



FRIENDS WITH DISAGREEMENTS

Lee Weng-Choy

For quite some time I have wanted to embark on a series of written collaborations which I would title, “Friends with Disagreements”. Ideally, our friends are the people with whom we have our most honest conversations. We share references and experiences, which provide the basis for a deep sympathy. But as friends, we also have disagreements. When we disagree, or more importantly, when we discuss our disagreements, we create an opportunity to strengthen our relationships as well as sharpen and develop our thoughts and positions. So far, I’ve conceived of this series as following or improvising upon a certain format: in the first section, called “The Friends”, the two co-writers introduce themselves and speak about their friendship — the point being to explore ideas and issues by grounding them in the contexts of relationships and personal histories. The next section is “The Disagreement”, and it is here where the writers have a focused dialogue on some specific issue where they have differing views. I’m in the midst of working on a couple of these texts, none of which are close to completion, and precisely because we’re enjoying the luxury of taking our time to write. Indeed, the gift of time is essential to friendship (a theme, by the way, which has preoccupied Zoe Butt, Artistic Director, The Factory Contemporary Arts Center).¹

For the *Spirit of Friendship* project, I thought to do something related but different from a “Friends with Disagreements” collaboration. Earlier in 2017, I co-facilitated an art writing workshop at ZeroStation.² The workshop marked a milestone for me in terms of my relationship to Vietnam. While I am still far from familiar with the local art scene, I feel that I have finally gotten past the preliminary stages. You can meet someone, have a strong first impression and like them, but it takes a number of encounters before you are confident that you will become good friends. Among the workshop participants were Nguyễn Quốc Thành and Trương Quế Chi from

¹ See for instance: Zoe Butt. 2016. “Practicing Friendship: Respecting Time as a Curator”. In *Southeast Asia: Spaces of the Curatorial, Jahresring 63*, edited by Ute Meta Bauer and Brigitte Oetker. Berlin: Sternberg Press. This text was first commissioned by Asia Art Archive: <http://www.aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/practicing-friendship-respecting-time-as-a-curator> (accessed 5 August 2017).

² The artwriting workshop was part of ZeroStation’s two-year project, “Asian In/VISIBLE Station”, which was funded by the Asian Center, Japan Foundation. The workshop was co-facilitated by Hiroyuki Hattori, and participants included: Đỗ Tường Linh, Dương Mạnh Hùng, Khương Lê, Nguyễn Bích Trà, Nguyễn Hoàng Thiên Ngân, Nguyễn Quốc Thành, Nguyễn Thị Minh, Trâm Đỗ, Trần Duy Hưng and Trương Quế Chi. There was also a series of public talks, see: <http://zerostationvn.org/ga0/blog/project/southeast-asias-art-writing-workshop-at-zerostation-in-april-2017-workshop-viet-nghe-thuat-dong-nam-a-tai-ga-0-thang-tu-2017/> (accessed 23 July 2017).

Nhà Sàn Collective, which is among the artists groups featured in the *Spirit of* exhibition. I approached the both of them, and wanted to talk about their friendships and disagreements. But before I get into our conversations, let me try to put some things into a larger context.

A few years ago, I wrote an essay with the subtitle, “friendship and the search for discursive density”; there, I wanted to underscore the role that close intellectual relationships play in the evolution of emergent arts discourses in Southeast Asia.³ Globalization has given us “global culture” — and whatever that notion may really mean, it signals the greater visibility and attention paid to the diverse contemporary art scenes from around the world, including places like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Chiang Mai and Jogjakarta, Manila and Singapore (the last being the city where I have lived and worked from 1992 till 2016). While contemporary art from Southeast Asia has flourished in the last twenty-five years, the same cannot be said for the practices of art history and criticism. Yes, there have been significant strides in those fields, especially more recently, but their development has been uneven, especially in comparison with the practice of exhibition-making, for instance. Yet where there is art, there is always verbiage about it, so reportage of varying quality has certainly increased. And if intellectual discourse has lagged behind the spectacle of cultural production and consumption, that should be no surprise. Although, as someone who’s been writing about art from this part of the world since moving back here, after a decade in the US, I can say that I’m cautiously optimistic that “discursive density” — where there is more and more writing and research that cross-references different cultures and cites intersecting intellectual histories — is a goal that seems within reach in the years to come.

Doubtless, the theme of friendship and discourse in Asia has a history. Let me refer to one episode. Rustom Bharucha is a theatre director and cultural critic based in India. In the 1990s, he participated in a series of inter-Asian theatre workshops, some initiated in Singapore. These workshops, relatively intimate encounters, were as much a part of the *zeitgeist* as the rise of the international biennale in Asia that featured star curators and artists from the region. At first, Bharucha found these inter-Asian workshops to be a refreshing contrast to past Eurocentric appropriations of other cultures. Eventually, however, it became clearer to him “that Asiancentricity could be the other side of the same coin as Eurocentricity”, and he found himself “turning to the one major Indian thinker who, indeed, had spent considerable time thinking about, and through, Asia” — Rabindranath Tagore. As he explored Tagore’s writings, Bharucha discovered “a charismatic Japanese traveller called Okakura Tenshin, who could be said to have catalysed the very idea of Asia for Tagore and many Indians at the turn of the last century”. The friendship between these two men is the basis of his book, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore & Okakura Tenshin*,⁴ in which he tries “to draw an intellectual history out of their affinities to Asia, complicated by the politics of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and friendship”. The two “may not be our contemporaries” — Okakura died in 1913 and Tagore in 1941 — but “they have the capacity to make us think about our times through the filter of shattered ideals, many of which may have been flawed in their inception”. While the “primary animating force that brought Tagore and Okakura together” was “beauty — not just the idea of Beauty, but the experience of beauty in works of art and in everyday life”, the two took rather different positions on

³ See: Lee Weng Choy. 2012. “The Assumption of Love: friendship and the search for discursive density”. In *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: a Critical Anthology*, edited by Boreth Ly and Nora Taylor. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University.

⁴ Rustom Bharucha. 2006. *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore & Okakura Tenshin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See also my review of the book: Lee Weng Choy. 2008. “Now and Them: Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore & Okakura Tenshin by Rustom Bharucha”. *Broadsheet*, Vol. 37, No. 2.

nationalism. Bharucha describes Tagore's position as a "virulent anti-nationalism", whereas Okakura's was a "closet nationalism, if not scarcely disguised Japanese imperialism".

Tagore and Okakura are major historical figures, and the scope of their sympathies and disagreements were continental, indeed global — the germ of the rhetoric of the "Asian Century" can arguably be traced back to Okakura. My interests here in exploring the dynamics at play in relationships and disagreements amongst friends in local and regional arts communities are much more modest in scale, but, I hope, they are resonant nonetheless. At first, when I approached Thành and Chi about this essay, I asked if they would recount certain episodes in their own friendships where there were disagreements. My intention was not to report on the facts of the matter, the substance and details, who was right or who was wrong. I suggested to Chi and Thành that we shouldn't name these persons, but should offer minimal albeit sufficient information. Names would complicate the issue, because then it's about one person's version of the story *vis-à-vis* another's, and to be fair, I would then have to get those other versions, which would diverge from my purpose. What I wanted to focus on were Thành and Chi's own reflections on some of their relationships and the particular tensions therein.⁵

During our ZeroStation workshop, Chi described a group photograph taken at a favourite hangout, of friends in the Vietnamese arts community, who had stayed up well into the night. She spoke about how this image could be the basis for what she might write for the workshop's final assignment. As Chi noted, for her the photo is "a sign of positivity — a 'reunification' of sorts — in that moment when the picture was taken, I realized that almost all of the alternative art spaces in Vietnam, from the North and the South, and mostly from the younger generation of contemporary art practitioners, were represented, in the same place". When I re-connected with her to talk about "friends with disagreements", and asked if she would be interested in discussing that photograph in this framework, she was reluctant. By the end of our conversations, I think I understand why. As a result, I have jettisoned my initial plan, and shifted the focus of this essay. I had taken for granted what "discussion" and "disagreement" mean, and how they function. Sure, there are many kinds of disagreements amongst friends, and they can function in so many ways — but I thought that, like a ball, if I threw it at someone, they would catch it, and from there we could figure out the rules of a game we would both invent on the spot as we played together. But disagreement is not a ball to catch right away. So I'd like to take a few steps back and explore what is at stake in discussion and disagreement, and by looking at them in the very specific contexts of my recent conversations with Chi and Thành.

With all the attention paid to contemporary art from all corners of the globe, scholars and researchers have been theorizing anew the concepts of the world and world-making — although I've wondered aloud if it might be too big to theorize.⁶ Even Bharucha's "Another Asia" seems too vast sometimes, and scaling down to Southeast Asia doesn't really help that much either — the region is still so large, diverse and complex. I suppose what I'm struggling to say is that the work of developing the discourses that can adequately represent and theorize all that is happening here can be daunting, but, thankfully, there is comfort in seeking to learn from friends.

⁵ My conversations with Nguyễn Quốc Thành and Trương Quế Chi took place over July and August 2017.

⁶ See for instance: Antoinette, Michelle and Turner, Caroline, editors. 2014. *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making*. Canberra: Australian National University Press; and Cheah, Pheng. 2016. *What is a World?: On Post-Colonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press. Also: Lee Weng Choy. 2011. "A Country of Last Whales — Contemplating the Horizon of Global Art History; Or, Can We Ever Really Understand How Big the World is?" in *Third Text* 25, no. 4.

Trương Quế Chi is a curator with Nhà Sàn Collective and a film lecturer at the Hanoi University of Theatre and Cinema. She is also a filmmaker and artist, and graduated with a Master's degree in Film Studies from University of Paris III: Sorbonne Nouvelle. Her practice examines the spectacle of everyday violence in Vietnam, and her works have been featured at various local and international film festivals, exhibitions and symposiums, including: *Asian Film Focus 2017: Time Machine*, Objectifs — Centre for Photography and Film (Singapore); *Skylines with Flying People 3*, Nhà Sàn Collective (Vietnam); *South by Southeast. A Further Surface*, Times Museum (China); Oberhausen International Film Festival (Germany); and Torino Film Festival (Italy).

When we spoke, Chi shared some of the behind-the-scenes discussions between Nhà Sàn Collective and The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre about the former's participation in *Spirit of Friendship*. As with any such "negotiation", there were differences of perspective, and propositions offered and counter-propositions made. The presentation that Nhà Sàn and The Factory finally settled upon offers a concrete image of the underlying ethos of the Collective, but it also serves as a metaphor for the whole process of discussion and disagreement that is an ineluctable part of any collaborative project. As is well known in Vietnam, Nhà Sàn Collective is an evolution from an earlier formation, Nhà Sàn Studio. There are many threads that connect the two different formations, one of which is the place where members have regularly met over the years, a certain kitchen corner in the house of Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, one of the co-founders of Nhà Sàn Studio (obviously, in this case, disclosing names is not an issue). His partner, Lê Thị Lương, respectfully referred to as Mẹ Lương (Mother Lương), often cooked meals for members of the Studio, and then the Collective, whenever they gathered in her kitchen, but also, it has become tradition for her to cook for Nhà Sàn openings. Even while the Studio and the Collective have based their activities in one space or another, members have consistently returned to this kitchen: to make or debate plans, or simply to spend time as friends and colleagues. More than just a space to meet, this corner, with its table and chairs, has become a structure of support. And so for *Spirit of Friendship*, Nhà Sàn Collective will present a recreation of Mẹ Lương's kitchen in the gallery.

I have used three terms here: discussion, negotiation and disagreement. One of the questions raised in my conversations with Chi is how each of these terms has certain emphases and whether these emphases accurately represent what is actually going on. Isn't "disagreement" always already built into a "discussion"? Though, perhaps before one even broaches disagreement, one has to reach a certain level of discussion. So why emphasize disagreement? At the extreme, "negotiation" suggests a game of competing agendas, where the final agreement reflects one party winning over the other. Chi spoke of how living in the age of reality TV, too often tension for the sake of tension is privileged and disagreement seems manufactured. As I interpret Chi's perspective, it's not so much that she wants to downplay whatever tensions there may be amongst friends; it's that she's suspicious of narratives that emphasize the adversarial or antagonistic at the expense of other, perhaps even more important dimensions of a relationship. Respecting nuance is very important to her. For instance, as certain as there are differences between members of the Studio and the Collective, or between generations of Vietnamese artists, these "disagreements" are complex, and have unfolded over a long, organic process across many years, finding resolution in some ways, remaining unresolved in others, and a representation that highlights disagreement would very likely do injustice to these still ongoing processes. There is also a fourth term — one that is critically important, as it frames all three other terms — understanding. In friendship it doesn't always matter if we disagree, but if we do not have a mutual understanding, then there is a weak foundation for the relationship. As people become friends, what matters is less whether you are like-minded than whether you try to understand where the other person is coming from.

Nguyễn Quốc Thành works in photography, performance and installation, and has participated in exhibitions and performance art festivals in Vietnam, Japan and the US. He writes about art and fashion, curates and organizes art events, with a focus on queer aesthetics and activism. In 2007, he returned to Hanoi after living in Poland for many years, where he had studied and worked. In 2012, he participated in the second edition of *Skylines with Flying People*, an interdisciplinary art platform initiated and curated by Nguyễn Phương Linh (incidentally, the daughter of Nguyễn Mạnh Đức and Mẹ Lương). The first *Skylines* in 2011 was a response to the closure of Nhà Sàn Studio, which at the time was one of the most active artist-led spaces in Hanoi. In 2013, Thành became one of the co-founding members who formed Nhà Sàn Collective. In the same year, he also founded and organized the first queer art festival in Vietnam called *Queer Forever!* — a space for sharing love and knowledge of queerness and Vietnamese culture.

In our conversations, Thành elaborated on the presentation of the kitchen corner for *Spirit of Friendship* and their discussions with The Factory. At one point, *Spirit of* co-curator Bill Nguyễn asked if they might want to also show a Nhà Sàn compilation video (sharing its history) in the installation along with the kitchen. Thành, however, argued that it would be better to keep the emphasis wholly on the kitchen, so as to make a clear statement that Mẹ Lương's kitchen is a metaphor for how the Collective operates. Mẹ Lương is highly respected within the extended Nhà Sàn community. Nonetheless, Thành can imagine that many people in the larger arts scene might tend to think of what she does as not an integral part of Nhà Sàn's artistic practice. And so the Collective wants to assert her support as fundamental to how they function; they want to put Mẹ Lương front and center and dedicate the entire installation to her and her kitchen, which will include an artist book with her recipes and illustrations by artists.

Both Thành and Chi spoke to me about how most of what Nhà Sàn does evolves organically. Thành shared with me one anecdote, where Nhà Sàn Collective member Tuấn Mami wanted to livestream the entirety of a series of performances. At first, Thành wasn't so keen on the idea, because he felt that watching a livestream online seems antithetical to the idea of durational performance, which makes demands on the audience to be co-present with the performer for considerable amounts of time. But he put aside this theoretical disagreement, and found that working in the crew to film the livestream created other collaborative dimensions to the project that he did not anticipate. This approach of being open, of allowing for differences in viewpoints, and then seeing where things lead, is a model of Nhà Sàn Collective methodology.

As a way of reflecting on their processes of collective art-making, I proposed a couple of animal metaphors, to which Thành was receptive. Animals have been a recurrent theme in my writing — from whales to dinosaurs — and, lately, I've been thinking about cats in the context of contemporary curating. The much loved internet meme and companion animal is stereotypically judged to be independent, aloof and cold, even as they are adored by multitudes of humans who live with them, or not. Unlike dogs, the other most popular companion animal, cats do not meet the human gaze with delight. Whereas dogs thrive on face-to-face communication — which is why we feel so close to them — cats consider such confrontation as too threatening. And so, the Internet tells us, if we want them to return our affections, we should sit calmly nearby, and wait patiently until they look at us momentarily, and slowly blink their eyes. We're told that we should do the same. With cats, you live together in adjacency, in parallel — every individual does their own thing, and yet there still is companionship. With dogs, especially a pack of them, while there is a lot of interaction, there is also hierarchy, and in that situation, divergence can lead to conflict. But with cats — or at least in this metaphorical caricature — difference does not necessarily mean disagreement.

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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

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

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