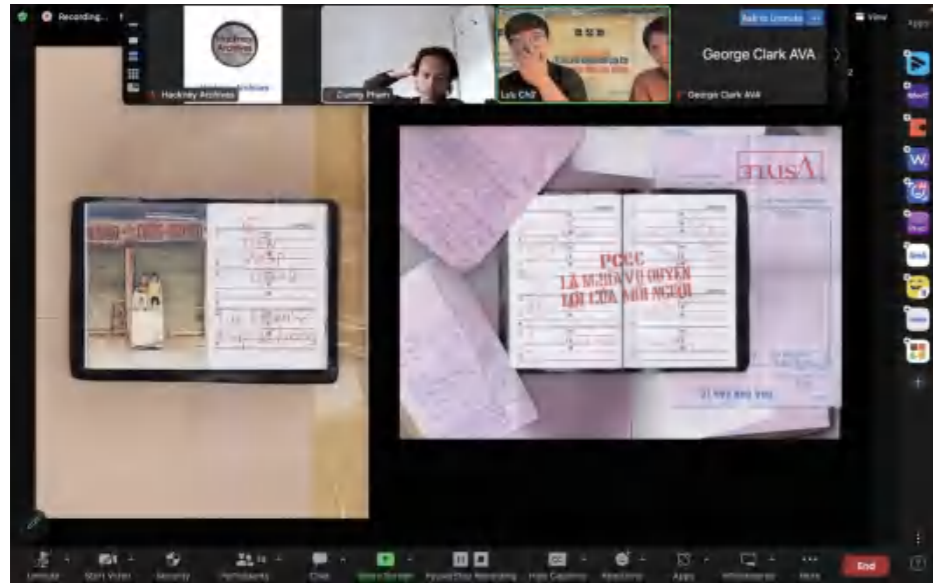
In our conversation, Georgina underscored that the AVA is far more than a static collection: “The act of archiving is just about making more people aware of the different kinds of narratives that are out there... any effort to complicate a simple timeline, or a simple view of things, is really valuable.” She described the committee’s current priorities—including ongoing restoration of fragile documents and plans for digitization—but emphasized that the value of the archive lies in its activation: “We allow [the public] to hold and to interact with the different materials... allow them to reflect on some things that they may resonate with.”

Workshops and public events, she explained, are deliberately designed to foster connections between generations and to democratize the act of memory-making: “We’re thinking of it as a living archive. We invite people to label it in ways that are specific to that experience. The way we reflect on those materials can be changing and evolving.”

A vivid example of this living practice is the AVA’s collaboration with Luru Chũ, a Ho Chi Minh City-based typography collective. Together, they have organized both in-person and online workshops for artists, archivists, and local community members, exploring how vernacular design—street signs, handwritten labels, everyday scripts—can serve as portals into shared heritage. These sessions culminated in participants mapping the typography of Hackney’s streets and physically handling AVA’s archival materials, activating them as resources for new forms of memory and imagination.



Photo Credit: Photographed by Mát Bét at the AVA workshop: *Imagining shared archives of the future.*



This hands-on, participatory vision direct responded to the exclusion of Vietnamese narratives from mainstream institutions, mirroring the generative uncertainty in Võ's work: the presence of archives functions beyond simply records of what things were, granting spaces for negotiating what might yet be felt and imagined. An Việt Archives foregrounds such "living" practices, let objects being hand-held, mapped, and re-narrated in their workshops, while archiving itself becomes an ongoing questioning over whose stories and objects matter.

By bringing Võ's reimagined archives into conversation with the everyday strategies of the An Việt Archives, we ask: How do objects mediate the violence, loss, and creativity of migration? Who determines what is worth keeping? And what kind of futures become possible when archives are reactivated as spaces of collective care, mourning, and reinvention?

Photo Credit: Photographed by Linh Thanh at the workshop *Typography Tales*, AVA x Luru Chir.



Faint Traces, a para-archive for a parallel reality



Love Songs for the Homeland, 2024-ongoing, spatial installation, 380x480x250cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



From a distance, da duum... da duum, a muffled bass rhythm reverberates through the space. Nestled within a grandiose brutalist architecture of striking concrete beams, high ceilings, and raw red-brick walls, the beats sound strangely familiar. More than the simple fact that songs are often built upon sets of rhythm, these thumping echoes—though the melody is not at all discernible—transform the vast five-storey Hiroshima House in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, into a distant village in rural Vietnam, where one of the residents' main recreational activities is singing karaoke. Indeed, as it turns out, these are the sounds leaking through the crevices and folds of the thin, flimsy aluminium-foam insulation that forms the walls of a makeshift tent. Its architecture is inspired by the homes of Vietnamese returnees in Tay Ninh province right across from the Vietnam-Cambodia border, which is positioned at the entrance of the second floor, where Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's solo exhibition *Faint Traces*, featuring works made between 2024 and 2025, is on view.

Inside, an invitation to sit, sing, contemplate, and for some, remember awaits: a pair of microphones, box speakers, folding chairs, and a disco ball—elements that belong to the video installation, *Love Songs of the Homeland*. On the screen, lines upon lines of Vietnamese songs about homesickness mechanically unfold against a backdrop of video footage

and photographs of life in the floating villages of the Tonlé Sap Lake, which Thanh Mai has documented since 2014. Despite the initial cheerfulness upon stepping into the tent, the room soon grows dense with melancholy as one lingers over the images and texts on display. The bucolic floating villages on what is known to the Vietnamese as the Sea Lake, the carefree, joyous children playing with each other, and dogs sunbathing appear as visions of a bygone past. Moored to the lake for years, if not generations, the Vietnamese community was never acknowledged by the Cambodian authorities. In recent years, in a hasty attempt to revitalise the lake's ecology as its abundance dwindles year by year, these families—whose lives have always been tied to the lake—were relocated to land a few kilometres away in Kampong Chhnang. Facing such sudden disruption, some families go to find work in other cities, others return to Vietnam, while only a handful stay. What remains is a nearly empty town populated with abandoned stilt houses with battered aluminium roofing sheets, termite-eaten wooden rods, and personal belongings.



Untitled, 2025, wild amaranth, wood, dimension variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

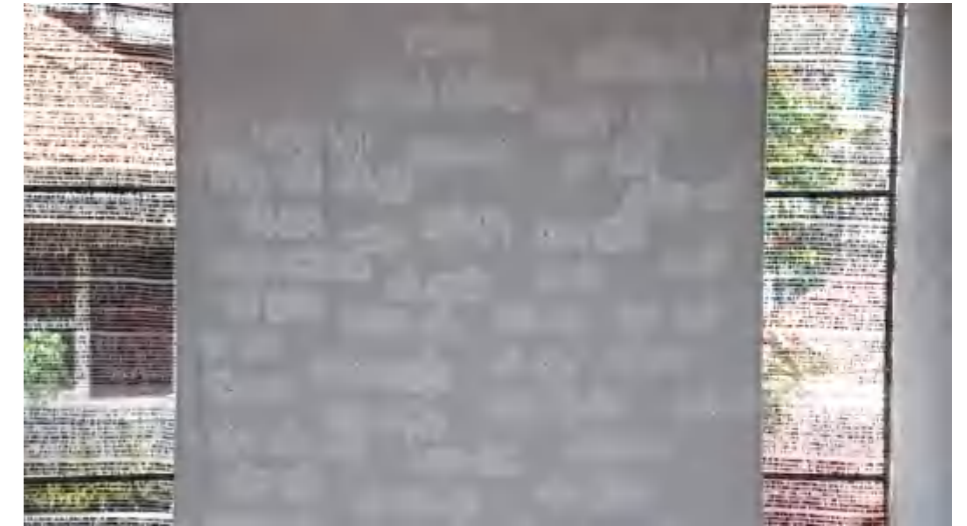
As the first work that visitors must pass through to view the exhibition, *Love Songs of the Homeland* functions as a transit space opening onto traces of Vietnamese migration in Cambodia. Turning right, one encounters a bundle of potted wild amaranth gathered from abandoned houses in Kampong Chhnang—plants that, amid a period of salt scarcity in labour camps operated by the Khmer Rouge, were boiled to yield a faintly savoury substitute. Described as an “impromptu” installation, the work *Untitled* stands as a symbol of resilience and the entangled histories of the ethnic Vietnamese

and Khmer that have rarely been acknowledged. Wild amaranth also reappears as both subject and material in *The Taste of Memory*, a series of hand-pencilled interview transcriptions on found, gridded student notebooks, which are accompanied by plant forms washed in a near-transparent green shade made from amaranth juice. Eschewing the taxonomic exactitude of colonial botanical drawings, Thanh Mai adopts a stylised register, since the aim is not to impress, but rather to animate a collective memory that otherwise has been suppressed.

Here, a thread of ephemerality and material precarity runs through the exhibition. Opposite the plants, which continue to wither as time goes by, hangs a long length of white fabric—*Map*. Only on close inspection do the scribbles—the names of forgotten places along the Mekong River and around the Tonlé Sap in Cambodia on which the Vietnamese community once set foot—become visible. Written with diluted salt water, the text is legible only at certain hours, especially at night, and, exposed to sun and rain, tends to disappear within a week. Even the exhibition’s most ‘enduring’ object—the colonial map held at the National Archives of Cambodia in Phnom Penh—is also subject to deconstruction, which

is then concealed beneath photographs of abandoned stilt houses in Kampong Chhnang or the evidence of a failed, botched resettlement scheme and a persisting nomadic life. Bearing the early traces of Vietnamese presence in Cambodia as early as the 1900s, in an attempt to depict the history of constant movement, in *Home*, Thanh Mai transfers parts of the map onto the student notebook, then overlays them with photographs of abandoned houses in Kampong Chhnang.

Map, 2024-ongoing, fabric, salt, dimension variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of *Home* (left), 2023-2025, old student notebook paper, heat transfer print, carbon ink on photographs, 49 photos each measuring 20x27 cm. *Fragments* (right), 2024-ongoing, charcoal rubbing on Do paper, 100 x 250 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Map, 2024-ongoing, fabric, salt, dimension variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



A continuation of Thanh Mai's solo exhibition *No More, Not Yet* at the Nguyen Art Foundation (Ho Chi Minh City, 2023)—a project on this community developed over nearly a decade—*Faint Traces* is conceived as an expanded archive that addresses migration while opening space to reflect on lives caught between political unrest, dictatorship, identity politics and illegitimacy. The exhibition also becomes a site for discussion and empathetic recognition. At Thanh Mai's artist talk a few days after the opening, an audience member asked whether the houses in Kampong Chhnang—depicted in *Home* and the animation *An Unfinished Dream*—were meant to be inhabited at all, given their modest scale and barely liveable conditions. Houses that were built from the remains of boats. Though being asked with genuine curiosity and sincerity, the question, nevertheless, adamantly exposed a gulf between groups of differing socio-economic standing. It was also empathy—more precisely, a political commitment to stand with a reality on the verge of oblivion—that first took Thanh Mai, an artist living roughly 1,500 kilometres away, to the Tonlé Sap in 2014 and has drawn her back ever since. Over time, she forged close relationships with residents, which in turn shaped her choice of form. She notes choosing the karaoke video format for its accessibility, recognisability, and capacity to bring people together. When *Love Songs of the Homeland* is shown, children she once knew, now adults, spot

themselves on screen and reminisce about the sights and landscapes of their childhood. The video is also uploaded to YouTube, allowing residents to temper their longing in their own time.

With works that rely on materials not meant to endure, *Faint Traces* is no archive in the traditional sense, but rather a para-archive, which houses what is beyond, beside and amiss. Here, dematerialisation both exposes gaps and absences, and acknowledges a sadder truth: after the exhibition, as the work expires, life moves on. Perhaps for this reason, some of the works may appear fragmented or under-explored, despite having a unifying theme and the recurrence of symbols and gestures threading through. If these works—and their contextual and material possibilities—were fully realised, would they still retain their immediacy and nuance, or would the artist risk the pitfall of “romanticising suffering”, a charge often levelled at contemporary artists engaging with critical issues today? Nonetheless, they still form a coherent viewing experience. For this exhibition, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai works closely with Hanoi-based artist Nguyen Tran Nam in the visualisation of the artworks in space. Thanh Mai shared that she was both excited and daunted working at Hiroshima House, an imposing architecture that represents yet another monumental and tragic moment in the world's history. The

An unfinished dream, 2025, two-channelled animation video, 2:05 minutes. In collaboration with Dao Tung, Nguyen Duc Dat, Nguyen Kim To Lan, and Uyen Minh. Image courtesy of the artist.

solution is to step into the space with respect and no intention to dominate, but rather to find, in Nguyen Tran Nam's words, “nooks and corners that these murmurs belong to.” *Faint Traces* begins and ends with the home, or rather its reconstructed model, precarious and finite in itself. It, too, begins and ends with distant sound, a poignant, heartwrenching outro to the lone shamanic chant that carries across open water, pleading for the fish to return, and to the hushed cacophony as families pack their belongings to leave the only home they have known and sail into an unknown darkness. [1]

Faint Traces was on view at Hiroshima House, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from 2–23 July 2025. It then toured to Manzi, Hanoi, Vietnam, from 7–28 September 2025, and is scheduled for Ho Chi Minh City in 2026. Marking the next phase of Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's engagement with the undocumented Vietnamese community in Cambodia, the exhibition foregrounds a plan—developed with her project partner, Dr Lucrezia Canzutti—to build an online archive in the coming years.



Black Landscapes, 2018–2020, single-channel digital video, color, sound, 8 minutes. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Footnote

[1] The former refers to Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai's single-channel video *Black Landscapes* (2018–2020), and the latter to *Downstream* (2017–2022). Both works were presented in the artist's solo exhibition *No More, Not Yet* at the Nguyen Art Foundation (February–June 2023), curated by Bill Nguyen.

About the artist

Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai employs various mediums such as drawing, installation, documentary film, video, and journalism to highlight issues spanning from personal narratives to broader themes of history and migration. Her works interweave research and experimentation, documentation and imagination. Exploring diverse subjects such as body, femininity, history, post-war, and migration, Mai's art pieces are disjointed fragments that provide a window into the societal landscape she inhabits and passionately explores. Holding a Master of Fine Arts degree from Mahasarakham University, Thailand (2012), Mai currently serves as a lecturer at University of Arts, Hue University. She received the Pollock Krasner Foundation Award in 2014 and the Artist Excellence Award in 2021 from The Factory. Together with her artist friends in Huế, Mai founded the bar art space *Mo Do* (2019) and initiated *No Cai Bum* – a grassroots travel art festival (2020).

About the author

Linh Le is an independent curator, writer, and researcher from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Her work investigates the changing landscapes and ecologies of Saigon and other parts of the country under the pressures of modernisation and urbanisation, while also addressing gaps in contemporary art-historical discourse in Vietnam—particularly in experimental forms such as performance and video art. Since July 2024, she has been developing *Do Dac*, a site-responsive curatorial project that examines the impact of forced resettlement in the Thu Thiem peninsula in HCMC. She is currently a curator at A. Farm, an international residency programme in HCMC; a member of the Curatorial Board at A Space in Hanoi; and a research fellow for ArtsEquator's Southeast Asian Arts Censorship Database project.

The Beat of Vietnamese Hip-Hop



Poster for music video "Đôi khi" by Suboi and Noday Nguyen.

Hong Vu

*For all the Vietnamese trên toàn trái đất
Hãy nhớ một điều mình là người Việt Nam
Sức mạnh và nhiều hãy sống bên nhau, giữ tình huynh đệ. [1]*

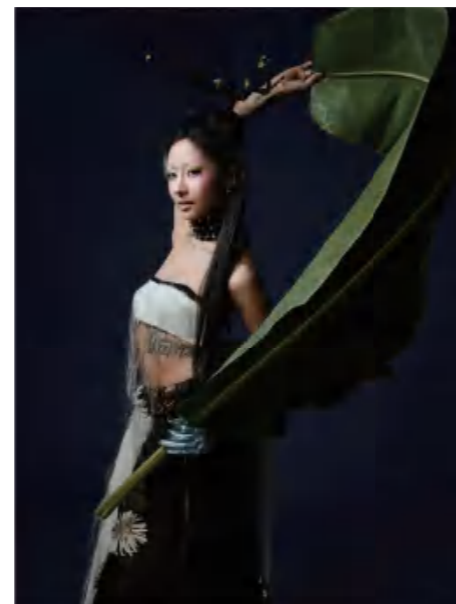
—Vietnamese Gang by Thai VG and Khanh Nho

More than 20 years ago, those lyrics were played and echoed through small alleys of Vietnam. At that time, not many audiences knew or paid much attention to rap, and some even did not consider it a form of music. Yet, there were already a few rappers experimenting with this new genre, and in 1997, for the first time, a Vietnamese-language rap song was composed by two Vietnamese diaspora rappers in the United State (US), “Vietnamese Gang” by Thai VG and Khanh Nho. Streamed online and later released as part of Thai VG’s EP Portland Love in 2001, the song quickly went viral among Vietnamese audiences worldwide and eventually made its way back to Vietnam. In 2005, Khanh Nhỏ brought the track to a rap contest called “Rappers, Where Are You?”, organized by the VHH forum in Vietnam [2], where it received enthusiastic reactions from the audience.

Despite being labeled as “reactionary music” [3] due to the historical complexities between Vietnam and the US (where rap originated), rap still managed to gain audiences in Vietnam. Over time, Suboi [4], one of those early listeners, went on to become a successful rapper in the country.

Sharing with VAC during her interview, Suboi unveiled her memories from 20 years ago, when she was still a high school student, driven by curiosity as she discovered hip-hop. Her passion for words had already been sparked at the age of seven, when she began creating free-form poems. However, her early works were often overlooked, as people did not consider them “real” poems due to their unconventional style and lack of strict structure. Undeterred, she continued writing and at the age of 15 she composed her very first rap song, titled “Cold”.

As a teenager who felt unable to confide in her family, share with her peers at school, or find any platform to express herself, she turned to rap as her voice. With boundless curiosity, she began questioning identity, individuality, and the meaning of being human. Rap arrived at the right moment, becoming the channel through which she could release her thoughts and emotions, the inner world of a lonely 15-year-old girl. “I guess people come to rap with different purposes. And my purpose wasn’t to be famous, to be dominant, to be in charge. I have questions about being a human being. I want to study about the world, to understand where I’m from, and therefore I can understand myself.”

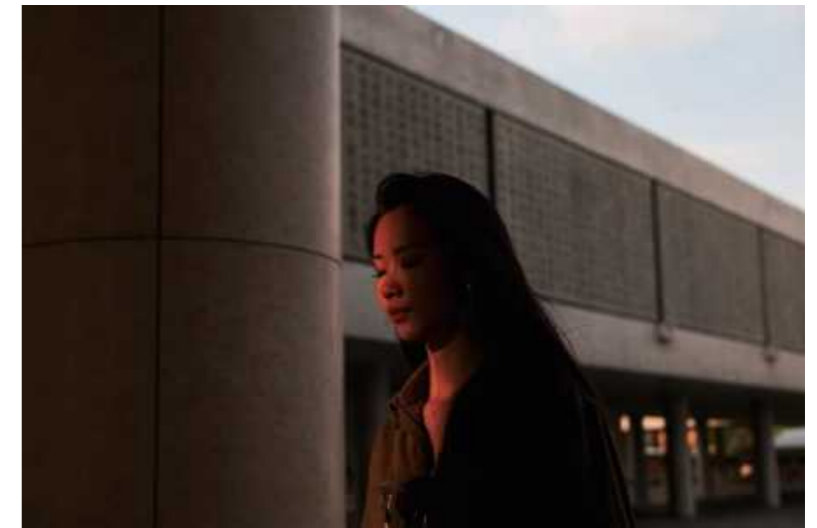


Portrait photo of Suboi by Nhi Ngõ (Shizenart)

*I’m a young Vietnamese lady who’s this
Twenty-five for life not a cookie cutter bitch
The modern H C M C deep within is the real Saigonese pop showbiz don’t fit.*

—Công by Suboi

Portrait photo of Suboi



Portrait photo of Nodey, from documentary film *The Nodey Process*.

Yet in another part of the world, there is also a “lonely” soul in Paris, Nodey Nguyen [5], the only Vietnamese diaspora artist making music within the Vietnamese community there in the early 2010s.

From a generation whose parents moved to Paris in search of a better life, most of his Vietnamese peers chose stability, becoming doctors or engineers rather than pursuing something creative as he did. He shared, on one hand, he still had his Vietnamese community in France, but on the other, he was the only Asian among his non-Asian colleagues in music. He described this as living in two worlds, the world of his Vietnamese community, and the world of music where there were no Asians at all.

As a composer, Nodey revealed the conflict he felt in his twenties, during his early years of producing music in France. Carrying childhood memories of Vietnamese traditional sounds, *cải lương* (Vietnamese opera) echoing through his home, singers performing during Tet and community choirs lifting their voices in Paris, he admitted his impulse to weave Vietnamese samples into his work. This instinct was tied to his roots and his identity. However, as a producer growing up in France, he was also shaped by Western production methods, where existing sounds were sampled and reworked into something new. This tension left him questioning the essence of his work: Was he truly creating something original, or simply reshaping what had already been made?

Despite these questions, he continued sampling Vietnamese music, to the point where it became almost inevitable for him to include it. The track that made his name known within the Francophone hip-hop community was "Chanson Française" built around a crackling feminine hum of a pre-1975 singer, occasionally interspersed by a "như một lần" sound, sampled from a 7-inch vinyl in his family's collection. He later followed this with his EP "Vinasounds Vol. 1", a five-track project where every song incorporates instruments drawn from traditional Vietnamese music. In "Quê Mẹ" (My Motherland), for instance, he sampled a common percussive instrument in ca trù (ceremonial singing, Vietnamese folk music treasure), and the đàn bầu (monochord), chopping and reconstituting them into an entirely new melody.[6]

No matter how strange or unfamiliar those sounds seemed to others, Nodey persisted. His unique style earned him several invitations to collaborate, including Youssoupha, a renowned French artist, with whom he created the hit "Public Enemy". Yet, within the French hip-hop industry, his music still carried an "alien" quality to non-Vietnamese ears. *"I remember he wrote in the credits: Thank you, Nodey. He tried to make radio hits but always ended up making strange music."* Nodey recalled. Surrounded by non-Asian, non-Vietnamese colleagues in France who were beginning to focus artistically on their origins, Nodey also felt the need to embark on a journey of his own. A turning point came when he was advised to focus more on his identity, his name, and his roots. *"But the issue is, there are no Vietnamese artists or musicians in France. So I'm like, okay, if I have to focus more on my roots, the only way is to move to Asia. So I think that's why I moved to Asia, to Vietnam."*



Portrait photo of Nodey

Photo of Suboi and Nodey



All paths lead back to Vietnam. In his documentary *The Nodey Process*, Nodey recalled his visit around 2002 - 2003, "I didn't feel the 'motherland vibrations' that some people talk about. But it was something for sure. I had to go to Vietnam to nurture my identity." More than a decade later, after securing a three-month residency in Saigon, he returned, this time in search of himself through the pulse of Vietnam: its people, its youth, its energy, and its hip-hop scene, which was, in his eyes, booming. No longer just sounds discovered through the internet or peer-to-peer sharing, Nodey was now walking the streets, immersed in the noise and rhythm of Saigon with music blaring from speakers, conversations and songs rising in Vietnamese, echoes that felt like fragments long embedded in his mind. Leaving everything behind in France, he discovered "the perfect place to reconnect with who I am. The environment here is very melodic."

And then, as if on cue, his love song was played when he met Suboi - his destiny in Saigon. *"On any trip, there are interesting encounters. It's a part of life. And some people make you evolve more than others, and give you more than you could expect"* Nodey reflected. Their first connection through music soon grew into friendship, then into love. In 2020, they released their first co-produced track, *Đôi khi <3*, a milestone that marked not only their artistic partnership but also their journey as Vietnam's hip-hop couple. After years of searching for answers to identity, Nodey expressed "I've found my balance here. In my art and in my lifestyle. I'm at peace here."

While Nodey's path to Vietnam was shaped by a search for identity, Suboi's journey with hip-hop began in the streets of Saigon.

"What it meant to me will eventually be -
A memory of a time when I tried so hard."

—*In the End* by Linkin Park

Recalling the first song she ever rapped on stage, Suboi shared her memory of performing "*In the End*" at Hung Vuong School [7] in Saigon when she was around sixteen or seventeen. She got this chance by being invited to join a newly formed nu-metal band as a rapper by her skater friend KraziNoyze (who is also a beatboxer and later a rapper), since they knew she could rap. Taking on the rap part, she jumped on stage

and began performing in front of Hung Vuong's students. The audience was taken by surprise - no one expected a girl to step up and rap with such confidence. Yet the crowd quickly joined in, cheering and singing along with the band. The performance became an unforgettable experience for both the band and the audience.



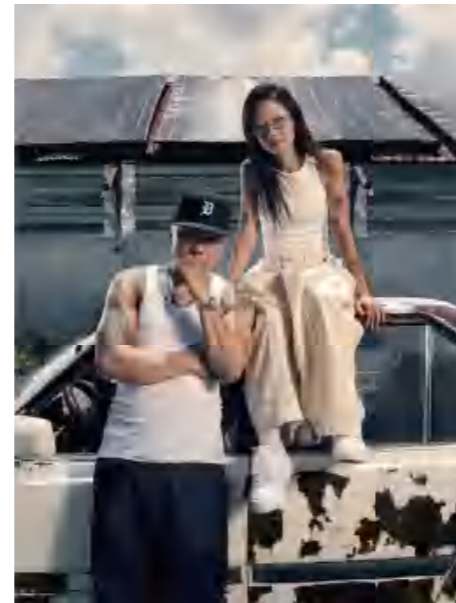
Piu Piu, a series of events dedicated to hip-hop underground in Sai Gon since 2016

But it wasn't just a one-time performance, the rapper admitted. Linkin Park became her "best friend" that carried her through her teenage years, a time when, as she recalled bluntly, many of her peers were "harming themselves and stuff like that, and I did too, you know, we cut our skin, we cut our wrists, all that shit."

According to Suboi, rap from the Southside [8] felt like "something burning in the city. It's kind of hush-hush, like a secret. But hip-hop from the North [9] is more like a pleasure, it's cool, really cool, but it follows the Korean style more." She pointed to LK's track "Lip", which is the first song she ever heard from him as an example of Northern rap. To her, Northern hip-hop resembled polished R&B: popular, melodic, and lyrical. By contrast, Southern rap was rooted in storytelling, capturing real life and the struggles of the streets. It was, as she described it, "real" and sincere: "What's your life like? Are you real? What's going on? What's going on in your neighborhood?"

By the time Nodey arrived in Vietnam in 2018, rap had already captured the public's attention. Suboi was releasing hit songs, performing on stages with crowds screaming her lyrics back at her.

Having gone a long way with rap, Suboi describes her relationship with listeners as being like a letter in a bottle: "For me, I always use a metaphor: putting a letter in a bottle and then just throwing it all in. If anybody sees the bottle and they open the letter, then okay, you are connected." The bond she creates with her audience does not come from making songs to earn their attention, but rather grows naturally through her work. With all the honesty and reflection poured into her rap, more and more people have discovered her "letters".



Thai VG (left) and Suboi (right) for their music video *War and Peace*.

"Đời nhiều người bạc phước nhưng trời trêu người bạc nhược
Minh thì chậm mười bước, cung cầu theo người đặt cược
rò chơi cuộc đời
Trời cho cười đùa." [10]

—*Trời cho* by Suboi and Hoang Touliver

For those who have followed her from the beginning, the connection is reignited every time she steps on stage. For newcomers encountering her music for the first time, what they feel most strongly might be her sincerity, that she is real. Whether it's the first or the hundredth time hearing her rap live, each performance becomes a shared moment, an opportunity for both Suboi and her audience to feel the beat and experience something unforgettable together.

At the same time, the crowd also began paying attention to other rappers, some of whom were Suboi's peers. What once started on small school stages soon expanded into larger venues with bigger audiences. Underground events dedicated to rap began to rise, such as *Tu Te Show*, a rap show hosted by rappers in Hanoi that ran for seven years before closing in 2017. Another well-known event was *Dissneeyland*, hosted by MC ILL (also a well-established and veteran rapper) in Hanoi, where rappers went head-to-head in battles.



Tu Te Show VII.
Photo courtesy of Tu Te Show

Tu Te Show VII.
Photo courtesy of Tu Te Show



Rap reached its peak as a mainstream trend in Vietnam in 2020, when two major rap competition shows, namely *Rap Việt* and *King of Rap*, aired at the same time, turning rap from an underground music into a cultural phenomenon. Both attracted massive audiences across all age groups. *King of Rap* followed a format similar to *Show Me the Money* [11], with contestants competing in elimination rounds and being graded by judges alongside audience votes. Meanwhile, *Rap Việt* had competitors selected into teams by coaches who are veteran rappers, one of them being Suboi, and results decided by a mix of coaches, judges, and audience input. Together, the two shows generated enormous buzz, drawing attention from both emerging talents and established rappers alike. Their impact was undeniable: each episode racked up thousands to millions of views on YouTube, a striking contrast to the early days of Vietnamese rap, when videos typically attracted just a few hundred to perhaps a few thousand views.

Rap in Vietnam has become a welcoming, almost “safe” harbor for everyone, including foreigners. When Nodey first arrived, it didn’t take him long to find his place in Saigon’s hip-hop scene. Carrying curiosity and a Vietnamese spirit rooted in his heritage, he quickly connected with the community. People embraced both his music and his passion, and his work soon found its audience. For Nodey, the Vietnamese hip-hop scene felt different from what he had experienced in France.

In France, he explained, hip-hop often carried a heavy code of masculinity, toughness, and even violence. The environment was rigid, sometimes intimidating, there were “no girls in the gang,” and keeping up a hardened attitude was part of survival. By contrast, Vietnam’s scene struck him as open, easygoing, and free of that danger. Here, rappers could channel their gangster spirit on stage, but behind the scenes they were kind, approachable, and supportive. “They are really nice,” Nodey reflected. “It’s not the same mood, it gives a different energy, I would say.”

Agreeing with her husband, Suboi emphasized the idea of rap being a safe harbour for men because, she explained “This is how they get to be men. This is how they learn how to be men. Instead of fighting, putting a knife out and hurting each other, you can do a rap diss. And men need that. They need to fight, in a way. So through rap they fight smarter to become something that they can live on.” Therefore, rap is a way for guys to be soft, to find friends, to have male friendship, to conquer and to win.



Game show *Rap Việt*
(Vietnamese rap)



Game show *King of Rap*

Still from documentary film
The Nodey Process



Disneyland event (2025).
Photo courtesy of Dissneyland.

With its rapid growth over the past years, rap has become a trend, and, as many fans say, it has now fully entered the mainstream. Suboi, who has encouraged artists to seek sponsors and brand partnerships, noted that hip-hop can now be a career for young performers to pursue. Riding the global wave, rap is transforming into pop(ular) music, with international celebrities singing over hip-hop trap beats and setting the trends. In Vietnam, the sound is everywhere: from star-studded stages to coffee shops, you’ll almost certainly hear a rap track echoing from the stereo. For Nodey, after seven years in Saigon, it has become normal to see rappers advertising for major brands, something far rarer in the past. Today, people can speak of a true “rap industry” without questioning what the genre is or how it could be considered a “real job”.

Yet, as with anything that becomes commercialized, its rise has also brought challenges and a darker side. As rap grew larger and more people became involved in the scene, it had to face increasing scrutiny. Long-time fans often complained that “Rap Việt mất chất” (rap has lost its essence). Especially after the success of rap game shows, the term “rap fan tháng 8” (August rap fan) emerged as a mocking label for newcomers who had

just started listening but were already quick to pass judgment on the culture.

Despite the obstacles and pitfalls that rap can bring, “I really do hope that we have more successful female rappers who state their opinions, express their thoughts, represent and truly enjoy this platform.” Suboi asserted. For her, rap is simply rap, there should be no gender divide in the art form, whether male or female. “It’s not about gender for me” she emphasized, “it’s about having diverse opinions, perspectives, and the representation of women in the game”. Because in Vietnamese society, women are sometimes praised to be quiet, to stay silent, to be prim and proper. “Sometimes we let the bully pass. We don’t stand up. We didn’t learn how to stand for ourselves, and rap gave me a voice. This is why I’m here.” She hopes to see more women raising their voices and standing tall to challenge the passive expectation that women must behave in a certain way to be respected.



Meanwhile, Nodey sees his mission as "being someone in between, a hybrid, a connection between the two countries", a cultural bridge between Vietnam and France. As a French-Vietnamese artist drawn to the vibrancy of the scene, he embraces this role of connector between two cultures. "I will never entirely feel Vietnamese. But I'm good with this," he reflects in *The Nodey Process*. Carrying Vietnam in his blood yet raised in France, his life experience allows him to deeply understand both worlds and their shifting realities. Vietnamese music, he observes, carries "the energy of a country that is getting empowered." With Vietnamese artists stepping into the global spotlight, the need for connection grows louder, followed by a reminder that the voices of the Vietnamese diaspora are meant to be heard, united, and carried far beyond borders.

The unique voice that Suboi, Nodey, and all Vietnamese rappers carry is the voice of Vietnam, infused with its distinct spirit. To rap in Vietnamese is to bend the language into rhyme and wordplay, to let its tones, its history, and its culture dance together in verse. As the saying goes, "Phong ba bão táp không bằng ngữ pháp Việt Nam" (the storms of life are nothing compared to Vietnamese grammar), reminding us of the richness and flexibility of the language. It's the language, the voices rappers use to show the world what's really going on, stories that mainstream news never tells.

Every detail sparks curiosity among international listeners, and as one observer noted, "Vietnam definitely makes a mark with hit songs.". No longer hidden in alleys, our rap now travels the world, becoming global music to international ears, yet always rooted in home. Another signature of Vietnam, as the couple mentioned, is Vinahouse. DJs across the world have brought it to their sets, sending its audiences into a frenzy and even making its way to Coachella, where a DJ dropped Vinahouse on the global stage and the crowds went wild.

Today, in this era, rap has become a career, a business that people can pursue, build on, and continue to be a platform to raise their voices. With rap now recognized as an industry, Suboi, and surely many other rappers, hopes it will bring fair opportunities and real benefits to those within it, especially by welcoming more female artists, because the culture needs more women's voices.

And from those hopes comes the truth: Once marked as "underground", rap has now become the main music being streamed in Vietnam. This isn't a surprise or a stroke of luck but the fruit of generations of dedication, of those who never gave up on rap, keeping its heart beating to this day. Because hip-hop is not just a game, it's a way of life. For that, SHOUT OUT to every Vietnamese rapper still spitting, still grinding, still holding it down for the culture. Whether in Saigon, Hanoi, Paris, or anywhere the beat carries you, may your words keep carrying the fire and may your voices keep shaping the beat of tomorrow!



Sinh Tố Paradise Block Party (2023)



Sinh Tố Paris by Nodey and Kikko Raikkonen (2025)

Footnotes

All images related to Suboi and Nodey are courtesy of the artist.

[1] English translated by author "For all the Vietnamese around the world/ Remember this we are Vietnamese/ Strength and unity, live side by side, keep brotherhood alive"

(*Vietnamese Gang* by Thai VG and Khanh Nho)

[2] Viet Hiphop forum is an online community dedicated to Vietnamese hip-hop culture, connecting artists and fans across music, fashion and street art: <https://viethiphop.vn>

[3] The term is mentioned by Suboi during her interview with the author.

[4] Suboi (b. 1990) is a Vietnamese rapper, singer, and songwriter. Born and raised in Saigon, also where her musical journey began, she is widely recognized as Vietnam's first successful female rapper. Known for her sharp lyricism and boundary-pushing style, Suboi has played a key role in shaping the Vietnamese hip-hop scene and bringing it to international audiences.

[5] Nodey Nguyen (born Don Nguyen) is a Vietnamese-French DJ and music producer, born and raised in France. Now based in Saigon, Vietnam, he's known for blending electronic music with hip-hop, traditional Asian sounds, and cinematic textures to create a sound that bridges cultures and continents.

[6] Cường Minh Bá Phạm, *The Making of Nodey*, diaCRITICS, October 10, 2022, <https://diacritics.org/2022/10/the-making-of-nodey/>

[7] Hung Vuong's school: A high school built by the French since 1934 in Ho Chi Minh city. Fun fact: Although Hung Vuong's stage is Suboi's first stage, the school is not her high school.

[8] "Southside" in Vietnamese rap represents the southern region of Vietnam, including cities like Saigon, Tay Ninh, etc.

[9] "Northside" in Vietnamese rap reflects the northern region of Vietnam, including cities like Hanoi, Hai Phong, etc.

[10] English version translated by author

"Some are born unlucky, yet fate teases the frail,/I walk ten steps slower, chasing odds set by their scales./Life is a game,/ And heaven laughs at the pain"

(*Trời cho* by Suboi and Hoang Touliver)

[11] *Show Me the Money* is South Korea's rap competition show, first aired in 2012, where underground and mainstream rappers compete through battles and performances.

A Detail Can Be Transformative



Monique
Gross

Vintage blouse with original collar.
Photo: Benjamin Reich.



It may sound obvious to say that every garment carries a story, but in Vietnam those stories are deeply entwined with colonial contact and cultural exchange. Fashion historians and scholars of Vietnamese history will confirm this: garments remain legible as artifacts of those encounters. Here, I want to take you on a journey through a landscape where textiles speak: traditional forms reimagined in contemporary style, each piece inscribed with the heritage of artisan craft. Welcome to the archive of Thao Vu, founder and designer of Kilomet 109, the slow fashion brand based in Hanoi.

Thao's archive is her personal universe from which she draws inspiration, a collection built on moments of human connection: the pull of a detail, the feel of a material, the trace of folk art, or a gesture toward sustainability. These pieces hold values that can't be measured by price or the class it was made for. Instead, they embody care, skill, pleasure - in a word, love - woven into their making. For her, collecting grew out of fascination with - and an intense curiosity for - the complexity of handmade textiles in Vietnam.

From a detail glimpsed in a carefully folded pile of fabrics in an old quarter vintage boutique, to an encounter during her travels, or a visit to one of the families she works with to source materials for her fashion line, each piece calls out to her, sparking her curiosity. The thrill might come from the way a border is stitched on a costume, how a collar fastens on a blouse worn by an elderly woman in a remote northern village [1], or the feel, weight, and finish of silk drawn from a producer's special stash. These moments become both visual and technical obsessions for Thao.



Vintage silk blouse.
Photo: Benjamin Reich.

In the late 1990s, Thao was a young journalist working for local magazines, reporting on national issues at a time when Hanoi was shifting from a sleepy city to one bustling with the tourist trade after the Doi Moi reforms of the late 1980s. Research for her stories required firsthand encounters with both the materials and the artisans themselves. In the early 2000s, lack of infrastructure meant that travel to the remote areas where these materials were produced and used was still lengthy, exhausting and costly.

Amidst the giant souvenir market serving tourists that the Old Quarter had become, a few tucked away shops selling vintage textiles, costumes, and objects from Vietnam's indigenous groups became her "private museums." Easy to visit, they offered what institutional museums could not: the chance to handle the objects directly - to feel the texture and weight, turn them inside out [2], even try them on. "Heaven!" She exclaimed. "The time, the method used, you can see it right away." These qualities determined whether she would collect a piece or not.

Collecting also became a way of remembering the places, the individuals, the families and communities she encountered. Each piece was a treasure, a key to understanding Vietnam's textile diversity, its cultural elements, and the scope of its political and historical landscape.



Ebony fruit dyed silk drying in the field.
Photo: Benjamin Reich.

The economies of under-valued artisanry turned folksy tourist-trade items, dried up. Many producing families came to see the work as no longer worth the effort, nor worth the corner of their agricultural fields set aside for growing the necessary raw materials. But Thao sought out the artisan families and communities with the know-how and drive to keep these hand-crafted processes alive: people with empirical knowledge of botanical dyes and the complex techniques refined over generations to achieve true quality.

While sourcing black silk, for example, Thao visited a former producer from a state silk company in the North. The company had been popular in the 1990s, but production died out after many Vietnamese migrated to Eastern Europe, where they became producers and exporters of a different quality of black satin. The woman still had some stock and brought out bolts of Lanh silk, made in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang. Thao was struck by how it recalled her mother's and grandmother's satin trousers. "When I touched it I felt the coolness from the fabric, kind of waxy. That day was also in the middle of summer, so hot, and we were sitting on the floor but you feel the satin and it feels like water, a layer of cool water, running over your lap and hands and arms and feet."

The feel of the fabric "chased" her. She searched until she found the father and son who still made this lacquered silk and ebony-fruit-dyed silk, which she later incorporated into her fashion line. Her reading of textiles deepened with an understanding of their full process of becoming: planting, harvesting, spinning yarns, dyeing, weaving, and decorating. Over many years, she worked in collaboration with artisans - building on each other's strengths, extending communities, and evolving together.



Calendaring to softening hemp fibers.
Photo: Benjamin Reich.

Stone polishing.
Photo: Benjamin Reich.



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Similarly, the glass buttons originally designed for the 1990s Trang Anh *áo dài*, made from super lightweight, very delicate silk required a button that was “slippery,” one that easily slipped into and out of a button loop. Previously, the *áo dài*, itself a garment that is now identified with Vietnam, but only became national dress in 1980s after being influenced by Chinese and French styles, had a “Chinese knot” button woven from the same fabric as the garment.

These see-through buttons set on a brass stem were mythic, known only about by word of mouth from the grandmothers and seen in books. Thao found a shop that was selling vintage trimmings and after inquiring about them, she was supplied with five glass jars, indigo, blue, reddish, clear, and green glass buttons in oil. The oil is necessary to keep the brass stem set in the center of the button from rusting or tarnishing. An incredible treasure.

In the multi-step processes required to create hemp fabric, the heritage value lies in the knowledge embedded in these non-industrial textiles, carrying within them all the hands that have touched them. In fact, it isn't only hands: many of the spinning wheels and calendaring processes are powered by feet, legs, and hips.

Calendaring - a smoothing technique historically achieved by stone polishing and introduced to Vietnam from the Yangtze River - adds luster to textiles. Among the Blue H'mong, artisans apply a thin layer of beeswax to hemp cloth and hand-polish it with a smooth stone as the final step in the cloth-making process. The Black H'mong use another method: standing on a large stone set perpendicularly over a solid log, with the fabric placed in between, and “skating” the stone across the surface. Mastery of the technique requires both practice and talent.

Textiles can be read through their depth of color. Artisans measure value by the strength of the dye. In an indigo cloth, for example, careful study reveals subtle variations - reddish, purplish, or greenish tones within the blue. To achieve such depth, different botanicals, including certain tree barks, are combined with indigo to act as mordants, fixing and strengthening the color [3].

Thao has often witnessed the full cycle of indigo production: soaking fresh leaves, fermentation, aeration, liming, frothing, dipping, rinsing, weaving. Finally comes the sun-drying of the color-fixed fabric - a precise choreography performed in the sweltering field, in early morning or late afternoon light. Every ten minutes, artisans turn the fabric again and again, ensuring even drying and preventing scorching.

Ebony fruit dye (*mặc nura*), which produces colors ranging from stone grey to deep charcoal black, is made along the Sông Tiền (Tien River). The pulp of the yellow-green ebony fruit is first processed by men who grind and soak it, squeezing out fibers from the paste to create the dye. The work continues through a sequence of dipping, kicking, stepping, beating, washing, twisting, and rinsing, until the silk reaches the midnight black demanded in dyeing. The reward comes in handling the finished textiles: their luxurious surface makes all the hard work feel worthwhile.

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Looming hemp.
Photo: Benjamin Reich.

Củ Nâu dyeing yams - edible, medicinal tubers rich in tannins - were once widely grown and used by rural Vietnamese to dye and preserve silk and cotton fabrics. Earlier generations relied on them to produce dye for clothing, fishing nets, and sails, by peeling and shredding the tubers, sometimes mixing them with bark, leaves, or minerals. This color tradition peaked in the early 20th century and has since been nearly lost.

Traditional tools for shredding tough Củ Nâu included knives and hammers. Thao simplified and updated this work by introducing graters inspired by those used in Hanoi-style cuisine, while also expanding the color range to include pinks, reds, and deeper browns.

She was perhaps inspired by a shared value of looking at things differently. For example, the Nùng An people make use of the traditional stilt house, whose optimised architecture was designed around “the whole weaving set, including spinning wheel, loom, and warping tools, which were created to fit harmoniously in their living space,” she explained.

Local materials were chosen for their ability to participate in the process: the Cột poles, cut from the sturdy Nghien tree (the bark of which is used in dyeing), were set at measured distances to aid the warping process, allowing the weaver to determine the scale of the textile they would produce. Thao’s archive also includes other tools with double functions - such as metal combs and hairpins, once used as hair accessories but equally essential for combing shredded hemp fibers before spinning.

Other items in her archive hold the honorary place of being created especially for her. One example is the indoor cloth shoes made for decades by an elderly blind woman in a northern village. So valued are these shoes that the community keeps a waiting list to receive a pair. When a turn comes, the maker measures the foot with a string, then draws and cuts its width and shape onto paper. The finished shoes are soft, embroidered with the owner’s name and simple decorative motifs. For special occasions, such as weddings, the date of the event is stitched in. Nieces and granddaughters assist the maker by helping choose the color of the threads.

Handmade and embroidered indoor shoes.
Photo: Benjamin Reich.

Thao describes her archive as having both a physical part, like a human body, and an intangible part, a spirit or soul. Even using a single element from it, she explains, infuses her creation with “an element of its spirit.” Something of its heritage “is still around.” For her, creating from this archive is both a way of keeping traditions alive and a way of also moving them forward.



About the author

Monique Gross is an independent translator, a native English speaker (American), based in Paris. She participates in French into English translation projects in the fields of architecture and urbanism, art and culture, and development. She has had the opportunity to research and write about urban development in Hanoi, Vietnam, where she lived for several years.

Footnotes

[1] The woman and Thao spoke throughout the visit and the following day, before she left, the woman presented Thao with her washed and carefully folded blouse as a gift.

[2] Looking at a piece of fabric means Thao will turn it inside out, or see the “wrong” side, the back side. Some weaving is so complex, she says, fascinatingly puzzling — provoking questions, making her want to “tear it down,” take it apart, and study it thread by thread. She counted the threads, especially in silk, to understand the techniques used to create patterns.

[3] For example, the Nùng An ethnic minority group in the Cao Bang region, a community Thao connected with early on, produce an indigo of exceptional depth and darkness, quite unlike indigo from elsewhere. For Thao, the results often surpass the color and quality of Japanese and Indian indigo, which are frequently praised at international symposia and conferences.

MONO-

LOGUE

Is it her, or is it me?

Yasmine Anlan Huang



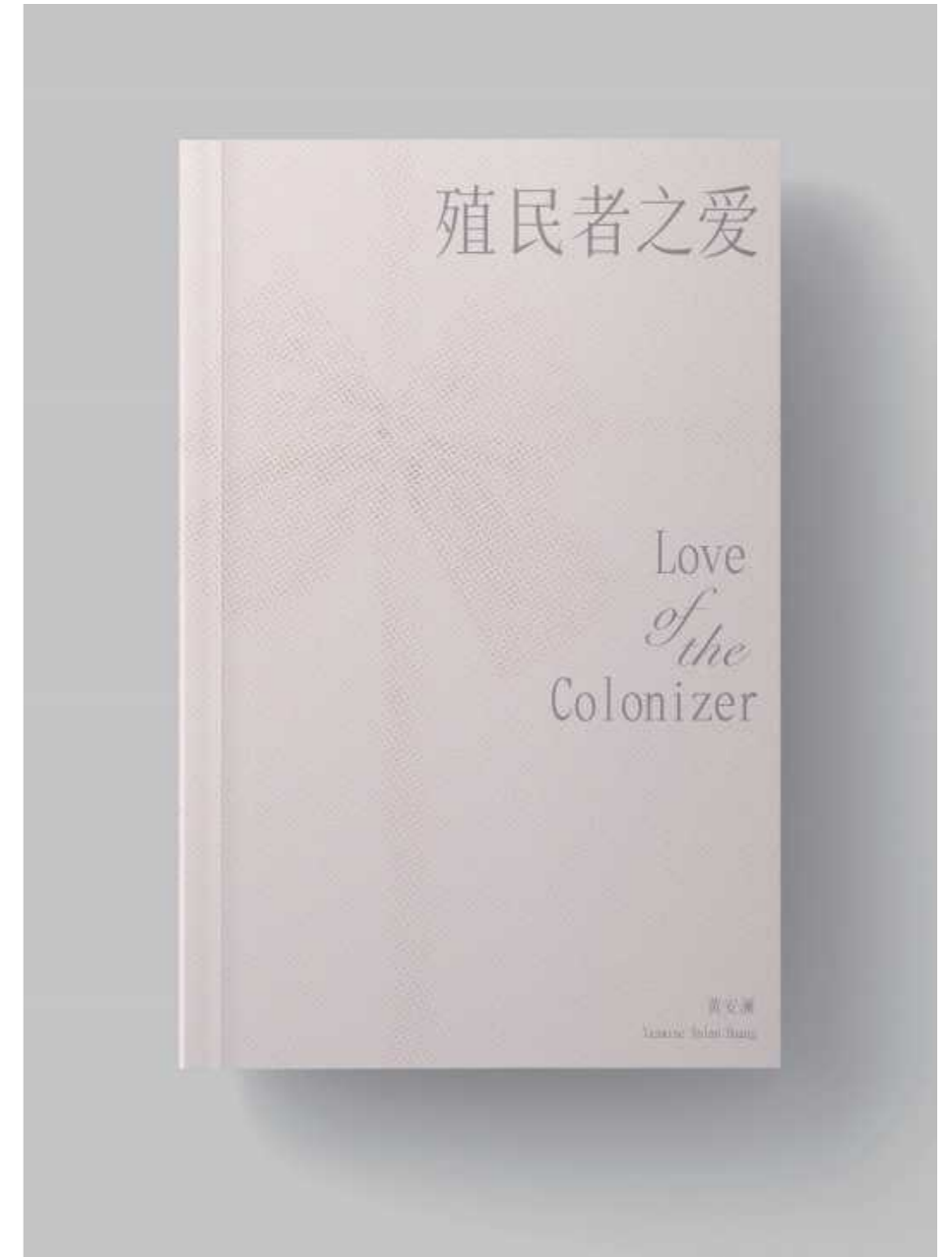
Courtesy of
Yasmine Anlan Huang

ABOUT

Yasmine Anlan Huang (b.1996, Guangzhou) is an artist and writer working in London and New York. Her solo and two-person shows include *Magician Space* (2025), Goethe-Institut Hong Kong (2024), Three Shadows Photography Art Centre (2019), among others. Her work has been presented at Whitney Biennial 2024, Peckham 24 (London, 2024), HART Haus (Hong Kong, 2024), Power Station of Art (Shanghai, 2021). She has participated in multiple residencies, including the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Her debut book of poems and essays, *Love of the Colonizer*, was published by Accent Sisters in 2022. Her second book *Becoming Everyone, Everywhere*, is forthcoming in 2025.



Ly Lan's book *Women's Novel* (Tiểu Thuyết Đàn Bà), 2008
and my book *Love of the Colonizer*, 2022



Car wasn't my favourite way of getting around. Having grown accustomed to the rise and fall of planes, I kept asking myself every time I was stuck in traffic: why don't I just fly there instead? Still, there was a confusing yet mesmerizing car ride that lingers with me, even though it happened a little over ten years ago. Back then, my parents and I were visiting my maternal relatives on the West Coast. After years of migration from Chaozhou, Guangdong to Vietnam, and from Vietnam to Seattle, the Li family had settled as the Ly family. Not surprisingly, as the stereotypical only child, even distant relatives felt close and intimate. We drove around, to Costco, a few Asian restaurants, a nursing home, and the first Starbucks. The foreign sights and long car rides spun our heads, and there was one time when it was just me, my mom, and my cousin Lisa in the car. Born in the States, Lisa didn't really speak Mandarin, Teochew, or Vietnamese, nor did her intense TVB drama-watching equip her with colloquial Cantonese. The young and blunt me single-handedly sustained a feedback loop, translating Lisa's English small talk back into Chinese so my mom could grasp her kindness and hospitality.



Ly Lan's book *Strangers' Land* (Đất Khách), 1995 and my upcoming book *Becoming Everyone, Everywhere*.

In hindsight, this back-and-forth of translation—of language and intimacy itself—which always risked miscommunication yet was held together by love and trust, has become the foundation of my practice since moving away from the Sinosphere to New York. I grappled with an unfamiliar tongue in this exile of language, and however hard I tried, the only option was to reconcile with the inaccuracy of my foreign melancholy. Three years later, the archive of my nomadic poetry writing wrapped itself up as a delicate little book, declaring my temporary victory in this negotiation of the in-betweenness. Yet life had the last laugh, choosing to turn back the clock and begin anew in London. I found myself back in Guangzhou waiting for my UK visa. The pandemic stretched my stay longer than any I had ever spent as an adult. I filled my days with thoughts of the uncertainties of navigating yet another new land, and of my failure to recontextualize my practice for Chinese audiences. Both near and impossibly distant, they looked at my works as a near-human doll, both familiar and unsettlingly alien. Those who had never left—the monolinguals—how could I make them understand the careful assembly of each sentence, the deliberate punctuation of every foreign rhetorical device?

A dramatic car ride ended my long wait. On the way to the airport, my mom, cradling my new book, decided it was time to drop some news: “You know what, you really remind me of your mom’s cousin. She was a great writer, and once translated Harry Potter.”

“What?” A secret family member revealed at the airport felt like a trick of timing. “You had so many chances to tell me she existed, and you didn’t say anything until I moved away?”

“You’re both named Lan,” Mom said, as if that explained everything. “Maybe some of her literary genes are yours.”

Who is she? I pulled out my phone. Li—Ly Lan [1] —Harry Potter. Tap. On the screen, a face popped out that could have been both me or my mother, only with grey hair. In the face of this undeniable parallel, the achievement of translating a best-seller felt secondary. Where was she? Three decades ago, Lan’s father, my grandfather’s brother, returned to Chaozhou. In the old home’s photo archives, yellowing photographs foregrounded the long-separated brothers, reunited. In this feverish homecoming of overseas Chinese, Lan was missing. In her stead came a check for three hundred dollars and a copy of her book. How had she, too, been translated out of the family’s memory?

I speculated that there might be some underlying tension behind her absence. Mom waved it away: she simply doesn’t speak Chinese.

Messages from Chaozhou traveled back quickly after I forwarded Lan’s recent photos: “You two are indeed alike, especially that you both married American men.” “Anlan is so brilliant for finding this!” “Thank you, Anlan, for bringing Lan’s news.” Reaching out with our similarity felt narcissistic and creepy, yet these joyful messages held me back even more: what if she were truly, utterly content with life, with no need for an extra layer of distant delight to disturb it?

The London version of me felt like a migratory bird, returning to my tropical nest every spring. Similarly, home-returning scenes of her father recur throughout Lan’s short stories, capturing the backstory of the old family photographs. In *Strangers' Land* (Đất Khách), she depicts a conversation with her father before his departure: “Father says: I’m not going anywhere, I’m just going home.” Reflections appear in another essay, *Teochew Porridge* (Ăn Cháo Tiều), written about his return: “The old home is now prosperous, and the villagers are all doing well”.

Chaozhou is a small but densely populated region, so many people went abroad to make a living. Some to Thailand, some to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the United States, and elsewhere. One relative settled well in Vietnam, and many villagers followed. In 1940, the eldest son in that generation, Lan’s father, moved to Vietnam. The third son, Lisa’s grandfather followed later on. After they settled, they sent money home, gradually buying land and houses, and the family became “middle peasants.” My grandfather, as the youngest son, was able to go to school and became the first in our family to attend university.

Photo taken when my grandfather successfully entered school, with my great-grandparents.





In the early 1990s, Ly Lan's father returned Chaozhou to visit relatives. Ly Lan's father had arrived in Vietnam at eighteen, while my grandfather was only three. They reunited after half a century. The photo was taken at the family home, which had already fallen into ruin.

In 2015, I met Lisa in Seattle. 2019, moved to New York.



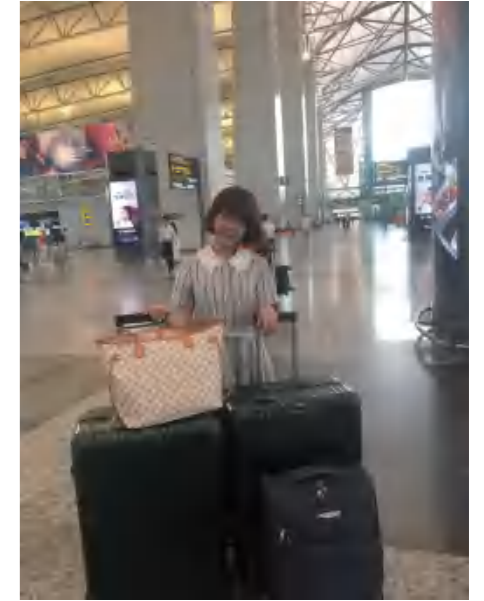
In 1997, Ly Lan first time going to the United States for The International Writing Program Graduate College, The University of Iowa. The image come from The University of Iowa's library records and Báo Tuổi Trẻ.

Decades later, my mother departed from Chaozhou to Guangzhou, as determined as Lan's father when he boarded that ship away to the South Seas. Lan and I went to the United States—not out of necessity to better economic opportunities, but simply to pursue our artistic ambitions. No more dangerous ocean crossings. We had simply traded one form of turbulence for another: lives caught between worlds, longing for selves that had already slipped away. Creation was no longer optional; it was a way to make sense of the fracture.

I found my remedy in two things: clinging to my mother tongue in a foreign land, and threading my work with the recurring image of a teen girl, who struggles between action and passivity. Lan's characters moved similarly through her stories, from Binh Nham to Cho Lon, each echoing childhood's subtle dislocations. In the snowy mountains, I confronted the inexplicable grief of translation:

"A flowering dictionary, one for each of us / You run forward through the fields / Without a homeland, the songs go on..."

Disoriented and adrift from hours spent scrolling through library indexes and auto-translated Vietnamese news, I encountered something decisive. In an early interview with Saigon Times, Lan was asked about an article she'd written on director Việt Linh, in which she posed a haunting question: "A woman who forges her own path abroad, yet keeps her heart in her homeland—is it her, or is it me?" The question struck the interviewer with its raw sadness, but it astonished me just as much with the revelation of our true similarity: a translator, caught in the liminal space of being a go-between, and the challenges came after.



In the lines of her writing, as I traced her miscarried projects and rejected pitches, the resonance of life across decades filled me with both comfort and wistful sorrow. Her decision to translate Harry Potter had not sprung from literary ambition but from pragmatism. The income from a bestselling children's book could be sent home and could also support her MFA studies. I, even with family support, felt that every sentence I wrote abroad was from scratch, as if no fallback existed to catch me. I kept circling back to writing's futility: is each generation doomed to the grind of migration, cultural dissonance, and the endless labor of remaking identity? Thirty years on, if we still wrestle with the same confusions, what is writing even for? At certain points in reading, I even lost track of which confusions were mine and which were hers—a small moment of joy appeared from one of her short stories.

"We just drove across North America from the East Coast back to our home on the West Coast. There's a small garden at home that had gone untended all year, so all kinds of weeds had overrun it. Now I'm weeding and planting flowers."

"Wow! You're so happy!"

I, too, made a mirror-image journey once, from the West Coast back to an apartment in the East. I had chosen the apartment life precisely for this reason: to escape the perpetual chore of tending a yard, a duty that felt quintessentially American. I had always seen such chores as a tether to a conventional life I never desired, until I read her words and saw them for what they truly were: not a chain, but a potential. Nostalgia and the dissonance of navigating two worlds inevitably return like daily chores, in words fraught with ambiguity, in the streets people move through, and in the memories they carry. They grow back wildly after each homecoming, like weeds in a garden that sprout no matter how often they're cut down. And so the cycle continues. I began to accept that the task of the next generation is not to finish the work, but to continue it. There is no grand finale of translation, only the quiet, mutual labor of weeding one's gardens across time and distance. Lan tended a plot for me with her writings; now I tend my own. There is a quiet satisfaction in the writing, the tending, the small and consistent acts that allow new roots to take hold in foreign soil.



2025, Ly Lan at her book-signing event with readers in Ho Chi Minh City.
Photo: TRE Publishing House.

In my head,

and

before
my eyes

FOOTNOTE

[1] Ly Lan (b. 1957) was born in Binh Dương, and later moved to Chợ Lớn. She published her first short story collection, *Singing Grass*, in 1983 and has since authored more than twenty collections of short stories, poetry, and essays, as well as a novel. Her writings have appeared widely in leading Vietnamese literary journals and newspapers, and she has also written for film and television, including the feature *Nori Bình Yên Chim Hót* (1987) and the five-part series *Đất Khách* (2000). Ly Lan has received multiple literary awards, including the Association Prize in the children's book category for *Ngôi Nhà Trong Cỏ* (Home in Grass) in 1984, the Ho Chi Minh City Writers' Association Poetry Prize for *Là Mình* (Self) in 2005, and the Cricket Knight Prize at the 5th Cricket Arts Awards for *An Autobiography of a Pig* (*Từ Truyền Của Một Con Heo*). As a translator, she is best known for introducing J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series to Vietnam. She currently divides her time between Vietnam and the United States.

Koa Pham



Photo: Trang Rót

Koa Pham is based in London and works between the UK and Vietnam. Koa prominently investigates the relationship between objects, humans, and spaces, with an emphasis on the potential agency that objects have on humans and how they influence their decision-making. He recently had his solo exhibition, *A Melted form leaves stains on the surface*, at Monade Contemporary Art Gallery in Kyoto (2024). His works have been featured in numerous international exhibitions and venues, including Osaka International Art, Osaka, 2025; Mega Art Fair, Milan, 2025; *A Landscape of Chance*, SLQS Gallery, London 2024; *Means of Production*, Lunch Hour Collective, New York 2024; *No Place*

Like Home Part II (A Vietnamese Exhibition), Museum of the Home, London 2023; *Paintings Now Redux*, Osaka Art Stage, Osaka, 2023; First Biennial Exhibition, The Ballinglen Arts Foundation and Museum of Art, Bally Castle, Ireland, 2023; *The Foliage IV*, Vincom Contemporary Art Centre, Hanoi, 2022; 195th Royal Scottish Academy Annual Show, 2021 among others.

In My Head

"Go to Phong Lan's. She seems to have a fire in her."

That year my mother, through a colleague, found a place for me to learn drawing. I had to learn because it was the key for studying abroad. In Vietnam, secondary schools don't teach art, so students who dream of Fine Arts university shall train themselves - taking extra classes run by secondary-school art teachers, university lecturers, or art students who've walked the path before.

Miss Lan's home nestled in a narrow lane called Longing Alley, once home to beauty queens and other celebrated pageants. In a cramped room of barely ten square meters, I saw pure faces, eyes squinting, hands raised to measure with pencils, then decisively setting the tips to paper with a soft scratching. I watched them, spellbound. In heartbeats, the plaster cast would bloom on paper and, under their deft hands, slowly breathe into life.

I wondered if I could do it. I doubted myself. I knew I wasn't particularly bright. Miss Lan emerged from the inner room to welcome my mother and me. She said with quiet authority, "Stay awhile. We'll see if talents live in you. If not, you can go home." "Art demands instinct." She arranged paper and pencils like ritual objects, setting up an easel. After my mother paid and left, nerves danced through my chest.

"Draw this shape. Make your lines straight. No crooked lines!" she commanded.

I took out my mechanical pencil and began. She swept it away with a gesture. My strokes lay stiff and lifeless on the page.

"Use a wooden pencil," she said. "But first you must learn to sharpen it. I'll show you."

"Watch. See how I peel the wood like fruit skin, how my wrist turns in rhythm until the core grows sharp. Now you try."

I tried. My clumsy blade dug into the wood and splintered it; the lead snapped in two. The pencil and I were at odds. She encouraged me: "Don't lose heart. Breathe. Hold the blade lightly, not like you're chopping. Practice with patience. For now, use this one I've prepared. Cut the eraser on the diagonal - use that corner to lift away mistakes, you understand?"

I drew my first tentative line. Pencil touched paper and moved; a line was born. A thrill ran through me, a sweet energy flowing with each stroke like water finding its course. When I finished, she looked and simply said, "You belong here."

So, I came each day, carrying my satchel to Miss Lan's sanctuary. Her teaching was simple: she'd place a model before us, explain the basics once, then leave the students to discover. When we finished, she'd return like ceremony itself. She inspected each drawing in turn and pointed out mistakes.

"This lacks life. Your pencil work sleeps; the form hasn't awakened on the page. Begin again."

When she spoke criticism, the room fell silent. It stung to have your labor dismissed. Some students felt discouraged; she'd say, "Keep going. You must work hard to get into art school. Art is a harsh road; it won't be easy." But when she nodded approval, faces would light up and excitement would ripple through the room.

To me alone, she said:

"Since you're not taking the university exam, I'll teach you other things beyond charcoal sketching and decorative geometry. I'll teach you oil painting and watercolor too, but only when you're ready. Go practice."

Those early days were brutal for me. My hands stumbled and fumbled; sometimes I'd leave with my heart hollow as a gambler who'd lost everything. Other days rang with quiet pride as I gazed at my work, pleased with myself. One day she handed me a colored still life.

"Sketch this for me," she said.

I followed her instruction. My hands, trained through countless days, had somehow grown nimble and sure. Holding the pencil, my lines began dancing together, rhythmic and carefree. I was lost in the trance when she appeared behind me.

"Good. Today I'll let you add color, and from now on, you are a painter."

I froze. Painter: the title felt like an oversized coat. Even now, fifteen years later, when people ask what I do for a living, I still answer vaguely. But in that moment her words cast a spell. Light seemed to pour through me without warning. Had she glimpsed something in my absorption? Then she said, "Watch my hands."

She took a jar of gouache, dipped her brush in the colors, and swept them across my sketch. Her wrist moved like water - swift, sure, decisive.

"Don't be afraid. Objects have many tones. Let the colors weave into each other."

She layered more colors, building them up. The collision of brushstrokes made them blend and merge, revealing depths on the paper. Red and yellow intertwined, embracing each other as they followed my circular sketch. Before long, an apple had come to life. Magic! She handed the brush back to me.

"Here, finish the other fruits. Be bold and fearless - liberate your brushstrokes! Don't worry about hurting the paper!"

I nodded.

That's how I began. Every night I painted, forgetting time, my mind floating with each stroke. Liberate brushstrokes, liberate, liberate. I'd sweep a long line across the page, heart bursting with joy - haha!

Sometimes I'd arrive at class early. I loved those moments most. The kids would compare their work; everyone was talented. I was enchanted by all their paintings - so beautiful. Each seemed to possess magic. We'd often talk about our teacher, chattering away. How could someone so stern and quiet be so understanding? We all agreed that after our initial confusion, by day's end her guidance always made our paintings better. We thought she appeared like a saint sometimes. The Saint of Art, we'd laugh. One kid said, "That's actually true, because I overheard somewhere that she survived an accident at sea."

"Really?" We all gasped, eyes wide.

He continued: "I'm not sure of the details, but everyone else died, and she saw Quan Yin reach out her hand and say, 'Take my hand, child, let me guide you home,' and when she woke up, she was on the shore."

We all fell silent. When she walked in, we kids scrambled awkwardly; it took a while to act normal again. I looked at her differently after that - curious, as

if searching for traces of that dance with death. One day when the class was empty, I dared to ask, "Is it true?"

"What?"

"Did you really see Quan Yin?"

"Yes, I did see her."

She gazed out toward the courtyard where sunlight was playing with a swooping bird.

"It was long ago..." she said. "Want to listen to music?"

She had a cassette player. She put on a melodic song with a woman's voice, serene and flowing.

"Ah, is that the Carpenters?"

"That's right. They're my favorite band."

She leaned against the doorframe, watching the tree stretch toward the bird and sunlight.

"Have you seen any good movies lately?"

"Yes, occasionally."

"Tell me the titles. I love movies. I used to go to the cinema all the time. I loved dancing, going to dance halls. But not wild like young people today. Our whole group would share one pot of tea and dance all night..."

She stepped through a few cha-cha moves while the Carpenters played their gentle, rolling melody. Before my eyes she was no longer Miss Phong Lan but a young artist. Her movements were soft and swaying. A time of pure youth suddenly flickered to life. I looked up toward the high wall near the ceiling.

"Miss!"

"What is it?"

"What's that painting up there?"

"Chemical painting. That's abstract art. I captured emotions and painted with chemicals mixed with color."

"I love that painting of yours. Why don't you become an artist, have exhibitions?"

"Artist... then who would buy my paintings?"

We both fell quiet. I looked down at the floor. The tiles were scratched from her dancing. They had probably been new once, like dreams.

I kept painting, more and more each day. I couldn't stop thinking about her chemical painting. In my head an ever-changing image appeared, a chaotic rhythm. Night. I read hungrily about abstract art. Then morning into afternoon.

In class, whenever my neck and back grew stiff, I'd turn to look at it again. The painting hung high, majestic and full of secrets, silently watching me.

As autumn drew to a close, it was time to prepare my application for studying abroad. Those final lessons unfolded in quiet. Hardly anyone came anymore.

There had been times when the classroom buzzed with energy. Little kids clustered together mixing "tertiary colors," sharpening pencils together before taking their university exams, then rushing off to blow off steam.

I was the only one who stayed for those last few days, driven by an anxiety no one could understand. If they liked you in the interview, you could go; if not, you stayed home. Flipping through my drawings made my heart flutter. From someone completely clumsy, I now knew how to unfold colors, swimming

freely in art's shallow waters... I was lost in reverie, smiling, when I heard her voice calling.

"Khoa, you're going for your interview soon?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then don't paint these last few days. Organize your portfolio properly for the interview. Come with me to this place - I need your help."

"Of course. How can I help you?"

"I'm preparing to go to the city cancer center. I need people to carry things. Follow me."

I agreed. The trip included several other students. We brought milk, candy, and many of our paintings. She had everyone copy Matisse's goldfish using colored clay. Everything was nicely framed. She wrote a few words: "Young Artists Group."

"Shouldn't it be 'Little Artists'?" I asked.

"Young Little Artists Group, then. Your brushstrokes are still finding their way, so you remain young in art's eyes." She laughed with gentle warmth.

"Load everything into the car - it's here!"

We followed her to the cancer center, pediatric ward. When the car entered the hospital, we young artists carried the paintings and milk up for everyone. Along the way I glimpsed hollow faces, heavy-lidded eyes, people sitting everywhere like wilted flowers. I pushed myself into that thick atmosphere of pain to reach the child patients.

There was a common room with bookshelves decorated with painted sunflowers. This was the legacy of a small patient who had passed away long ago but still managed to give the world a volunteer program called "Thuy's Dreams." The flowers were painted large and carefully, as if adding drops of luck, hoping patients could rise above their illness like sunflowers turning toward light. Along the corridors, little children chatted carelessly, fearless before life's death sentence. We were just the carriers. But she ran to them, hugged them, stroked their hair, gave them paintings and milk. She sat right on the floor, talked with patients' families, slipped money into their hands, encouraged them to stay strong alongside the patients. She said to me: "Do you see? Everyone must pay the price of karma. But these children here - they're still so small. What could they have done wrong to pay such a steep price?" I fell silent at her question.

"I often come here to teach drawing to these children. I want to bring them joy. I hope art will give them wings, make people peaceful and comfortable. I don't teach much - just portrait lessons. Have them draw portraits of each other. But many times while they're drawing, their necks suddenly droop, the nurses take them away, and the next day they're no longer in this world. I look at their paintings and feel stunned. An unfinished circle. Incomplete, like their very lives. Remember what I'm telling you - that's art's function."

I took a long, deep breath. I walked through the endless hospital corridor, the atmosphere heavy and suffocating with pain. I thought about life's scenes and art. Miss Lan had left me with an enormous revelation. I shuddered, my

whole body weak before art's immense scope with humanity. In that moment, I pledged myself wholeheartedly to follow.

I kept thinking about that unfinished circle, like an ending. Someday, in another life, might that child be waiting to complete their circle? I thought of artist Lêna Bui's performance. She drew a circle on a blackboard. "When the starting point and ending point touch each other, we have a circle." And perhaps the ending is precisely how we begin again.

"Goldfish after Henri Matisse", 2025, colour pencil in A4.
Photo by Yiqing Chen



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Before My Eyes

This story followed me and haunted me for a long time. So when VAC invited me to collaborate on their second issue of the journal, I didn't hesitate. I wanted to write about my first art teacher.

Returning to Saigon in a torrential June downpour, I carried a pot of orchids to give my teacher, asking permission to write an article about her. She remained as before, though time had left its marks like gentle brushstrokes on aged paper.

"Is that Khoa? How long have you been back?"

"I just returned."

The sound of rustling papers mixed with my voice. She was busy preparing art supplies for a new young student. Just like me long ago, she handed out pencils, paper, erasers...

"Wait just a moment."

"What have you been studying? Going smoothly?"

"I studied industrial design, but I've been working as a freelance artist for three years now. It's quite difficult, but joyful."

"Freelance artist? Creating work?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Can you support yourself selling paintings?"

"Sometimes. I also have to do side jobs to earn extra money."

"Washing dishes for hire?"

"No, odd jobs - tutoring kids for university entrance exams."

"Why did you bring flowers without wrapping? I don't know how to carry them home. Did you just hold them like that the whole way here?"

"Yes, and with the rain, I thought the flowers would probably enjoy staying fresh."

She smiled kindly.

"Come out here. Adult conversation - the kids can't listen."

I followed her to the stone bench. Before us, the rain had stopped, leaving only a few drops falling hesitantly onto the damp ground like the last notes of a song.

She waved over a lottery ticket seller.

"How much for this bundle? Show Khoa the numbers."

"840."

She gave money to the lottery seller.

"A parent just gave this to me. Take it all," she said.

She lit a cigarette with practiced grace.

"Will you smoke with me?"

"I'll smoke with you," I replied.

Taking a long drag, she asked, "What's this magazine about?"

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I explained the background. She said, "Why don't you write about your own life instead of wanting to write about mine?"

"Well, I haven't seen you in so long, but I can't forget what you did for us students and those children with cancer. I want to write about that story. I think it was your courage, after you..."

"That wasn't courage," she cut me off. "That was karma."

"Karma?"

"Exactly. Karma. The natural way of things. I had no choice. A job is different. That's what feeds you. Karma is what drives you, what you must carry your whole life, how you pay back the world. I chose education. After graduating from the 10th class of Gia Dinh Art School, almost the last cohort, I went out into the world hustling, doing many different jobs - 5, 6 jobs at once. Graphic design, newspaper montage, event decoration, even building houses for people. I was a single mother, needed to earn money to raise two small children, but in the end, I chose teaching. Confronting extremely strong personalities and using art to transform young souls. I gave up many dream salaries to teach art. That's my karma."

"I'm impressed by how you escaped death after drifting at sea for days, how Buddha's hand brought you to shore."

"Don't write much about that. That's my private corner, long ago. And I've had many other near-death experiences. I've had four close calls with death; each time I survived, I wanted to learn more and more. I'm just a grain of sand in a river, among countless lifetimes, and among my own countless lives."

"And it's precisely those experiences that made me start doing charity work, with the spirit of always giving what I can. Giving dharma. There are many things I've done that I've forgotten completely. Like teaching children at the cancer center. I'd forgotten about it long ago. Today when you brought it up, I just remembered."

"Don't write about or make art about things you haven't experienced. Don't make art about something foreign that you haven't used your life to verify. It's just shallow, superficial. After graduation, I wasn't close with my classmates. Artists sometimes just talk about lofty things they've never actually experienced."

"I also want people to see that abstract painting you made long ago, the one you called a chemical painting. I want to put your painting next to mine so viewers can understand how you influenced me."

"I've moved many times. That painting got lost. But it's not important. That was just a moment of inspiration when I felt moved to paint. You students are my real works of art. I've helped many generations of students get into art and architecture schools in the city. I taught all of you very carefully about composition and drawing techniques. That's my artistic legacy. My art is for humanity, planting faith and hope in people."

"Do you need a photo?"

"Here, here's a photo." She hurried inside and pulled a picture from a cabinet.

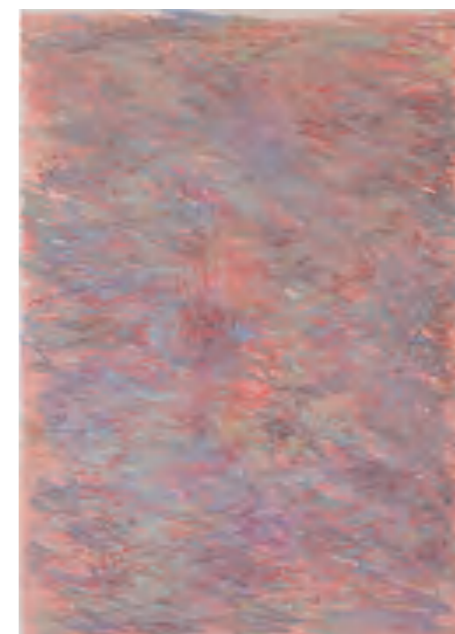
"This photo shows me well. It was in a newspaper once. I designed this 'ao dai' myself. I have many, I should give some away. I like this photo. It's the truest one about what I do."

Then she stubbed out her cigarette. "I have to go now. When you're free, come visit and we'll talk. When you finish writing, let me read it. I'll help you revise."



"Miss Phong Lan",
retouched by Yiqing Chen.

I said goodbye and hurried away. On the wet street, yellow lamplight spread and dissolved into gentle streaks of light. I walked slowly, my shadow patiently following behind me like a faithful companion. I kept thinking about today's meeting. After nearly 15 years apart, so much had changed with life's rhythms. The stories she told felt both familiar and strange. In that moment, the reality before my eyes and the memories in my head seemed to joyfully meet in a quiet, deep place within me. There, together they sharpened pencil points like weapons guarding the legacy she passed to me: art's enduring and fierce flame.



"Memory Map of Miss Phong Lan's
Chemical Abstract Painting (A+B overlay)",
2025, pastel in A3.
Photo by Yiqing Chen.

The text is written by the artist.
All images courtesy of the artist.

A National Feeling

Something strange had escaped my notice.

My tongue has, for a while, felt foreign in its place. The muscle—a wet, perturbed, incorrigible mass—had managed to lodge itself in the back of my throat. It threatens my faculty of speech with the aura of a pedantic, literary scholar. To make matters worse I'd discovered—the emergence of a persistent ring. This ringing, risen from my mind's darkest recesses, would reverberate whenever I try to open my mouth to speak. It'd seal up my throat with its inscrutable varnish—devoicing me of meaning, emptying me of words.

Here, you might come to the conclusion that only a careless individual would allow such a condition to manifest unnoticed. Or perhaps, in good faith, you might extend towards me a little bit of humanity. *"Of course her Vietnamese sucks. She went to international school!"* I'll extend a little bit of my own humanity in kind, adding more damaging context to the already problematic origin of my peculiar condition. For not only did I attend international school, I was also, an international student; spending almost 7 years of my life in America, pursuing of all things, a career in the arts. I'd also learned English at a young age, able to competently use it while being raised by American pop culture. Further exacerbating my condition was the advent of the internet, where I was always one click away from all the knowledge humanity had accumulated—knowledge that just so happened to be Western in origin. I cannot tell you when my internal monologue ceased to be in Vietnamese. But for as long as I can remember, English has been the only language I'd employed in order to communicate with myself. So despite being born amid Sài Gòn's eternal summer, somewhere along the way, I'd misplaced my roots.

The condition, however, despite these further illuminations, could still be sufficiently attributed to carelessness. I must confess that *careful* have never been—and probably never will be—an adjective I'd use to describe myself. But personal inadequacies aside, I must say that I did allow for the condition to escape my notice; deliberately banishing the eventual admission to my unconscious' no-man's-land. I must then confess to my original undoing, that instead of operating on self-honesty, I'd chosen the comforting realm of self-censorship. I'd resorted to a willful ignorance. Ignorance of why despite having returned to my country for almost five years, my native tongue still remains, for me, a struggle. And it is, an ignorance. Made willful by the painful truth I was incapable of confronting. But time has a way of peeling back the layers of self-deception; even dragging the truth from the shadows into the most brilliant of sunlight. Through this passage in *"The Wretched of the Earth"*, Frantz Fanon spoke my truth into existence:

... At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country. He contends himself with stamping these instruments with a hall-mark which he wishes to be national, but is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner ... [T]he ideas that he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the real situation which the men and the women of his country know.

Fanon's words struck a resounding chord; for this ultimately appears to be the exact diagnosis of my condition. Make no mistake, I am not an intellectual. But I am a native who's also a foreigner; "anxiously trying to create a cultural work". But at this I've often stumbled, finding the things I've chosen to concern myself with, the manner in which I've chosen to conduct myself, had been alienated from any semblances of national feelings. This conflict appeared to be my perpetual condemnation—an eternal dance between the knife's edge of past pains and future possibilities. Yet my linguistic inaptitude, the mass of flesh currently sitting at an impasse in my throat, had finally become impossible to ignore. Our barely-healed-over scab demands at my picking. For deep within this wound reality had hastily sewn up, shone an auspicious light—illuminating the unending mystery, of where we are going, what we are becoming, what is happening to us.

Hanging somewhere in the balance, the answer lies,

The Hué sun in late May employs an almost megalomaniacal posture, hell-bent on the expansion of its own brutal regime. This oppressive heat, hovering so low to the ground, could be the reason why the cicadas here screech with an unparalleled intensity, piercing my eardrums as I dragged my suitcase into the guest room of my friend's garden compound. The luscious scenery, along with the compound's traditional architecture was a welcomed sight to this wayward traveller, who was emptying her water bottle of its content. Finally hydrated, I took in my surroundings. Patiently waiting for the slow drying of my sweat-soaked shirt.

The room was bright and spacious, with floor-to-ceiling windows that overtook the entirety of the front wall. Decorated with minimal yet eclectic furniture, a mattress was placed at center, while a wooden tea table humbly sat in front. From here one is provided with an optimal view of the garden, with its luscious bed of grass and flowers, and its fruit trees innumerable in variety and abundance. Here resides the spirit of simplicity and resplendence; that when combined with the sensual aromas of summertime fruits could delight even the most jaded of fools. Being myself a jaded fool, I'd succumbed to the visual delight I was somehow permitted. Releasing, in the process, a sigh of relief. Here I was in the land where the river languishes slow, where the sun draws the sharpest contrast. Sài Gòn's whirlwind pace and invariable troubles then became something of the past, allowing me the realization that for once, I did not miss it.

Abruptly, I was pulled out of my reverie—at the discovery of an unassuming tin box that had been inconspicuously placed on the bedside table. Here, you might be puzzled. For why something so lackluster in nature could enrapture me so? But my friend, the host, knew me extremely well. He has time and time over proven to me this. He'd done it again—in this exact, precise moment. For out of this humble container I'd noticed, that he'd bestowed upon me, a gift. Like all magical things the gift did not demand any special attention. But it had mine as I pried it open, secretly elated at the enlightening potentials within.

My hedonism should not come as a surprise to you, given the blatant decadence infused within my paintings. My predilection for the surreal should not bolt anyone out of their seats either. For this predisposed leniency towards superstitions is the most evident sign of my Vietnamese identity. When taking a bird's eye view of our history, one would notice, that amid numerous tragedies and horror, a devotion to the sacred had always been kept alive. Perhaps this can be plainly seen through our prolific myth-making [1], or through the diverse assortment of gods, enthroned and sanctified upon our altars. Holy figures such as Thần Đất (God of the Land), Thần Bếp (Kitchen God), Thần Tài (God of Wealth), etc. Whether native or foreign in origin, have been combined and recreated, in order to ensure the gratification of our spiritual needs. For how could lands be purchased and used without divine blessings? How else could the tides of the stock market be turned in our favor? The anthropologist Đinh Hùng Hải had attributed this faithful flexibility to the absence of wars waged in the name of religion throughout our 4000-year existence. He'd made use of “*Ông Trời*” [2] as the perfect example, the ultimate symbol of our “unity in faith”.

... This is because Vietnamese people possess a very simple philosophy, *có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành* [3]. They “don't pay attention to any specific religious or spiritual system. For them, everything is sacred, everything that possess supernatural powers is supreme for them to pray for peace and happiness, to eliminate misfortune and disaster”. And Ông Trời will forever exist in the people's subconscious as long as in this world there exists injustice and absurdity. Figuratively speaking, as long as the people continue to endure misfortune, Ông Trời will continue to “sit back” and listen to their prayers! [4]

Such comforting narratives can sweeten even the most terrible of tragedies. But sweetness, as it turns out, is an affront to revolution. This is an almost innocuous observation. For the kowtowing in front of religious idolatries is at best useless, and at worst antithetical to demands of revolutionary work. On the dissemination of Buddhism in 2nd Century Việt Nam under Chinese occupation, the historian Đào Duy Anh had this to say:

...The working class suffered from all kinds of hardship, thus easily accepted the delusion of reaping prosperity in the afterlife, therefore Buddhism was spread very easily among the people. Such an effective reasoning to deceive the poor was of course welcomed by the exploitative class. Buddhism also highly valued merit and charity. So the exploitative class—especially the Chinese mandarins—can continue on with their cruel embezzlement, as long as they use their money to build temples and hold vegetarian altars to give alms, than their crimes would be acquitted, or at the very least, reduced. So the ruling class not only took advantage of Buddhism because it itself was able to lull them to sleep.

The newly established exploitative regime needed its own ideology, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were the three main elements of the exploitative ideology that the Chinese rulers brought into our country along with the new regime. [5]

And who could forget the French? Was it not them who presented before us our prophet and savior Jesus Christ? White in skin and soul, the Holy Son of the Holy Father himself? The halving of our tongues and minds seemed then inevitable. Much like how the capitulation of the Hué Imperial Court, when faced with their foreign invaders' smoking guns, seemed inevitable as well. I can then sympathize greatly with the resentment held towards religious feelings. But in all honesty, I've never found the idea, that faith and revolutionary work are inherently incompatible, to be correct. In truth, what has been more consistently accurate, is the harmonious nature of their timeless coexistence. Throughout our history invaders had come and conquered. And over and over, we'd prevailed. Though at times we'd momentarily relented, only to eventually, once again rise up. Yet neither rebellion nor subjugation had ever managed to eliminate from our people the desire to worship. Their foreign gods became our native gods; and their foreign faith became, our native faith [6]. This is because politics had been and will forever be incapable of being the be-all end-all of our humanity. Through the hands of our gods and deities we'd found absolution, then deliverance, towards the sacred eternal blue of Paradise. I saw my Paradise beaming with light. Made beautiful, despite the modest appearance of the gift. Salvation, I'd believed, would begin at the end of its ingestion.

Grey clouds painted the sky a sombre mood, inspiring the most sentimental of feelings. This was the scenery in question, encompassing the tomb of the late Nguyễn king, Tự Đức. Yet despite the change in appearance, the heap retained its ornerous posture. This was made ever more insufferable, by the menacing promises of summertime rain.

A steady stream of visitors had arrived to visit this ancient relic. After all it was only mere weeks after the April 30th celebrations. But although being toasted alive by the sun is a given, everybody wanted to vacation in Huế. Perhaps Huế, notorious for its doleful yet peaceful air, represented a desirable escape for many city-dwellers. Or, at least, this was the case for me. For this ancient tomb, in particular, has remained a favorite of mine ever since I was still a miraculously sober art student. The reason is, of course, unsophisticated: I can recognize another hedonist from a mile away. I'd certainly recognized one here; for this tomb was absolutely a hedonist's exaltation. Upon crossing the grand, mossy entrance, one is immediately overtaken, by the sight of a vast, man-made lake, along with its lush, man-made island—a sight unmistakably reminiscent of a Chinese painted landscape. As if mirroring the sky at present, the lake shone an opaque, jade-like green—perfect for one to glide over, and perhaps spend all day reading poetry, upon embarking on the cultivated forest kept alive on this islet. Taking slow, even steps, I meandered upon the terracotta-tiled grounds, finally stopping at a small, wooden hut that's been erected at lakeside. This hut was Tự Đức's designated place to read books and compose poetry, with the panoramic view of the scenery guaranteeing a deluge of inspiration. With shoes off I stepped into this poet's haven, purchased two packets of fish food, and proceeded to watch the ensuing carnage, as Kois of various colors and markings commenced their feast.

The gift had then begun its gestation. A fluttering pressure formed, climbing in intensity from its place at the inner most part of my heart. Flushing itself against my innards, it'd chosen the delicate breaking point at the bottom of my throat as its final resting place. I was choked, vexed, made unable to delineate between the very boundary between my ego and the world. Through dilated pupils, I observed the world's slow abandonment. With its rational cloak now forsaken, the mysticism of which I'd always suspected was finally revealed. And at this loomed an overwhelming fear, as I wondered if I was truly capable of handling the very enlightenment that I'd yearned for. Salvation was then a visitor at the door. Though I can't quite yet hear its knocking. For the peak was then, still, at a great distance; far away enough for me to be confronted with an enormous absurdity, that this tomb was never meant to be enjoyed by me. In fact its very existence—its very essence—is the unambiguous evidence of the omnipotent power a feudal king once possessed. How many was reserved a final resting place so immense? Allowed such a lurid display of power? As ecstasy flooded my receptors, the fallibility of human existence appeared strangely amusing.

In his own account of Việt Nam's long history, Nguyễn Khắc Viện had accused Nguyễn Anh—the first king of the Nguyễn Dynasty—of introducing “a snake into the family henhouse”.

Sticking to his policy of treason, Nguyễn Anh did not content himself with asking for help from the Siamese; he also contacted a French missionary, Pigneau de Béhaine, Bishop of Adran, who advised him to appeal to France. The French missionary took one of Nguyễn Anh's sons to France where, with the help of the Foreign Missions, he managed to obtain an audience with Louis XVI. On 28 November 1787, a treaty was signed between a representative of France and Pigneau de Béhaine representing Nguyễn Anh. France promised military aid in exchange for the ceding of the port of Tourane and the Poulo-Condore Islands, and the right to free trade inside Việt Nam to the exclusion of other European nations. [7]

Not only paving the way for French imperialism in Việt Nam, Nguyễn Anh, according to Nguyễn Khắc Viện, had also defeated Việt Nam's first socialist movement—the Tây Sơn. After vanquishing his enemies, Nguyễn Anh—enthroned as king Gia Long—became the first king of a unified Việt Nam [8] with Huế (then Phú Xuân) as the capital. His restoring feudalism and Confucianism as the reigning dynasty's methods of rule. The time period before the Nguyễn restoration and its subsequent reign was and still is, a painful and contentious period in Vietnamese history. Yet despite its early successful efforts at unification and restoring economic prosperity, the failures of the later Nguyễn kings unequivocally tarnished its name. One of which could perhaps be attributed to their strict adherence to regressive Confucian ideology [9]. Another could be their antiquated stance regarding technological innovations [10]. The brutal treatment reserved for the Chăm [11] and those of Catholic faith [12] was also, a crucial point of contention, demonstrating the oppressive manner of which they've chosen to conduct themselves. Moreover, the cholera epidemic of 1849, combined with persistent natural disasters, did not alleviate nor help improve this dire political situation. Especially when handled with incompetency, which the Imperial Court certainly did [13]. This historical backdrop—fraught with sadism, greed, and corruption—naturally fermented the growing resentment among the people. Thus, peasant uprisings became increasingly common, especially during the reign of Tự Đức.

Yet the king's highest treason was not brutality, but decadence. Đản Duy Anh had made it a point to declare Tự Đức to be the most frivolous out of all the Nguyễn kings [14]. Being ill of health from possessing a weak constitution, this late king spent a significant amount of his rule if not out hunting and promenading, then languishing in the Imperial Palace, enjoying private Hát Tuồng performances with his innumerable concubines and royal servants. When one of his court mandarins implied a return to governmental duties is of the essence, he'd say: “There is much to be done, yet my body is sick. If forced to hold restraint in such a manner, I cannot possibly do it” [15]. So the people continued to suffer, while this hedonistic king composed musicals and poetry within the tomb mandated for him by Heaven. The very same tomb that required so much exploitative corvée labor, that a workers' uprising took place during its construction in 1868. Thus Tự Đức must've always been aware of the resentment the people held towards him. Which was why the real location of his burial site remains a mystery to this day—for after the 200 laborers tasked with its construction returned from the secret route, Tự Đức had ordered their immediate beheadings.

Blood soaked the ground, spilling over. Temperate trees grew from their late bunsals; the bony branches bloomed frail, sickly flowers, perfumed by the stench of death. So many have died here. So many have laid their final breaths languishing on the hot earth; as if waiting for their final deliverance, under the eternally omnipotent gaze of the sun. Yet the sun here chose not to act the part of the savior—it had resolved itself to a megalomaniacal posture, after all. Upon our altars, we'd then curate for ourselves personal visions of Heaven. Perhaps up there in the sky awaits a kind, elderly paternal figure, holding in his hand the very scroll in which lists all of our good deeds, and most important of all, our unjust misfortunes. He'd then reward us with a piece of real estate in Heaven. For after everything we'd been through, don't you think we deserve it? On Earth debauchery reigns under the banner of Justice. Mayhem, of course, remained its fateful seat in the shadows, where it is free to disseminate its own dreadful gospels, as if reality wasn't cruel enough.

Opportunism, then, is an unavoidable by-product. Yet how can I assure you that I mean this without any condemnation? For when the tectonic plates of our shared reality—our shared history—had once crashed together in a manner so profound, what grows from the ground cannot be trust. It instead is made fertile for disharmony, by the innocuous realization that to exist in this life means to suffer. Yet we demand to meet this realization with resistance, grasping at any assurances that the ground we are standing on is rock solid, safe and still. But unconsciously we all know, that no matter how assured we may wish to feel, fate has its own designs, completely immune from any of our attempts at manipulation. So it's truly no surprise that we would cling to any semblance of wealth and status, rationality and control—anything at all that can placate the insanity constantly threatening to break through and invade our waking consciousness. We've chosen, instead, to throw up our hands towards the sky in desperation. For at the end of the day, *aren't we mere children of God?* What are we supposed to do when Father dispenses onto us horrible violence? When He delivers unto us not salvation, but constant misfortune and unimaginable pain instead? Yet our sadistic fantasies still live, while on Earth limbless ghosts roam still. Barren trees sway listless, condemned to a life underneath the impossible forces of the onerous sun. Only the blue promises of Paradise can draw upon our heads rings of light pious and glowing, allowing us the reprieve of deeming ourselves angels—the perpetual and unfortunate victims of an unjust and unchangeable world. On this Sigmund Freud had astutely observed, in *"Civilization and Its Discontents"*:

The life imposed on us is too hard for us to bear; it brings us too much pain, too many disappointments, too many insoluble problems. If we are to endure it, we cannot do without palliative measures.

As my palliative measure spun my head with absurdity, I tread with caution along the now familiar terracotta-tiled grounds. Grey clouds have parted. The cicadas still screamed. It was already late May, but there bloomed no Phung flowers. I could not help but wonder, how amid this fantastic hedonism Heaven had mandated, I was still caught with such a reverent feeling? Half of tongue, half of mind... I might as well halve the rest of my heart. Or better yet, slice it up into tiny little pieces, evenly divided among every regions of my beloved country. At the verge of psychosis I saw myself floating—along the inky black constitution of the Nhiêu Lộc Channel, over the steel and glass apartments ostensibly marketed to resemble groves of bamboo, passing through the "Save Our Rhinos" murals surrounding the Điện Biên Phủ underpass. Then finally coming back, arriving at the bottommost stairs leading towards Tự Đức's symbolic burial site. The past and the present collided—the obscenity reminded me of the power I'd never once, and most certainly never will, possess.

I therefore dare not set myself up as a prophet vis-à-vis my fellow men, and I plead guilty to the reproach that I cannot bring them any consolation, which is fundamentally what they all demand, the wildest revolutionaries no less passionately than the most well-behaved and pious believers.

The façade of the old tomb had long disintegrated under centuries of summer, made ever more ashen and frail, by the combined efforts of moss and humidity. Smoke curled at the ends of joss sticks, while ripening summer fruits were placed ceremoniously before the absent king. There stood before me this perfect symbol of our feudal past and communist present, where I've come to offer up the only thing a child from the ungrateful modern ever really could: contradictions—by forming my irreverent tongue around words I only partly believe in, by drawing together the palms of my faithful, immoral hands. As my head turned downwards in mock ceremony, I could feel vain, earnest wishes, spoken in my rudimentary native language, escaped the caverns of my throat.

Human beings have made such strides in controlling the forces of nature that, with the help of these forces, they will have no difficulty in exterminating one another, down to the last man. They know this, and it is this knowledge that accounts for much of their present disquiet, unhappiness and anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'heavenly powers', immortal Eros, will try to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary [Thanatos]. But who can foresee the outcome?

Yes, Dr. Freud. Indeed who can?

FOOTNOTE

[1] To name a few, “Sơn Tinh–Thủy Tinh” was a reflection of many people’s efforts to combat the yearly floods at the time of the summer monsoon. “Thần Giàng” was a son of Heaven, descendant of the sky arriving to help liberate our people from foreign invaders.

[2] Crudely translates into Old Man Sky, Ông Trời is the abstract, anthropomorphic embodiment of the Sky or Heaven, deeply embedded within the Vietnamese collective unconscious, and has never been disturbed by neither religion nor ideology.

[3] Crudely translates into: “worship, sacred, gang, peace”.

[4] Đinh Hồng Hải, “Những biểu tượng đặc trưng trong văn hoá truyền thống Việt Nam – Tập 2 – Các Vị Thần”.

[5] Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương IX: Bắc thuộc lần thứ hai, cuộc kinh lý của Mã Viện – Tinh kinh giao châu trong thời kỳ Đông Hán, Tinh hình văn hoá, tư tưởng, và nghệ thuật.

[6] Cao Đài – the heterodox, monotheistic religion that flourished in the Southwestern region of Vietnam during the 20th century – is perhaps the best example of this. The religion is an eclectic combination of the three doctrines – Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism – with beliefs and practices borrowed from Cambodian and European spiritism.

[7] Nguyễn Khắc Viện, Việt Nam: A Long History, Chapter V: The Tây Sơn Era (18th Century), The Tây Sơn: Reunification and Renewal, End of the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn Restoration.

[8] For 150 years during the 17th–18th century, Việt Nam (then Đại Việt) was embroiled in a bitter civil war home from rising tension between two ruling families, Trịnh and Nguyễn. This tension split the country in half, leaving Đàng Ngoài (in the North) to be ruled by the Trịnh lords, and Đàng Trong (in the South) by the Nguyễn lords. The split was followed with bloody conflicts, myriad in casualties, with two sides waging their own campaigns at unification. During 1774–1775, the Tây Sơn movement, led by Nguyễn Huệ in the name of the Trịnh lords, was briefly victorious. But due to weakness in ideology and rule, they were overpowered by the Nguyễn, leading to their elimination, and Nguyễn Anh’s subsequent ascension to the throne.

[9] Perhaps made most apparent through the Huế Imperial Court’s renunciations of any kind of progressive reforms. When King Tự Đức called on the Roman Catholic scholar and reformer Nguyễn Trường Tộ to discuss what was to be done about the dire situation of the country, mandarins of the court, allegedly, had nothing to say but protests. For Confucianism – with its rigid social hierarchies and obsessive world-worshipping – was the most advantageous ideology for them to exploit the peasant class and their vulnerable positions in society, to the point of causing many to lose access to their farmlands (Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương LI: Tinh trạng suy đốn của Nhà nước phong kiến trước khi bại vong, Vua và Triều đình nhà Nguyễn).

[10] Dilapidation of the economy as well as the Court’s own excesses led to the withering of technological advancement. This was made even more troubling when faced with French aggression, yet the Court did little to address this. During Tự Đức’s rule, soldiers were barely trained and when they were, of 50 only 5 were allowed to practice aiming guns, and of 5 only 1 was allowed to shoot, and only 8 shots were allowed when shooting. Moreover, soldiers were paid a meagre sum and were often left hungry, eliminating from them the will to fight (Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương LI: Tinh trạng suy đốn của Nhà nước phong kiến trước khi bại vong, Vua và Triều đình nhà Nguyễn).

[11] At the fall of the Champa kingdom in 1832, reigning Nguyễn king, Minh Mạng, annexed their territory into Việt Nam. At this the Chăm revolted, leading to the August 1834 Já Thak Wa uprising. On March 1835, King Minh Mạng dispatched 3,000 royal troops along with Kinh paramilitary units, and ordered the Chăm’s brutal extermination. It’s believed – verified by eyewitness accounts and historical documentation both from Vietnamese and Chăm sources – that a “hunting competition” took place. For three Chăm heads collected every morning, Kinh-Vietnamese soldiers would be rewarded with money and status. The atrocities successfully suppressed the Chăm rebellion, with the revolutionaries immediately executed, exiled, or forced into labor camps. Still not satisfied with the human cost, Minh Mạng committed cultural genocide, ordering the destruction of Chăm temples, royal tombs, villages, cemeteries, ... It took until Tự Đức’s time for the brutal discrimination against the Chăm to be lightened, and the total removal of anti-Chăm policies only took place when the French occupied Việt Nam (Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương XLVIII: Nhà Nguyễn rung đổ nội trị, Những cuộc khởi nghĩa của người Thái, người Mạc, người Chăm, người Mên; Fo Dharma, Champaka số 9: Sự vùng dậy của Ja Thak Wa (1834–1835).

[12] Angered by the French’s initial military aggression at the port city, Đà Nẵng on 15 April 1847, reigning Nguyễn king Triều Thi – Tự Đức’s father – ordered the bloody repression of Catholicism in Vietnam. When Tự Đức inherited the throne in November of that year, he’d maintained the same brutal policies, causing many to forsake their Catholic faith in fear of persecution. This led the bishop Pallatin, who’s managed to escape, to finally ask the French government to use aggressive force against the Huế Imperial Court. Further incited by the 1858 slaughter of two Spanish missionaries in North Vietnam, a French flotilla, with the aide of a Spanish warship, entered Đà Nẵng again on June 27th of that year, and began their violent invasion of Việt Nam in earnest (Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương L: Sự xâm nhập của Tư bản Pháp, Cảm đạo và tuyệt giao).

[13] Epidemics and natural disaster during this time period forced many to become beggars, displacing thousands in the process. To make matters worse, corruption was rampant among the mandarin class, devastating the economy in favor of lining their own pockets (Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương LI: Cảnh sống của nhân dân Việt Nam ở nửa thế kỷ XIX, Nông dân khởi nghĩa và giặc giã, Cảnh khổ cực nhân dân).

[14] Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương LI: Tinh trạng suy đốn của Nhà nước phong kiến trước khi bại vong, Vua và Triều đình nhà Nguyễn.

[15] Đào Duy Anh, Lịch sử Việt Nam từ nguồn gốc đến Thế kỷ thứ XIX, Chương LI: Tinh trạng suy đốn của Nhà nước phong kiến trước khi bại vong, Vua và Triều đình nhà Nguyễn, p. 522.

Calcium Breather

Alvin Luong



Alvin Luong (b. Toronto) restages and reinterprets moments and objects that are intimate to contemporary life and significant to the development of history. Narrative exposition through film and material experimentation through sculpture is used by the artist to articulate and transform meaning that is gathered through field work, archives, ethnography, and collaboration. This exhaustive approach by the artist collapses temporalities, places, things, and knowledge to create unlikely relationships that make histories and distant sites urgent for understanding a present condition and for imagining new futures. The artist is interested in the transformation of communities and commodities across physical distance, time, and political structures. Luong has exhibited at institutions including Gudskul (Jakarta), The Polygon Gallery (Vancouver), Times Art Museum (Guangzhou), Art Museum (Toronto), and Mercer Union (Toronto). The artist's works are held in the Permanent Collection of The Rockefeller Foundation (New York City).

"Untitled (Approaching Bidong Island with scientists from the University of Malaysia Terengganu, June 20, 2025)".
Photo: Alvin Luong.



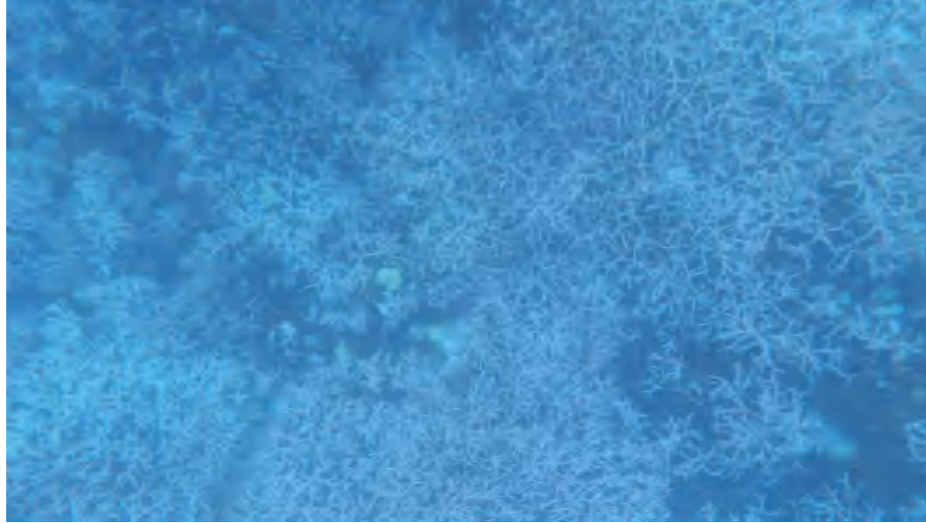
Corals and refugees share a fragile condition of displacement that carries them to distant regions in the pursuit of new grounds to anchor themselves. The entanglement between corals and refugees are tightly woven at Bidong Island in Malaysia. The history of Bidong as both a Vietnamese refugee camp during the aftermath of the America-Vietnam War and a contemporary site for the research and farming of coral has preoccupied my practice since 2023. Through an approach that combines oral history, field research, and ethnography, I have created the two films, *The Corals of Bidong* (2023-2025) and *Camp Atlanta* (2025).

Corals of Bidong (2023–2025) reimagines the perilous sea voyages of Vietnamese refugees to Bidong. Unfolding from a point-of-view perspective, the film stages a drowning at sea and slips into a magic realist narrative where the drowned bodies of refugees that had sunk to the ocean floor transform into corals. The narrative then follows these corals as they are cultivated in undersea farms and harvested to be shipped to buyers abroad. The filmic exposition parallels the historic lives of refugees who survived their voyage to Bidong and their time in the refugee camp as they awaited resettlement to another country.

Located off the province of Terengganu in Malaysia, Bidong was a major refugee camp from 1978 to 1991 following the end of the America-Vietnam War. At the peak of the refugee crisis on the island in 1979, Bidong was inhabited by more than 40,000 Vietnamese refugees [1], making it widely regarded as the most densely populated island on Earth [2]. Many of the refugees, like my father, gained humanitarian sponsorship on Bidong to resettle to Canada, where I was later born. During the refugee crisis, the island's corals had vanished from overfishing and pollution from the refugees. After the closure of the refugee camp in 1991, Bidong was closed off to the public [3] and its ecosystems left to recover over time [4]. When the island reopened in 2017 [5], the corals had quietly returned to surround the sea floor around the island. Today, Bidong is home to a marine research station operated by the University of Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) and a commercial coral farm operated by Yayasan Coral Malaysia that exports to Canada and the United States—[6], mirroring the global dispersal of the former refugee inhabitants of Bidong.



"Untitled (Scientists of the University of Malaysia Terengganu preparing to dive, June 20, 2025)".
Photo: Alvin Luong.



A mass bleaching event of corals surrounding Bidong Island.
Image Still from "Corals of Bidong", 2023-2025.
Photo: Alvin Luong.

In June 2024, I was invited by Dr. Muhammad Hafiz Borkhanuddin, Head of Marine Biology at UMT, to join him and his students on their monthly diving excursion to study the corals that surround Bidong. We set sail for the island in the early morning to avoid the heat of summer and the daily afternoon storms. After their assessment of the corals was completed, Dr. Borkhanuddin and his students emerged from the sea, and shared to me that a mass coral bleaching event had taken place. This meant that a large portion of the corals around Bidong had transformed to a porcelain-white color that indicates the death of the corals.

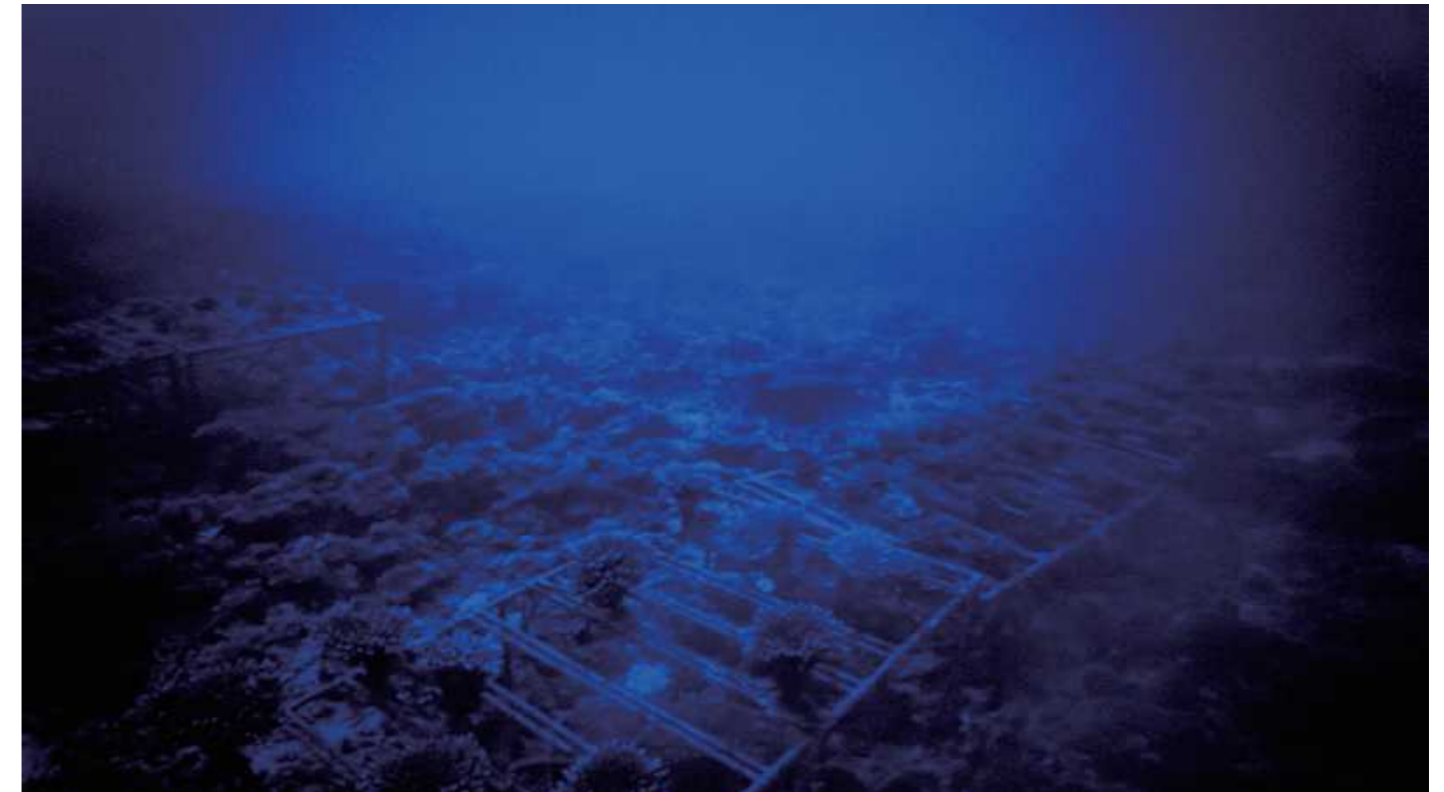
Dr. Borkhanuddin informed me that the corals had died from the unprecedented heat of the Malaysian summer that has been intensified through climate change. While the corals are dying in their natural reefs below the waters of Bidong, they are simultaneously being cultivated on the sea floor by the commercial coral farm. On another trip to Bidong, I discovered from a poster that the coral farm had made its first ever commercial shipment in 2016 to Canada. My guide to the island, Alex Lee, who has brought former refugees to Bidong since the early 2000s, informed me of how the commercial coral farm also exports to the United States. Through this profound coincidence, Bidong has become a gateway for both refugees and corals to be resettled in the same far away places. This discovery gave me the conceptual framework to make artworks where corals and refugees serve as analogies for one another and while remaining autonomous.



Approaching Bidong Island. Image Still from
"Corals of Bidong", 2023-2025.
Photo: Alvin Luong.



Image Still from Corals of Bidong, 2023-2025.
Photo: Alvin Luong.



As I worked with the scientists from UMT, I realized that they were largely unaware of the refugee history of Bidong which underscored for me how memory can be selectively forgotten. Their dives took place in the same waters where Vietnamese refugees had drowned, yet this past remained unspoken. My work, beyond the poetic encounter, steps into that silence—filling a gap in Malaysian historical memory, and also in the memory of my own generation, whether descendants of the refugees or from a liberated Vietnam.

While filming *Corals of Bidong*, I was informed of another site of coral migration located in a specialized holding facility at the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta, USA. Acting on this tip, I contacted the aquarium and was invited by Steve Hartter, the Associate Curator of Fish and Invertebrates, to visit the coral facility. This became the basis for a second film, *Camp Atlanta* (2025). Filmed in a deadpan documentary-style, *Camp Atlanta* depicts a closed-door facility that holds corals that have been confiscated from importers by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency (USCBP). The corals are kept alive in state-of-the-art aquarium tanks until legal proceedings between the importers and the USCBP are concluded. If the importer prevails, the corals re-enter circulation through the commercial marine wildlife trade in the United States. If the USCBP prevails, the corals become permanently housed within the public displays of the Georgia Aquarium or with its partner institutions. Paired with *Corals of Bidong*, *Camp Atlanta* reframes the holding facility as a new refugee camp where corals, like the refugees, live precariously according to bureaucratic judgment.



Filming "Camp Atlanta" in the coral holding facility of the Georgia Aquarium, Atlanta, USA. Photo: Alvin Luong.

Coral holding facility at the Georgia Aquarium, Atlanta, USA. Image Still from *Camp Atlanta*, 2025. Photo: Alvin Luong.



Through the production of *Corals of Bidong* and *Camp Atlanta*, I came to realize that the refugee and coral experience is not defined by arrival, but by movement itself. Both cannot anticipate their destination, they are just given a trajectory. What remains of this journey is only a wake across the water and detritus in a camp. When the two films are paired together, they imagine another possibility for the watery deaths of the refugees who drowned on their way to Bidong. They imagine that these refugees might still persist today as corals that are now moving outward across oceans and land through the marine wildlife trade. They insist that migration cannot be fixed to a single location, or even a single life, but must be understood as carried forward by currents over time.



The text is written by the artist.
All images are courtesy of the artist.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Manaf, Ab Norhayati, et al. "Historic Vietnamese Settlement of *Bidong Island*", *Bidong Island: Natural History and Resources* (2021), 33

[2] Hamza, Abdulmaula, et al. "Diversity of Birds in *Bidong Island*", *Bidong Island: Natural History and Resources* (2021), 106

[3] Manaf, 33

[4] Razak, Iqbal Harith Abd., et al. "Decapoda Crustaceans at the South China Sea Repository and Reference Centre in Terengganu, Peninsular Malaysia", *Bidong Island: Natural History and Resources* (2021), 61.

[5] Manaf, 34

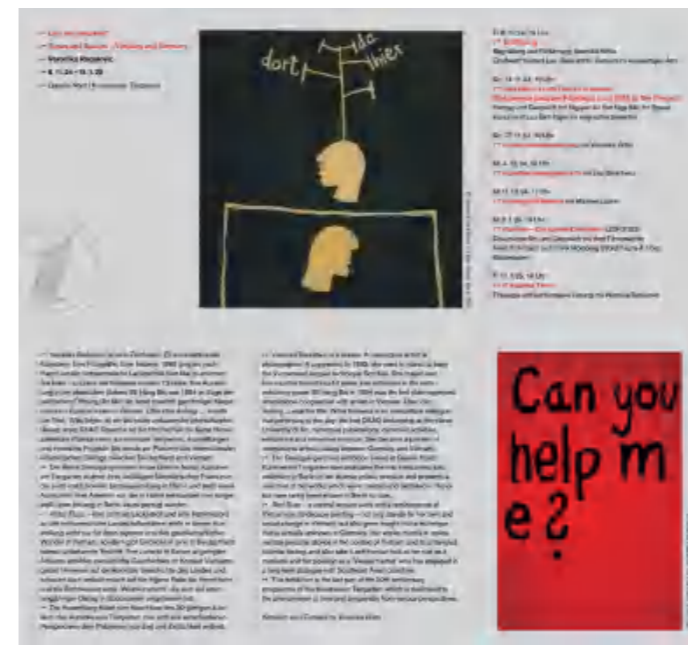
[6] An information poster installed at the coral farm's above-water facility on Bidong Island notes its shipment to Canada. The coral farm's shipment to the United States was informed by my guide to the island, Alex Lee.

Monologue:



Veronika Radulovic is a drawer. A conceptual artist. A photographer. A writer. In 1993, she went to Hanoi to learn the Vietnamese lacquer technique Son Mai. She stayed and four months turned into 13 years. Her exhibition at the state exhibition space 29 Hang Bai in 1994 was the first state-approved international cooperation with artists in Vietnam. Über den Anfang ... (About the Beginning) was the title. What followed is an intercultural dialogue that continues to this day: the first DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) lectureship at the University of Fine Arts Vietnam, numerous publications, curatorial activities, exhibitions and innovative projects. She became a pioneer of international artistic dialog between Germany and Vietnam.

Veronika Radulovic





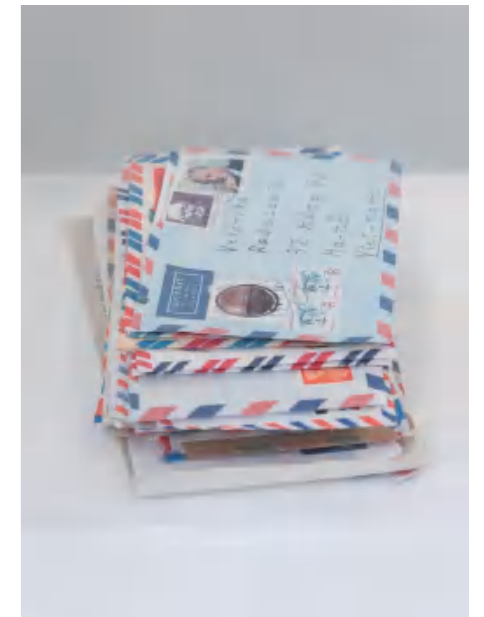
The artist has recently had her first institutional solo exhibition, titled *Can you help me?*, curated by Veronika Witte, in Berlin as part of the Grenzgängerinnen exhibition series at Galerie Nord | Kunstverein Tiergarten. The show brings together a selection of her works which were created and exhibited in Hanoi but have rarely been shown in Berlin to date. Her works, mostly in series, narrate personal stories in the context of Vietnam and its entangled colonial history, and also take a self-ironical look at her role as a mediator and her position as a 'Western artist' who has engaged in a long-term dialogue with Southeast Asian countries.



Featured here is one of the installation works, "Dear Miss Sapa", which consists of a 30-meter-long hand-woven cotton fabric, a catalogue of an exhibition in Bielefeld and a photo of the artist with a weaver from the Hmong village. Radulovic acquired this fabric in 1996 in a Hmong village with the help of her students. Handwritten dates span along the entire folded fabric, suggesting the enduring and complex process of weaving. In her fictional letter *Liebe Miss Sapa...*, Radulovic addresses the weaver of the Hmong village. The fabric forms the basis for the expansive installation in the KunstArbeit exhibition in a disused textile factory in Bielefeld. It links the former East Westphalian textile industry with a mountain village in the Sapa region of North Vietnam.



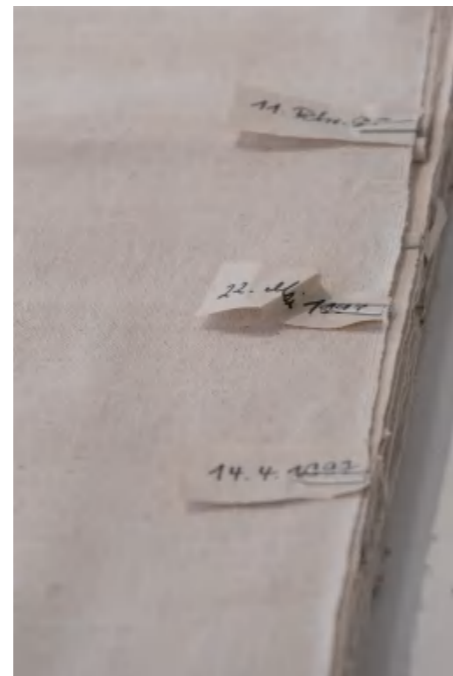
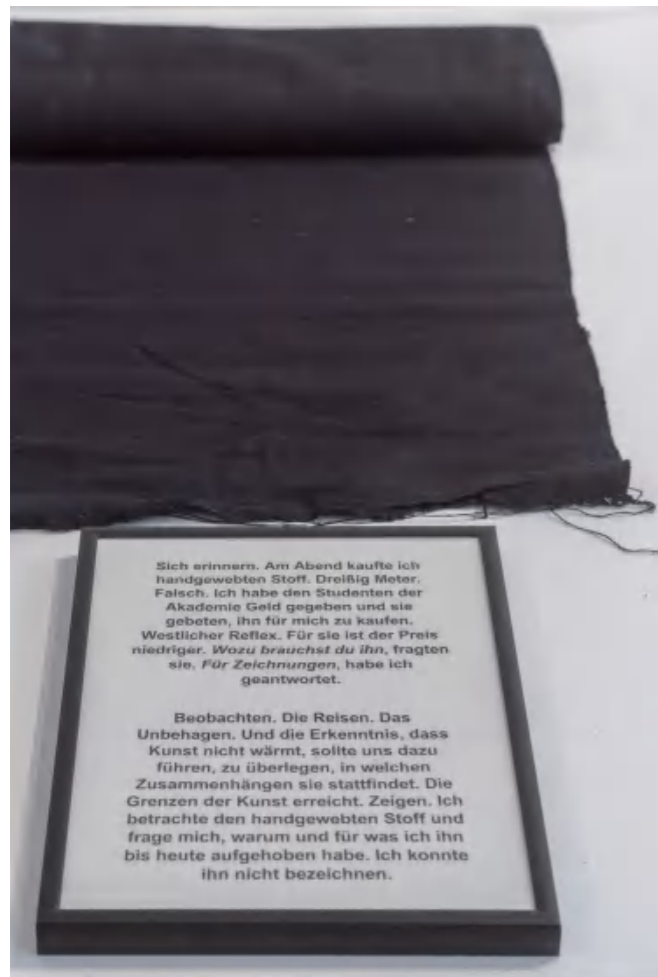
Installation view,
"Veronika Radulovic: Can you help me?",
Galerie Nord | Kunstverein Tiergarten, Berlin,
8 November, 2024 - 18 January, 2025.
Photo: Michael Zeeh.





Installation view, "Veronika Radulovic: Can you help me?", Galerie Nord | Kunstverein Tiergarten, Berlin, 8 November, 2024 - 18 January, 2025.

Photo: Michael Zeeh.



Veronika Radulovic. *Liebe Miss Sapa...*, 2024, fabric panels, book, photo, information sheet, letter "Dear Miss Sapa", dimension variable.

Photo: Michael Zeeh.

Dear Miss Sa Pa,

Your eyes. Can I start a letter like this? I want to write to you because you have become a part of my life. Maybe like this? I remember your dress. And the colour of the fabric. Black. Sometimes blue. Black blue. Dark sheen. Beautiful. A memory. A win and a loss.

On December 23, 1994, I went with some students of the University of Fine Art Vietnam to Lao Cai. Later to Sa Pa. Embroidery. Beautiful hand-woven fabrics. There, we tried to ask how the fabric gets its sheen. Knowledge. Dealing with loss. Observing. Portraits. Landscapes.

The simple and hard life of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Discontent arising from the lack of infrastructure is allayed by things rarely seen before. It was worth it. Your portrait, if it had been made, would certainly have pleased the tourists in Hanoi. With such paintings, you can make money and politics.

The girls from the mountain villages walk down to the valley every day to sell something. The path to get there leads through rough terrain and takes several hours. They transport the things they want to sell in wicker baskets. Sometimes a wooden beam. Or perhaps fabrics. Bamboo. The path. Rain. Ten kilometers or more. It's hard to say exactly. What's a kilometer? What are shoes? How cold is it?

I saw a young girl walking down to the valley after sunrise. No. I saw that in the morning, she was already in the valley. It just sounds nicer if I say: after sunrise. I do not notice the sunrise. It is not something I need to wait for. The first time I was in Vietnam, I was confused by the darkness. I am simply used to there being light at night. Difficult therefore.

I was taught to read and write in school. I do not even know your address. What is an address? Where do you live? In Sa Pa? Near Sa Pa? It is located in northwestern Vietnam. Far. What did I want there? To be there was less necessary for me than your daily trip down to the valley is for you. I just wanted to be there.

December 24, 1994, it was raining in Sa Pa. A soggy marketplace. Brown clay. Vegetables on a piece of newspaper. Muddy. Pig skin and rain. There were fried clumps of rice and loudspeaker announcements. The firewood got wet. Party slogans in a language that is also foreign to the ethnic minorities. The old women had plastic sheets hung around their shoulders. The embroidered clothing, the jewelry, and the hand-woven cloths are popular objects for foreigners to purchase. How much? And at the other side: tre juilleeeeeet, ok?

It was cold. We didn't work. The students of the University of Fine Art Vietnam expressed their sense of unease about making portraits of ethnic minorities. The sketches, watercolors, and oil paintings of the simple lifestyle, necessary for their graduation, they completed in one night based on my photos taken in Sa Pa.

To remember oneself. Later in the evening, I bought hand-woven fabric. Thirty meters. Wrong. I gave money to the students to buy it for me. Western reflex. For them, the price is lower. What do you need it for, they asked. For drawings, I answered.

Observing. The journeys. The discomfort. And the realization that art does not warm should lead us to consider the context in which it takes place. The limits of art have been reached. Necessary. Carrying water.

You know, sometimes I read texts on art in exhibition catalogues. Usually, they are too formal for me. I forget them. Nevertheless, I do remember a recent essay written by Ulrich Krempel in the "Sex&Crime" catalogue: "And yet: what can art do? Only the naming, the evocation of these problems, their processing is possible in art, that and the vision of good or terrible times; but art can rectify nothing, heal nothing, make nothing whole again that has been broken. And with this realization, too, the artists leave us alone when they show us what else there is to see."

My realization. The water. I want to write and draw on the hand-woven fabric. The girls need four to six hours to carry two buckets of water up to the mountain village. Water to live. To prevent it from spilling over in the rough terrain, they lay

fire branches on the surface of the water. This breaks the movement. Another kind of art. Skills.

What I am going to describe is thirty meters of fabric that a woman has made under extreme conditions, so that her family can buy something to eat, and from which another woman would make clothing? More dramatic: so that they can survive.

The cold in the mountains is horrible. In some mud huts, there are fireplaces and hot tea. I often think about leaving. Where can we get a hot coffee? A boy shows us a blue plastic school bag with a UNICEF emblem. I think about the hand-woven fabric. Compassion and power. The fabric is for my drawings. The UNICEF emblem: silkscreen printing.

To help. To give. To share. I remember a story about a man who cut his cloak in two and gave half to a freezing person. Martin. Later, he was made a saint. On December 24, the Catholics in Sapa wait for midnight mass. The host, the body of Christ, was probably the only thing they ate that day. Jesus Christ and Saint Martin. The power of the strongest. Safe distance.

Later. The thirty meters of fabric smell musty. In Hanoi, it is not so cold. We talk about our work in Sapa. For the Hanoi students, the visit to the mountainous region of Vietnam was an encounter with existential poverty, displayed to them in the same way as the wealth of the foreigners at home. Those foreigners who have always had more than they need to live. Power and pity and plenty. And their refusal regarding traditional art. And I am expected to collect donations of clothing for the children in Sapa from foreigners in Hanoi. This will make another visit easier for them, too. It calms.

So you see, this is what I get from all those lovely trips and the very interesting things I have seen, which it would have been better not to have seen at all. Thirty meters of hand-woven fabric. We talk about clothing.

In Germany. We plan an exhibition. Exhibition sites are a disused textile factory in the centre of Bielefeld and the Museum Waldhof. Museum. Factory. The museum, a place to display, collect, store. Thinking about something that is long gone. The smell of memory. Silence.

The industry, with its constantly increasing speed, leaps of innovation, and conquest of new sales and profitable production sites, makes itself obsolete. Contaminated sites remain. We smell them. Art will be displayed between the relics of production and the still-functional machines. A connection? A compromise solution for the "Brücke Artists". And for us? All over now. Time. The museum has never been a production facility.

Art in the museum. Had its day. The knowledge of the production methods is nearly lost. Long outdated. Art is fast, Andy Warhol said. The fire branches are superfluous. Where is the movement of the water?

I look for a space in the former factory building for the 30 meters of fabric. Made on a prehistoric-looking loom, by wind and weather, I want to show it in a large, bright room, so that the presentation is appropriate to its value. Measured by the human working time invested, it is valuable. Handwork. Production. Loss. Intercultural in no man's land. Only the exiled ones fill it out sometimes.

It would have been nice to touch the fabric and, while pacing its length, to see the drawings and the data indicating the amount of time taken for its production. And the smell. But it's already over again.

This space does not exist anymore. It is no longer accessible. It exists now only as an exposed piece of paper in a museum showcase. The possibilities of art are limited. To show. November 1996. The hand-woven fabric likewise lies in a museum showcase. I still have not drawn on it.

March 2015 in Trondheim. Norway. We are working on an exhibition project with students from KIT. Suddenly, I remember you. I also remember this old work about time. Look at the 30 meters of fabric.

I ask myself what and why I have kept it till now. I couldn't draw on it. 19 years without drawings. The letter to you, dear Miss Sa Pa, has also not been sent yet. How old are you now? And, do you have an address now? Definitely. It's about time.

This letter was part of an installation by Veronika Radulovic in the following exhibition: *Kunst-Arbeit*. Bielefelder Kunstverein 1996.

Published in: *Kunst-Arbeit*. /ed von Andreas Beaugrand. Veronika Radulovic: *Liebe Miss Sapa*. S. 117-123. Pendragon Verlag. Bielefeld, 1996.



Veronika Radulovic, "It was cold", 1996/2024, video essay, 15 min. Post-production: Candie Koschnick.



In company with *Dear Miss Sapa*, the documentary video about a weaver in the Vietnamese minority mountain village of Meo Vac was produced in 1996 during an excursion with students from the University of Fine Art Vietnam. The region in Northern Vietnam was not yet accessible at the time. As a foreign lecturer, Radulovic was only allowed access by means of an officially authorized pass. The excursion was part of the compulsory curriculum of the art academy since its

foundation in 1925 during the French colonization. In the video, Radulovic documents the weaving technique of the Hmong, an ethnic minority in Vietnam. The scrolling text below the video document is a personal essay by Radulovic from 2024, in which she reflects on her encounters in the villages of Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

ABOUT

Veronika Radulovic studied Visual Communication at the University of Applied Sciences in Bielefeld from 1977 to 1983. Immediately after graduating, she took part in numerous interdisciplinary projects and symposia with visual artists, musicians, writers and performance artists. In 1988 and 1989, she taught as a guest lecturer at the Free Art School in Szentendre in Hungary and travelled as artist in residence to Singapore in 1992. There, among other things, she came into contact with Vietnamese lacquer painting, which she learned a year later in Hanoi. Between 1994 and 2005, she was the first German to teach at the University of Fine Art Vietnam as a short-term and long-term DAAD lecturer, teaching students about international contemporary art and becoming a mediator of artistic dialogue between Vietnam and Germany. Her own exhibitions followed at the Museum für Lackkunst Münster, Ministry of Culture and Urban Development NRW: *Kunst am Bau*, Goethe Institute Hanoi, San Art Saigon, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, among others. She has also curated innovative exhibition projects on Vietnamese contemporary art: *Gap Vietnam* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (1998); *Ryllega Berlin* at Volksbühne Berlin (2008), ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) *Connect: Kunstszene Vietnam* (2009/2010) and *no war no vietnam* (2018) Galerie Nord | Kunstverein Tiergarten.

Text provided by the artist.
All images courtesy of the artist.

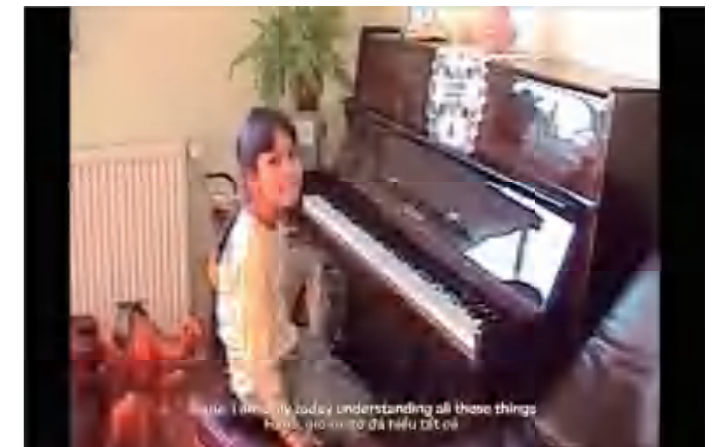
Monologue:

Kvet Nguyễn



Photo: Tobias Paral

Kvet Nguyễn (Hoa Nguyễn Thị, b. 1995, Nové Zámky, Slovakia) is a visual artist. She completed her doctoral studies in Photography and New Media at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. Her multidisciplinary work primarily explores the theme of otherness in the context of post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in broader geopolitical relations. Using autoethnographic theory, she reflects on issues of dual cultural identity through the categories of memory, migration, exile, and longing. Nguyễn won the Oskár Čepan Award 2024 (together with Svetlana Fialová, Paula Malinowska, and Tomáš Moravanský) and completed a residency at the Delfina Foundation in London in 2024. She is author of the autobiographical essay *Everything That Connects Us* (2024). Her most recent solo and group projects have been showcased at Galerie 35m2 (Prague, CZ), tranzit.sk (Bratislava, SK), The Július Koller Society (Bratislava, SK), Kunsthalle Bratislava (SK), VCCA (Hanoi, VN), and Center A (Vancouver, CA).



Stills from *Limits of Our Pain* (2025). Single-channel video. Courtesy of the Artist.

Kvet Nguyễn's practice engages critically with state archives, media, and vernacular materials, revealing how the narratives of socialist internationalism and post-socialist Central Europe are entangled with racism, xenophobia, and colonial amnesia. Alongside this critique, she turns to community archives, correspondence, and myth to recover suppressed voices, from the overlooked histories of labour migrants to the hidden biases embedded in the visual language of propaganda. Her practice honours the resilience of marginalised communities while developing a visual language that transforms collective trauma into a space for hope, desire, and the possibility of a fairer future.

Recently presented in her solo exhibition *Till the Water Meets the Shore* at Bratislava City Gallery, Bratislava, Nguyễn's semi-autobiographical docu-fiction *The Limits of Our Pain* (2025) uses critical fiction to explore the existential experiences of the second-generation Slovak–Vietnamese community. The film reflects on questions of home and belonging while indirectly appealing to a fading human capacity for empathy, revealing the lingering consequences of colonial violence that continue to shape lives across generations. By drawing personal narrative into dialogue with broader structures of power, the work unsettles official accounts of history and insists on the visibility of stories too often overlooked or erased.



Land records (2025). Installation view,
Kvet Nguyễn: *Till the Water Meets the Shore*, Bratislava City
Gallery (Mirbach Palace), Bratislava, Slovakia,

18 June - 23 November 2025.
Curated by Zuzana Flašková.
Photos: Leontina Berková



The installation *Land Records (2025)* reimagines the Vietnamese origin myth of Âu Cơ and Lạc Long Quân, retelling it as a framework for rethinking erased histories. Through close study of archives, diaspora correspondence, and community memory, Nguyễn traces the lost identities of the Chrastava children and exposes how official narratives determine who is deemed worthy of remembrance. Meanwhile, *Leftover Bodies (2024)* examines the forced social isolation of 5,500 young Vietnamese who came to Czechoslovakia as industrial workers during the 1970s. Drawing on Christina Schwenkel's concept of "Leftover Bodies," the work highlights how this community, once bound by international agreements, became an unintended diaspora in the wake of communism's collapse.

Fountains of A High Mountain



Minh Duc
Pham

Courtesy of the artist.

and A Sweet Dream



Minh Duc Pham works across performance, sculpture and installation. His practice investigates identity within the entangled structures of race, gender, and class, often shaped by his upbringing in post-migrant and racialized environments. Drawing from personal and intergenerational experience, his work examines the politics of visibility, the mechanics of voice, and the emotional aftermath of historical violence. Through poetic composition and fragmentary narration, Pham creates sensorial installations that operate at the intersection of memory, care, and resistance. His work often reflects on forms of erasure tied to labour migration, as well as the embodied strategies that arise in response to displacement and systemic silence. Pham has exhibited in art institutions such as the Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, Bundeskunsthalle Bonn, and most recently Kunsthalle Osnabrück. As a performer, he has been involved in productions at HAU1 Berlin, Cloud Gate Theatre Taipei, and Gessnerallee Zurich. He has been a recipient of fellowships and grants from institutions, f.e. the Baden-Württemberg Art Foundation, the Berlin Senate Department for Culture and Europe, and the Fonds Darstellende Künste. Pham lives and works in Berlin.

Fountains of A High Mountain and A Sweet Dream

2024



Installation, 26 min

Porcelain fountain, ceramics,
water, lily scent, table, chairs,
table cloth, sound

Courtesy of the artist.

Consisting of a table arrangement with a porcelain fountain, the installation, *Fountains of A High Mountain and A Sweet Dream*, deals with questions of existence, heritage and labour migration. At its heart lies an imagined dialogue between two siblings – one of whom is alive, while the other was not allowed to live. This conversation raises questions of belonging, representation and presence: Who has the right to a life, to memory, to a 'self'? Tender and comforting, like a lullaby, the conversation is carried by a quiet melancholy.

The porcelain fountain, floral ceramics and the scent of lilies add a further sensual layer. In this multi-layered ensemble, the artwork addresses the subject of forced abortions among Vietnamese contract workers in the former GDR. The installation becomes a place where personal reflection and collective remembrance overlap: what does it mean to fill the void left by a sibling who was never born – and what traces do such intangible losses leave behind?

Originally developed as part of the performance, *A High Mountain, A Sweet Dream* (2023), the installation translates its core themes into a spatial and immersive experience. Visitors are invited to sit down at the table, as if taking part in the conversation themselves. The arrangement suggests a silent encounter with an absent counterpart where listening becomes an act of remembrance.

The continuous flow of water refers to life cycles, to memory, and to the never-ending process of coming to terms with structural violence and discrimination. Here, porcelain, scent, and sound combine to form a silent moment that fluctuates between vulnerability and resilience.

Deep sea ambience Und Underwater ambience

When the course of events changes unexpectedly, orders and hierarchies become rearranged. While new biographies are written, others may never take place.

How does it feel when lullabies remain unheard?

How does it feel when someone else is listening to songs meant for you?
How does it feel when someone else, not you, lives your life?

2023



Ocean sea soft waves

As a child, I would feel it
What is love?
What was love?
Being told, I'd have to feel it,
love was sad,
tore me apart.
In the darkness
I could hear,
You'd kissed me
I want to love
Oh what is love.
The way I see you
Summer nights turned bright

— The stars.

A High Mountain and
A Sweet Dream

Meditation Aquatic Sound

Inside myself
The air was tight,
I would feel it coming.
Like common people
You and I
We long to be
forgiven.

You are part of me.
You surround me.
Softly and tenderly.
You are my greatest sense. You are
Sensuality.

You protect me and at the same time
you are the mirror of my inner self.

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

Sense.

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

You are gently absorbing your surroundings into me. Trembling.
Pulsing.
Up and down.
Up
And
Steadily upwards.

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

Higher.

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

It is the way you talk to me. You reach
my inner,
always reflected
you are my inside.
I feel your breath. You inspire me with
the most beautiful things and
I start dreaming.

*Hulalalala
Hulalala*

Just a little breath at first,
 you raise up to a wave.
 With each new one, you
 strongly and confidently become

A surge

figuratively speaking
 the expression of an emotion,
 hits the very core of mine.
 and settles down.

Then:
 Your suction is flaying my face,
 unveiling me.
 Softly and tenderly,
 yet brutal.

You are my reflection
 and I'm the universe
 of your mysteries.
 You are me through you,
 You . . . are yourself through me?

One more moment
 and I remember you.
 You are embracing me
 and embodying my existence.

You, my imprint.

You are me. You're my
 surface, my aesthetics.
 My spirit determines you
 and you determine my spirit.
 You don't exist without me. I . . .
 exist without you?

Courtesy of Soydivision.



Everything is shifting.
The essential widens and I drop.
Lack of control:

I'm losing control of a construct,
which cannot be without structure.
Freeing me.
Does that make sense?

I promise,
no one will rule over you,
I keep
your infinity.

It settles like velvet on my thoughts.
Do you feel it?
It's your experience, my freedom.
Hold me in suspense.

I am losing my direction, stumbling.

In a state beyond time and space,
non-dimensionalism reigns,
Ecstatic.
I live in the infinity of the moment,
being aware, infinity is impossible.

You lead me through the void.
I feel your breath. Where are you
taking me?
I trust and my world glides
under my feet.

Your feeling is asleep, hidden,
so pure and intense,
it might hold thousands of infancies.
Imminent potential.



Hover.



Courtesy of Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

Don't be afraid.
I do know this world,
living there all your life.

My pores widen and welcome you.
You in my world, we are becoming
one.
You devour me from the inside out.
You will be my feeling.
You're feeling.
Let me drift and trust in
You.

Embrace. Feel your existence.
Touch your forehead and pause. What
do you feel?
My hand glides over the bridge of my
nose to the top.

Feel your breath.
on, off,
Up and down
cold and warm.
Sooner or later
Can you sense it?

My lips,
they are soft and tender. Can you taste
them?

Feel the scars.
Do you know how you felt,
when you were young?
Do you remember yourself,
strongly determined and convinced,
to make things better?



Courtesy of Haus der Kulturen der
Welt, Berlin.

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I feel myself, can not stop.
Every touch resembles a memory.

They are ephemeral yet intense
Hugs, gazes,
they would expose me within my
existence,
Beatings,
They shape me.
They follow their fate.

I am their work
in any case.

I feel you.
I can feel you touching me.
Any of your touches is an excessive
demand.
I lose my hold with every memory.



Every time I create
new memories,
my addiction,
an infinite state.

Courtesy of Soydivision.

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In the same way, a net is stretched
over you.
It follows your mind,
you are giving it its shape.

Its shape, your limits.
your existence becomes reality.
You're making me
-am I finite?

You stand there quietly and
feel every single movement.
Don't turn around, please have
faith in me.

I'm part of you. I surround you.
Softly and tenderly.

Dance with me,
Creating the perfect symbiosis
of you and me,
because

You are my greatest sense
And me,
sensuality.



Courtesy of Haus der Kulturen der
Welt, Berlin.

I embrace myself,
feel myself,
the way you experience me.

I realise my inner self,
anxious, doubtful.
Why are you hiding?
You are beautiful.

I desire you,
want to take away all your sorrow.
Trust you, I am.

Can you feel? What do you feel?

I stand behind you,
in front of you, across from you,
next to you.
I embrace you entirely
sense your fears, your desires.
My joy,
a never-ending dream.

I surround you
With warmth, love and comfort.
You're giving me sense,
I'll give you sensuality.

My chest raises constantly.
Up and down, in and out.
Breathe.
The pulse is slowing down.

Exhale.
In and out.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom. . .

Uh la la la la
Uh la la la

I'm glad you're here today.
Keep breathing.
May I ask?
Your breath is getting wider.

Can you sense me?
-My desire.

I'm obsessed with you.
Because I am sensuality
And you are my greatest sense.

You're so soft and tender,
yet twisted and cruel.

I follow you with loyalty,
your spirit gives me form.
My existence, your protection.
My sense.

I'm exposed to you and
want to drown in you.
Surround me,
as well as from the outside,
now also from the inside.

I desire you.
An eternal dance,
the most beautiful dream.

You are bringing me closer to myself.
I feel you. I sense myself
-an eternal dance.

I don't exist without you.
You . . . could exist without me?

I'm obsessed with you.
Because you are sensuality
And you are me.

//

I don't exist without you.
You . . . could exist without me?

You don't exist without me. I don't exist without you.
I could only exist because of you.

~~it makes me infinite.~~

You are part of me. You surround me.
Softly and tenderly.
I carry the name that was meant for you,
I listened to the songs that should have been yours.
I live the life we both deserved.
I long to be forgiven,
my dear brother.

Monologue



End.

Emmie Massias

Emmie Mai Linh Massias (b. 1997, Paris, France) is a French-Vietnamese visual researcher, ceramic artist, and furniture designer.

Through an exploration of form and material narratives, her practice investigates the entanglements between the body, territory, and systems of extraction. By amplifying her own cultural identity, Massias' work seeks to raise questions of heritage across objects and participatory processes, facilitating knowledge-sharing and storytelling.

Her practice spans Ho Chi Minh City, Paris, London, Eindhoven and Guadalajara. In 2024, she received the Talent Development Grant Scheme by StimuleringsFonds in the Netherlands, and co-founded Amalgame Studio with Marine Col.

Requiem for a River

Requiem for a River (2022) is a participatory performance and installation that unravels the hydropower dam as an architecture of conquest and control over shared water resources. Using clay and twelve modular moulds, participants create countless vessel forms through slip casting, a process that serves both as making and metaphor, each cast a record of the dam's authority. The performance exposes how dams reshape natural rhythms, causing droughts, floods, and sediment loss, while destabilizing the Mekong Delta and threatening its communities. In confronting the dam as more than energy infrastructure, the work reveals it as a political weapon of territorial dominance and economic exploitation, privileging the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable.

This project has been presented at the venues including: Sandberg Institute as part of the "Tapping Water" series of events hosted by ORGA nl (previously Non-Depleted)(2023); Design Academy Eindhoven Graduation show 2022. The *DAM Vessels* are currently on show at Gallery Medium in Ho Chi Minh City.



Installation view, *Requiem for a River*. Installation, Participatory Performance and Objects. Stoneware ceramics, plaster, clay slip. Work displayed on wood and clay brick structures. Photo: Jeroen Van de Gruiter, 2022.



Requiem for a River. Photo: Nicole Marnati, 2022.

Saline Roots



Saline Roots. Sculpture, copper, steel, glazed ceramics, heating elements, 45x130cm. Photo: Jeroen Van de Gruiter, 2020.

Saline Roots (2020) is a salt-filtering device inspired by the mangrove tree *Rhizophora apiculata* and its ability to extract salt through its root system. Translating this process through distillation, this artificial copper tree highlights mangroves as vital biofilters and keystone ecosystems. The salt within the flask reflects peak salinity levels in the Mekong Delta during 2020 (5 g/L), when record drought and saltwater intrusion devastated water supplies, food security, and livelihoods. Yet while mangroves buffer such crises, they face deforestation from tourism-driven land reclamation and governmental pressure to expand aquaculture, exposing a paradox in which ecosystems that guard against climate catastrophe are sacrificed for short-term economic gain.

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Shifting Sands

Shifting Sands. Installation, Participatory Performance and Objects. Sand, Plaster, Glass, Jute containers. Video still: Robert Andriessen, 2021.

Shifting Sands (2021) is a narrated, four-act workshop that uses the body and sand casting to trace the effects of erosion and land subsidence. The performance mirrors the extractive systems of river sand mining, revealing tensions in Ho Chi Minh City between displaced downstream communities and the fixed urban core that profits from sand's transformation into concrete, reclaimed land, and skyscrapers, which in turn accelerates the region's sinking. The resulting sand-cast vessels form a peaceful protest against destructive extraction and unsustainable land reclamation in the Mekong Delta.



Shifting Sands. Photo: Emmie Massias, 2022.



Shifting Sands. Installation, Participatory Performance and Objects. Sand, Plaster, Glass, Jute containers. Installation view, MAAT Museum Lisbon. Photo: Lorenzo Vitagliano, 2022.

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INDEX

Rehoming DunDun: from Dameng New York

(dūn)

to

none



- **Stump:** A short, thick post remaining after a tree has been cut down.
- **Pier:** A solid support designed to sustain vertical pressure, commonly used in the construction of bridges or buildings.
- **Mound or hillock:** A small, naturally raised area of the earth; a knoll.
- **Pedestal or base:** A base or stand on which a statue, an ornament, or a pillar is mounted.

Examples:

- The old tree was cut down, leaving only a stump (墩).
- Engineers inspected the piers (墩) of the bridge for signs of wear.
- Children played on the grassy mound (墩) near the riverbank.
- The sculpture was placed on a stone pedestal (墩) for display.

Siyang Dai

& Zijun Zhao

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Rehoming DunDun is a collaborative initiative with Chinatown Basketball Club and the independent bookstore Bungee Space in New York. In the summer of 2024, we collected 25 DunDuns from Dameng village and brought them to New York in search of new homes. Using “adoption” as a method of co-creation, the project seeks to share the stories of displacement from Dameng community and reflect on the broader impacts of urbanization and the gentrifying forces of loss that happen in every corner of this world. What we mean by adoption is through the action of “using” DunDun, instead of treating DunDun as merely a commodity, DunDun became the object that embedded Dameng villagers’ life experiences and struggle, and the storyteller of Dameng’s loss.

DunDun is a handmade stool crafted by the villagers of Dameng, located in central China, Henan Province. Due to the government’s urban planning reforms, the villagers lost not only their land and homes, but also their way of life. The new architectural space fragmented the close-knit bonds between villagers. In reaction, the villagers made DunDun, as a subtle resistance. Made from abandoned heat insulation foam from the construction sites where their villages once stood, DunDun became an indispensable part of everyday life. Carrying DunDun, walking, sitting on it, and chatting with old friends in the new neighborhood, villagers try to maintain their previous life rhymes. In the near future, the traces of their living experiences could be erased as the concrete rises around them.





Adoption of an Object

Adopting an object is different from purchasing one. Adoption emphasizes the act of fostering, much like adopting a child. When people understand that DunDun is part of an adoption project, they treat it differently, not as a commodity, but as a small creature requiring care. This act of fostering allows us to explore the complexity of objects in a non-humancentric way: as a stool, as a collective design, and as an active agent participating in new networks.

Adoption is also about connection. It goes beyond the transactional relationship of producers and consumers, creating instead a deeper form of communication through embodied experience between individuals and materials, between communities, and across cultures. By emphasizing the act of using DunDun, adoption opens up these connections.

However, the adoption of an object may exaggerate all the myths of an adoption, as positive, and as a successful, full transition. When DunDun finds a new home in New York, its forced transformation into “something new” raises questions about what is lost when both the object and its human traces are removed from their original context. Every object carries the histories of its makers, previous users, and the many agents who co-author its biography.

Rehoming DunDun is not simply about relocating artifacts—which risks erasing their context—but about fostering meaningful connections: linking people, communities, and places through interaction with the object. Each adopter of DunDun is asked to record their interactions and reflect on how DunDun actively participates in its new environment, especially within a new socio-cultural setting. The broader aim of *Rehoming DunDun* is to circulate these stories back to Dameng, while exploring practical ways of using the adoption fee to “give back” to the local community.

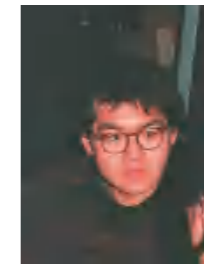


DunDun's Pack, consisting of a zine and a photography book handbound with recycled fabrics, carries the stories of Dameng villagers and DunDun.

About the project initiators



Siyang Dai is an anthropologist whose work explores the intersections of material culture, vernacular practice, and public storytelling. Trained in Cultural and Museum Anthropology, her research uses applied ethnography to examine how everyday objects—such as DunDun—exercise agency within networks of people and things. She is interested in developing collaborative narratives rooted in local knowledge and daily experience.



Zijun Zhao is a spatial and furniture designer whose work bridges architectural thinking, craft-based making, and community engagement. Trained in both woodworking and design, he approaches furniture not as static objects, but as relational tools that mediate between people, space, and everyday life.

Rehoming DunDun is an ongoing project.

If you're interested in participating or learning more, follow us on Instagram @dungetahome or reach out via email at dungetahome@gmail.com.

All images courtesy of Zijun Zhao. All texts courtesy of Siyang Dai.

The New Comfort Shanghai 2025



The Chair as Cultural Battleground



Installation view, *The New Comfort*,
RAMa, Rockbund Museum,
Shanghai, 2025

Few objects carry the weight of design history as heavily as the chair. From Marcel Breuer's tubular steel Wassily to Charles and Ray Eames's molded plywood, the chair has long served as a manifesto object - a distillation of technological innovation, aesthetic ideology, and social aspiration. Yet, as *The New Comfort* demonstrates, the chair is also a site of tension: a symbol of stability that can be destabilized, a promise of comfort that can be withdrawn.

Enzo Mari's Autoprogettazione: A Radical Instruction



In 1974, Enzo Mari published *Autoprogettazione*, a set of open-source instructions for building simple wooden furniture using only planks and nails. Mari's goal was not to democratize good design by distributing "affordable Eames chairs," but to challenge the very notion of what design is and who has access to it.

Mari argued that the process of making was more important than the final object. By forcing builders to measure, cut, and hammer, *Autoprogettazione* trained them to see beyond polished commodities and understand design as a critical act of construction. He described it as "a proposal for a critical exercise" — a way of unmasking the alienation produced by consumer culture.

The furniture itself was crude, awkward, and heavy. But this was the point: it embodied resistance to the seductive smoothness of industrial design. Mari's theory suggested that comfort — in its standardized, ergonomic, mass-produced form — was part of a system of passive consumption. To truly inhabit design, one had to confront its materiality, its politics, and its labor.

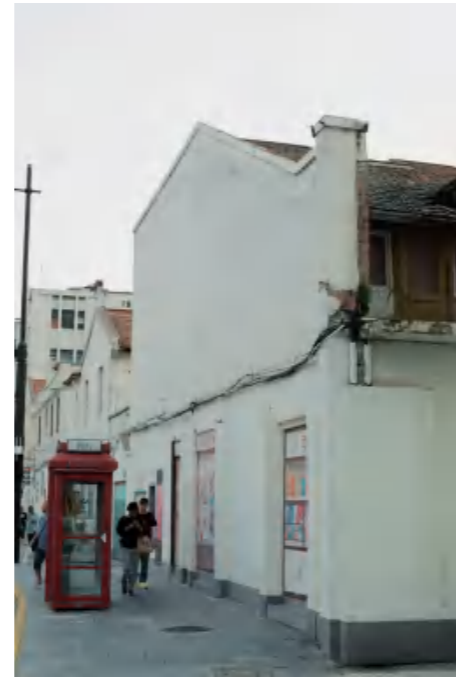
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Photos of field research led by Ném with "The New Comfort" workshop participants in Shanghai.

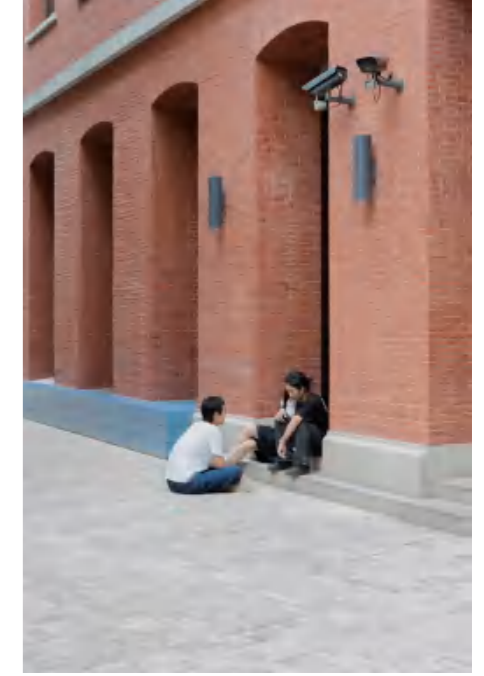
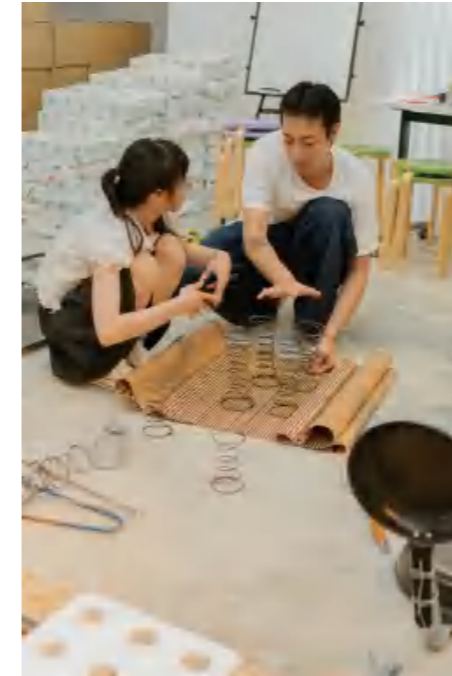


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Photos of field research led by Ném with "The New Comfort" workshop participants in Shanghai.

Discomfort as Critical Design



"The New Comfort" Workshop, RAMA, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2025.



In the late 20th century, theorists like Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby extended Mari's critique through the concept of *critical design*: objects not meant to solve problems but to provoke questions. A "discomfortable" chair, in this framework, is not a design failure but a critical tool.

This aligns with Sara Ahmed's observation that comfort often reinforces existing norms. The "comfortable" chair is built for the average body, the normalized posture, the standard living room. By refusing to fit, by demanding awkwardness, the chairs of *The New Comfort* expose comfort as exclusionary. They echo Michel de Certeau's notion of *tactics* — everyday acts that subvert the systems imposed upon us.

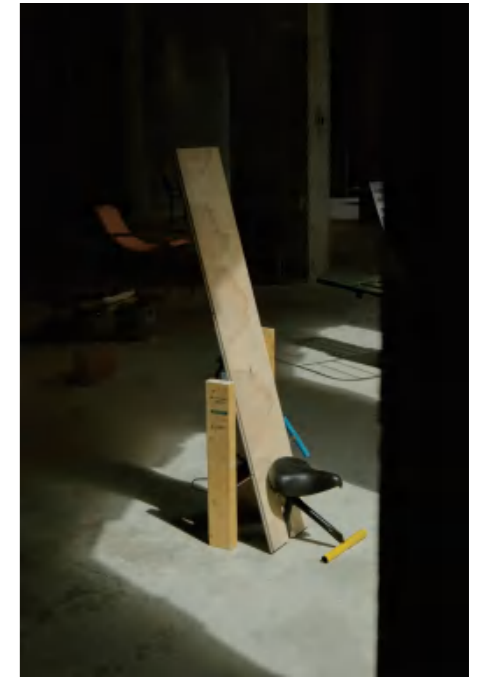
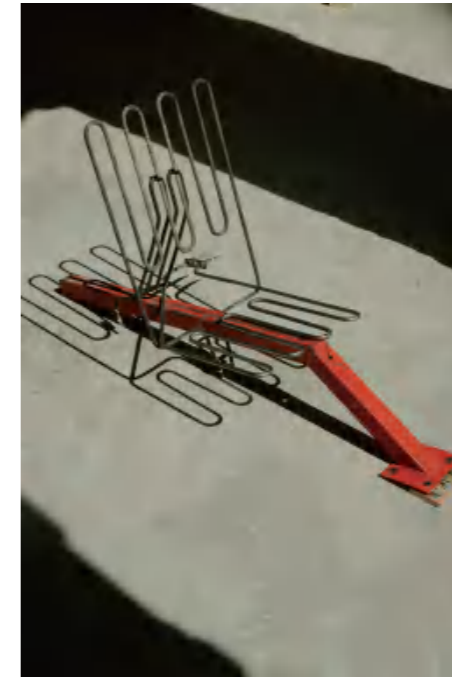
From Papanek to Banham: Parallel Currents

Victor Papanek, in *Design for the Real World* (1971), condemned design's obsession with luxury and aesthetics at the expense of social good. He argued that design should serve real human needs, often through improvised or low-tech means. Mari's *Autoprogettazione* embodied this ethos; *The New Comfort* extends it by locating design's future in the everyday adaptations of Shanghai's streets.

Meanwhile, Reyner Banham's writings on "environmental comfort" - from air conditioning to the suburban living room - remind us that comfort is always technologically and culturally produced. Banham dismantled the illusion of comfort as natural, showing it instead as a carefully engineered condition. In this light, *The New Comfort* stages its protest by undoing that engineering, returning comfort to its raw, negotiable state.



"The New Comfort" Workshop, RAMa, Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai, 2025.



Toward a New Comfort

What unites Mari, Papanek, Banham, and *The New Comfort* is the insistence that comfort is never innocent. To design for comfort is to design for politics, for bodies, for social relations.

The twenty five chairs of *The New Comfort* Shanghai are not ergonomic solutions; they are material essays, each advancing a different argument. They declare that comfort is not given but made — and therefore open to unmaking, contestation, and reinvention.

Like Mari's timber furniture, they are clumsy by design. They demand that we notice their awkwardness, that we reflect on what it means to sit, to rest, to occupy space. In doing so, they transform the chair from a passive vessel of comfort into an active agent of critique.

The New Comfort thus stands as both homage and evolution: a twenty-first-century *Autoprogettazione*, reimagined through global collaboration and urban improvisation. It reminds us that to redesign comfort is to redesign the ways we inhabit the world — and that sometimes the most radical act of design is not to smooth, but to protest.



A Project by Ném



Artistic Direction: Duong Gia Hieu (Ném)
Producer: Duong Gia Hieu, Nguyen Thao Ngan (Ném)
Technician: Duong Gia Hieu, Do Thanh An (Ném)
Photography: Duong Gia Hieu
Local coordinators: Stone (RAM), Jiaming (RAM), Wei Chen, Irene Ng.
Rental house: M.Lab Shanghai

In Silence, Things Speak:

Truong Minh Quy from Saigon to New York

All images courtesy of Ném.

Made possible with support from
Rockbund Art Museum

19 out of 25 chairs from this project will be on view during the West Bund Art & Design 2025 at design /delight section.

Participants

Adira Lian, Duong Gia Hieu, Do Thanh An, Dong Longyue, Irene Ng, Jiayue Yu, Koom Thanaphat, Liang Zihan, Nguyen Thao Ngan, Shen Caiyi, Wei Chen, Xiaolu Yan, Yingfan Chen

Ném is a Sài Gòn-based design studio run by designer/artist Dương Gia Hiếu with an approach from upcycled objects. Today Ném focuses on how to improve the relationship between people and objects by design.

Nguyen Dinh Ton Nu

An index of films by Truong Minh Quy from 2017-2025 shown in Vietnam and the United States, followed by an index of films shown at the same time, in the same place.

Film notes for *Mars in the Well* (2014), *The Tree House* (2019).



Film stills from *Hair, Paper, Water...* directed by Truong Minh Quy and Nicolas Graux, 2025. Courtesy of the film directors.



"Water trickles in dark caves, drop by drop. Drops of memory handed down from Mrs. Hâu to her grandchildren, word by word. Frame by frame, water carries them, carries us, carries the film – homeward."

– Nicolas Graux and Trương Minh Quý, Director's Note for *Hair, Paper, Water...*, Locarno 78.

Introduction

Home, memory, and water – these are themes that have recurred throughout the years in Truong Minh Quy's body of work. Perhaps, these fascinations came from the tropical settings in which he works: from his hometown Buon Ma Thuot in the Central Highlands, to the beaches of Can Gio, the deep forests of Quang Binh and Quang Ngai, and the soot-covered mining towns of Quang Ninh. In each of these places, water seeps and pours. The shelters that Quy finds hardly shields him or his characters from the primordial water, the source of which is unknowable and uncontrollable.

Like his previous work, his latest collaboration with Nicolas Graux is made with a personal touch. *Hair, Paper, Water...* centers on Mrs. Cao Thị Hâu, an elder in the Rục ethnic minority group. Quy met Mrs. Hâu during the making of *The Tree House*. He kept in touch with her ever since. The film follows its main character over 3 years: from when she came to Saigon to take care of her newborn grandson, to when the boy was old enough to speak and join her on her journey to the cave where she was born and learn her mother tongue. Ms. Hâu has the gift of memory. She speaks vividly of growing up in a time when tigers eat people. Nearby, acacias are grown and cut down for paper production.

A few days ago, I got to see *Hair, Paper, Water...* at the New York Film Festival 63. [1] This was my third time seeing Quy at NYFF, the first time being 2019 with *The Tree House*, and the second time for the astoundingly successful *Viet and Nam* at NYFF 62, 2024. As Tyler Wilson, Senior Programmer at Lincoln Center, noted, Truong Minh Quy's films have been a common thread of the festival's programming in the past few years. In the Q&A at NYFF, Nicolas shared that this project was a chance for them to work together in a language that was new to both of them: the language of the Rục, and of the 16 mm Bolex camera. Nicolas shot most

of the footage, and Quy edited. They embraced chance: sometimes, when the rushes came back from the lab assembled in an order that makes sense, they would keep the sequence in the final edit.

Tracing Quy's filmography and history of exhibition allows us to visualize the bigger picture of the vibrant Vietnamese and international arthouse scene in the past decade. Here, the film index attempts to map this trajectory: each time I see Quy's films, and other films I saw around the same time. This list, in a way, is my personal list of four years in international film programming: 2017, 2019, 2024, and 2025. It is as much about Truong Minh Quy's filmography as it is about my chance encounters with different pockets of cinephilia, as both of our journeys take us far away from Vietnam: me to the United States, and Quy to France and Belgium.

In my first year abroad, I came across this passage from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*.

"Objects should not touch because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts."

Written in 1938, Sartre's *Nausea* follows a young man, Antoine, as he descends into a crisis. It is identified as a feeling of nausea, triggered whenever he recognizes that objects can beckon to him. They are more than just "useful"; they live among us, they touch, they reach into deep crevices of our being. The films listed in this article explore a different notion of being among things that may be antithetical to the uncanny feeling described in *Nausea*. Quy and the filmmakers featured in this index are not afraid of being in contact with the "other". Their sensibility is attuned towards the touch of things.

Film poster of *Hair, Paper, Water...* directed by Truong Minh Quy and Nicolas Graux, 2025.
Courtesy of the film directors.



Hanoi and Saigon, 2017

I first met Truong Minh Quy in Saigon in 2017, at Viva Cinema, a film seminar he co-taught with Đỗ Văn Hoàng, and Vũ Ánh Dương, held in Chaos Downtown, an art space and venue [2]. The class met three times a week from 6:30 pm to 10 pm, with back-to-back sessions on Saturday from 2:30 pm until late. We were a group of about 30 people, mostly 20-somethings. Some were film students who had known about the seminar through Vũ Ánh Dương's teaching. Others were cinephiles with no institutional affiliations. We would sit on the floor, or lie down, as we watched the films and listened to Quy, Hoang, or Duong's presentations. Sometimes it rained. One night the electricity cut out, and one night we stayed up together through the night, until morning. It was here that I first saw Quy's film, *Mars in the Well* (2014).

At Viva Cinema, Quy gave lectures about the films of Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Errol Morris. He was interested in the philosophy of time in filmmaking and questions of cinema's relationship with the real. Quy shared with the class an excerpt from Andrei Tarkovsky's book, *Sculpting in Time*, which he had translated into Vietnamese and annotated. The chapter Quy selected

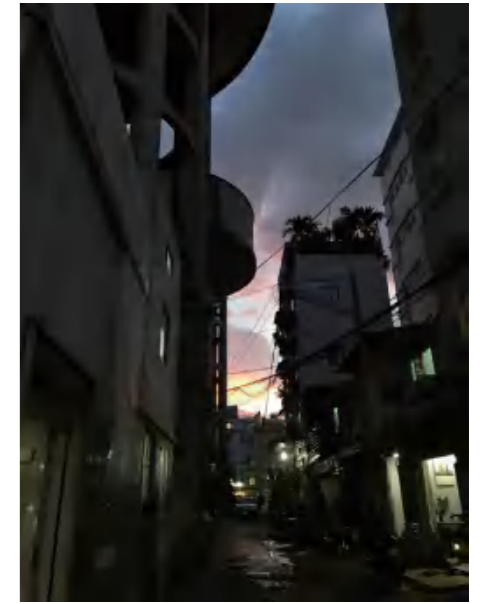
talks about the idea of filmic rhythm, how time moves within a frame, the poetry and immensity of the cinematic image.

How does time make itself felt in a shot? It becomes tangible when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realize, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction, but is a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame and to infinity; a pointer to life. [3]

Tarkovsky believes that cinematic time exceeds, spills over its own frame. Film is not just about a story or an idea. It is an experience of time.



The alleyway of Chaos Downtown in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City.
Courtesy of the author.



The rooftop of Chaos Downtown.
Courtesy of the author.

At Zero Station, an art space in District 7, Quy gave a talk on resonances between Tarkovsky's notion of cinematic time and Martin Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, and then showed his film *Someone is going into the forest* (2016). This event was part of Bui Van Nam Son's philosophy seminar, which Quy had attended four years before. Professor Nam Son was an important presence in Quy's early career. His encounter with Heidegger under Professor Nam Son's tutelage marked a departure in his thinking about cinema and art in general. [4]

Soon after Viva Cinema, DocFest took place in Hanoi, led by Hanoi DocLab and Nhà Sàn Collective, and held in conjunction with a symposium titled *Space, Time, and the Visceral in SEA Cinemas*, organized by the Association for Southeast Asian Cinema (ASEAC) [5].

Quy showed his short film, *In Silence, Things Speak* (2017) at Nhà Sàn. This film recuts shots from his first feature, *City of Mirrors* (2016), and features an extended shot of a closet on fire. Other films programmed at DocFest 2017 were *Drowning Dew* (2017) by Đỗ Văn Hoàng and Trương Quế Chi, *The*

Endless Road (2017) by Siu Phạm, and video installation titled *In a green island* (2017) by Jamie Maxtone-Graham. During this festival, Quy met Ernst Karel, with whom he would collaborate on the sound mix for *The Tree House* (2019) and *Hair, Paper, Water...* (2025). Ernst held a sound recording workshop and presented his sound work at Vui Studio on Tong Duy Tan street. Ernst's field recordings capture the sounds of the human and natural world from the perspective of an attentive, moving, yet silent observer. I was deeply moved by this encounter with Ernst and observational film and audio. I would see Ernst and encounter his work again at Harvard, where he taught Sonic Ethnography.



Film stills of *Drowning Dew* (2017) by Đỗ Văn Hoàng and Trương Quế Chi at Docfest 2017. Courtesy of the artist.



Film still of *In Silence, Things Speak*, directed by Truong Minh Quy, 2017. Courtesy of Galerie Bao.



Film still of *Ai đó đang đi vào rừng (Somebody is going into the forest)*, directed by Trương Minh Quy, 2013. Courtesy of Queer Forever Film Festival/Busan Film Festival/Tuổi Trẻ, 2016.

Film stills of *Drowning Dew* (2017) by Đỗ Văn Hoàng and Trương Quế Chi at Docfest 2017. Courtesy of the artist.





In a green island (2017) by Jamie Maxtone-Graham, installation at Docfest 2017, Nha San, so 1 Luong Yen. Courtesy of the artist.



Author and Truong Minh Quy (shadow) at Viva Cinema. Courtesy of the author.

While I split time between Hanoi and Cambridge, Massachusetts, film was my way of making connections and feeling at home. I realized that people who loved films in America were watching the same films I saw in Vietnam: at DocFest and Viva Cinema, and on the laptop with my friends. I came to appreciate how articulate film can be as it moves across borders.

Film note:

Mars in The Well. 2014. Truong Minh Quy, co-directed with Freddy Nadolny Poustochkine. 19 mins.



Film still of *Mars in the Well*, directed by Truong Minh Quy, 2016. Courtesy of the film director.

In *Mars In The Well*, Truong Minh Quy reconstructs his hometown through the lens of science fiction. The year is 2053. Climate change has caused sea levels to rise by over 500 meters, putting his home city, Buon Ma Thuot, only 5 meters above sea level. Quy plays the main character in the film, narrating his own story, sometimes through disembodied voice-over, sometimes mediated through on-screen text and books. This history is rewritten as science fiction. The *Tree House*, Truong Minh Quy's second feature-length film, explores this topic in greater depth.

Cambridge and New York, 2019



Film still of *Blessed Land/Một Khu Đất Tốt*, directed by Phạm Ngọc Lân, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Reassemblage* (installation detail), 1982. Photo: Rachel Topham. Courtesy of CAG Vancouver.

In 2019, DocLab ceased operations [6]. Despite this downturn, Truong Minh Quy continued to make films, like many other artists who were active during this era. After shooting *The Tree House*, Quy attended Le Fresnoy – a prestigious film school in Tourcoing, northern France – from 2019 to 2021. His films became a staple at international film festivals, screening at Berlinale, Viennale, Locarno, and the New York Film Festival. I saw him again in New York City in October 2019 at a sold out screening of *The Tree House*. This was a good year for shorts programs at the NYFF. Another director from Vietnam, Phạm Ngọc Lân, has a short film – *A Blessed Land* (2019) – in the festival program.

Back in Cambridge, I was watching films by Harun Farocki, Jafar Panahi, Chantal Akerman, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Pedro Costa. Quy's film could be considered a part of this tradition of hybrid essayistic films that blur the boundaries between fiction and documentary. Catherine Russells' text, "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self", provides a useful framework for understanding this emerging genre. Taking Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1982) as an example, Russell describes autoethnography in film as a form of "self fashioning... in which

the ethnographer comes to represent himself as a fiction, inscribing a doubleness within the ethnographic text." [7]

This is precisely what happens in *The Tree House*, and in *Mars in the Well*. Autoethnographic films tend to be diaristic, concerning themes of displacement, exile, where "family histories and political histories unfold as difficult processes of remembering and struggle." Examples include Hara Kazuo's *Extremely Personal Eros* (1974), and Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976). The films I saw in fall 2019 at Harvard got me thinking about the way documentary and hybrid films unfold between truth and fiction, and the way we, as audience, are invited to tease out a reality perched in-between, as they often are.

Coincidentally, there is a Chantal Akerman retrospective happening right now at MoMA [8]. Films being shown includes Akerman's first film, *Saute ma ville* (1968), *D'est* (1993), a slow film that captures placid views of Eastern Europe during a great transition out of communism, and *News from Home*, which was filmed in New York City over a few days in the early 1970s.

Coincidentally, there is a Chantal Akerman retrospective happening right now at MoMA [8]. Films being shown includes Akerman's first film, *Saute ma ville* (1968), *D'est* (1993), a slow film that captures placid views of Eastern Europe during a great transition out of communism, and *News from Home*, which was filmed in New York City over a few days in the early 1970s.

Film note:

The Tree House. 2019. Directed by Truong Minh Quy. 84 mins.

We hear Quy's voice. He had gone back to Mars and was visiting ethnic minority communities in the mountains across Vietnam. We hear him on the phone with his dad. He tells us about his childhood home, but does not show it.

With *The Tree House*, he returns to the forest and mountains, where people have a different relationship with nature. Quy filmed Ms. Cao Thi Hau, of the Ruc ethnic community, for the first time in this film. She was born in a cave, where she would return from time to time with her family. He also filmed a Kor man, who lived in a tree house for many years with his father, completely cut off from the rest of the world. Quy's participants make themselves at home in the forest and on mountains.



Film still of *The Tree House*, directed by Truong Minh Quy, 2019. Courtesy of the director.

Film still of *Viet and Nam*, Directed by Truong Minh Quy, 2024. Courtesy of MUBI.



Like the narrator, I am struck by how Ms. Hau recalls her childhood so vividly. She tells us, without hesitation, how she was born, games she played as a child, things she said to her sister while they waited for their father to come back from hunting monkeys one day, and so on. Her language and way of life is tied to the forest. She talks about how the last thing elders in her community do before dying is visit their cave. Despite the tough journey, they went because they missed the forest – “nhớ rừng.” How does she remember so much from her own life and the lives around her? Maybe they tell stories to remember together. The Ruc people do not have an alphabet for their language, and only 500 people speak this language. It can disappear at any moment. While they preserve their memories through stories, the narrator does it through images. He asks: “Without images, what will happen to my memories?” Images allow him to remember such intangible qualities as a constellation of dust in the air.

Technologies of recording memories are often implicated in structures of power and governance. Truong Minh Quy uses archival footage from the American army in South Vietnam during the creation of strategic hamlets – “Soldiers also make documentary films”. The history of film in this region is fraught with geopolitical violence. The filmmaker had returned decades later, to film, like the soldiers. The narrator asks: why am I here, violating these people's right to anonymity – “quyền ẩn danh”? “Who are you to speak on their behalf” – the narrator speaking in 2rd person about himself.

The narrator sometimes speaks about himself in the third or second person, “anh”, sometimes in the first person, “tôi”: “Can I, an ethnic majority Kinh Vietnamese, can be accepted in the house of the dead of the ethnic minority Central Highlanders? In the realm of the dead, will language and skin colour be a distinction?”

Film, as an art form, seems capable of violating the boundary between life and death, between the visible and the real. The narrator speaks of a Raglai woman who saw footage of her dead son and demanded the soldiers to release him, thinking that is proof that he is alive.

Could it be that Truong Minh Quy has a karmic bond with the mountains? In *Viet and Nam*, he takes on a whole new subject matter and approach: no more hybrid auto-ethnography, use of voice-over or archival footage. *Viet and Nam* is a fiction film, with actors and sets. It was immensely successful. The next year, he came back to the mountains and forests, to Ms. Hau, with *Hair, Paper, Water...* Maybe it is not just Quy who has a karmic bond with the forest, but also Nicolas, who had come to the region to shoot his film, *Century of Smoke*, around the same time Quy filmed *The Tree House*.



Film still of *Century of Smoke*, directed by Nicolas Graux, 2019. Courtesy of the director.

New York and New York 2024-2025

A few months ago, DocLab's website went down. While the Facebook page still exists, there is no longer a centralized source of publicly accessible information about this film workshop, which fostered so much filmmaking and cinephilia in its ten years of operation. Viva Cinema existed for many years in the form of a Facebook page, had also gone under recently, a victim of Meta's indiscriminate copyright strikes. 2017 is not too long ago, but not too close either. Enough time has passed for the landscape of experimental filmmaking and cinephilia in Vietnam to change substantially.

I got to see Truong Minh Quy in NYC theaters three times in the past year. In 2024, the NYFF showed *Viet and Nam*, which premiered at Cannes as a selection in Un Certain Regard.

Thanks to Strand Releasing, I was able to see *Viet and Nam* again at the IFC in New York in spring 2025 [9]. Unfortunately, the film was banned in Vietnam. Another Vietnamese film that did well in the international festival scene that year, *Cu Li Never Cries* by Pham Ngoc Lan, had better luck receiving permission for domestic distribution.

In the fall, Quy came back to New York with Nicolas Graux to show *Hair, Paper, Water...* A member of the audience asked about distribution for Quy and Nicolas' film. They said that for now, there is no plan. I personally would love to see their film in the theater again.

At NYFF 63, *Hair, Paper, Water...* was shown alongside a truly impressive selection of films. Part of the joy of cinephilia lies in discovering the connection between these films, which may or may not have been conceived by the programmer. Before seeing Quy and Nicolas' film, I saw Alexandre Koberidze's *Dry Leaf* and listened to the director in conversation with Dennis Lim [10]. *Dry Leaf* was unlike anything I could have expected. It was filmed on a Sony Ericsson phone from the 2000s. The Georgian countryside appears as if from a dream. In conversation, Koberidze mentions that the movement of the pixels reflects one's soul. Pixelation is the grain of the digital.

Dry Leaf was my last September film. October films are more sombre, without bold visual experimentation. For the most part, they are filmed on professional digital cameras. I saw *Little Boy* by James Benning, *The Fence* by Claire Denis, *Miroirs no. 3* by Christian Petzold, and *Nuestra Tierra* by Lucrecia Martel. Questions of repair and remediation come up, in terms of familial feelings as well as indigenous rights and human rights. Use of archival material in the making of films is also a strong theme, as well as use of phone footage – as fiction, and as documentary.

New York city has a vibrant film culture, with multiple film festivals and film magazines based in the city. There is even a review column of the city's film programming month by month. I want to bring this index/dispatch/essay to a close with two thoughts. First, we need more print publications and periodicals on film in Vietnam. The technological landscape changes so rapidly, but print is reliable. Secondly, film lives through programming and exhibition. This is the most important expression of film culture.

Truong Minh Quy and Andrei Tarkovsky intuit that film has something to do with life. Maybe, it is life's shadow. Light and time. Thinking beyond digital or photochemical processes, the medium of film is also the medium of life. The movie theater contains life – our lives, our bodies. Each of the films mentioned in this article are connected to me by a moment in my own life, where I come to a theater or sit in front of a screen to see them. Doing nothing besides living through the film. Through Quy's film, for a few brief moments, I was taken back to Vietnam, to parts that were both familiar and new. It satisfies my longing in a way I cannot explain. Maybe this is why *News From Home* is considered an exemplary auto-ethnographic film. Home is the most vivid in the imagination of an exile.

Film still of *Cu Li Never Cries*, directed by Pham Ngoc Lan, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.



About

Truong Minh Quy was born in 1990 in Buon Ma Thuot, a small city in the central highlands of Vietnam. In 2008 he entered film directing class at the Cinema and Theatre University in Ho Chi Minh City. Yet he decided to quit his education after the first year in order to pursue his independent filmmaking career. In 2012, he was a fellow of AFA (Asian Film Academy, Busan International Film Festival). In 2016, he attended Berlinale Talents (Berlin International Film Festival).

Nicolas Graux was born in Binche, a small town in Belgium's former coal-mining region. His work, blending documentary and fiction, explores sociopolitical realities through immersive research and a poetic, sensitive gaze. His debut feature, *Century of Smoke* (2019), premiered at Visions du Réel and screened widely at international festivals.

Ernst Karel (b. 1970, Palo Alto) works with sound, including electroacoustic music, experimental nonfiction sound works for multichannel installation and performance, and postproduction sound for nonfiction film [film/video], with an emphasis on observational cinema.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.filmlinc.org/nyff2025/films/hair-paper-water/>

[2] Chaos Downtown, where Viva Cinema met every week, was a townhouse hidden in the alleyways of District 1, near Ngã Sáu Phú Đổng. It was founded by Xuân-Hà and Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai (Nu) in 2015. Xuân-Hà went on to found A Sóng art collective in Đà Nẵng in 2019, and Thanh Mai founded AirHue, an international art residency program based in Trúc Lâm village, Huế, in 2024. Vũ Ánh Dương works as a film critic and lecturer in film studies in HCMC, and Đỗ Văn Hoàng is a filmmaker and artist based in Hà Nội.

[3] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, Chapter 5.

[4] Email correspondence.

[5] Email from Docfest 2017 organizer.

[6] Philippa Lovatt, "(Im)material Histories and Aesthetics of Extractivism in Vietnamese Artists' Moving Image," in *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, Volume 4, Number 1, March 2020, pp. 221-236.

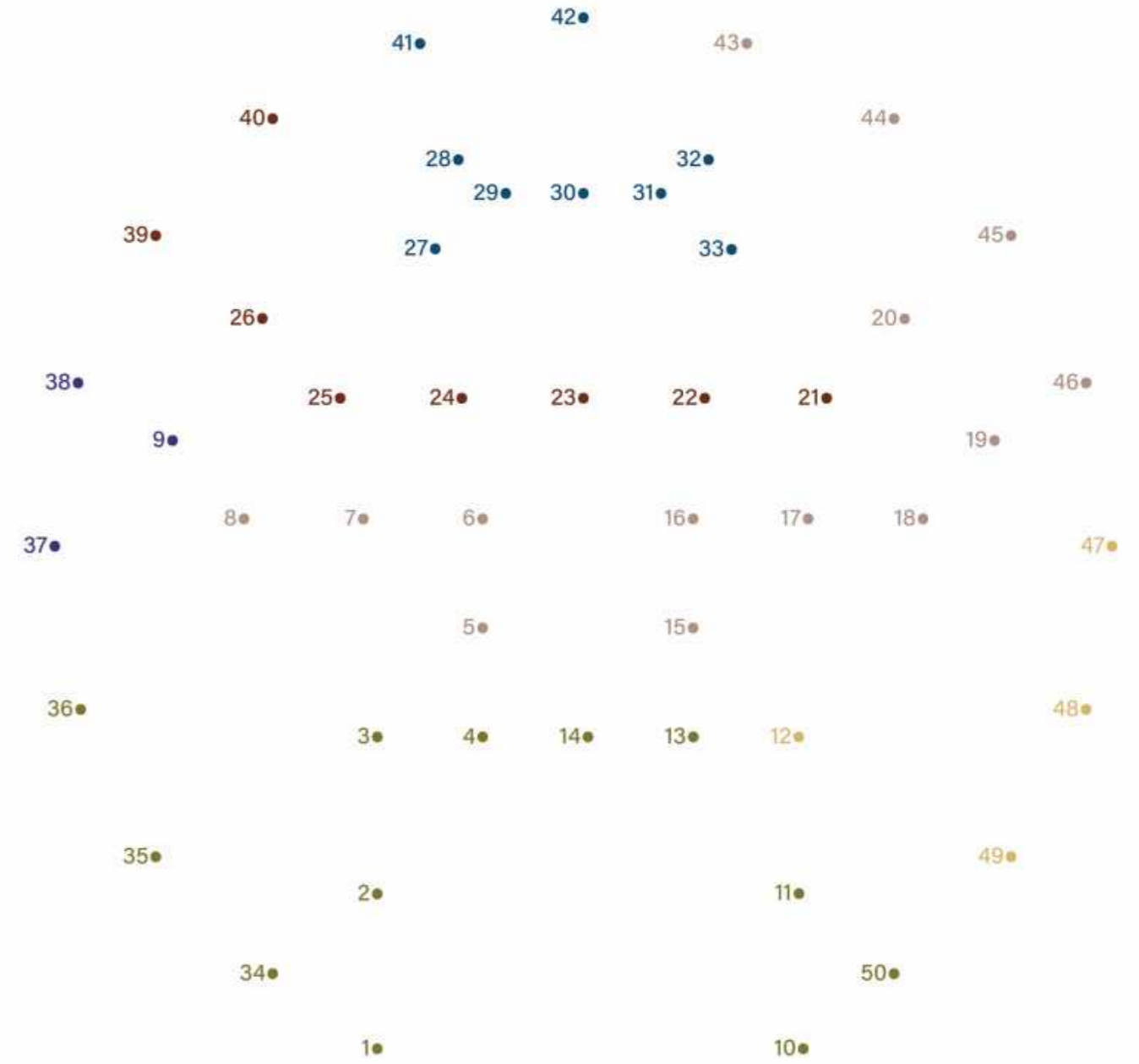
[7] "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self" in Catherine Russell, 1999. *Experimental Ethnography*, Duke University Press.

[8] <https://www.moma.org/calendar/film/5844>

[9] There has been multiple excellent interviews and articles about *Viet and Nam*. To name two excellent interviews with Truong Minh Quy: one by Ari Nguyen on Ultra Dogme (<https://ultradogme.com/2025/10/02/viet-nam/>) and one by Bach Dang Tung on Rough Cut (<https://roughcutfilm.com/2024/08/24/in-the-heart-of-the-earth-an-interview-with-truong-minh-quy/>)

[10] Dennis Lim is the Artistic Director at the New York Film Festival. He teaches film criticism at Columbia University.

Ctrl+Hanoi



● Art Spaces ● Bookstore ● Local Brands ● made by Thảo Linh Trần
 ● Artsy F&B & Cinema ● Design Stores ● Night Shift

Thao Linh
Tran

Ctrl + Hanoi

One dot at a time - map your footsteps as you explore Vietnam's capital through its creative community. Inspired by the city's symbol, this map will reflect your own pathways.

TRANG BUI Hanoiia
 Gia Đình Đồ Đá cafe
 Xofa
 city owls Rich Montauk by LP Club
 Studios dining Gram leninn Tired City
 Chie Dùpùdùpà Ginkgo Blue bird nest
 Haflington Nậu Cassette
 Cricket project unmute hanoi Réno Bar token express Long Waits Abstrct Lounge Cẩm Hermanos
 Bookworm
 Hộp bookstore Us. Coffee & Spirits Tadioto Pin cafe 'n clothes blue dot cafe sanctuary low battery Gỏi Gém
 Tranquil Quán Thi
 Hang Buom Culture and Arts Center TITA Art Á space Én lab A Queer Museum the journal things Collective Memory
 Heritage Art Space Long Bien Art Space Studio 42 Zó project
 Art 30 Gallery Vietnam Art Collection Thang Long Art Gallery Cộng Xưởng Interdisciplinary Creative Hub

PARTNER

Unexpected Encounters Between Art and Design

Since 2014, West Bund Art & Design has been held annually along the Huangpu River at the West Bund Art Center. It has brought together leading galleries from around the world to present outstanding contemporary painting, sculpture, installation, video, and performance in Shanghai. In dialogue with a wide range of exhibitions and events at museums and galleries, the fair has become the centerpiece of Shanghai Art Week, firmly positioning the city as an essential destination on the global art calendar each November.

As part of this growing ecosystem, design /delight made its debut in 2024 as the fair's platform dedicated to collectible design and functional art. Bringing together design galleries, studios, brands, designers, and artists – many presenting in China and Asia for the first time – it expands the fair's scope from fine art into design, function, and everyday culture. Blending unique and limited-edition works, bespoke collections, site-specific commissions, and scenography that unfolds as narrative, the platform becomes a melting pot of imagination where design demonstrates its collective and transformative power.

Where do we draw the line between art and design? Is it a matter of utility, or of collectability? design /delight does not seek to impose a rigid distinction but instead explores the intersection of design, function, and art. At the 12th edition of West Bund Art & Design, held November 13–16, visitors will encounter not only contemporary art but also a diverse spectrum of collectible design and functional art – creative works that illuminate everyday life in playful and unexpected ways.

The preview unfolds through three encounters: shells and light, shifting between nature and artificiality; an “entryway” reimagined to stage everyday rituals of coming and going; and silent blocks of stainless steel, standing in living rooms with the poise of sculpture. Together, these narratives demonstrate how contemporary design evolves from material explorations into reflections on space, culture, and lived experience.

Ludovico Grantaliano

Tension towards Lightness and Suspension

Ludovico Grantaliano, a Rome-based artist and designer, returns to design /delight this year with a new site-specific installation. He graduated in architecture from the University of Roma Tre after a year of studies in Portugal at the Universidade do Porto, and later founded his own studio in Rome.

All his research is permeated by the relationship with nature. He is particularly interested in seeking a symbiosis between what might be considered artificial, and therefore technological and measured, and the world of nature, imperfection, and undesignable forms. His way of working is to insert undesignable shapes and elements into highly designed and measured systems. These elements and forms are taken from the outside and incorporated into the project precisely to achieve results that are unpredictable and unmanageable, both functionally and formally. These elements, that often take the form of natural fragments, do not have a decorative function but a real structural function.

In his work, there is a tension towards lightness and suspension, towards the removal of weight, the stripping away of mass, the reduction of forms and elements to a minimum, the use of balance using only the force of gravity as support. His interest is to generate a relationship and a possible symbiosis between natural and artificial shapes and materials, and thus investigate the relationship between man and the environment.

At this year's design /delight, Grantaliano presents a new large-scale installation, *MADRE aria*, extending the artist's signature shell-inspired lighting series. Mother-of-pearl functions as a natural diffuser: part of the light passes through its surface, while the rest is reflected, producing a distinctive interplay of color and shadow. *MADRE aria* expands this exploration into installation form, composed of a constellation of small light points, each illuminating a single shell.

The work can be configured into different sizes and shapes according to the spatial context. It may appear as a single light source, or as multiple units combined, either mounted on walls or suspended in space. Beyond the shells and light, the installation deliberately reveals its power supply, hub, and wiring, foregrounding the aesthetic value of industrial and technical components. In doing so, the work establishes a dialogue of contrasts and unity between the natural form of the shell and the language of industrial technology.



Ludovico Grantaliano, 2024.
© Agustina Salvatori



Ludovico Grantaliano, Installation
view of design /delight 2024.



Ludovico Grantaliano:

"For design /delight 2025, I have created a large-scale version of *MADRE aria* to be installed on a wall, composed of around thirty lights that will spread across a surface six meters wide. The installation incorporates multiple power supplies, hubs, and electrical wires to support each light. Every shell within the work generates its own shade and color, coming together to form an unpredictable and ever-changing light installation."

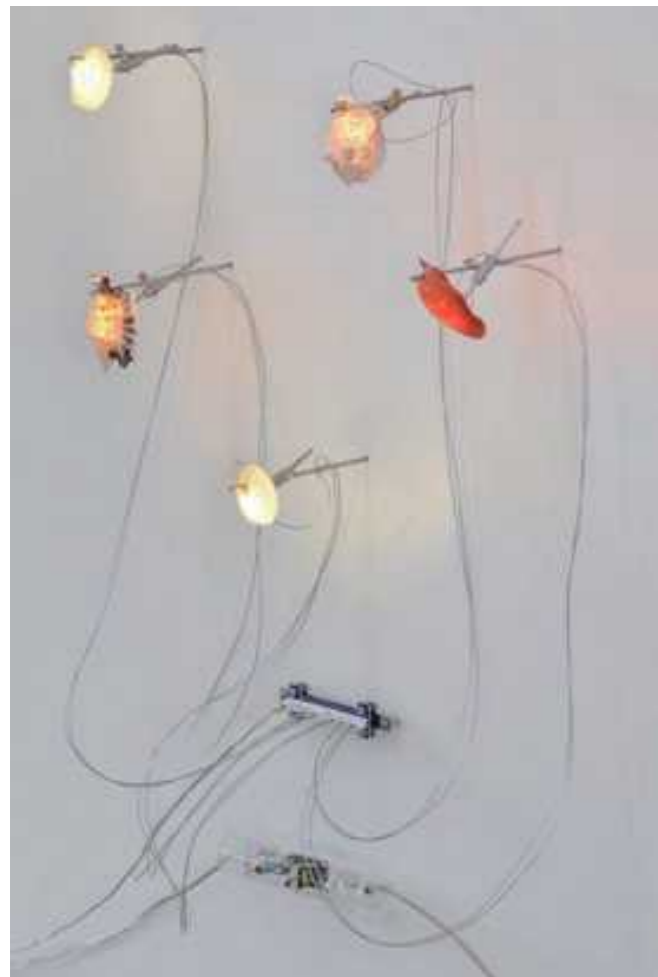


MADRE aria, 2025. Stainless steel, shells, electrical wiring, and electronics. Variable dimensions.

© Ludovico Grantaliano, Agustina Salvatori

Haus of Hu, Theo Sykes & Dariia Nepop

Entryway as an Architecture of Transition



MADRE, 2024. Stainless steel, shells, electrical wiring. Floor model 190 x 25 x 25 cm, Wall model 15 x 10 x 15 cm.

© Ludovico Grantaliano, Agustina Salvatori



Dariia Nepop, Theo Sykes, Ellen Hu

London-based cross-disciplinary design studio Haus of Hu will present its first collaborative series at this year's design /delight, created together with designers Theo Sykes and Dariia Nepop. Founded by Chinese designer Ellen Hu, Haus of Hu weaves sensibilities from Chinese culture into a contemporary design language, highlighting subtle contrasts between East and West, the classical and the minimal. Hu's practice spans architecture, fashion, and furniture, with works previously showcased at Alcova and the Salone del Mobile in Milan.

Theo Sykes is an architectural designer, researcher and curator based in London, working in Mumbai, London and Santiago de Compostela. Dariia Nepop is an architectural designer and curator based in London, with previous work in Piedmont, London, and Kyiv. Her recent project *The Missing Room*, a multifunctional outdoor pavilion in rural northern Italy, received international recognition.

This collaboration explores the nuance and intersection of difference – how architecture and furniture converge to create moments of encounter, transition, and ritual. Not conceived as objects in isolation but as systems, each design operates as an instrument to structure domestic life.

This collaboration originates in a shared exploration of the overlap between architecture and furniture – an inquiry into how objects can articulate space and shape experience. The space of the entryway was chosen as the point of departure: the first domestic threshold. A site of dualities – arrival and departure, interior and exterior, where the actions of arrival and departure unfold.

The console table, low chair and hooks are designed as a collective/unified scenography for these actions. The trio works toward a language of entry and exit, each serving a precise function, together forming an intentional architecture of small rituals. It invites you to encounter your home deliberately – to understand it not as a backdrop but as an actor.



CHARM, 2025.
Oak, aluminium, lacquered charm.
30 x 30 x 4 cm.

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NOST, 2025.
Oak, aluminium, glass, print.
45 x 35 x 14 cm.

The scenography of the *Entryway Collection* at design /delight is conceived as an architecture of transition. It recreates the spatial characteristics of the entryway: the shift from public to private, street to entryway, the delineation of borders. Walls of varying heights, carpets, and the collection itself compose a sequence of thresholds and views, staging the sensation of arrival; a doorway is encountered, a room is entered, and furniture appears utilised.

This staging extends the logic of the collaboration itself. In our space we propose moments of encounter, transition and ritual, where the visitor can become a participant, interacting with furniture as spatial instruments. Placement becomes suggestive – guiding the eye, framing approach, proposing utilisation.

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NOST, 2025.
Oak, aluminium, glass, print.
45 x 35 x 14 cm.

C2 Gallery

An Architectural
Volume Stands
in Silent Confrontation
within the Living Room



DYAD, 2025.
Oak, aluminium, cushion.
65 x 37 x 37 cm.

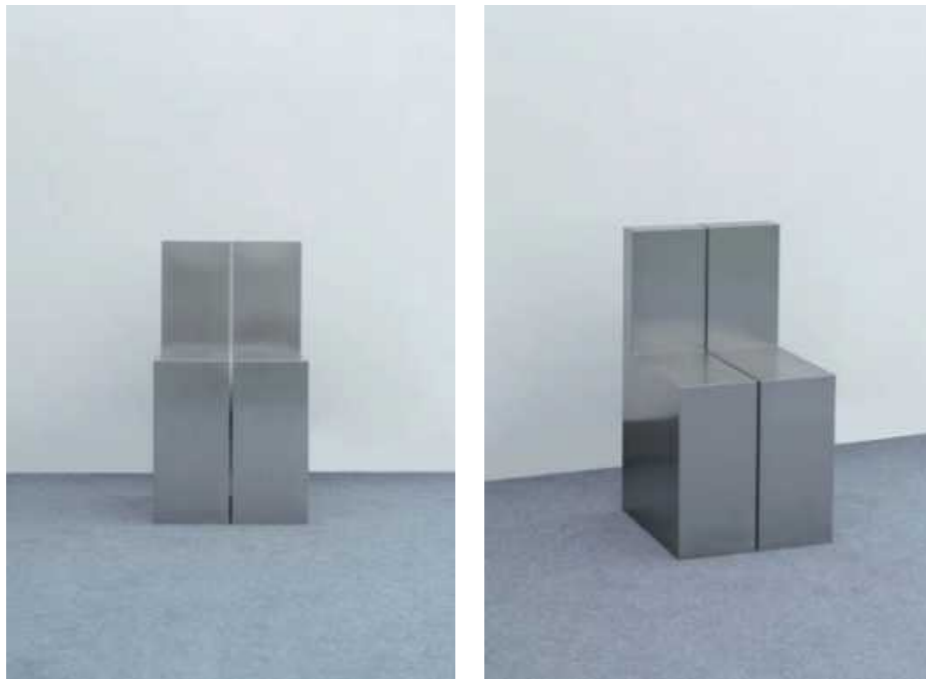


Liu Chang



Block Seat, 2025.
304 stainless steel.
75 x 55 x 47.2 cm.
© Liu Chang

Section, 2025.
Brushed stainless steel.
75 x 20 x 43 cm.
© Liu Chang



Block Seat is a chair constructed from stainless-steel blocks. At first glance, it appears to be a casual stacking of cubes in varying sizes, yet it conceals a precise sense of proportion where each block functions both as a structural support and as part of a sculptural composition. The work's distinctive-ness lies in the tension between "order" and "block": the arrangement of volumes creates rhythm and structure, transforming the chair from a functional object into a geometric sculpture. Balancing randomness and precision, it reveals a beauty that is both raw and refined.

Section takes the archetypal chair as prototype, severing the complete form with a single vertical cut. The stainless-steel surface is intensified in its minimalist geometry, cool, pure, and forceful. Division here is not only formal but conceptual, reflecting on whole and part: a chair cut in two, yet persisting in essence. Between function and sculpture, *Section* embodies a spatial meditation on structure and boundary.

Echoing the idea of an architectural plinth, *Foundations* carries a metaphorical resonance as a "foundation of design." Employing the block as its sole language, it dispenses with furniture's reliance on function or ornament, speaking only through geometry and proportion. Two volumes, slightly misaligned, are stacked without curves, cuts, or additions. Simply "existing," they generate order and tension within space.

Foundations does not attempt to perform as a coffee table, but rather, with rational restraint, it distills furniture into both "architectural fragment" and "essence of objecthood." Each plane and edge responds to the aesthetics of construction and the pursuit of spatial purity.

C2 is an art-furniture brand founded by designer Liu Chang, rooted in minimalism and sculptural presence. The "C" in its name suggests cube, construction, and chair, while the number "2" implies extension, layering, and dialogue. C2 conceives of furniture not only as functional objects but also as volumes, orders, and concepts within space.

Exhibiting in the debut section at design /delight, C2 Gallery will present a new body of work in stainless steel. Here, furniture transcends utility to assume the presence of sculpture, situated at the threshold between design and art. Square, pure, and restrained, the works act as nodes of force and autonomous sculptural entities, maintaining tension and spirit in any setting.

Derived from basic geometries, the pieces emerge as stacked blocks, offset structures, or compositions dictated by structural logic. Some invite sitting, while others retain only the silhouette of a "chair." Together, they articulate an inquiry into the shifting boundaries between sitting and seeing, function and form.



Foundations, 2025.
Brushed stainless steel. 115 x 100 cm.
© Liu Chang

Murmurs: A Gathering of Modern and Contemporary Arts from Vietnam

Westbund
Art Center,
Shanghai

12-16 November,
2025

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Curated by

Yang Zi, Mai Ta, and the VAC
team led by Sophie Huang

Artists

Bui Xuan Phai (1920-1988, Hanoi); Nghia Dang (b.1994, Hanoi/HCMC); KV Duong (b.1980, HCMC/Toronto/London); Mifa (b. 1990, Da Nang); Lam Na (b.1987, Nghe An/Hanoi); AP Nguyen (b.1999, Hanoi/London); Florian Song Nguyen (b.1988, Paris/HCMC/Marrakech); Phuong Nguyen (Toronto); Tuyen Nguyen (b.1992, HCMC); Tra My Nguyen (b.1992, Hanoi/Berlin); Ha Ninh Pham (b.1991, Hanoi); Koa Pham (b.1993, HCMC/London); Lien Pham (b.1997, HCMC); Mai Ta (b.1997, HCMC); Thai Tuan (b.2003, Vung Tau/HCMC); Tran Luu Hau (1928-2020, Hanoi); Trinh Cam Nhi (b.1996, Hanoi); Truong Cong Tung (b.1986, Dak Lak/HCMC); Vo Huynh Phu (b.1993, Ben Tre/HCMC); Vu Cao Dam (1908-2000, Hanoi/Paris).



Murmurs: A Gathering of Modern and Contemporary Arts from Vietnam presents a curated selection from the Vietnam Art Collection, featuring artists from the diaspora and homeland. This group exhibition offers a nuanced look at the vibrant and expanding field of Vietnamese art.

The exhibition title *Murmurs* draws inspiration from the historical Chữ Nôm writing system, a vernacular script of Vietnam. The character “喃” evokes soft, continuous sounds like whispering, flowing water, or birdsong. In this context, *Murmurs* reflects the intimate perspectives and creative impulses of artists with Vietnamese heritage, suggesting an art scene that is both deeply rooted in tradition and attuned to global dialogues.

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"We are thrilled to present *Murmurs* in Shanghai, a city known for its vibrant international art scene," said Muchun Niu, Founder of VAC. "We conceived *Murmurs* as a dialogue across generations and geographies. It pays tribute to modern masters while capturing the most vibrant creative voices of today, revealing the deep roots and flourishing branches of Vietnamese art."

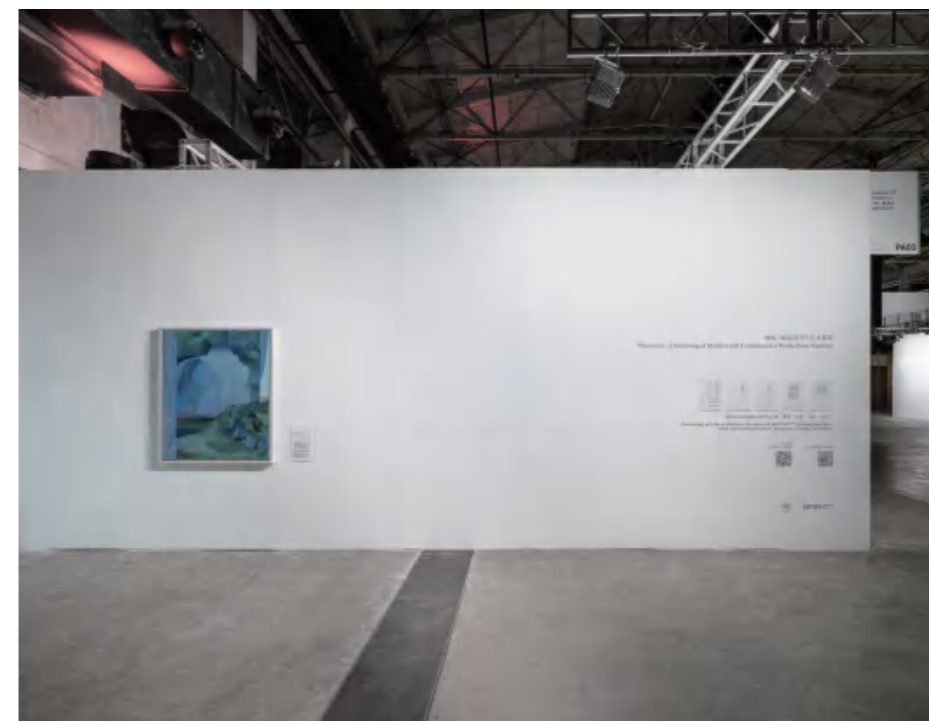


Jenny Hsu, Collection Manager of VAC, shared insights into the selection process: "Working closely with these artworks, one experiences *Murmurs* not just as a concept, but as a tangible reality. From delicate modernist paintings to the raw materiality of contemporary installations, each piece has a unique voice. Our role was to orchestrate these individual whispers into a cohesive chorus that tells a larger story of Vietnamese art."

Sophie Huang, Director of VAC, elaborated on the curatorial approach: "A murmur is a soft yet persistent sound. It doesn't declare itself loudly like a manifesto, but invites audiences to lean in and listen closely to the intimate memories, cultural threads, and global conversations within the works. The resonance triggered by this intimacy can be equally profound and powerful."

Murmurs bridges generations and geographies, featuring works ranging from VAC's permanent collection highlights - including revered figures like Vu Cao Dam, Bui Xuan Phai, and Tran Luu Hau - to pioneering works by emerging artists such as Mai Ta, KV Duong, Tra My Nguyen, Trinh Cam Nhi, and others. The exhibition showcases artists working within Vietnam and across the global diaspora, from London and Berlin to Paris and Toronto.

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Coninciding with the exhibition is the release of ARTIFACT Journal Issue No.2, exploring themes of Migration, Fluidity, Resilience. The journal features contributions from a wide array of artists, writers, and scholars, including Lena Bui, Dr. Nicolas Henni-Trịnh Đức, Monique Gross, Yasmine Anlan Huang, Alvin Luong, Bich Ngoc Luu, Adeena Mey, Ngoc Nau, Ném, Huong Ngo, Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, Nodey Nguyen, Veronika Radulovic, Suboi, and others, providing a deeper scholarly and critical context for the exhibition.

Hedvig Liestoel, Editor and Contributor of ARTIFACT #2, added: "The journal represents VAC's expansion from a residency and exhibition space to a platform for discourse production. We are thrilled to collaborate with diverse creators and thinkers to extend these themes from a visual experience into intellectual discussion, embodying VAC's comprehensive mission."

ARTIFACT is a cultural initiative funded by Muchun Niu, the founder of VAC, and his team based in New York and Hanoi. It is dedicated to fostering cross-cultural dialogues and strengthening a global network of creative and intellectual talents across Asia and beyond.

462 W 42nd St, #2515,
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6/44/11 To Ngoc
Van, Tay Ho, Hanoi,
Vietnam

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For Chinese readers:

