

**CHAPTER 6:**  
**RENOVATION: PLURALISM IN THE ARTS**  
**OF THE PERIOD 1990-2004.**



Figure 1: Billboard celebrating the Party's Anniversary, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Chapter 6 focuses on the dramatic changes in Việt-Nam during the later post-war era. From 1990, while the nation was initiating political decentralisation it was increasingly exposed to western contact. Despite the Party's deconstruction of Socialism, the administrative body overseeing art remained in situ but the power of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association gradually diminished. Artistic autonomy increased during this reform and the waning of Socialist Realism provided greater flexibility in subject matter and style. Through the development of an art market there were new options for exhibiting art that attracted consumers and expanded the production of art.

While the State continued to press Vietnamese artists to produce works honouring its great wars, artists yearned for information about regional and global cultural developments. Furthermore, artists began to disassociate themselves from the strict national doctrine preferring, instead, to express their individuality through the adoption of new media and exchange exhibitions. The Vietnamese government was unable to cope with mounting globalisation and an expanding art market, which generated a cultural void to be filled by international art dealers, curators and artists.

In the face of persistent Socialist misgivings about foreign invasion, the aesthetic shift continued and attested to Việt-Nam's capacity to accommodate outside influences. These ongoing cultural exchanges established a plurality in Vietnamese contemporary art never previously experienced.

### **A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN THE ECONOMY**

The reform policy of 1986 did not bring about change, until the subsidised economic system finally collapsed in 1990. An influx of private and international enterprises replaced it and introduced new features to all aspects of Vietnamese society. Rice production in the Mekong Delta was the first significant free market success, where farmers now worked for financial rewards by harvesting their own crops. Between

1997 and 2001, after more than a decade of near starvation, Việt-Nam developed into the world's second largest rice exporter.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the imperatives of early post-war reconstruction, it was not until the 1990s that capital flowing into Việt-Nam stimulated the construction industry. Increasing urbanisation and the post-war baby boom, led to a growth in the construction of hotels, shopping centres, multi-storey offices blocks and private dwellings. Some old edifices were refurbished to accommodate the flow of international business, for instance, the Sofitel Metropole Hotel in Hà Nội and the Caravelle Hotel in Hồ Chí Minh City. In a pragmatic universal style, straight-lined multi-storied edifices with glass façades, were designed without much consideration for Việt-Nam's tropical climate, as seen in the 21-floor Vincom City Towers (fig.2), opened in 2004 as the largest shopping centre in Hà Nội.



Figure 2: Vincom City Towers. 2004, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.foodproductiondaily.com/news/news-NG.asp?n=57113-quality-and-stability>.

The rush of investment initiated many new constructions, with very little consideration given to the existing architectural environment. A rare exception is the Hilton Hotel, adjacent to the Hà Nội Opera House (fig.3), where the semi-circular design of the hotel wraps around the colonial architecture and appears, “to speak to the Opera House but does not compete with it.”<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3: Hilton Hotel, Hà Nội. 1999, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.

The construction boom was linked to a changed urban lifestyle, through the increasing number of supermarkets and shopping centres. In 2000, a survey showed that there were 15 mini-markets and supermarkets in Hà Nội and 30 in Hồ Chí Minh City.<sup>3</sup> The figures for 2004 show that, nationwide, there are 140 supermarkets and 30 shopping centres.<sup>4</sup> Shopping in malls has become a fashionable activity for the urbanised youth, of which more than half is under 30 years of age.

One by one these edifices impose themselves onto the skylines of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City. This caused community protests during the mid-1990s in Hà Nội, when

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<sup>2</sup> Cited from William S. Logan, 2000, *Hanoi Biography of a City*, University of New South Wales Press, p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> Vietnam, Exporter Guide, <http://www.fas.usda.gov/gainfiles/200012/65679186.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Vietnam Investment Review: <http://www.vir.com.vn/Client/VIR/index.asp?url=content.asp&doc=4794>.

construction companies began building high-rise apartments around the West Lake to overcome a land shortage.



Figure 4: Hà Nội's Mini Hotels, photograph by Nguyễn Háo Thoại.

Hà Nội's old quarter also experienced prosperity through a boom in high-rise 'mini hotels' (fig.4), to meet the increasing tourist demand. However, despite national and international advice on town planning and heritage preservation, the cultural landscape has been spoilt, because of a lack of concern by Hà Nội's residents.<sup>5</sup>

Hồ Chi Minh City, (or Saigon as most Southerners continue to call it), with its inherited commercial skills, offered greater opportunities for construction. The tallest building in the nation is the Saigon Trade Centre completed in 1997 with 33 floors. Saigon's

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<sup>5</sup> William S. Logan, 1995, 'Heritage Planning in Post-doi moi Hanoi: the National and International Contribution', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, (Summer) , v61,n3, p.328 (16)

Metropolitan Towers (fig.5) and Diamond Plaza (fig.6) have dwarfed Notre Dame Cathedral.



Figure 5: Saigon's Metropolitan Towers. 1997, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.



Figure 6: Diamond Plaza in Saigon with blue glass facade. 2000, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.



Figure 7: The Statue of General Trần Hưng Đạo, between the Renaissance Riverside Hotel, (2000)-Left and Me Linh Point Plaza, (1999) photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Similarly, the statue of General Trần Hưng Đạo is now sandwiched between the Renaissance Riverside Hotel and Mê Linh Point Plaza (fig.7).

Resorts and apartments for foreign residents were also built, again in a variety of international styles. To balance this architectural style, a revival of traditional Vietnamese styled dwellings emerged. The curved roof and interior design of old communal houses first appeared in provincial projects for memorials, such as the Bến Dược Temple in Củ Chi, (fig.8) and the House of Revolutionary Martyrs in Hàng Gai Street, Hà Nội (fig.9). The Bến Dược Temple incorporates the roof structure of communal houses and Huế palaces, to emphasise the political status of the historical Củ Chi Tunnels' site.<sup>6</sup> Disregarding traditional architectural material, the temple construction is of cement instead of wood and cannot accommodate carved motifs on its beams and rafters. This has resulted in a vast interior with few aesthetic attributes.

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<sup>6</sup> Củ Chi tunnels are a 75 mile long labyrinth where most of Việt Cộng's attacks were designed and launched on Saigon during the war.

Carved marble plaques cover its walls from top to bottom, with the names of 44,357 martyrs and their mothers.



Figure 8: Bến Dược Temple.1995, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 9: The House of Revolutionary Martyrs in Hàng Gai Street, Hà Nội. 2000, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

The most spectacular undertaking in traditional Vietnamese architecture of the 1990s must surely be the Ghostly City, a cemetery in An Bằng (Peaceful) village, 25 kilometres south of Huế (figs.10-11). In the 1970s and 1980s, fishermen from this village left Việt-Nam in search of a better life overseas and, once they had settled, began to send money back home to relatives, for the reconstruction of their ancestors' tombs. It is estimated that 90 percent of the villagers have relatives living overseas and, over the years, competition grew between families, for the most impressive and imposing mausoleum. Subsequently, the Ghostly City grew to have more than a thousand mausoleums, each costing from 15,000 to 40,000 U.S. dollars and built mostly by local artisans.<sup>7</sup> Decorative styles resemble the tiled mosaics of the Khải Định Mausoleum in Huế and traditional aesthetics are distinctively displayed in the curling mosaic dragons on the columns supporting roofs and the mosaic unicorns crawling down the steps. All the decorative qualities of Huế's architecture are present, including the windbreak, featuring the carved Chinese character for happiness. Catholic mausoleums in the cemetery display similar features, with the addition of a Christian cross. The growth of the Ghostly City of An Bằng demonstrates the revival of Vietnamese ancestral worship and the transformation of belief into cultural artefacts. In the distant future, the Ghostly City might become a national heritage, to venerate the prosperity of the Vietnamese Diaspora.

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<sup>7</sup> An interview by Boi Tran Huynh with Đào Thế Lộc, an American Vietnamese, on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2004 when he was holding an opening ceremony of his ancestors' house in An Bằng village.



Figure 10: Ghostly City, An Bằng Village, Huế. (Eternal rest for the dead, sign of wealth for the living), photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 11: Ghostly City at An Bằng Village, Hue, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

The economic gains of the post-*doi moi* era introduced significant changes in personal clothing and helped the development of a thriving textile industry. Hà Nội women in

particular, became obsessed with style, after decades of dull uniformity. By 1994, they were displaying, en masse, an exotic pluralism, by defiantly substituting ‘dark pyjamas’ for dresses and skirts and surpassed their southern sisters in fashion consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Western fashion became a status symbol and stylish attire was worn at work, in the home and even wedding ceremonies. The xenophobia from decades of war against the ‘alien others’ was replaced by an exciting life of trendy fabrics and an eagerness for modernity. The desire to participate in the world at large was expressed by the tumultuous crowd of Hanoians, who extended an unrestrained welcome to former U.S. President Clinton in 2000. Cable News Network claimed that the level of support for Clinton was the largest turnout ever, in Việt-Nam, for a visiting head of state.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 12: Áo dài with hand-painted patterns and coloured pants.



Figure 13: Áo dài fashion by Liên Hương.

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<sup>8</sup> As a southerner, I was astonished by Hà Nội womens’ dresses during my 3months stay in Hà Nội in 1994.

<sup>9</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2000/ASIANOW/southeast/11/16/clinton.vietnam.02/>  
Nguyen Ngoc Bich, the first interview with President Bill Clinton on Radio Free Asia, text at [http://www.ncvaonline.org/archive/news\\_111900\\_clintoninterview.htm](http://www.ncvaonline.org/archive/news_111900_clintoninterview.htm).

The development of urban commerce and a burgeoning tourist industry saw the re-introduction of the Vietnamese áo dài onto the modernising agenda. Some artists initiated a trend of hand-painted floral patterns on the front of the garment, an adaptation that rapidly increased in popularity. The artist Lê Vượng (1952-) supported his family by modifying áo dài, before establishing himself, nationally, as a photo-realist painter.<sup>10</sup> The trend originated in Hồ Chí Minh City and gradually spread throughout the nation. In the mid 1990s, as a symbol of both a release of suppressed desire and prosperity, there emerged an unrestrained craze for colours. The áo dài grew longer, its flaps reached to the ankles, and it was accompanied by the adoption of coloured pants; for instance, a red áo dài would be matched with red pants (fig.12). Steadily, over the years, the áo dài confirmed its status as a national costume and even found its way into international fashion collections, through the enterprise of Vietnamese designers like Minh Hạnh, Sĩ Hoàng and Liên Hương (fig.13).<sup>11</sup>

The evolution of the áo dài over a century is marked by its modifications when Việt-Nam faced outside contacts. The áo dài as seen from old postcards<sup>12</sup> shows little difference from the áo dài today. The core structure is maintained with details varying from time to time. The áo dài is a good example of the philosophy of water-flexibility in that it can be adapted yet retain its identity. Twice in history, when Việt-Nam endured French and American colonisation, the áo dài was threatened to dramatically change or compete with other outfits. Yet, it stands.

### **Renovation and Freedom**

Stimulated by Soviet perestroika, the Vietnamese Reform Policy initiated some flexibility in literature and art. The Party's General Secretary from 1986 to 1991,

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<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted by Boi Tran Huynh with the artist in 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Joanne Fowler, 'Simply Devine: Designer Mind Hahn Gives New Life To Classic Clothing', *People Weekly*, May 1, 2000, v. 53. i17 p66+

<sup>12</sup> *Knowledge on Viet Nam through Ancient Postcards*, 2002, Fine Arts Publishing House & Open University of Hà Nội.

Nguyễn Văn Linh, encouraged writers to publicly express their criticism of social issues, as well as their evaluations of revolutionary Socialist literature.

Eventually, after much hesitation and whispering, we had for the first time enough bravery to speak the truth and express our belief that revolutionary literature is still very poor.”<sup>13</sup>

For almost 50 years, Socialist Realist methodology in literature offered mere praise along party lines. Contrary to this, the post doi moi era blossomed with alternative literature, casting doubt over many Socialist ideals. Some influential works include, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s 1987 criticism of war, *The General Retires*<sup>14</sup> and Lưu Quang Vũ’s play, *The Butcher’s Skin*, underscoring issues of individual identity. In 1988, Dương Thu Hương’s *Paradise of the Blind*,<sup>15</sup> questioned, for the first time, the 1950s land reform and Phạm Thị Hoài’s *The Crystal Messenger*,<sup>16</sup> commented on the social and moral decay of a disillusioned society. Bảo Ninh’s 1990 semi-autobiographical, *Sorrow of War*,<sup>17</sup> concentrated on the loss and suffering endured at every level of Vietnamese society. These novels were at odds with the Socialist mainstream, in that they expressed strong opinions on topics not to be aired in public, such as bereavement and the sin of war, or the development of ghastly relationships after quarrels over property. The Vietnamese government grew to realise that their encouragement was taken far beyond their expectations and did not welcome views they considered threatening to their political stability. However, both the Vietnamese literary establishment and the public enthusiastically read these novels and some gained recognition overseas.

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<sup>13</sup> Lê Ngọc Trà, cited from *Văn Học Việt Nam dưới Chế Độ Cộng Sản* (Vietnamese Literature under Socialism) by Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, 1991, Văn Nghệ Publisher, p. 356.

<sup>14</sup> Greg Lockhart translated, Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Translated by Pham Huy Duong and Nina McPherson, New York: Morrow, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Translated by Ton That Quynh Du, Dunedin, NZ: University of Otago Press, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> English version by Frank Palmus, based on the translation from the Vietnamese by Vo Bang Than and Pham Thanh Hao, with Katrina Pierce, London: Secker & Warburg, 1993.

Shortly after *doi moi*, party officials became apprehensive about Soviet perestroika and the fall of the Berlin wall, so they reneged on freeing up speech, by imposing a crackdown on literature. In 1989, the writer Dương Thu Hương was expelled from the Party for her land reform views and later jailed without trial. However, following international protests she was released seven months later.<sup>18</sup> In 1988, the weekly magazine *Văn Nghệ*, saw its chief editor Nguyễn Ngọc removed for allowing provocative stories to be printed, such as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's *Fired Gold*<sup>19</sup>. The most popular magazine in Hồ Chí Minh City, *Tuổi Trẻ*, had its editor Kim Hạnh dismissed in 1991 under the Party's pressure, after publishing an article about Hồ Chí Minh's marriage. In the 1999 plenum of the Party, General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh reminded Vietnamese writers of their role as 'tools of the Party' and not only 'the people's voice.'

The visual arts, however, did not have outspoken individuals equivalent to those in literary circles. Flexibility in art policies encouraged a steady search for new forms of expression but many emerging artists were corrupted by commercialisation and ignored the reforms that the writers advocated.

### **THE ART MARKET AND ALTERNATIVE ART SPACES**

The influence of *doi moi* on the art scene and the possibility of making a profit gave rise to a blossoming art market, as witnessed by the hundreds of art galleries that emerged in Hà Nội, Huế, Hồ Chí Minh City, Hải Phòng, and Hội An. These galleries marked a departure from the government sponsored propaganda exhibitions.

In 1989, Rừng (Nguyễn Tuấn Khanh) held his first solo exhibition after reunification, at a souvenir shop in Tự Do (Freedom) Street, which was renamed Đồng Khởi (General Uprising) Street, after 1975. The exhibition was opened in the name of

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<sup>18</sup> See the English transcript interview of Duong Thu Huong by Radio Free Asia on 07 July 2000 at <http://www.fva.org/0700/story03.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.thefileroom.org/documents/dyn/DisplayCase.cfm/id/66>.

charity for flood victims in the central Vietnamese provinces of Quảng Nam and Đà Nẵng. A street banner announced, “Exhibition and sale of paintings” (fig.14) and most of the works, to the shop owner and artist’s surprise, were all sold to an anonymous Taiwanese businessman.<sup>20</sup> Later the shop was developed into a commercial art gallery known, today, as the Tự Do Gallery; its success encouraged other shop owners on Đồng Khởi Street to open up art galleries. In 2000, Tự Do Gallery moved to its current venue in Hồ Tùng Mậu Street to have a larger space for display, but perhaps, to remove itself from the previous precinct of tourist-art galleries. As a clear example of success, Tự Do Gallery opened a branch in Houston, Texas in 2004.

It was also from these emerging galleries and foreign agents that Saigonese art was re-evaluated. Robert Bezuijen, who came to Việt-Nam and worked in 1993-96 for an Australian company, became interested and passionately searched for Tạ Ty’s abstract art in Hồ Chí Minh City. This raised the local awareness of Tạ Ty’s art and the price of his paintings.



Figure 14: Rừng’s exhibition at Tự Do Gallery in 1989, courtesy of Tự Do Gallery.

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<sup>20</sup> An interview by Boi Tran Huynh with Đặng Hải Sơn, the owner of Tự Do Gallery in January 2003.

Most gallery owners are either relatives or friends of artists and sometimes artists, themselves. Meanwhile, in Hà Nội's old quarter, galleries sprung up like mushrooms despite the city's land crisis, with some galleries acquiring huge spaces, such as Apricot Gallery (fig.14) and Cố Đô Gallery, a few doors from each other.



Figure 15: Apricot Gallery in Hà Nội, 2001, courtesy of Apricot Gallery.

The gallery boom thrived with the State's promotion of tourism, which saw the ancient town of Hội An, for instance, turn its narrow street into a 'gallery town,' with one gallery next to the other, on both sides of the street, for about a kilometre. Unfortunately, the majority of these galleries continue to operate with little knowledge of curatorial practices and express little interest in nurturing emerging talent. Galleries too often display art as a competitive mishmash of works and all the galleries focus on business from overseas visitors, as indicated by the number of Vietnamese employees from foreign language studies. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of galleries led to an expansion of the art market and, inevitably, a crisis resulting from inflated prices, fake paintings and artists duplicating their own paintings or imitating the styles

of others.<sup>21</sup> The worst case in Vietnamese art history is, perhaps, related to the artist, Bùi Xuân Phái, whose paintings have been both forged or imitated.<sup>22</sup>

However, the marketability of Vietnamese art, facilitated a power shift from the State controlled Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association to the private sector and with the exception of Socialist Realism, all 'isms' were explored in depth. Artists exhibited in a climate of economic openness that attracted growing international attention and the opportunity to exhibit overseas, with the promise of financial reward beyond their dreams.<sup>23</sup> In the 1990s, an artist owning a Japanese scooter was an indicator of reasonable wealth, by 2004, some of the most successful artists owned new four-wheel drive vehicles and multi-storey houses.<sup>24</sup> Personal achievements of this magnitude changed the art community's prevailing attitudes toward the Fine Arts Association. During the war and for more than a decade after, artists worked hard to be accepted into the Association but by the late 1990s, they began to turn away from the organisation, as an expression of their independence. Nguyễn Quang Huy (1971-) claimed that neither he, nor many of his colleagues, could find enough reasons to join the association, although others might.<sup>25</sup>

The shift of power is also seen in the availability of alternative art spaces, both domestic and international. Artists recognised the new conditions and seized upon every opportunity to participate in the world at large, through foreigner-run galleries, exchange programs and international exhibitions.

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<sup>21</sup> See Samantha Marshall, 'Painting by Numbers: Art Market in Vietnam Becomes Crowded', *The Wall Street Journal*, 10, December 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Nora A. Taylor, 'Pho' Phai and Faux Phais: The Market for Fakes and the Appropriation of a Vietnamese National Symbol', *Ethnos*, v.64:2, 1999, p.232-248.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Shenon, 'Success Overnight, in a Sense: Vietnam's Artists Are in Vogue', *The New York Times*, Tuesday, November 29, 1994, p. C15 cont. C18.

<sup>24</sup> Field trip in January in 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Interview conducted by Boi Tran Huynh with the artist in January 2004.

In 1990, Salon Natasha was opened in Hà Nội's old quarter as the city's first private art gallery.<sup>26</sup> The owner is Natalia Kraskevskaja, a Doctorate of Russian literature, who came to work at the Pushkin Institute in Hà Nội in 1983 and married Vũ Dân Tân, a self-taught artist. Salon Natasha actively supports emerging and experimental artists, several of whom went on to acquire international recognition, including: Lê Hồng Thái, Trương Tân, and Nguyễn Minh Thành.



Figure 16: Salon Natasha, photograph by Boi Tran Nguyen Huynh.

Like all townhouses in the old quarter, Salon Natasha had little space. It included two small rooms, with the smaller one also used for storage purposes. Apart from providing a space to display experimental art, Natasha ran exchange programs, like *Crosscurrents* (fig.17) between Hà Nội and Australian artists. Over a period of 16 months, half-completed artworks were exchanged by mail, to be completed by the other party. This practice removed the concept of possession and saleability, which in 1996-98, during the period of the project, was ubiquitous in the Vietnamese art market.

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<sup>26</sup> Salon Natasha was closed in 2005.

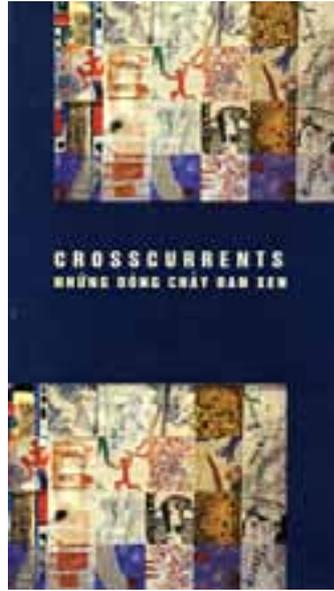


Figure 17: Catalogue of the touring exhibition, Crosscurrents. 1998

In 1991, the Plum Blossom Gallery, in Hong Kong, exhibited the works of 15 Vietnamese contemporary artists, under the title, *Uncorked Soul*, and attracted significant attention. Art critic, Jeffrey Hantover, a Việt-Nam based contributor to the journal, *Asian Art News*, outlined the differences between art in North and South Việt-Nam in a catalogue essay. The journal's contributors were by and large, from an English-speaking background and aimed to provide insights into Vietnamese contemporary art, but it included articles by Vietnamese art critics, from time to time. *Asian Art News* also informed Vietnamese artists of cultural events at a global level and introduced them to markets in the Asian region.

The reform environment enabled many young Vietnamese artists to modify various political and aesthetic paradigms, making it possible for them to go beyond boundaries established for nearly half of a century. By the 1990s, exploration of diverse movements including abstractions and portrayal of the nude figure became inspirational and developed into a dynamic quest. However, changes could never have been realised without Việt-Nam's renewed contact with the outside world. Young Hanoian artists began forming themselves into groups to exhibit their creative

endeavours, without necessarily sharing similar aesthetic ideals. One group, *The Gang of Five*, included: Hồng Việt Dũng (1962-), Hà Trí Hiếu (1959-), Đặng Xuân Hoà (1959-), Trần Lương (1960-) and Phạm Quang Vinh (1960-). Another group, *Five New Faces*, involved: Trần Quang Huy (1961-); Nguyễn Quốc Hội (1960-), Phạm Ngọc Minh (1966-), Đinh Quân (1964-) and Trần Tuấn (1961-). Flexibility within these groups allowed each artist to pursue their own research interests. Trần Lương was fascinated by the ever-changing forms of aquatic plants and made abstract art based on this theme. Đinh Quân used lacquer paint to portray the female form, with a stylistic manipulation of Romanticism and Symbolism, while Hà Trí Hiếu and Hồng Việt Dũng, displayed a strong interest in atmospheric minimalism.

In 1997, a Contemporary Arts Centre in Hà Nội was established with financial support from the Ford Foundation. Although the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association administrated the Contemporary Arts Centre, it initially functioned with relative independence under Trần Lương's leadership. In 2002, the centre had its most productive year, with nine exhibitions, but then in mid 2003, the government imposed restraints and Trần Lương resigned.

Currently, young Hà Nội artists who wish to disengage themselves from official and commercialised art, utilise Nhà Sàn Đức (fig.18), a stilt house located in the outer suburbs. The house, owned by an artist and conservator, Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, is an antique workshop and the space underneath is used for unofficial gatherings, exhibitions and art performances. This venue attracts mostly a foreign audience and provides an almost bohemian atmosphere for experimental artists. Most of the artists reflect on social issues, with a focus on art interaction rather than formality, usually through installation, video or performance.



Figure 18: Đức's House on Stilts, with art critic Trang Thanh Hiền and artist Nguyễn Mạnh Đức, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Đức's House on Stilts provides an alternative space for arts but does not function as a full-time centre of contemporary arts, nor does it have a legal status to exchange with international bodies. In the 1990s, to communicate to the world, was a must for the art community in Việt-Nam. The Goethe Institute in Hà Nội, established in 1997, met these criteria: alternative art space, funding, legal sponsorship and understanding, all of which meant inspiration to contemporary arts. With the opening of its new premises in 2004, the Goethe Institute (fig.19), in the last three months of the year, displayed work by German artists: Georg Baselitz, Wolfgang Laib, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Veronika Radulovic and from Hà Nội, artists: Trần Lương, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Lê Quốc Việt.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See program on the website: <http://www.goethe.de/so/han/vnindex.htm>



Figure 19: New Building of Goethe Institute in Hà Nội. 2004, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

Through these alternative spaces, Hà Nội became the focus of many international organisations that inevitably brought influences to bear on Việt-Nam in its process of de-constructing Socialism. Since 1990, Asia Link of Australia has sent Australian artists-in-residence to Hà Nội, but not to other Vietnamese cities, reasoning that budget restrictions do not permit it.<sup>28</sup> Veronika Radulovic has been working at Hà Nội Fine Arts University as guest lecturer, under the sponsorship of DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) from 1994 to 2002. Suzanne Lecht arrived in Hà Nội in 1994 and has permanently lived there as an art consultant. Through her Vietnamese and international partners, she has organised exhibitions of Vietnamese art in not only Hà Nội but also Holland, Hong Kong, the U.S. In November 2002, she opened her Art Việt-Nam Gallery (fig.20) in Hà Nội which, to date, is regarded as the best purpose-built commercial gallery in Việt-Nam. With these international connections, exhibiting opportunities for Hà Nội's artists have been dramatically expanded.

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<sup>28</sup> Conversation between Asia Link and a Delegation comprised of 8 members from Fine Arts University of HCMC and Đồng Nai College in 1998.



Figure 20: Art Việt-Nam Gallery, photograph from the gallery website.

In the South, the demand for alternative spaces is not as great as in Hà Nội, partly because the Socialist restraints were not embedded as long as in the North and partly because the South was expected to resume some of its former international contacts. Trịnh Cung started painting again in 1985 with support from an expatriate friend. Nguyễn Lâm and Hồ Hữu Thủ have been represented in Singapore since 1996 while, from the early 1990s, a Dutch art collector has regularly brought Nguyễn Tấn Cường's works.

Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre in Hồ Chí Minh City (fig.21) was established in 1997, in the basement of the Fine Arts Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City<sup>29</sup> and provides a venue for experimental art. With funding from the Ford Foundation, Blue Space frequently uses its space and the courtyard of the Museum to present seminars, installations and performances. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre was the first gallery in the South to introduce new media when, in 1997, the artist Lê Thừa Tiến (1964-) collaborated with the American artist, Bradford Edwards, in his first installation *1+1*. Other first solo installations at Blue Space were by: Jun Nguyễn-Hatsushiba, Nguyễn Minh Phương and Mai Anh Dũng.

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<sup>29</sup> The Fine Arts Museum of Hồ Chí Minh City rents its entire basement to Blue Space Contemporary Art Centre, Lạc Hồng Gallery and Nhật Lệ Gallery.



Figure 21: Blue Space Contemporary Art Centre.  
Opening of the exhibition, Hà Nội-Huế-Saigon Artists in 1997, courtesy of Blue Space.

The gallery's vital role in keeping artists updated was again displayed in 2003, when it invited Dr. Annette Van den Bosch from Monash University, Australia, to deliver a lecture titled, *Artists and Gallery-Art Practices in the West*. At the end of her presentation the question was raised, "Why wasn't this seminar supported by the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association, so that we artists can perform our practice properly?" This clearly demonstrates an anxiety about the lack of support from the Vietnamese government.

In 2003, Gallery Quynh was opened, after three years operating on line, and held solo exhibitions in rented venues for selected artists.<sup>30</sup> Gallery Quynh is a smaller, but equally professional space as the Art Việt-Nam Gallery. Its director, Quynh Pham, was born in Đà Nẵng, before being evacuated in 1975, with her family to the U.S. After graduating in 1995, from the University of California, San Diego, (in non-Western art

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<sup>30</sup> [www.galeriequynh.com](http://www.galeriequynh.com)

history), she worked with the Smithsonian Institute's Sackler Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego. Gradually, the Vietnamese art world has become aware of the importance of curatorial practice, through the 'imported' intellectual property of Suzanne Leicht and Quynh Pham. Curatorship remains unknown in Vietnam, and is not included as a subject in art schools' curricula.

### **The Revival of abstract art and the 'Old Gangs'**

In 1994, six painters from the *Society of Young Saigonese Artists* gathered for an exhibition at the Fine Arts Museum of Hồ Chí Minh City: Trịnh Cung, Đỗ Quang Em, Nguyễn Lâm, Nguyễn Phước, Hồ Hữu Thủ and Nguyễn Trung (fig.22). The exhibition was co-sponsored by the Fine Arts Museum of Hồ Chí Minh City and Nguyễn Thị Quỳnh Nga, a local art collector and restaurateur. The catalogue confirms that abstraction was the dominant style on display and that artists were, once again, on a search for the individuality.



Figure 22: Nguyễn Trung, *Nocturne II*, 1993, from the Six Saigonese Artists Exhibition. 1994.

To me, truth does not exist in the outer world but in the consciousness, in the legends of very sensitive feelings, where a more splendid, newer world has been created and where resides truth and beauty.<sup>31</sup>

The brief (200 words) introduction by the Fine Arts Museum of Hồ Chí Minh City was diplomatic in addressing the artists' 30 years of persistent devotion to the arts but avoided referring to the exhibition as a rendezvous of Saigonese Artists. The organisation reminded viewers of Việt-Nam's recent history and its effect on the visual arts.

People who know that Việt-Nam has suffered heavy losses from 30 years of war and experienced extreme post war difficulties will appreciate the achievements obtained by Việt-Nam's modern painters and conservators.<sup>32</sup>

There was little pressure for Saigonese artists to exhibit within Việt-Nam during the mid-1990s, due to the strong international interest in their work and the curiosity about Vietnamese non-Socialist contemporary art. Attention came from galleries in Singapore, Paris and the U.S. and particularly from the Plum Blossom and Lã Vọng galleries in Hong Kong. By this time, the *Society of Young Saigonese Artists* had disintegrated, as members started to emigrate, one-by-one. Nguyễn Phước, Đinh Cường and Dương Văn Hùng all left through the Orderly Departure Program while Nguyễn Khai and Mai Chửng fled by sea.

In 2001, eleven members of the former *Society of Young Saigonese Artists* reunited for one large show entitled *Hồi Cố* (Reminiscence) at Gallery Vĩnh Lợi (fig.23). Six artists from the US were Mai Chửng, Dương Văn Hùng, Nguyễn Khai, Nguyễn Phước, Đinh Cường and Cù Nguyễn; five local artists: Nguyễn Trung, Trịnh Cung, Nguyễn Lâm, Hồ Hữu Thủ and Đỗ Quang Em.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hồ Hữu Thủ's statement, Catalogue, *36 Recent Paintings*, 1994.

<sup>32</sup> HCMC Fine Arts Museum, Introduction, catalogue *36 Recent Paintings*.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyễn Trung, 'Một "Hồi Cố" Đẹp Đẽ', (A Beautiful Memory), *Tuổi Trẻ Chủ Nhật*, n.28-2001, 27 July 2001, p.26.



Figure 23:Saigonese artists' reunion at Vĩnh Lợi Gallery. From L to R: Nguyễn Lâm, Đỗ Quang Em, Dương Nghiễm Mậu (writer), Đinh Cường, Dương Văn Hùng, Khuu Đức, Hồ Hữu Thủ and Nguyễn Văn Trung, courtesy of Nguyễn Trung.



Figure 24: Mai Chửng, *Girl*, bronze. 2001, courtesy of the artist family.



Figure 25: Nguyễn Khai, *Light*. 2001.

The exhibition was warmly greeted by Saigon's art world, which was curious to see works by overseas Vietnamese. The sculptor, Mai Chửng, brought back 11 bronze statues but on the eve of the exhibition, he fell ill and was rushed to hospital. Sadly, on return to the U.S. he passed away from cancer, in September of the same year. His bronze sculpture, *Girl* (fig.24) displays the influence of Henry Moore but combines aspects of abstract expression.

Nguyễn Khai introduced an innovative freshness, by showing two mixed media works using computer circuit boards, which presented an abstract metaphor for contemporary technology, *Light* (fig.25). In an interview for the national daily, *Lao Động* (Labour), one of the exhibitors, Trịnh Cung, commented on the role of Saigonese artists:

We can be proud that the creative experience and success of artists such as Hoàng Tường, Nguyễn Tấn Cường and Trần Văn Thảo have become a motivation for new generations of artists in Hồ Chí Minh City. Their influence has also opened up references for many Hà Nội artists, even those of maturity like Lưu Công Nhân and Trọng Kiêm. Furthermore, they have had a significant bearing on development of the 1990s art boom.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Thuận Thiên, 'Gặp Gỡ Các "Họa Sĩ Trẻ" Saigon Cũ' (Meeting with Old Saigonese "Young Artists"), *Lao Động*, n.165 26 July 2001.



Figure 26: Đỗ Hoàng Tường, *Way to Darkness*. 2000.



Figure 27: Trần Văn Thảo, *Square II*. 2000.

In this atmosphere of change, there was a revival of abstraction and nude painting, the genres that southern artists had been most familiar with before 1975. The First National Abstract Exhibition was held in 1992, at Hoàng Hạc Gallery in Hồ Chí Minh City, with support from the art critic, Nguyễn Quân, and painters from Hà Nội. The exhibition focused on the group, *Ten Artists of Hồ Chí Minh City*, who had held their first group exhibition in 1990 and consistently held annual exhibitions of the group, both in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, for seven years until 1996 when they started to

have more exposure in the international market. The artists were from various backgrounds but shared a common interest in new abstraction. They were: Đỗ Hoàng Tường (fig.26), Hứa Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Thanh Bình, Nguyễn Tấn Cương, Vũ Hà Nam, Ca Lê Thắng, Nguyễn Trung Tín, Đào Minh Tri, Nguyễn Trung and Trần Văn Thảo (fig.27). *Ten Artists of Hồ Chí Minh City* were influential in the resurgence of Vietnamese abstraction in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as a pursuit distinct from Socialist Realism. Moreover, their activities in other art-related fields helped promote the revival of abstraction, particularly Ca Lê Thắng and Đào Minh Tri, who were the Director and Vice-Director, respectively, of the Fine Arts Association of Hồ Chí Minh City. In 1994, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Artist Friendship Association of Asia, was celebrated by a collaborative exhibition with the Fine Arts Association of Hồ Chí Minh City which saw representative artists from China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and Việt-Nam. Of the 33 Vietnamese works exhibited, 28 were paintings and all but seven were abstract.

The South, in its attempts to interpret and advocate a new avant-garde art, particularly the revival of abstraction, launched the bilingual art journal, *Mỹ Thuật*, of Hồ Chí Minh City (fig.28) in the early 1990s. Edited by Ca Lê Thắng and Nguyễn Trung, it was a discrete publication to that of the *Mỹ Thuật* journal, published by the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association in Hà Nội.



Figure 28: Fine Arts magazine. 1995 issue featuring abstraction.

With the aim of linking Việt-Nam's art to the outside world, the new periodical provided some French and English translations of their articles. It also had translations of a large number of articles on contemporary art from international art magazines, for instance, articles by Philippe Dagen, Geneviève Breerette, and Henri-François Debailleux. There was no propaganda, which brought the criticism from conservatives that it was too westernised. The cover of each issue presented the most recent works of Vietnamese contemporary art, with many coloured reproductions in the content and, to meet the costs of colour printing, the magazine generated advertisements from art galleries and art-related industries. However, despite financial support from the French Consulate of Hồ Chí Minh City, *Mỹ Thuật* magazine of Hồ Chí Minh City ceased production in 1998, due to funding problems and the resignation of the two editors. Nevertheless, the magazine had sown positive seeds and unveiled some aspects of the outside world, to help develop Vietnamese contemporary art. With the cessation of this

publication, the active role in Vietnamese contemporary art was taken over by Hà Nội's artists.

### **INDIVIDUALITY VERSUS COLLECTIVISM**

The most apparent shifts in everyday life and art, during this period were from collectivism to individualism, realism to expressionism or symbolism and state control to private management. These changes were hastened by an overwhelming national eagerness for a true art dialogue and international enthusiasm for Vietnamese art. As Việt-Nam rushed to catch up with international contemporary art movements, it encountered the West, which was inquisitive about Vietnamese art and war-related myths. The flow of tourists, expatriates and foreign officials, introduced a flourish of private art galleries and in 1992, Hồ Chí Minh City alone, had 130 exhibitions and one out of every six paintings sold.<sup>35</sup> The ideals of Social Realism were gradually abandoned, when Vietnamese artists, no longer obligated to endorse state sanctioned subjects or styles, crossed the threshold into former taboos. Increasingly, through the 1990s, artists demonstrated a desire to address themselves as individuals and not simply a constituent of the masses. For northern artists, in particular, this gave rise to self-analysis and the adoption of self-portraiture to express a personal identity that, later, developed into an important genre. Through portraiture, Vietnamese contemporary artists represented their individuality and their reflections on society (fig.29).

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<sup>35</sup> Ca Lê Thắng, 1993, 'Are We Ready to step into the Next Age', *Fine Arts Magazine of HCMC*, n. 7, p. 52.



Figure 29: A staff member from Massachusetts College of Arts (Boston) photographs Bui Xuân Phái's self-portrait at Đức Minh Museum. 2003, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 30: Thành Chương, *Self-Portrait*. 1995, photograph from *Thế Thao & Văn Hoá*.

Thành Chương (1949-) became known for his self-portraits, emphasising a lonely and bewildered individual (fig.30). Chương's paintings called attention to the disparity between the masses and the individual, where he represented himself as the

quintessential modernist and, at other times, as a buffalo boy, travelling through a background of village motifs.

In an interview, he commented, “I paint myself separated from the crowd, sad and lonely.”<sup>36</sup> In this context, the ‘masses’ (quần chúng), were transformed into the ‘crowd’ (đám đông). While the ‘masses’ bear a revolutionary positive meaning, the ‘crowd’ suggests alienation. Thành Chương had considerable success in the newly prosperous art market, until he produced so many paintings that they became a tourist commodity.<sup>37</sup>

Hà Nội’s young artists of the 1990s, such as Đặng Xuân Hoà (1959-) and Lê Quảng Hà (1963-), saw self-portraiture as a means to express their inner feelings and artistic styles. Hoà’s 1998 *Self-Portrait* (fig.31) portrays a wide-eyed look of wonder mixed with despair and resembles the portraits of Picasso and the German Expressionists, but with calmer colour tones and lines.



Figure 31: Đặng Xuân Hoà, *Self-Portrait*. 1998.

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<sup>36</sup> Interviewed by Ian Findlay in ‘Pursuing A National Voice’, *Asian Art News*, p.64-68.

<sup>37</sup> See Samantha Marshall, ‘Painting by Numbers: Art Market in Vietnam Become Crowded’, *The Wall Street Journal*, December, 10,1999. The article was then translated and published in *Thế Thao & Văn Hóa* n.20, 10/03/2000.



Figure 32: Lê Quảng Hà, *Self-Portrait*. 2002.

Lê Quảng Hà went further with a series of self-portraits and portraits of friends, utilising an aggressively expressionist approach, in oil or lacquer. Likeness is not a concern for Hà in his portraits, which, instead, portray a critical view. The rich orange background of his, *Self-Portrait* (fig.32), contrasts against the black bold lines of the figure, with its haunting and questioning eyes, gazing at the viewer.

For other artists, to portray themselves is to contemplate the self, or an attempt to express their individuality in relation to society. Trương Tân (1963-) (fig.33) challenged traditional norms, by presenting a passion for individualism and disclosing his homosexuality. He has revealed himself in controversial sexual contexts and depicted images of naked males with erect penises. Tân worked against the traditional concept of Vietnamese beauty, by using 'pop' iconography to substitute female images with eroticised male figures. Eighteen of his paintings were removed from public display in 1995, when his frankness incurred censorship during a dual show in Hà Nội, with American artist Bradford Edwards.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Birgit Hussfeld, 'Cultural Collisions', *Asian Art News*, September/October 1995, p. 46-47.



Figure 33: Trương Tân, *Stop*. 1990s.

Male artists traditionally dominate Vietnamese contemporary art practices. However, Đinh Ý Nhi (1967-) became known as a young female artist with an original style, by depicting primitive human forms, using the most basic lines and shapes. With a very restricted black and white palette, she paints unusually expressive symbolic portraits, as in her painting, *Inside the Fear* (fig.34), reminiscent of the chalk drawings of children. Here she presents three almost identical figures, painted without gender but in a generalised manner, and makes reference to human feelings of concern and insecurity.

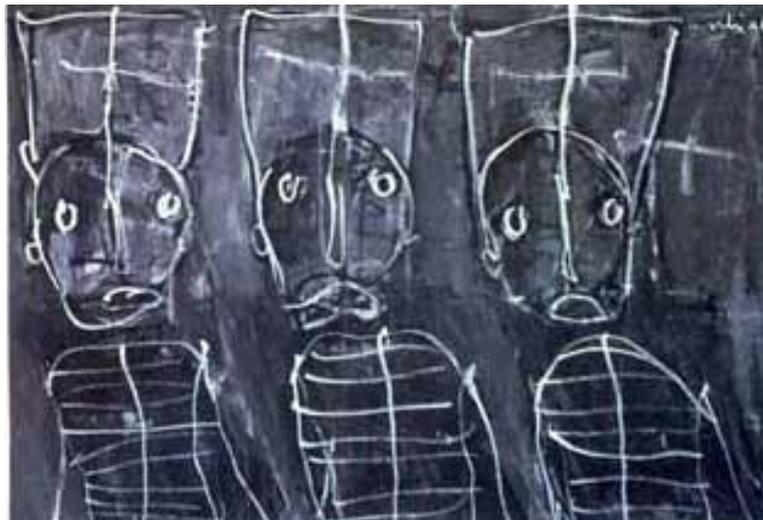


Figure 34: Đinh Ý Nhi, *Inside the Fear*. 1999.

The artist Nguyễn Thái Tuấn (1965-) paints expressionist images of himself, drawing attention to suppression and victimisation. In a variety of poignant circumstances, he has portrayed himself being executed by a hail of daggers, trapped by a treacherous serpent and, in one disturbing work, he is hanging himself, accompanied by a label declaring, “I love this life so much!”<sup>39</sup> Later, Tuấn’s images come close to the sharp messages of poster art and display a departure from the Vietnamese norm of using symbolism to convey an idea. In *Great* (2003) (fig.35), Tuấn portrays himself as an impoverished labourer, wearing only shorts and lumbering a wrapped bust on his back. Contributing to the ambiguous situation, he is accompanied by the repeated phrase, “Vĩ Đại” (Great), which is ideologically reserved for Hồ Chí Minh and the Party. Nguyễn Thái Tuấn graduated at vocational level (hệ trung học) from Huế College of Art but was refused entry to a Bachelors Degree, because of some political background in his family. After wandering throughout Việt-Nam, he settled in Dalat in 1991, where he secured a job in the local Department of Culture and Information. About this time, a Việt kiều friend introduced him to publications of *Flash Art* and *Art in America*. Reflecting on the experience Tuấn recalls, “I was stunned by what I saw because they were so different from what I had experienced. Images of: Basquiat; Clemente; Baselitz; Kiefer; Schnabel and Salle, to mention a few, shocked me with both happiness and frustration. I splashed paint over my existing canvases then slashed them with a knife. A couple of years later, I left my job and committed myself to a new painting venture.”<sup>40</sup> Despite having no solo exhibitions in his homeland, Nguyễn Thái Tuấn has received favourable reviews. An article in *Asian Art News* declared that, “Tuan is a huge talent who dwarfs most of his contemporaries, many who have reaped the rewards of commercial success.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Images of these paintings appear in ‘In His Own Image’, by Bradford Edwards, in *Asian Art News* March/April 2001, p. 46-48.

<sup>40</sup> Email exchanged on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Bradford Edwards, ‘In His Own Image’, *Asian Art News* March/April 2001, p. 46-48.

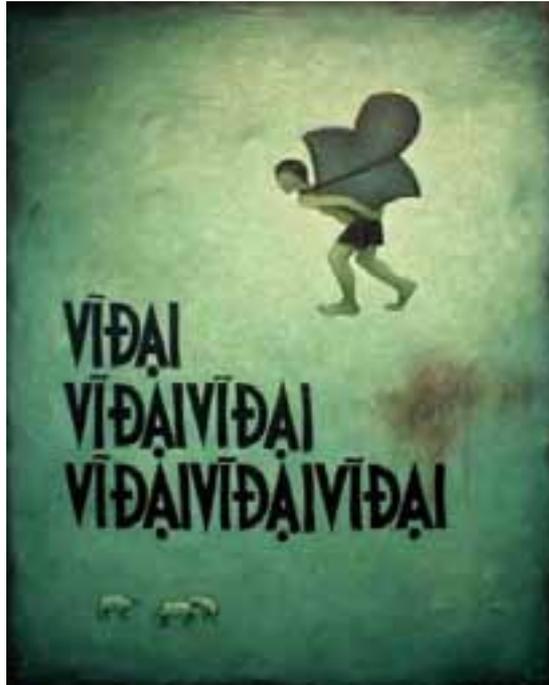


Figure 35: Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, *Great*. 2002.



Figure 36: Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, *Identity Card*. 2004.

Nguyễn Thái Tuấn's most recent paintings have become increasingly minimalist, as in *Identity Card* (2004) (fig.36). The painting portrays an anonymous and faceless subject, squatting in a vast spacious background beside a fallen lamp, with a blurry identification number squeezed into the left corner of the painting. Tuấn's work has

evolved into a type of figurative art that allows viewers to make their own interpretations.

These works by Trương Tân, Đinh Ý Nhi and Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, in a variety of styles, demonstrate the successful search by Vietnamese artists for originality. Moreover, their works reveal a shift toward political issues, which was not apparent a decade ago. The cult of Hồ Chí Minh remains very strong in Vietnamese political life, however, critical references are beginning to appear in the work of some celebrated contemporary artists, as Nguyễn Thái Tuấn's painting, *Great*, exemplifies.



Figure 37: Lê Hồng Thái, *She Works Hard*. 2003, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

The art of Lê Hồng Thái (1966-) developed into a scandal, initiated in an article about his work in *Asian Art News*, when it described a character in one of his lacquer paintings as, “gazing downward as some famous leader might look down upon his

subjects, but he looks eerily familiar.”<sup>42</sup> The article brought the artist trouble, when it escalated into an issue with the cultural police.<sup>43</sup> Reportedly, the *raison d'être* was that Thái's character looked like Uncle Hồ's shadow, in a familiar posture as seen in historical textbooks and the media.

Tuấn and Thái's works, based on taboo subjects, have never been exhibited in Vietnam. However, Lê Hồng Thái has been exhibiting less provocative paintings at Salon Natasha and other places. The lacquer painting, *She Works Hard* (fig.37) was exhibited in the *Mauvais Goût* (Bad Taste) exhibition in a Hà Nội restaurant, Chim Sáo (Sparrow), in December 2003. It is probably one of the most confrontational and controversial works in that it criticises prostitution in the developing economy. It portrays in the foreground, the lower part of a woman in her briefs, accompanied by six shadowy male busts against a dark background. Only half of the woman's body can be seen, but her pose appears to challenge the men, who are portrayed as apathetic voyeurs.

To be overtly political, has not been a choice for many Vietnamese artists and many reasons were discussed by Mai Chi, Nora Taylor and Natalia Kraevskaia, at a Round Table Talk on the website, Talawas.<sup>44</sup>

And why should Vietnamese artists criticise the government? They have gotten so many things in this post-doi moi era: access to any information, the possibility to exhibit and sell their work, ample opportunities to travel abroad and to participate in international shows.<sup>45</sup>

Natalia Kraevskaia cynically gives this explanation, which is exactly what many artists feel, Vietnamese artists sense that they are given a piece of freedom, like a piece of

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<sup>42</sup> Bradford Edwards, 'A Muscular Art', *Asian Art News*, January/February 2003, p.61-63.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Lê Hồng Thái and Bradford Edwards on 5 January 2004, in Hà Nội.

<sup>44</sup> On 12 & 16 January 2003 at <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=827&rb=0201>.

<sup>45</sup> Natalia Kraevskaia, at <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=827&rb=0201>.

cake, to rid them of their hunger. And the writer Phạm Thị Hoài asked, “Are Vietnamese writers free today to think?”<sup>46</sup>

To be political, is now, however, the tendency in Vietnamese visual arts of the new millennium. Lê Quảng Hà had his first solo exhibition at the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội in 2001. Although all photographs of the paintings were submitted to the Department of Information and Culture three months in advance, as required, he was forced to rename three of his paintings on the grounds that, “The titles do not suit the content”.<sup>47</sup> Seven other paintings were totally banned as was the middle panel of the triptych, *The American Dream* (fig38) because, “the painting implies a love affair of a president and his intention of invasion.”



Figure 38: Lê Quảng Hà in the final phase of completing *The American Dream*. The middle panel was removed from the exhibition, courtesy of Nguyễn Thị Thu Thủy.

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<sup>46</sup> Phạm Thị Hoài, talk at <http://www.international.ucla.edu/cseas/article.asp?parentid=7568>.

<sup>47</sup> Trần Thanh, “Tại Sao Triển Lãm Tranh của Lê Quảng Hà Suýt bị Đóng Cửa?” (Why Lê Quảng Hà’s Exhibition Was Nearly Shut Down?) *Tiền Phong Chủ Nhật*, 30 December 2001.

In 2004, Lê Quảng Hà held a solo exhibition at L'Espace of the French Cultural Centre in Hà Nội. The artist attracted accusations of decadent visual extremity, incompatible with Vietnamese customs, because of his critical views on violence, hypocrisy and prostitution. Subsequently, the cultural police shut it down after one week.<sup>48</sup> One year before Lê Quảng Hà's exhibition, Việt-Nam put on trial 155 defendants, on murder, bribery, prostitution trade and drug trafficking, of whom 16 were officials and two ousted members of the Party's Central Committee; it was seen as the trial of the century.<sup>49</sup> One must ask if Lê Quảng Hà's warning, from the State, was for his unwanted criticism and political opinions expressed in the wake of this trial.

More flexibility and more art spaces helped to promote works that were not permitted during the war. Trần Trung Tín (1933-) attended the two Indochina wars, became known as a movie star in Hà Nội, then after 1975, came back to his hometown, Saigon, and practiced art as a self-taught artist. He reflect war through children's innocent eyes and his instinct toward love and peace.

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<sup>48</sup> Việt Trung, 'Tranh của Lê Quảng Hà, Truy Lạc hay Bước Đột Phá Mới' (Lê Quảng Hà's Paintings, Decadence or Breaking New Ground) at:

<http://www.hcmc.netnam.vn/index.asp?fcid=2&progid=29002&newsid=26455>.

<sup>49</sup> The trial of Trương Văn Cam, known as Năm Cam, and 154 other defendants, including senior Party officials, went for a year from May 2002 to June 2003. For more details, see: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2003/06/05/international11615EDT0677.DTL>.



Figure 39: Trần Trung Tín, *Mother and Child*, 2000.

Another notable shift in Việt-Nam's contemporary art was the emergence, in the mid-1990s, of Installation Art, Performance Art and Video Art, which was introduced through the influence of visiting artists programs. For instance, Australian Justine Mai Nguyen Xuan Long's *Happy Little Vegemite – 25 Years and I Still Can't Get It Right* in 1996 at the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội surprised the local audience for its unconventional structure and use of medium.<sup>50</sup> In 1999, with the aim of developing greater appreciation of performance art in Việt Nam, Blue Space Contemporary Art Centre, sponsored Seiji Shimoda (Japan) and Chumpon Apisuk (Thailand), to conduct workshops and in 2000, Blue Space sponsored Vietnamese artists to attend the Asiatopia Festival of Performance Art in Bangkok.

Vietnamese installation artists tend to exploit the fundamental qualities of traditional items, by manipulating materials such as candles, votive papers, incense and coins in their work, as well as images of gods and goddesses. Art historians, Bùi Như Hương and Trần Hậu Tuấn, claim that the artist Nguyễn Bảo Toàn (1950-) is the first Vietnamese to produce a significant work in this artform, with his 1994 installation,

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<sup>50</sup> Dương Tường, 'Sao Lại Ế Chồng' (Why Is She Late for Husband), *Thế Thao & Văn Hoá*, n. 34(729) 24-08-1996, p.20.

*Earth Through Fire*.<sup>51</sup> He also impressed Hà Nội's audience with his 1999, *Homeless Souls' Day* installation, with its candles, votive papers, statuettes and ceremonial banners. Subsequent examples of early Vietnamese installations worthy of note are, Nguyễn Minh Thành's 1999 *Rice Paddy* and Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang's, *Love*, exhibited in 2000. The common point in all of these early installations is their associations with religion and memoirs – they look pleasant to the eye but have little to do with contemporary issues.



Figure 40: Vũ Dân Tân, *Masks*. 2002, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

The work of self-taught installation artist Vũ Dân Tân (1947-), however, departs significantly from his contemporaries. With intuition and craftsmanship, he uses discarded cigarette packets, cardboard and other rubbish, to express his social concerns on consumerism (fig.40). Later installation works bear contemporary concepts, such as, *Be the Image with the Shadow*, (fig.41) by Nguyễn Minh Thành in the exhibition *Green-Red-Yellow* at Goethe Institute in 2003. All the keys were placed on the ground so that they became the shadow of the hung-up padlocks.

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<sup>51</sup> Bùi Như Hương & Trần Hậu Tuấn, *New Vietnamese Art in the 1990s*, p. 86.



Figure 41: Nguyễn Minh Thành, *Be the Image with the Shadow*, 2003, photograph by Phan Cẩm Thượng.



Figure 42: Nguyễn Minh Phương, *Grown Up*. 1998, courtesy of Blue Space.

Another installation related to social issues is, *Grown Up* (fig.42) by Nguyễn Minh Phương (1964-), exhibited in 1998 at Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre.

Fragments of tree branches are woven with coloured silks and support each other, as if to replace the highland forests that have vanished through consumerism. The brightly coloured silks act as bandages that cover the wounds imposed on nature.

The artist Trương Tân, previously discussed with reference to self-portraiture, began performance art in Việt-Nam, in a solo exhibition at the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội, in 1994. Initially trained as a painter, his commitment to performance art developed out of issues surrounding his homosexuality and of a 'self' alienated from social norms.<sup>52</sup> Tân's performances raised the interest of other Hà Nội artists, most notably Trần Lương, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Đào Anh Khánh.



Figure 43: Trần Lương's performance on the banks of the Red River, 2001, photograph from Iapone. In 2001, innovation in Vietnamese performance art was introduced when Trần Lương undertook his performance with the installation, *On the Banks of the Red River*, (fig.43) at a location in the capital occupied by illegal immigrants. Participants in the performance included local children, who played musical instruments and chanted traditional songs inside mosquito nets. Later that year, Lương exhibited his *Coal Mine*

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<sup>52</sup> Iola Lenzi, 'Hanoi, Paris, Hanoi, The Evolving Art of Truong Tan + Nguyen Quang Huy', *Art AsiaPacific*, n.35, July/August/September 2002, p. 64-69.

*Project*, to draw public attention to the similarities between peasant labour and coal miners.<sup>53</sup>

The performances of Đào Anh Khánh, on the other hand, touched on the more emotional side of humanity, with such extravagant sexual expression that he provoked extensive criticism. In his performances, Khánh acts out the role of a primitive male, wearing a loincloth with body paint, while he freely dances, shouts and chants expressions of pain, pleasure, joy and despair.<sup>54</sup> His performance, *Arrival of Spring* (fig.44), incorporated 3,000 candles, masses of flowers and scarecrows lined up along a 30-metre lane, on his large property in a Hà Nội outer suburb. It has often been asked that if it were not for the influence of his father, a former colonel in the northern military, would the cultural police tolerate many of his performances?



Figure 44: Đào Anh Khánh, *Arrival of Spring*. 2003, photograph in *Mỹ Thuật*.

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<sup>53</sup> Read Joe Fyfe, 2003, 'Making It New', *Art In America*, n.10 October, p.77-81 and Katherine Oliver, 'Letter from Hanoi', *Art Monthly Australia*, n. 162, August, 2003 p. 24-26.

<sup>54</sup> See Bùi Như Hương, 'Ấn Tượng "Đáo Xuân" của Đào Anh Khánh', is published 23-02-2004. at: <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=638&rb=0202&von=20>. The same article also appears under the title 'Đáo Xuân' (*Arrival of Spring*) by Thuý Minh in *Mỹ Thuật*, n.100 (63) (3-2004), p. 35-36.

The performances and installations of Ly Hoàng Ly (1975-) concentrate on femininity within a domestic context. In her performance, *Trays*,<sup>55</sup> (fig.45), she comments on the duties of Vietnamese women in their household responsibility of ‘home-making’. The function of trays is used as a metaphor for Vietnamese women’s subservience and their inner desire for liberation.

Within the context of Vietnamese traditional culture, performance art goes against a strong reluctance to publicly display the ‘self’ and the taboo of revealing the body. Therefore, the medium attracts a limited audience, of which most are foreigners, or, upon invitation, Vietnamese artists perform overseas. Ly Hoàng Ly is unique, in that she is the only female performance artist in Việt-Nam and quickly established herself locally and internationally. In 2003, she collaborated with Anida Yoeu Esguerra, a Cambodian-American artist, for the performance, *Pushing Through Borders*, at Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre.



Figure 45: Ly Hoàng Ly, *Trays*, Chang Mai, Thailand, 2004, courtesy of the artist.

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<sup>55</sup> Ly Hoàng Ly’s *Trays* performed in Korea in 2002, in Thailand 2003 and German in 2004.

Video art was introduced to Việt-Nam much later than other new media, due to equipment costs. A major exponent in Việt-Nam is Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, who was born in 1968, in Japan, and graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago, U.S. and Mount Royal School of Art, Maryland Institute, U.S. In 1997, Hatsushiba had his first solo exhibition *Dream* in Hàng Bài Gallery in Hà Nội and, in 1998, held an exhibition titled, *WWW.XEOM.COM* in Blue Space Contemporary Arts Centre. His installations frequently use rice as an expression of his cultural identity, based on the three cultures he considers characterise his individuality: Việtnam, Japan and America, In Jun Nguyen-Hatshushiba's video art, water is also used as a metaphor to deal with issues of war and stagnation (fig.46), a problem he regards as omnipresent in the lives of people in post-war Việt-Nam.



Figure 46: Jun-Nguyen-Hatshushiba, *Towards the Complex - For the Courageous, the Curious and the Cowards*. (video still) 2001 courtesy of the artist.

## THE OUTER IMPACT

Vietnamese refers to doi moi of 1986 as, 'opening the doors', a metaphor for the Party's tolerance of foreigners, who influenced the post-doi moi cultural framework. An instrumental player in doi moi is the Indochina Arts Partnership Program, initiated and administrated in 1987 by David Thomas, an American Việt-Nam war veteran and

artist.<sup>56</sup> David Thomas curated two exhibitions: *As Seen by Both Sides, American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War* (1991) and *An Ocean Apart, Contemporary Vietnamese Art from the United States and Việt-Nam* (1995). These exhibitions created a dialogue between Vietnamese and American artists, some of whom had been adversaries during the second Indochina war. With enthusiasm of Thomas for Việt-Nam, the IAP program has sponsored nearly 100 Vietnamese artists, researchers and art officials, to travel or study in America. Financial sponsorship particularly favours Hà Nội artists and Saigon artists have to subsidise themselves, because they are seen, according to David Thomas, as, “well-off.” With funding from a Fulbright Scholar Grant, he stationed himself in Hà Nội in 2002 and 2003 and published *Hồ Chí Minh – A Portrait* (fig.47).<sup>57</sup> In response to the question of whether these overseas excursions had any impact on Vietnamese art policy makers, Thomas said:

I don't see any benefit at all yet but maybe in the future. It takes time to change policies and I expect that in Việt-Nam it will come ‘one funeral at a time.’<sup>58</sup>



Figure 47: David Thomas, *Hồ Chí Minh – A Portrait*. 2003.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.iapone.org/index.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Published by Youth Publishing House, Hà Nội, 2003.

<sup>58</sup> Exchange email with Boi Tran Huynh 2004.

If the West sees Việt-Nam as exotic, Vietnamese artists look at the world with a curiosity and eagerness to catch up. Attendance at international exhibitions by Vietnamese artists, wishing to expand their interactions with foreign colleagues, has become a trend in the last decade. In 1993 the first Asia Pacific Triennial was held at the Queensland Art Gallery, Australia and Việt-Nam's sole representative was artist Nguyễn Xuân Tiệp (1956-). At the time, Tiệp was an art official at the Fine Arts Museum of Hà Nội and this was his first overseas trip. After witnessing the visual arts of the region, Tiệp returned home and saw his job in a new light. To the delight of both Vietnamese and foreigners, two of Tạ Ty's abstract paintings were displayed for the first time, in the Fine Arts Museum in Hà Nội.

In 1994, another significant new opportunity for Asian artists was established, through the introduction of the Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards. The award presented a forum through which Asian artists could research new dialogues and discover the work of regional contemporaries. The Phillip Morris Award is an annual event, without limitations in topic or style. Emerging artists throughout Asia, consider that it offers the potential to become known in the region, if not internationally.<sup>59</sup> The scope and criteria of the Philip Morris Awards excites young Vietnamese artists, with its annual 15,000 USD prize money. This overshadows the Vietnamese National Exhibition held every five years, with prize money of 500 USD.

The Philip Morris Awards gave many Vietnamese artists the incentive to cease working with Socialist Realist themes or romantic subjects for the art market, and develop a contemporary view on issues of a social nature, such as urbanisation, poverty or the aftermath of war. The artist, Vĩ Văn Long, is one such example: his approach to the problem of a population boom after the war was portrayed by a dozen pregnant mothers lined up in a hospital maternity ward, in his painting entitled

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<sup>59</sup> See Sian E. Jay, 'Sixth Sense', *Asian Art News*, January / February 2000, p. 36-37.

100,000,000.<sup>60</sup> By the year 2000, Vietnamese artists selected for the Philip Morris Art Awards, were depicting the full spectrum of social issues of a local, regional and global nature. The artist, Nguyễn Tấn Cường (1953-) commented on war and violence in his 2001 painting, *Scenario* (fig.48), a reflection on the New York Twin Towers terrorist attack on September 11, of the same year. Cường's usual abstract style is mingled with haunting faceless figures that project the horror and vulnerability of human beings. Nguyễn Tấn Cường represented war without heroism – a departure from the convention of depicting war as a 'glorious victory'.



Figure 48: Nguyễn Tấn Cường, *Scenario*. 2001.

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<sup>60</sup> This painting won the Jurors' Choice of Honour in 2000.

Ironically, paintings entered into the Philip Morris Awards in later years, were publicly criticised as, “expressing false feelings and borrowed ideas.”<sup>61</sup> Gallery director, Natalia Kraevskaia, upon viewing the 2003 participants for the award, described it as a gallery of nightmares in which, “artists rush in search of the most memorable events, striking evils or outspoken problems, by copying the style and ideas of earlier winners.”<sup>62</sup>

The 1990s was the most financially successful decade for Vietnamese artists, undoubtedly through their interaction with outsiders. Success stimulated a series of international sculpture symposiums: Hà Nội (1997), Huế (1998, 2002 and 2004), and An Giang (2004), with the participation of artists from various nations. In Huế, for instance, works from these three symposiums, which have become tourist attractions in the Huế Festivals, line the northern bank of the Perfume River. The desire to catch up with the outside world is reflected in these symposiums, however, compared to painting, their achievements remain modest. This was revealed in the National sculpture awards.

The Fourth National Sculpture Exhibition, which is held every ten years, was opened in December 2003 (fig.49). With 332 works displayed, the dominant tendency was conventional, in both style and content. Only one installation was accepted for display, *Land and Water* (fig.50) by Vương Văn Thạo, but it was indifferent to other surrounding sculptures.

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<sup>61</sup> Phong Vân, ‘Mỹ Thuật VN và Thái Lan, Một Cách Nhìn’ (Vietnamese and Thai Art, a Vision), *Thế Thao & Văn Hoá*, 2 November 2001, p.30.

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.talawas.org/gocnhin/gnh35e.html>.



Figure 49: The 4<sup>th</sup> National Sculpture Exhibition. December 2003, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.



Figure 50: Vương Văn Thọ, *Land and Water*, installation, 2003, photograph by Boi Tran Huynh.

The winning sculptures were criticised by Hà Nội's art circles, both official and unofficial, as being selected according to political criteria and not for their aesthetic values. The first prize, granted to recently graduated Nguyễn Hồng Dương, for his sculpture, *Festival of Buffalo Sacrifice*, was seen as decorative, and the second prize to Lý Châu Hoàn, for, *Engineering Soldier Making a Bridge*, was criticised for its lack of variety.<sup>63</sup> The Chairman of the Art Committee stated in his conference address that,

<sup>63</sup> Lê Quốc Bảo, 'Tản Mạn Đôi Điều' (A Few Notes), p. 16-18, and Phạm Quang Trung, 'Ấn Tượng về Triển Lãm Điêu Khắc Lần thứ VI' (Impressions on the National Sculpture Exhibition IV), *Mỹ Thuật* n. 98 (62) (2-2004) p. 18-21.

“Everyone can create whatever they want but art must follow politics, while the nation remains threatened by adversarial forces.”<sup>64</sup>

### **Art criticism**

Art criticism remains a new area of study in Việt-Nam, where only 43 out of 1,395 members of the Fine Arts Association are affiliated with the Art Criticism Branch.<sup>65</sup> In the history of Vietnamese literary discourse, there is only one documented debate on, “art for art’s sake or art for humanity’s sake” and that took place in 1935. After the 1956 Nhân Văn–Giai Phẩm scandal referred to in Chapter three, artistic freedom was suppressed as decadent and reactionary. As a result, art criticism served the Socialist Realist single agenda of ‘art for humanities sake’ as understood in Socialist ideology.

In 1976, the Fine Arts University of Hồ Chí Minh City established an Art History and Theory course, authorised by the director, Nguyễn Phước Sanh. The first cohort of students was made up of 12 successful applicants who passed an entrance exam that focused on theory and writing skills.<sup>66</sup> However, in the following two years recruiting difficulties were experienced and the course shrunk to five and nine students, respectively. No graduates from these two intakes ever entered the cultural work force and in 1978, the university ceased running the course.

However, in the same year, the Fine Arts University of Hà Nội adopted the Art History and Theory course, under the management of Nguyễn Quân. The University’s location in the ancient city was a major asset, where the wealth of historic architecture and temples gave strength to research on traditional art. Hồ Chí Minh City has no such heritage and its propensity for adapting to the new does not lead to critical thinking about the history of art.

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<sup>64</sup> P.V., ‘Hội Thảo Mười Năm Điêu Khắc Việt Nam’ (Conference Ten Years of Vietnamese Sculpture), *Mỹ Thuật* n. 98 (62) (2-2004), p.14-15.

<sup>65</sup> The others are painting, sculpture, decorative arts and print making. If someone wants to join the association, he or she must notify what branch to enlist. Statistics are taken from the analogy of the Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association in 1999.

<sup>66</sup> I am one of these students.

The art critic Nguyễn Hải Yến (1942-) graduated in Literature and History in 1964 from Hà Nội University of Pedagogy, and described the status of Vietnamese art criticism in the following:

Throughout their studies, the majority of graduates from the University of Social Sciences carry out their research with enthusiasm but students of art criticism realise that they have to overcome difficult research boundaries. They have no direct contact with original masterpieces, interactions with international conferences or access to academic publications of Western scholars.<sup>67</sup>

From this description, there is no doubt that Vietnamese art critics have difficulties in acquiring information for their scholarship. Furthermore, the government has not acknowledged that Vietnamese art critics face ongoing competition from the expertise of foreign critics, who arrived with the flow of tourists and overseas investment. Vietnamese artists are first recognised abroad and not by their own critics. A case in point is Bradford Edwards's article in 2000, on the work of Lê Thừa Tiến, published in *World Sculpture News*. Before Edward's commentary, few people in Việt-Nam were aware that Tiến spent 1995 studying at the Rijksacademie in Holland and held a key exhibition in 1998 at the Lilian Immig Gallery, Emmanuel College, Boston, U.S. This exhibition included the installation, *Việt-Nam – The Fossilized War* (fig.51), a display of plaster figures with video footage. The culturally perceptive editorial staff of both, *World Sculpture News* and *Asian Art News*, makes it their business to keep up to date on current activities in Vietnamese contemporary art - but where are the Vietnamese art critics?

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<sup>67</sup> Nguyễn Hải Yến, cited from B.B.T., 'Những Ý Kiến từ hội thảo Phê Bình Mỹ Thuật trong thời kỳ đổi mới' (Comments in the Art Criticism Symposium in Doi Moi), published in *Mỹ Thuật*, n.88 (57) (9-2003), p. 10-13.



Figure 51: Lê Thừa Tiến, *Việt-Nam – The Fossilised War*. 1998, courtesy of the artist.

The art critic, Lê Quốc Bảo (1934-), bitterly remarked on the difficulties of practicing art criticism in Việt-Nam, by claiming that while many artists survived financially through the sale of their work, art critics had to supplement their meagre earnings through other activities, be it teaching, editing or something else.<sup>68</sup> Research is therefore, last on their agenda.

The real crisis in Vietnamese art criticism is exacerbated by the education system's failure to support independent thinking and the prohibition on intellectuals raising a critical voice. Furthermore, even today, the press and media rarely publish points of view that risk contravening Party guidelines. The Việt-Nam Fine Arts Association's official magazine *Mỹ Thuật*, in circulation since 1977, fails to provide a base for solid criticism, as only 'pleasant' reviews are acceptable. Most articles are merely descriptions that lack scholarship and published, more often than not, without a reproduction of the work under discussion, by an editorial staff with little professionalism. Newspapers and magazines occasionally publish art reviews by reporters who have little knowledge of the visual arts. In 2002, a 'round table forum' in

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<sup>68</sup> Lê Quốc Bảo, 'Lý Luận Phê Bình Mỹ Thuật Đã Khởi Động' (Art Criticism Has Been Started), *Mỹ Thuật*, n.1 A (bộ mới) 1994, p. 35-36.

Vietnamese and English was established on the website, *Talawas*, to discuss issues in Vietnamese contemporary art.<sup>69</sup> Practitioners, critics and the interested public, expressed views with little regard for Vietnamese censorship, which, in 2004, led to Vietnamese authorities' blocking domestic viewers access to *Talawas*.

The dearth of art criticism and curatorship contributes to the indifference of the Vietnamese audience. Friends, family and students usually attend exhibition openings, thereafter, the space usually remains empty. Moreover, wealthy Vietnamese rarely, if at all, go to museums or attend art exhibitions, either for leisure or information, let alone to purchase an artwork.

Collecting art can be both an adventure and a long-term investment. The collector, Trần Hậu Tuấn, (1955-) moved from Hà Nội to Hồ Chí Minh City, in the early 1980s and established the largest private collection in the city, comprising nearly 3,000 works that range from colonial times to the present. Tuấn developed a love of art through his friendship with one of Bùi Xuân Phái's sons and, subsequently, became the major collector of Phái's paintings. He is also the co-writer of publications on Vietnamese art history, based on his collection and an art consultant to foreign buyers.

The only other major private collection in Hồ Chí Minh City is in Đức Minh Museum (fig.52), owned by Bùi Quốc Chí, a son of Mr. Bùi Đình Thảo or, as he is known, Đức Minh.<sup>70</sup> Đức Minh Museum was developed from his father's collection, which was split up among the children after his death. Đức Minh Museum was opened to the public in 2002, in a new purpose-built venue, "to house the old Masters"<sup>71</sup> and periodically exhibits contemporary art.

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<sup>69</sup> <http://www.talawas.org/talaFrame.htm>.

<sup>70</sup> See Chapter 3, p. 183-184.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Bùi Quốc Chí, January 2004.



Figure 52: Đức Minh Museum, courtesy of Bùi Quốc Chí.

## Conclusion

The reform policy inaugurated in 1986 halted the process of ‘North going South versus South going North,’ as artists were hurled into a new market-driven economy. The desire for modernity, accompanied by multifaceted international interactions, accelerated changes and generated a shift in aesthetics.

Post-doi moi prosperity adds more colours to a changing society. In the 1990s, the áo dài was reintroduced into everyday Vietnamese life, bringing with it colour, pattern and even original painting and, eventually, its official recognition as Việt-Nam’s national costume. Fashion designing and modelling became a new career, leading to the renewal of urban wardrobes. Western dresses are seen everywhere in everyday life – a sign of affluence and freedom.

With the reforms and the expansion of international business in Việt-Nam, the construction boom in the 1990s dramatically transformed Việt-Nam’s landscape, and revealed a clear preference for international styles and high-rise buildings. There were

some attempts to revive tradition in architecture but, so far, this is not evident in State edifices. The most notable architecture is a cemetery (the Ghostly City, south of Huế) that embraces Huế's tradition of mosaic tiles and was built by the affluence of Việt-Nam's Diaspora.

Concurrent with the reforms, was the rise of an art market through which, for the first time in Vietnamese history, career artists as opposed to crafts people, could make a living, with real opportunities to become affluent, beyond all expectations. Art galleries in Hong Kong and Singapore recognised Vietnamese art as the epitome of Vietnamese-ness and artistic individuality, due to rediscovery of the 'self' after decades of suppression. The blossoming art market also provided opportunities to participate in international exhibitions.

The reforms brought numerous gains, including greater artistic freedom and choices of styles and media that included the introduction of installation, performance and video art. Never before has Vietnamese art reaped so many benefits, and all within a decade. On the other hand, rapid economic expansion brought equally spectacular drawbacks: an increase in forgeries, imitations, deficiencies in curatorship and art criticism, accompanied by static growth in exhibition attendances. Vietnamese contemporary art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is perplexing, with a prevailing uncertainty, about artists who are whirled into the western orbit and, in the process, potentially lose their national identity.

Currently, there is a tendency in Vietnamese art of, 'going out to the ocean' whereby artists hope to gain recognition overseas, before establishing themselves at home. Eagerness to embrace the outside world is a reaction to the long-standing restrictions, imposed by the Socialist government and raises controversial questions for Vietnamese artists, about plurality versus authoritarianism, individualism versus collectivism and the market versus artistic integrity.



Figure 53: Thái Bá Vân beside his bust by Phạm Văn Hạng, *photograph from Tuổi Trẻ*.

The magnitude of change can be understood in the following account. Thái Bá Vân (1934-1999) (fig.53), a well-known art critic in Hà Nội, presented a conference paper to honour the July, 1992 birthday centenary of the artist, Nguyễn Phan Chánh. He argued that Chánh's painting *Chơi Ô Ăn Quan* (Girls Playing with Pebbles) represented the peak of his creativity, despite having been produced in 1931, well before the introduction of Socialist Realism to Việt-Nam. Thái Bá Vân was known for his cautious use of language, but stated in his paper:

In 1960, Mr. Kuznesov, from the Soviet Union, came to Việt-Nam Fine Arts College to teach painting, Mr. Ghivi taught sculpture, and Mr. Iakovlev taught Marxist-Leninist at the College of Theories of the Ministry of Culture. Then Soviet and Chinese books, magazines and films flooded Hà Nội; *we initiated an art movement after them and thought that there was only one path to follow.*<sup>72</sup>(Italics added).

Thái Bá Vân implies that there was actually more than one path but only one was accessible to Vietnamese artists before *doi moi*. He could not have used this language if the reform failed to set new movements in motion. However, the political climate in 1992 was such that the critic dared not reveal what the other paths could be.

Since *doi moi*, Vietnamese contemporary artists have eagerly and, in many cases, hurriedly discovered, re-discovered and followed various paths. These new directions represent the dynamic aesthetic choices currently available to artists. In the aftermath

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<sup>72</sup> Thái Bá Vân, 'Nguyễn Phan Chánh và Chơi Ô Ăn Quan' (Nguyễn Phan Chánh and Girls Playing with Game of Pebbles), *Mỹ Thuật TP Hồ Chí Minh*, n. 6 (12-1992), p. 11.

of the reform, Vietnamese artists quietly slipped out of the Social Realist straightjacket and in a Vietnamese saying, “the doctrine was buried without drums or bugles.”

However, Vietnamese contemporary art still faces a harsh reality. On one hand, the State still controls public spaces and art education on behalf of their ideology. Despite their international travels in the last ten years, mostly to the West, art policy makers appear to retain their autocracy and create obstructions for contemporary art practices. On the other hand, the ubiquitous presence of foreigners in Vietnamese art circles of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including art galleries, alternative art spaces, curators, art critics and investors, indicates that Vietnamese art is subject to potential cultural Imperialism. In the flow of many international influences, Việt-Nam has the choice to position itself in the global village, to understand the world and grow with it at the risk of losing a national identity so long fought for, or, once more, isolating itself from others. The question is, do Vietnamese contemporary artists have the strength and flexibility to absorb and assimilate alien elements, without being dominated?