

News from Southeast Asia



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SOJOURN is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the study of social and cultural issues in Southeast Asia. It publishes empirical and theoretical research articles with a view to promoting and disseminating scholarship in and on the region. Areas of special concern include ethnicity, religion, tourism, urbanization, migration, popular culture, social and cultural change, and development. Fields most often represented in the journal are anthropology, sociology and history.

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The return of the h i ngo i artist and new art spaces in Vietnam

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THE ART SCENE IN VIETNAM is undergoing a revival. Fast changing socioeconomic trends brought about by the 1986 reform have resulted in profound changes in every sphere of Vietnamese life, including the arts and entertainment sector. Economic growth followed by international cooperation, the advancement of technology, including new media, have seen a proliferation of new cultural activities, innovative forms of artistic expression and creative cultural exchange with other countries. Art has once more become attractive to a wider national audience.

Nevertheless, this optimism was not always there. Indeed, the reform may have even been detrimental in some ways to the traditional arts. For example, pre-reform, the arts and performing organizations were subsidized by the communist

Artist Ngoc Nau is working in her studio to produce artwork 'Light portrait', 2013
Source: San-Art

regime, but later, economic reforms saw a reduction in public funds available to the cultural sector. On one hand, the cultural sector saw a reduction of subsidies while, on the other, it failed to generate sufficient income because of the small portion of income an average Vietnamese spent on art and entertainment. Many art and cultural organizations were severely affected, including the film industry. Those who managed to commercialize and survive, however, also complained about the difficulties of preserving artistic standards. Meanwhile, state control over the content of artistic and cultural expressions hampered innovation and creativity. Mainstream art was harnessed by the state to inspire patriotism and represent 'Vietnam-ness' through the themes of idyllic villages, peace, life and heroic people. Art served the purpose of promoting

national identity, particularly important for a country that suffered years of wars and continuous foreign aggressions. The communist regime decided what artistic expressions to promote and what to prohibit.

The political turmoil and wars resulted in a mass exodus of artists in the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of which originated from south Vietnam. This artistic diaspora formed a vibrant community of h i ngo i (literally 'overseas'), who sought freedom for their artistic, and often political, expression. H i ngo i' became a genre of its own, manifesting mainly in music, but also in literature and cinematography, and is popular among the overseas Vietnamese in France, USA, Canada, Australia and other western countries. These artists in exile were able to express what could not be expressed in their country and produced works of art that were full of nostalgia and idealization of a beloved, estranged motherland. Quite naturally, these overseas Vietnamese were influenced by western styles and artistic idioms whilst they continued working with traditional art. With the relaxing of state censorship and the return of the h i ngo i artists to Vietnam, a new art form is being introduced to a domestic audience of 90 million.

Many post-war artists have embraced forms of expression that transcend local traditional styles and themes, and have begun experimenting with contemporary art. Contemporary art, still marginal, is consumed only by a small and select community of art lovers. The Academy of Fine Art continues to focus on preserving traditional forms of artistic expression and hence is resistant to artistic innovation. However, new spaces for contemporary art are emerging. While only a small circle of cosmopolitan Saigoners, many of them Vi t k i u (overseas Vietnamese), was initially supportive of contemporary art, H Chi Minh City is now offering prominent art spaces like Galerie Qu nh, Cactus Gallery or Zero Station. Not to be outdone, Hanoi also boasts Manzi, Hanoi Grapevine and Nhà Sàn Studio to cater to its contemporary art lovers. Foreign partners, like the Goethe Institute and the British Council in Hanoi, have been instrumental in promoting contemporary artistic expressions.²

The changes wrought by h i ngo i artists became more evident by the late 2000s. A new generation of h i ngo i contemporary artists began to make their mark. One such initiative was San-Art, based in H Chi Minh City, established in October 2007 by four Vietnamese-born and educated artists who are now working abroad, namely Dinh Q. Le, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phu Nam Thuc Ha and Ti any Chung. Noticing a lack of artistic exchange in Vietnam, they started San-Art as a platform where local and international artists could engage and showcase their work, serve as a forum for contemporary art discussion, and to nurture new talent. San-Art was for a long time the only such experimental art organization in Vietnam that worked with local and regional artists while offering education opportunities. It has been recognized as a good example of the UNESCO Convention on Promoting and Protection of Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

