



## SPIRIT OF FRIENDSHIP

This exhibition seeks to highlight the role and contribution of artist friendships in furthering the development of experimental languages in Vietnam, since 1975. As an educational display, it gives recognition to how ‘friendship’ continues to further the testing and encouraging of ideas among artists, beyond what was officially understood, taught, or predominantly exhibited in Vietnam at that time, believing their art worthy of more than catering to ideological/formal and touristic (commercial) demand.

Conceived as an ‘introduction’, it provides a general map of activity outlining 22 artist groups<sup>1</sup>, from across Vietnam, focusing primarily on the visual arts. This endeavor was initiated particularly for the local audiences of The Factory, aware that their access to the history of contemporary art in this country is incredibly limited, due to Vietnam’s lack of diversity in cultural infrastructure operating with comparative and interdisciplinary experience and expertise.

Beginning with the ‘Gang of Five’<sup>2</sup> who started working together in the 1980s (arguably the first example of artist friendships mutually identifying themselves as driven by shared motivation in the post-American War era), this exhibition’s chronology charts until the present-day, where evidence - such as quoted testimonial, documentary photographs and videos, exhibition catalogs and artwork from the artist groups themselves - illustrates the rise of independent<sup>3</sup> artistic activity across the country.

From the utilization of domestic living rooms, to the re-appropriation of traditional architecture; from public activation of artist studio space to the bar-cum-studio; from the hostel as art host to the occupation of diplomatic zone as site of artistic production – what we observe in this landscape is an entrepreneurial flair for strategic survival as artists strive to be heard in a community greatly underestimating their role in society. In addition to highlighting such DIY pro-activism in locating space and means, this exhibition shares how artists pay homage to the lives of artists before them, as a means of learning, and remembering their legacy; while also focusing on the practices of particular artist groups – ‘Salon

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<sup>1</sup> This exhibition focuses on artist groups, as opposed to ‘collectives’, as many artists who gathered to work together in Vietnam (particularly in the 1980s and 1990s) did not label themselves with a specific name, mission or vocalized purpose. Rather we (the curators) chose to acknowledge how ‘friendship’ was what brought about a furthering of testing and encouraging ideas. Where possible, in this essay indication is given on how an artist’s group came to be given an actual name.

<sup>2</sup> This group of artists - Hồng Việt Dũng, Phạm Quang Vinh, Đặng Xuân Hoà, Hà Trí Hiếu and Trần Lương – came to be known as the ‘Gang of Five’, named by Dương Tường, Thái Bá Vân and Nguyễn Quân who encouraged their practice at that time. Email conversation between researcher of ‘Gang of Five’, Ms Lê Thuận Uyên and Zoe Butt, July, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The use of the word ‘independent’ in this endeavor refers to artists who sought to challenge their ideas and concepts beyond the national educational curriculum - an inherited interpretation of the plastic arts from the French colonial era (1887-1954) that was then fortified as an ideological vehicle (which continues to prevail today), with the establishment of the entire country as a Communist State in 1975.

Natasha’, ‘Nhà Sàn’, ‘Group of 10’ and ‘Sàn Art’ – for their facilitation of differing means and modes of making, thinking, talking and disseminating artistic ideas, thus influencing their community’s capacity to participate and understand the experience of art as a conduit with which to grapple differing perceptions of contemporary life.

Sustaining a shared motivation of ‘mutual’ contribution as a group of friends laboring together is not easy however, for when the financial realities and career opportunities of life become all too overwhelming, it is often only friendship that fires the tendrils of collective endurance, and even then it can be fraught with differing levels of commitment and belief. This exhibition visually focuses on the memorable moments of kindling trusting friendships through art; while its associated public program (4 November, 2017 at The Factory) looks for critical reflection and observation of the struggles of sustaining such grass-roots infrastructure, desiring a constructive discursive space where endured dilemmas are shared, debated and given hopeful insight for creative improvement.

‘Spirit of Friendship’ is by no means comprehensive, rather it is conceived as the first chapter of an ongoing research project (with dedicated website – [www.spiritoffriendship.org](http://www.spiritoffriendship.org)), desiring a deeper and broader exploration of Vietnam’s art history, so as to better understand from whence we come and from here, where and why do we move forward.

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

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## **CONJURING ‘SPIRIT’**

‘As members we are almost the same age, and have known each other for a very long time, ever since we applied to go to Art School. And because of that, establishing the group was really honestly based on friendship. After we graduated, we realized how rough and cramped the conditions were for making art.

So we decided to start the group with a simple reason, which was to nourish our desire to create. The other way was to quit art and go to Eastern Europe (which was the most promising place for those who wanted to escape from poverty and war; Western Europe was riskier and more expensive since you had to travel by ship). The group met up, drank tea and wine almost daily, we also went on picnics, visited some studios and went dancing! (which was illegal at that time)’

Trần Lương, ‘Gang of Five’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview between Trần Lương and Zoe Butt, June 2017.

These were the early days of the 'Gang of Five'. Gazing at the black and white photographs Trần Lương has shared of that



as youthful glee dances beneath arms raised, eyes drawn excitedly toward a camera overhead - it is revealing to know that this was a group of artists who had survived a protracted ideological war. In another image we see a staged group portrait



five handsome young men in black, all looking away from the lens, except Luong, who is armed with his signature stare that, to this day, continues to challenge assumed understanding of power. Much of the photographic documentation featured within the bilingual chronology of 'Spirit of Friendship' is similarly confident and celebratory in tone. From 'exhibition' openings, to the process of collaborative artistic production; from impromptu gatherings in song, to pointed artist gatherings engaging group critique: what these small windows offer is but a glimpse into what might be similar experiences anywhere in the world's diverse landscape of artistic communities. However in Vietnam, these artists who are committed to pushing differing modes and concepts of art making beyond official or commercial dictation, continue to endure a landscape whose government and influential figures of wealth, perceive such experimentation as suspiciously culturally subversive or not a socially palatable economic investment. As a consequence, Vietnam today does not possess museums, libraries or universities with critical comparative expertise and resource on the history of Art (local or international). Thus (for better or worse) there are very few experienced curators, dealers, collectors and scholars who can readily argue the validity and value of its experimental pioneers. So just how do these artists survive and what motivates them to continue their work?

In an attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to share a little background on the social and historical specificity and perception of this country's experimental artistic landscape. As Trần Luong eludes above, escaping poverty and war was the ultimate dream for a survivor who endured the international conflict between 1955-1975 (the collapse of the French Empire and the ensuing bloodbath that gave way to the establishment of the Communist State of Vietnam). Whether you were living in the North or South of the country, all artists faced some kind of battle of conscience with their ideas



following the end of the Vietnam War. After 21 years of partition<sup>5</sup>, there were stark differences in artistic leanings between these two communities. North Vietnam had been ensconced in Socialist Realism since 1945<sup>6</sup>, a vehicle to serve the ideology of Marxism and the growing dialog with international Communism. In the South however, up until 1975, the extensive contact with American culture, the remnants of French philosophical attitudes in the translation of existential European thinkers (Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche for example) and the proliferation of printing houses (particularly in Saigon), all meant that southern artists were more exposed to western art movements, playing with form and composition in ways their Northern counterparts were not permitted. In 1966, the first Fine Art Museum in Vietnam was established in Hanoi, but only after museums addressing political issues had been firstly set up (such as the Museum of Revolution in 1959, and it is revealing that northern artists who had relocated to South Vietnam - following the ousting of the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 - were no longer identified as worthy of its halls)<sup>7</sup>.

With the Fall of Saigon in 1975 came the view towards 're-education', the artistic communities of the South conscripted into the armed forces by the Fine Art Association, often to violent detrimental ends<sup>8</sup>. For the first decade of Vietnam as a one-party state, life was incredibly tumultuous for its artists. Friendships were integral to propelling commitment to artistic experimentation. While the members of the 'Gang of Five' in Hanoi felt compelled to work off the official grid, exploring a life of art beyond the Social Realist official dictum, feeling an urgent need to conceptually and critically reflect on the nature of their everyday; other groups of artists in the re-named southern city of Ho Chi Minh (previously Saigon), were living amongst Northern artists whose belief in the nationalist (thus Communist cause) had awarded them senior positions in the newly established Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association. In the early 1990s, the 'Group of 10'<sup>9</sup> found themselves friends under such circumstances precisely because of their commitment to art (particularly to the language of abstraction which was officially unaccepted at the time), despite their differing political attitudes (which will be discussed further on). While the presence of politics may be a key influence in the generation of an artistic aesthetic, what was also of critical impact on the mutually motivated experimentation in art in post-1975 Vietnam, was the introduction of national economic reforms in 1986. Following what is locally referred as 'Doi Moi'<sup>10</sup>, artists found increasing access to technology and international opportunity, thus fragmenting the dominance of a socialist worldview on the purpose, materials and meaning of art. Artist and filmmaker Nguyễn Trinh Thi (founder of 'Hanoi Doclab') states, '... until the early 2000s, artists mainly used video as an additional element to art installations or documentation of performances (in much the same way that video entered China in the

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<sup>5</sup> On 27 April 1954, the Geneva Agreement was signed, with the French relinquishing any claim to territory in the Indochina peninsula. Vietnam was divided into northern and southern zones into which opposing forces were to withdraw. Elections in 1956 were supposed to take place to unify the country, however this never occurred, the divide between North and South instead exacerbating ideological tensions and ultimately giving way to civil strife that became internationally known as the 'Vietnam War' (within Vietnam, it is referred as the 'American War').

<sup>6</sup> With the closing of World War II and the weakening power of France in Indochina, Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) seized power in North Vietnam in 1945. With his Viet Minh army (Vietnam Independence League: a coalition of Communist and Vietnamese nationalists), a socialist society was thus adopted. South Vietnam remained under French control. <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1945.html>

<sup>7</sup> See Huynh-Beattie, Bội Trân. 'Chapter 3: Vietnamese Socialist Realism: The Arts of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam (The North) 1945-1975' in 'Vietnamese Aesthetics 1925 onwards' (unpublished thesis), pg. 175.

<sup>8</sup> '... artist-lecturers were removed from teaching and detained in camps for two or three years. Upon release, many found it difficult to recommence creative activities....' See Huynh-Beattie, Bội Trân. 'Chapter 5: The Construction and De-Construction of Vietnamese Aesthetics of the Post-War Period 1975-1990' in 'Vietnamese Aesthetics 1925 onwards' (unpublished thesis), pg. 274-276.

<sup>9</sup> 'Group of 10': Nguyễn Trung, Ca Lê Thắng, Đào Minh Tri, Nguyễn Tấn Cương, Nguyễn Thanh Bình, Hứa Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Trung Tín, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Trần Văn Thảo, Vũ Hà Nam.

<sup>10</sup> '...when the country faced economic crisis, at the 6 Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986 the Vietnamese government launched a bold new policy of social, economic and political reform under the rubric of doi moi ('renovation'), aimed at transforming the old command economy into a market-based one. Since that time free enterprise has been encouraged and foreign investment and dollar-spending tourists welcomed...' See Tim Doling, 'Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management Vol. 1 Issue 1' (Dec 2003), pg. 35

early 1990s, where video art was first seen as a social tool of documentation, as opposed to an exploration of the form itself). In the 1990s, and even to this day, knowledge of the conceptual history of art and the exploration of abstraction beyond the “Abstract Expressionists” is not found in universities. Thus it was due to the popularity of television and film that artists studying and working in Vietnam were introduced to the potential of video as an artistic medium, largely drawn to its artistic potential as opposed to its structural capabilities.’<sup>11</sup>

From the early 2000s<sup>12</sup>, the artist’s toolbox began to engage the digital realm, its camera (still or moving) now a more affordable medium that immediately captured a ‘truth’ to reality (eg. evidenced in the establishment of ‘HanoiLink’<sup>13</sup>), questioning the role of artists and the purpose of their expression in society. This questioning of the construct of ‘truth’ was further deepened with access to the World Wide Web, enabling comparative thinking<sup>14</sup> on issues of identity (thus explorations of sexuality in the subversive installations and performances of Trương Tân and Nguyễn Minh Thành); the role of spirituality (in dialog with questions of ideological belief as evidenced in the work of Trần Lương, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Nguyễn Minh Phước); or the prevalence of social corruption and immorality (illustrated in the graphic figurative work of such artists as Nguyễn Văn Cường and Lê Quảng Hà). It is important to note that even today, still none of these critical experimental (and conceptual<sup>15</sup>) art histories are taught in the secondary or tertiary levels of education in Vietnam.

The economic reforms of Doi Moi did, however, afford educational exchange opportunities. In 1987, Vũ Dân Tân found himself with the offer of study abroad, firstly in the Soviet Union and then Cuba, drawn to the compositional quality of music and the art of the stage, succumbing to the thrall of animation, eventually returning to Hanoi with his Russian wife, Natasha Kraevskaia. Emboldened by the spirit of Perestroika and the way artists in the USSR had removed the ideological shackles from their artistic energies and outputs, ‘Salon Natasha’ was born in 1990 (essentially the front room of Tân's family home<sup>16</sup>) to which a steady multitude of music nights and ‘salon’ hung exhibitions of local artist friends began to regularly occur.

Around that same time in Ho Chi Minh City the ‘Group of 10’ (a group of friends as teachers and students) began to embrace abstract ideas in painting, demonstrating a mutual desire to technically and conceptually explore the painterly surface beyond the limited scope of the French inherited plastic arts schooling and the heavy-handed dictum of Social Realism (members of this group were to become

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<sup>11</sup> Nguyễn, Trinh Thi. ‘Discourse on the Moving Image in Vietnam in the 21st Century’, in Jinsuk Suh (ed.), ‘Moving on Asia’, Alternative Space Loop, Seoul, 2013, pp. 414-419.

<sup>12</sup> Hoa Nguyễn (co-founder of ‘HanoiLink’) recalls her first digital device in 2002 – the Panasonic Lumix F150 (2.0 megapixel) – such machinery being a particular (affordable) tool for experimental artists in Hanoi at that time. Conversation between Hoa Nguyễn and Bill Nguyễn, July 2017.

<sup>13</sup> ‘HanoiLink’ was established in 2006 with Hoa Nguyễn, Nguyễn Hoài Văn, Nguyễn Trần Nam, Trương Thiện and Nguyễn Ban Ga as core members.

<sup>14</sup> In 1997, Internet access was enabled in Vietnam (as comparison, it arrived in Japan in 1984), an era when Chinese contemporary artists particularly were gaining international attention (Harold Szeeman curating 20 Chinese artists in his 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1999 – one of the first curators to give art of contemporary Asia such prominence). The engagement of conceptual ideas of chance, exploration of existential questions of mortality through material, and the usage of the body as site of resistance (of reference to the work of artists Xu Bing and Zhang Huan and in turn their looking towards the art movements of Fluxus and Dadaism through such work as Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp) deserves more research of its impact on the development of conceptual art practice in Vietnam in the early 2000s.

<sup>15</sup> ‘... as Duchamp was unveiling ‘Fountain’ in New York, Southeast Asians were simultaneously encountering modernist painting, academic painting, Euramerican abstraction, Futurism, Dada, and genres such as landscape, still life and the nude, along with the ‘modern’ in the wider social and political sense’. Lenzi, Iola. ‘Conceptual Strategies in Southeast Asian Art: A Local Narrative’, in ‘Concept Context Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia’. Bangkok Art and Culture Centre Foundation, 2014, pg. 22-23. An analysis of this history yet to be taught in Vietnamese art education, or presented within its museums.

<sup>16</sup> Vũ Dân Tân's father - Vũ Đình Long - was a well-known playwright and translator and already during his time, the front room of this house had been a popular ‘hang-out’ for intellectuals in Hanoi.

instrumental in arguing to the cultural authorities the need to officially approve such artistic language)<sup>17</sup> In the 1990s, what was to also have fundamental affect on the development of contemporary art was the trickle of foreign curators, dealers and collectors with interest in Vietnamese art slowly turning into a steady stream, introducing a lucrative idea that being an artist was a ‘career’ or a form of livelihood (as opposed to a professed tool of the state). And thus a private and commercial landscape for art began to flourish, where the deducing of tourist demand – a desire for something ‘Vietnamese’ – particularly pushed a language of art, opportunistically supported by the Vietnamese government, as a series of undebated cultural stereotypes propped up as national symbols of culture (think the conical hat, the áo dài dress, the lacquer box or the lotus flower).

It was in 1994 that American art-dealer, Suzanne Lecht decided to establish her commercial gallery ‘Art Vietnam’ in Hanoi, initially drawn to the inexplicable energy of the individual projects realized by the artists within ‘Gang of Five’; and also, the artists who would eventually be regarded as the ‘Avant Garde Calligrapher Group’ (or locally referred as the ‘Zenei Gang of Five’<sup>18</sup>). ‘Art Vietnam’ was a commercial initiative with productive collector networks beyond Asia, increasing recognition of these experimental pioneers, supporting artwork production and organizing exhibitions by such artists whose aesthetic language extended beyond the tourist stereotype. This support of the experimental artist was furthered that same year by the arrival of German artist Veronica Radulovic, who came to Vietnam to study lacquer art, becoming the first international lecturer at the Hanoi University of Fine Art, supported by the German Academic Exchange Service. Nguyễn Minh Thành from ‘Hanoi Triad’<sup>19</sup> comments: ‘At that time, seeing Trương Tân’s novel and daring paintings, looking at artworks of Veronika Radulovic, along with foreign books and videos on contemporary art that she brought to Vietnam, and engaging in discussions and talks – all of these were inspirations for us to practice drawing and creating art. At that time, we were tired of the formal education at school and had started slacking<sup>20</sup>.’ With Doi Moi also came a stronger and more active cultural diplomacy between Vietnam and foreign governments, with Alliance Francais (later renamed L’Espace), Goethe Institute, British Council, Japan Foundation, and later the ‘Cultural Development Exchange Fund’ (CDEF) of the Danish government (mainly operating in Hanoi), evidencing strong advocacy of experimental art practice in Vietnam (their initiatives predominantly demanded engagement or collaboration with an artistic expertise from their country and thus directing (ie. limiting) the cultural and historical direction of artistic enquiry by Vietnamese artists however)<sup>21</sup>.

To glance in comparison at Ho Chi Minh City in the early 1990s (this city whose intellectual and creative intelligentsia had largely fled in 1975 following the Communist stitching of the country into one) it was considerably quieter than Hanoi, devoid of any foreign NGO’s cultural diplomacy program. However in 1995 this slowly began to change, as Vietnam and the USA restored diplomatic relations, that same year Vietnam also becoming a full member of the ‘Association of South East Asian Nations’ (‘ASEAN’).

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<sup>17</sup> The first official abstraction exhibition was organized at Hong Hac gallery 20-31 May, 1992 (no. 2 Le Duan street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City) inside the South East Armed Forces Museum, organized by the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Culture & Information, the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association and the South East Armed Forces Museum – a conversation largely facilitated by Colonel Phan Oánh, art historian Nguyễn Quân and Group of 10 artist members Ca Lê Thắng and Đào Minh Tri. Interview between artist Nguyễn Trung Tín and Lê Thiên Bảo, July 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Established in 2006 by artists/Nom scholars Trần Trọng Dương, Nguyễn Đức Dũng, Nguyễn Quang Thắng, Phạm Văn Tuấn, Lê Quốc Việt.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Hanoi Triad’ comprises of Nguyễn Minh Thành, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Nguyễn Văn Cường.

<sup>20</sup> Interview between Nguyễn Minh Thành and Bill Nguyễn, June 2017.

<sup>21</sup> These foreign NGO cultural institutes should not be underestimated for their role in furthering experimental concepts of art making in Vietnam. As foreign government entities they were able to host activities of a more challenging nature (ie. an ‘eased’ license process with the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture) and thus stand-out initiatives occurred, such as: the renowned group show ‘Green - Red - Yellow’ (Goethe Institut Hanoi, 2003) celebrating the works of 16 artists who were said to have marked the transformation of art from modern to contemporary; the series of seminars, workshops and performances in ‘Open Academy’ (curated by Veronika Radulovic and Andres Schmid, in collaboration with Goethe Institut Hanoi, 2010/11); the first performance art festival ‘Lim Dim’ (co-organized by British Council, Goethe Institut Hanoi and Nhà Sàn Studio, 2004/5); and the ‘Performance Art Young Talent Prize’ (initiated by CDEF, 2008) to name but a few.

These political shifts proved significant for it opened the door for Vietnamese artistic exchange with the South East Asian region, and more critically for South Vietnam - the chance for those who had fled to return home. Thus the return of celebrated artists today, such as Đinh Q. Lê (who was one of the first artists to relocate in 1996 from USA to Ho Chi Minh City), was indicative of a growing wave of Viet Kieu<sup>22</sup>, determined to return and contribute to the competitive growth of Vietnam's financial, social and cultural platforms. It was also in 1996 that Ms. Trần Thị Huỳnh Nga also decided to establish 'Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre', within the grounds of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Museum. This little gallery, nestled within the eroding ground-floor edifice of a State institution, was the first space in South Vietnam to network an array of artists from across the country, indeed the South East Asian region, in Ho Chi Minh City. It was through the artistic gatherings at 'Blue Space' that artistic friendships were furthered beyond the local, at times inspiring initiative to do something on their own<sup>23</sup>. A unique character of Ho Chi Minh City (differing greatly from Hanoi) was the mingling of Viet Kieu, foreign and local artist communities<sup>24</sup> - the social tension between these groups a particularly fraught relationship where, for example, assumption of Viet Kieu access to wealth and mobility was a prime motivation of local social stigma<sup>25</sup>. Thus such artist initiatives as, 'a little blah blah'<sup>26</sup> (formed 2004); 'Wonderful District'<sup>27</sup> (formed 2006); and 'Sàn Art' (formed 2007) were influential amalgamations of friendships that effectively bridged such social divide, demonstrating the beneficial networks afforded from such partnerships (results also reflected in the growing private business sector).

The growth in such artist-friendship activity was arguably also spurred by the growing international attention afforded Vietnamese art. Major exhibition platforms associated with museum collections in the 1990s, such as the 'Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial' (since 1979, previously referred as the 'Asian Art Show'); and the Queensland Art Gallery's 'Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art' (established 1991) were engaging curatorial research into Vietnamese experimental pioneers, and thus acquiring their art. Similarly art dealers (such as Plum Blossom Gallery in Hong Kong<sup>28</sup>) and freelance curators (such as Sherry Buchanan, the first curator to give recognition to the work of Trần Trung Tín<sup>29</sup>) were actively pushing Vietnamese experimental practices abroad. Whilst within Vietnam, collectors such as Lê Thái Sơn, Adrian Jones ('Witness' Collection, formed 2002); Dominic Scriven ('DOGMA' Collection and Art Prize, formed 2009), and 'Post Vidai' (a collector group of 3, formed 1993) were critical in their support of Vietnamese artists and their experimental explorations. By the early 2000s, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh

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<sup>22</sup> The term 'Viet Kieu' literally means 'Vietnamese sojourner' or 'Overseas Vietnamese'; and in the 1990s when the term was first in usage, it referred primarily to the Vietnamese community of boat refugees. Today it is a regularly used phrase with differing connotations: from those who lived outside Vietnam before 1975, to those who fled after 1975, and to those who studied/work abroad and returned. For further information, see: <https://www.asialifemagazine.com/vietnam/face-face-viet-kieu/>

<sup>23</sup> For example, the performance-based artist group 'Project One' by Ly Hoàng Ly, Ngô Thái Uyên, Bùi Công Khánh, Richard Streitmatter-Trần and Nguyễn Phạm Trung Hậu was formed in 2003 as the result of the project 'Pushing through Borders' (initiated by Anida Yoeu Esguerra and Ly Hoàng Ly, hosted by 'Blue Space Contemporary Art Centre'). The group disbanded in 2005.

<sup>24</sup> As the majority of overseas Vietnamese returning to Saigon were 'boat-refugees' from South Vietnam, thus it is to South that these 'Viet Kieu' return home.

<sup>25</sup> For further reading see Lê, Việt. 'Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists-Organizers in Ho Chi Minh City', in 'Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art' (ed. Nora A Taylor and Boreth Ly). Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012, pp. 85-115.

<sup>26</sup> Originally launched by three artists, 'a little blah blah' was directed by Sue Hajdu and Motoko Uda through its most active years.

<sup>27</sup> 'Wonderful District' was co-founded by Sandrine Llouquet and Bertrand Peret.

<sup>28</sup> Plum Blossoms Gallery organized the group exhibition 'Uncorked Souls' in 1991, in Hong Kong, featuring the work of 15 Vietnamese artists, arguably one of the first international showcase of Vietnamese contemporary art to take place in a non-Communist country, including works by Bùi Xuân Phái, Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm, Lê Công Thành, Phạm Việt Hải, Trần Lưu Hậu, Trịnh Cung, Nguyễn Trung, Hoàng Đăng Nhuận, Đỗ Thị Ninh, Bửu Chi, Nguyễn Quân, Nguyễn Thân, Bùi Suối Hoa, Đặng Xuân Hoà, Trần Trọng Vũ ('Uncorked Souls: Contemporary Art from Vietnam' (exhibition catalog). Plum Blossoms Gallery, Hong Kong, 1991. <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/586406>

<sup>29</sup> For further information, see video installation of artist Đinh Q Lê 'Vision in Darkness: Trần Trung Tín' 2015, featuring interview with Sherry Buchanan.



City possessed a heady number of commercial galleries (predominantly tourist focused), though glaringly few were willing (and equipped with necessary collector and exhibition networks) to represent artists of this experimental scene. While experimental artists' financial instability is a symptom world-over, what is of crucial concern for the sustainability of such art practice in Vietnam is the urgent need for reform of its educational curricula and expertise. Inheriting an Ecole des Beaux Artes system of studying the Plastic Arts (introduced by the French in 1925, possessing a curricula that still to this day, has had little innovation since the 1950s and lacks any critical comparative engagement of local or foreign developments in aesthetic ideas and theories), artists who seek to successfully engage international markets (as mirrored in this country's economic and tourist industries), must be incredibly pro-active and strategic. Addressing this lack of educational opportunity for artists is evidenced in the activities of 'Nhà Sàn' (Hanoi) and 'Sàn Art' (Ho Chi Minh City) particularly, their projects not only challenging themselves with historical and conceptual approaches to art making, but engaging critical dialog between local and non-local forms of interdisciplinary cultural knowledge<sup>30</sup>.

It is in acknowledging this complicated and socio-politically nuanced artistic landscape that the curating of this exhibition is physically divided into four sections on the gallery floor of The Factory. Firstly a lengthy timeline, attempting to provide basic map of this experimental artistic landscape, noting particular social, economic and cultural milestones within and beyond Vietnam [<see here>](#); 'Leaving a Mark – Finding The Way Forward' presents four mini-exhibitions dedicated to particular artist-friendship groups whose projects left indelible marks on the development of an experimental artistic thinking; 'Strategies of Survival' gives focus to how particular artist groups innovated use and access to space, in order to display and share their art, despite financial or political limits; and finally 'Artists Looking at Artists' - a screening program of moving image work (documentary, short film, video) whereby artists examine the lives and methods of other artists, not only in memorial, but also as a means of recording (and thus providing access) for the legacy of art and artists to be remembered by a broader community.

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## **LEAVING A MARK - FINDING THE WAY FORWARD**

Situated centre-fold within this exhibition is a focus on the work of the 'Group of 10', 'Salon Natasha', 'Nhà Sàn' and 'Sàn Art', specifically identified for their demonstration of how artist friendships have addressed the lack of networked support, opportunity, expertise and educational resource available for artists in Vietnam, via unique means of artistic exchange and production, exhibition making and creation of dynamic learning environments.

The 'Group of 10' (as they came to be named)<sup>31</sup> were a unique group of artists who, beginning 1989 started to exhibit in the ground floor offices of the newspaper 'Van Nghe', gathering together as friends in Ho Chi Minh City over a table, 10 chairs, a few bottles of vodka, and a sardine box – a scene soon enriched by leaflets about their annual group exhibitions, and recent issues of 'My Thuat' (a magazine on Fine Art published by the Ho Chi Minh Fine Art Association that two of its members, Ca Lê Thắng and Nguyễn Trung, were partly responsible). This was an unusual, yet significant group of people, for its members hailed from North and South Vietnam (arguably the first group of artists to work together across

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<sup>30</sup> The on-going series of workshops and group exhibitions for young emerging artists and students by Nhà Sàn; and 'Sàn Art Laboratory' (2012-2016) and 'Conscious Realities' (2013-2016) by Sàn Art.

<sup>31</sup> In 1992, Nguyễn Tấn Cường designed the catalog cover for the 3rd 'Recent Works' exhibition by the 'Group of 10 Artists'. Since then, the community called them 'Group of 10' and they took it as official name for the group with 10 core members - Nguyễn Trung, Ca Lê Thắng, Ngô Đồng (who withdrew from the group in 1993 and was replaced by Đào Minh Tri), Nguyễn Tấn Cường, Nguyễn Thanh Bình, Hứa Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Trung Tín, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Trần Văn Thảo and Vũ Hà Nam. Other artists known to subsequently exhibit with them were Bùi Suối Hoa, Kim Bạch, Hoàng Minh Hằng, Phan Gia Hương, Quỳnh Hương, Hồ Hữu Thủ, Lê Kim Thư.

this previous ideological divide<sup>32</sup>), partly a consequence of the Communist appointed 'Fine Art Association' forming national membership (thus the sending of significant artistic talent South to lead its initiatives), but also thinking practically for the chance of a better livelihood<sup>33</sup>. Leaving aside their ideological leanings and (perhaps intimidating) official appointments<sup>34</sup> these artists came together in the spirit of art, particularly their exploration of abstraction – a mode of painting not officially permitted (and thus not taught or supported) at the time. Their first group show in 1989 came to be an annual expected event in Ho Chi Minh City, their January 1992 edition, recognized as the first to display abstract art in the country<sup>35</sup>. Within 'Spirit of Friendship', nine paintings, representative of these artists' practice from the 1990s, are on view, demonstrative of their abstract explorations. Đỗ Hoàng Tường remembers, 'In 1993, the exhibition 'Tac Pham Moi' ('Recent Works') at 29 Hang Bai, marked a grand introduction of Saigonese artists in Hanoi, proposing a different perspective on art practice at the time. This pioneering encounter formed many friendships and collegial connections between North and South (such as our information and art discussion exchange with the 'Gang Of Five')<sup>36</sup>.

In Hanoi, 'Salon Natasha' was also a scene of exchange and community support in the 90s, with evenings often given over to improvisational experimental performances between poets, musicians and visual artists (amongst others). Natasha Kraevskaia recalls a visit by artist Bonny Bombach (co-founder of the 'Community Printmakers Murwillumbah' (CPM), Australia) who stumbled into the street-front studio of 'Salon Natasha' in 1996 whilst on holidays in Hanoi, catching a glimpse of a recently arrived letter from the Queensland Art Gallery, inviting Vũ Dân Tân to participate in the forthcoming 'Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art' (a national flagship exhibition in Australia, not far from where Bonny Bombach lived). Excited for the prospects of meeting again, they promised to get in contact if and when they came to Brisbane, this future meeting spurring the creation of 'Crosscurrents', a project where single artworks of multiple authors, were created across two continents between artists friends of 'Salon Natasha' and CPM. Artworks of ink, watercolor or acrylic on paper were sent back and forth between Vietnam and Australia by mail - the receiver embellishing/re-interpreting what they were sent with their own response (sometimes the artwork traveling back and forth more than twice). In 'Spirit of Friendship', a dedicated room presents a selection of these artworks and documentation from this exchange, illustrating the pre-digital era of envelopes, letters and printed photographs that enabled the process. Natasha comments 'It is worth a mention that the Hanoi Post office was very supportive, they let the project go on, satisfied by my explanation that it was just a children's game instead of demanding official

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<sup>32</sup> Ca Lê Thắng and Đào Minh Tri were part of the 'Red Seed' movement (they were educated in Hanoi before 1975, appointed to come South post-75 to teach at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art University). In contrast, Nguyễn Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Trung Tín and Vũ Hà Nam were born in the North, moving to Ho Chi Minh City for living and to complete their studies; while Nguyễn Trung, Nguyễn Tấn Cương, Hứa Thanh Bình, Đỗ Hoàng Tường and Trần Văn Thảo all grew up and studied in the South.

<sup>33</sup> It is important to remember that since 1954, the Communist Viet Minh dominated the North, while the South was precariously controlled by French and American backing of Ngô Đình Diệm's 'Republic of Vietnam' – the artistic communities of North and South were thus in little contact. Additionally, the influence and presence of French and American political ambition brought economic openness to the South, thus higher employment opportunity. Art historian Bội Trần Huỳnh-Beattie states 'While southern artists put up with losing the war, northern artists, especially in Hanoi, benefited from reunification... Northern artists appointed to administrate culture in the South, were fascinated by the expressive vitality and variety of southern arts... These friendships [eg. Ca Lê Thắng, Đào Minh Tri as members of the 'Group of 10'] and the social context of de-colonization of the South influenced art practices'. See Huỳnh-Beattie, Bội Trần. 'Chapter 5: The Construction and De-construction of Vietnamese Aesthetics of the Post-War Period (1975-1990)' in 'Vietnamese Aesthetics 1925 onwards' (unpublished thesis), pp. 284-287.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Ca Lê Thắng was appointed Deputy General Secretary of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Association (1988 to 2000). Interview between Ca Lê Thắng and Lê Thiên Bảo, July 2017.

<sup>35</sup> See article by Nguyễn Trung Tín. 'Trừu tượng trên đất Sài Gòn' ('Abstraction in Saigon'). The Fine Art Information, issue 31-32, The Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Art, Sep 2010, pg.17-18.

<sup>36</sup> Interview between Đỗ Hoàng Tường and Lê Thiên Bảo, June 2017

authorization for posting artworks, as was determined by law at the time<sup>37</sup>. The fact that a private initiative between two individuals (beginning as a kind of friendship, a game of exchange and exploration) could result in a collaborative exhibition attracting support for its showcase in Hanoi (27 March to 8 April 1998) and a regional touring show throughout New South Wales, Australia (1998-2000) demonstrates the power of commitment between artists to share their experimentations despite the limits of finance and the significant geographical distance between.

1998 was a significant year for the local art scene in Hanoi as it marked the birth of one of Vietnam's most resilient independent art spaces - 'Nhà Sàn'<sup>38</sup>. Over the last two decades, 'Nhà Sàn' has initiated and staged some of Vietnam's most critical experimental projects, having nurtured generations of artists, while always keeping its doors (and minds) open to those curious enough to step in. Aware of the status of art and artists in Vietnam continuing to be officially challenged (i.e. more artists responding to past and present historical issues of contention in their work), 'Nhà Sàn' understood early on the necessity of thinking like a 'curator' – a role of little understanding and practice in Vietnam not found in any of its State institutions. Here, a curator takes on a myriad of other roles besides an 'exhibition maker' - as a study partner who shares knowledge, researches and debates with artists; and as a mediator who negotiates and connects artists with the public, the authorities and other agents in the cultural field. For 'Nhà Sàn', it was no longer about what or who to curate, but rather, *how*. 'Nhà Sàn' continues to take such reality as the starting point for their curatorial approach and artistic doing. They offer different ways to think about the longevity and sustainability of an art space: relocating four times in nearly 20 years; overcoming financial limitations by securing sponsorship from the business sector; whilst continuously challenging the nature of curating and documenting art history.

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

The last mini-exhibition focus in 'Leaving a Mark' looks at 'Sàn Art Laboratory' (2012-2016), which was the first independent and locally driven artist-in-residence program in Vietnam, initiated and organized by 'Sàn Art' in Ho Chi Minh City<sup>39</sup>. With a focus on the production of art as a space of knowledge creation via talking, this program ultimately responded to Vietnam's education system lacking the encouragement of critically sharing artistic ideas via comparative reading, writing and speaking. The first session of 'Sàn Art Laboratory' took place with artists Tuấn Mami (Hanoi), Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai (Hue) and Trương

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<sup>37</sup> Interview between Natasha Kraevskaia and Zoe Butt, June 2017

<sup>38</sup> The name 'Nhà Sàn' (which translates as 'stilt house') refers to a group of artists who originated from, and have forged close connections, with 'Nhà Sàn Studio' and 'Nhà Sàn Collective'. Simultaneously, it refers to an actual space for artists to gather, labor, and exhibit over the last 20 years, at the private home of Nguyễn Mạnh Đức (who together with Trần Lương founded Nhà Sàn Studio in 1998, at Bưởi Street, Hanoi). In the minds of many, 'Nhà Sàn Đức' is the original name of 'Nhà Sàn Studio'. Continuing the spirit of 'Nhà Sàn Studio', the young artists associated with it founded 'Nhà Sàn Collective' in 2013, co-run by a community of 'Nhà Sàn Collective supporters' including managers, assistants and volunteers. The Collective rented a space at Zone 9 (Tran Thanh Tong street); relocated in 2014 to LACA - Ly Quoc Su Art and Culture Area (Ly Quoc Su street); and since August 2015 has been based at Hanoi Creative City (Luong Yen street), Hà Nội.

<sup>39</sup> 'Sàn Art' was co-founded in 2007 by artists Đinh Q. Lê, Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn, Tiffany Chung and Phunam.

Công Tùng (Ho Chi Minh City) as ‘residents’ of the Lab (as they locally came to be called). They met their nominated ‘talking-partner’ at least twice a month – Mami with artist collective ‘The Propeller Group’; Mai with artist Tammy Nguyễn; and Tùng with artist/designer/writer Sita Raiter, in addition to carrying out artist talks, open studio gatherings, group critiques and a final group exhibition at ‘Sàn Art’. Many impromptu parties were had at the Lab, with a constant flow of visitors (resident artists; visiting guests from out of town and the local community) also spending time at the main gallery space and reading room of ‘Sàn Art’.

Through an open call process of application, the focus of the Lab was initially Vietnamese artistic production, however by 2014, it was extended to artists across South East Asia. Assessed by an international jury, applicants under 35 who had demonstrated portfolios committed to experimentation of ideas and materials in their practice were considered – particularly those willing to take part in critique and discussion. ‘Sàn Art Laboratory’ consequently generated an active community of artists, curators and interdisciplinary thinkers who came together with the pointed purpose of learning from each other’s experience and expertise. Trương Công Tùng shares ‘In the Lab, while other artist residents were focused on developing their personal projects into full-fledged exhibitions, I was going from one experiment to another with various materials: from painting with powdered paint, video art, sculpture using polyester, to artworks that are induced from field-work method. Troubled by my confusion, I feared that I could not form a stable approach for myself. But after the Lab ended, it dawned on me that the Lab environment had provided us with an opportunity to experience new media, materials, and art forms – a counter-curriculum to what was being taught at the Fine Art University. It also taught us to be unafraid and pursue our postponed ideas.’<sup>40</sup>

Inside ‘Spirit of Friendship’ a dedicated room showcases three particular artworks that these artists from Session 1 consider ‘transitional’ since their time with the Lab, sharing how their methods and approach to art making has changed since their residency (interestingly all three artists have since engaged the impact of context on behavior, whether it be human or animal in nature – a characteristic also present in their group exhibition realized in 2012). Like many of the 24 alumni of ‘Sàn Art Laboratory’, Tuấn Mami, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai and Trương Công Tùng have gone on to do significant projects with international presence and critical acclaim.

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## STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL

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

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

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<sup>40</sup> Trương Công Tùng's artist statement, August 2017.

Throughout the world, cultural expression – its objects and rituals – are experienced via particular social gatherings, the transference of traditional languages into contemporary modes being some of the most dynamic artistic production in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century particularly (think of the Wayang puppetry influence on the art of Indonesian artist Heri Dono; the re-engagement of Ming Dynasty architectural technique in the art of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei for example). In tandem with this transfiguration of tradition (particularly across the Asian region from the 1970s onwards) was a grappling with the socio-political changes of the time as the industrialization of economy wrought tension with understandings of cultural identity and its representation. Thus for example, following the demise of the Cultural Revolution in China where visual art was largely a propagandist vehicle, ‘Apartment Art’<sup>41</sup> became a trend where experimental artists took to turning their domestic spaces into one-night exhibition spaces; in other countries such as Indonesia, artists were inspired by the New Order regime’s propagandist cinema sites which they turned into their own artistic zones, such as Ruangrupa’s public program ‘The Gerobak Bioskop (Cinema Cart) Network’<sup>42</sup> in 2013. Such strategies of survival is what energizes cultural languages, reminding us that ‘tradition’ is an evolving language, its transformation into contemporary modes (i.e. usage of contemporary media and subject) a means of ensuring, and testing, its social relevance<sup>43</sup>.

Thus it is not surprising that artistic communities in Vietnam who do not satisfy the criteria of commercial or official opportunities (feeling very much the minority in a society that largely does not acknowledge their creative worth) have similarly striven for strategies to remain visible to a dedicated few, partly in order to give hope and purpose to their need to be artists; partly also believing that their ideal community can be found – and many of them did, anchored in spaces unconventional and unexpected. As Sue Hajdu and Sandrine Llouquet refer above, their desire to create their respective entities/projects, was in identifying a collective need for it. In this exhibition area of ‘Spirit of Friendship’ a collection of documentary material lines one wall (photographs, video, a website blog, a printed hand-made book) sharing candid shots and, at times humorous footage, of artists daring to challenge the definition of ‘public’ through the re-purposing of domestic, commercial and spiritual space.

Whether it was due to limited funds (‘Atelier Wonderful’ project of ‘Wonderful District’); a critical need to engage public community spaces (‘a little blah blah’); a desire to create a ‘journey’ in the experience of art (‘Art Walk’ by ‘Sao La’<sup>44</sup>); the partnering with foreign government initiative in an effort to maintain artistic experimental autonomy (via the ‘occupation’ of the Japan Foundation by ‘Nhà Sàn Collective’ with ‘Skylines With Flying People 2’, 2012); or the conversion of a hostel’s lobby into a gallery space (‘Chaosdowntown’<sup>45</sup>): these are artistic strategies without commercial imperative, arising in response to a broader social scene’s unawareness of the existence and value of such innovative creative spirit, this experimental community with next to no promotional space in the public eye<sup>46</sup>. Thus rental of property continues to predominantly cater for commercial purpose, with minimal private investment in culture

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<sup>41</sup> For further information see: Minglu, Gao. ‘Apartment Art’, in ‘Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art’. MIT Press, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 269-310.

<sup>42</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-jyE0qDPiw>

<sup>43</sup> See ‘Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia’ (exhibition catalog). Asia Society Galleries, New York, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Sao La’ was founded in 2014 with the sponsorship of Galerie Quỳnh; its original core members include artists Tùng Mai and Nguyễn Kim Tô Lan; later the group extended to include Nguyễn Đức Đạt, Đỗ Thanh Lãng, Đỗ Sỹ Tùng, Đào Duy Tùng, Ngô Đình Bảo Châu, Trần Phương Thảo (Sunny).

<sup>45</sup> ‘Chaosdowntown’ was established by Thanh (Nu) Mai and Xuân Hạ in 2016

<sup>46</sup> Across Vietnam today, there is no regular print or online magazine, newspaper or journal that caters for critical comparative writing and review on experimental contemporary art in Vietnam, the official ‘My Thuật’ magazine (published bi-monthly) covers a limited range of practice with next to no international perspective on the history of Art. Previous credit should however be given to the influential online platform [www.talawas.org](http://www.talawas.org) (2001-2010), with articles and discussions on the arts, culture, and politics of Vietnam, including contributions by well-known Vietnamese and foreign authors, writers, researchers and scholars from inside and outside the country; and to [www.soi.today](http://www.soi.today) (2010-2017), who did attempt to translate select foreign material and provide some critical review of local artistic practice.



(made all the more complicated by an official landscape that is suspicious of independent non-commercial activity). Whilst there have been commissioned reports and forums<sup>47</sup> aimed to encourage public debate of the positive and lucrative value of culture to economy, Vietnam is yet to see sustained and committed interest in alternative models of support for experimental contemporary art.

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## ARTISTS LOOKING AT ARTISTS

In a community with little artistic archive, suffering a lack of institutions critically collecting and cataloguing artistic production<sup>48</sup> - the result of political instability, economic limitations and ideological directives - whereby access to living expertise and experience is limited due to the dispersal of much of this intelligence in 1954, and then 1975; it is increasingly prevalent that independent creative talent has sought to research and document influential figures of Vietnam's past and present artistic landscape. In this section of 'Spirit of Friendship', a select number of films are screened in a loop, showcasing particular artistic communities and individuals of notable aesthetic impact. 'The Propeller Group'<sup>49</sup> provides documentary (2013) on the graffiti scene of Ho Chi Minh City, via the perspective of American graffiti extraordinaire 'El Mac', whose visits to Vietnam has been of mutual influence. Nguyễn Quang Huy (of 'Hanoi Triad') explores the legendary poet Dương Tường's creative processes of performing, writing and translating poetry in the experimental video 'Le soir est tout soupirs' (2005). The young filmmaker Tạ Minh Đức traces the history and celebrates the pioneering spirit of 'Nhà Sàn' in the documentary '15+' - made on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of 'Nhà Sàn' in 2013. This reel also includes 'Essence of Spring (1996), a documentary by filmmaker Trần Mỹ Hà, showcasing the art scene of South Vietnam in the 1990s after Doi Moi. As complement, this exhibition premieres the filmic documentary 'Nguyễn Trung' (2017) also by Trần Mỹ Hà, revealing the art practice and life of artist Nguyễn Trung, an influential figure within the 'Group of 10' who is increasingly attributed as the leading pioneer of abstract painting in South Vietnam.

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This attempt to collate, notate, reflect and archive the history of artistic friendships as 'group' activity across Vietnam would not be considered credible were we not also attempting to provide access to these unique facts, thus a dedicated bilingual website has been created - [www.spiritoffriendship.org](http://www.spiritoffriendship.org) - the beginnings of an archive documenting the artistic friendships presented within this physical exhibition, but also envisaged as an ongoing curatorial platform for The Factory, whereby future projects related to the memory of this experimental community are commissioned and recorded. For this inaugural show, a commissioned essay by art historian and critic Lee Weng Choy shares his perspectives on the role and process of friendship as an influential negotiation in the frame of artistic production; while curator and researcher Đỗ Tường Linh writes a personal letter to an alter-ego, reflecting on her own involvement and observation of the local art scene of Hanoi; while I offer a philosophical pondering on the nature of 'friendship' in the structure of the global art world today, questioning the level of curatorial care for motivation, method and means behind artistic production today.

It must be reiterated that this ambitious desire to create an exhibition as window onto this landscape of friendship in the experimental arts of Vietnam is the first attempt by any institution or individual in this country; motivated by a sense of responsibility as the first purpose built space for contemporary art, to

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<sup>47</sup> See the British Council's commissioned reports on the creative industry of Vietnam:

<https://www.britishcouncil.vn/en/arts/resources>

<sup>48</sup> Vietnam is yet to possess a museum with purview to critically collect the diversity of Vietnamese contemporary art.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Propeller Group' was established in 2006 by Phunam, Matt Lucero, and Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn.

raise public awareness of the significance of this artistic community. The decision to include these 22 ‘groups’ was based on a particular set of questions posed to each group, seeking personal reflections on the kinds of spaces and activities they created and their acknowledgment of friendship as the basis of their mutual encouragement of artistic production. While recent exhibitions, such as ‘Concept, Context, Contestation’ (hosted and commissioned by Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, 2014) and ‘Sunshower’ (organized by the Japan Foundation and ASEAN in 2017; hosted by Mori Art Museum and National Art Centre, Tokyo) have (partly) focused on the idea of the ‘collective’ in contemporary artistic production of South East Asia, this term was deliberately not used for ‘Spirit of Friendship’ as many of the participants inside this show did not conceive themselves as a branded group identity. For example, the ‘Gang of Five’ came to be referred as such due to the reviews and critical support of art historian Nguyễn Quân; while the artists of Then Group in Hue share that the promotion of a collective independent identity as experimental artists would draw unwanted official scrutiny of their activities (thus they are promoted as a business).

By providing a threshold onto this landscape, it is hoped there is higher awareness of the particularities of artistic relationships and their impact on furthering the development of experimental artistic thinking in Vietnam though this exhibition does not have the capacity to do justice to the immense labor, commitment and contribution of the diverse set of players involved. ‘Spirit of Friendship’ seeks to highlight the role of friendship as a space of trust, in which artistic integrity is cultivated and nourished despite its political environment that stifles diversity in creative expression. It is with respect, and awe, that the growth of experimental thinking has arisen as a dynamic, and increasingly internationally recognized scene in Vietnam, whereby the support between friends has motivated its conception, production, display and distribution. It is in this community that the methodologies of artists stand as a particular framework with which to re-categorize and re-interpret an art history for Vietnam.

Zoe Butt, with the assistance of Bill Nguyễn and Lê Thiên Bảo  
Translated by Dương Mạnh Hùng  
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This text forms part of the ‘Resource’ library of the ‘Spirit of Friendship’ online platform, an ongoing program and research platform initiated in 2017 by The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre. [www.spiritoffriendship.org](http://www.spiritoffriendship.org)

Should you have any enquiry regarding this project and its research or activities, please contact: [info@factoryartscentre.com](mailto:info@factoryartscentre.com)