

## **‘Vision’**

Zoe Butt (Executive Director and Curator, San Art)

What inspires my curatorial work is the determination of artists in their demand for new histories to be written, for new modes of ‘interpretation’ to be found that better speaks to the context of where they live and work. In particular cases, artists with such passion are attempting to re-write the presumed mode of engagement between cultural producer and institution; between artist and curator; between citizen and government body, by initiating their own organizations and associated residency programs. This bold move to embrace their practice as a kind of social enterprise is often re-writing the mode of engagement and understanding of the role and shape of art organization as showcase, discursive agent, and archive. Providing space and time for artists to think and experiment, outside the pressures of political sensitivities and market restrictions, has been crucial in nurturing patrons who want to contribute to the sustainability of their society’s arts infrastructure.

In many parts of the globe, artists are often initiating their own artistic organizations that are the only arts infrastructure for experimental contemporary art practice in their locale. It should be made clear that their work often stands apart from the official understanding of ‘art’ that is supported in their country and as such it is problematic to argue their labor as ‘alternative’, as prescribed by popular western discourse. Also, artists who initiate such organizations often possess artistic practices deemed politically sensitive to local authorities and so the ability to raise public awareness of their work is very difficult. Such contexts can be found today in Vietnam, where I currently live and work; but also in places such as Cambodia, Lebanon, Indonesia or Myanmar to name but a few. In the Vietnamese context, there is no visual or textual resource material or expertise on contemporary culture post-1954; there is no financial support for contemporary artists; museums are spaces for hire with no curatorial expertise and very rare inclusion of art from abroad; and all public events must be approved by the Vietnamese Government Cultural Ministry (no official policy or guideline exists and remains wholly dependent on the employed rank of the individual giving approval).

In the establishment of ‘San Art’ in 2007, an artist-initiated<sup>i</sup>, non-profit, contemporary art space and reading room in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; the motivations for founding this unique entity were driven by a need to build an artistic community that enabled and empowered the sharing of ideas on a platform of open dialog, production and display that engaged both local and international art practice. From the very beginning it was important to San Art that they operate carefully ‘above-ground’, meaning that they would prepare the immense body of paperwork required for license permission for their events. In Vietnam, most artist-run spaces do not seek official permit and hence their activities and organizational lifetime is frequently short-lived/shut down. With its regular exhibitions, workshops and lectures, San Art’s initial target audience were primarily artists, seeking to maintain a space for creative experimental thinking, however in the last few years it has become an entity that recognizes the critical need for a larger interdisciplinary community to support its sustainability – not only for its own organizational capacity but also for the future of Vietnamese contemporary art practice.

In a country where artistic production is low due to reasons of economy and self-censorship; where there is no economic system that provides tax incentive for culture; where there is no recognition of a non-profit artistic entity; where an educational system does not offer arts management training let alone mandate the learning of local or comparative world histories, it remains crucial to innovate the fabric of our presumed community. In many cases artist initiated

activity that seeks to work openly with ‘official’ structures are slowly changing cultural policy – but often at a risk that can potentially restrict desired activities. San Art must activate two tier programming – exhibitions of quality that do not consistently challenge perceived State policy while also privately running activities that cater for an interest in experimental practice and critique. It is a precarious dance and all content must be carefully weighed, there are times where official admission of material is omitted or certain programs (such as lectures supporting critical thinking) are produced for private audience (thus not requiring permit). In early 2011, San Art programmed a lecture by Duong Diem Mau, a renown author claimed to be Vietnam’s William Burrough’s, however the government perceived this as our interest in this writer’s previous anti-government opinions (which was not to be a focus of discussion at all but rather his creative methodology) and so San Art as an organization was suddenly interrogated by Cultural Police and placed on high security alert within the country’s Cultural Ministry. Threats of arrest were handed down. It was made known that we were all being watched. This is but one example of the dance that can sometimes go awry. It is a fragile relationship that is slowly moving from suspicion to respectful distance.

With the initiation of ‘San Art Laboratory’ in 2012, Vietnam’s first homegrown ‘studio-residency’ program, offering artists space for 6 months at a time, it has afforded the organization an additional site in which official permits for use of space is conveniently cloudy as a residency is not necessarily considered a ‘public’ event. Using this to our advantage, we call it our ‘production’ house, the factory of our ‘business’ (for San Art must be at least registered as a small family business in order to employ staff). San Art Laboratory has become a hub, a meeting zone for artists and visitors to gather and share a meal, hear an artist talk, conduct workshops or undertake open ‘critique’ sessions in the studios of participating artists. With 3 of the 4 studio/apartments allocated specifically for local artists (the remaining for international), the building has become a rare laboratory of time and ideas that cannot be found anywhere else in the country. In many ways it is demonstrating artistic practice as a form of knowledge production for each artist is paired with a ‘talking partner’ – which could be an architect, musician or writer – as soundboard and critically thinking friend. Emerging artist Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai from Hue markedly benefited from her 6-month stay with us, her practice taking new conceptual turns benefiting from particular conversations with international resident Luz Angela Lizarazo from Colombia. This cross-cultural intergenerational bonding of women has made significant impact on Mai in terms of her confidence, method of experimentation and most importantly affirmed her reasons for being an artist in a climate of considerable obstacle. San Art hopes that ‘San Art Laboratory’ can continue however it is entirely dependent on unstable funding structures that demand hefty unrealistic quantitative evaluation (grants from international foundation) or the pilot investment from private collector – both relationships have huge potential in the long term, however with considerable negotiation. The former require audience statistics and financial reports that run counter to the organization’s capacity while the latter expects quality and efficiency in return for their investment. The former requires constant liaison to explain our context and argue for the need for their policies to shift while the latter require frequent reminder of prior warning of the realities faced by artists before they invest. Though this may sound arguably logical, it is heartening to share that the international foundation and private collector/corporate sponsor who currently support San Art are entirely committed to this dialog and deeply aware of the difficulties we face. It is a mutual learning, ‘try and see’ process of production that recognizes the immense potential within Vietnam’s artistic community. It is particularly exciting to be developing new forms of collector investment that understand the benefits in sponsoring an artistic organization, in commissioning new work, and in return, we offer consultation services to develop their private collection.

Such innovative kinds of relationships follows a critical question for all of us at San Art on how to maintain financial sustainability that mediates both local and international visibility while also catering for the integrity of artistic production. It is possible for artists to develop their own micro-financing and indeed artists in Vietnam often produce landscape and portrait paintings for the tourist trade in order to make their experimental art – however this comes at a cost of confusing authorities on what is deemed ‘contemporary’ art on the local level; while confusing international markets as to the consistency of their practice – it is an intriguing dilemma.

The danger in the future is the threat of commercialization and historical myopia. How can artists maintain integrity and critical self-reflection when curatorial facilitators of culture are thin, where educational resources and expertise is limited/restricted? The presence of international engagement is paramount in continuing to visually demonstrate the need for such integrity and facilitation to be seen as crucial (there is significant level of restriction being placed on international dialog in such places as Vietnam, China, Burma, Lebanon for example). I believe artists can maintain integrity in developing their own platforms, however it is at a great cost to their own individual finances - residencies are time incubators for social insight rarely afforded in any other means - such time spent serves to break down preconceived ideas of cultural difference and provides increased opportunity for mutual respect and collaboration (these two latter facts greatly needed in the Global South where mass of cultural diversity often leads to great social misunderstanding and stereotype).

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<sup>i</sup> San Art was founded by Dinh Q Le, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Tiffany Chung and Phunam. Today it operates with a Board that consists of additional members artist Matt Lucero (LA/Saigon), collectors Nicholas and Angela Curtis (Sydney), art dealer Wayne Blank (LA) and Zoe Butt.