

INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL

DISPATCH

The pilgrimage of inspiration - artists as engineers
in Vietnam

Interview with Rich Streitmatter-Tran, Dia/Projects

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Zoe Butt: As a Vietnamese artist with a refugee history, who was trained in interrelated media in the US, who has worked very closely, indeed collaboratively, with other Vietnamese artists based in Saigon, what were the largest obstacles you faced when you returned to live here in 2003?

Richard Streitmatter-Tran: Actually, to clarify, I don't fall into the refugee category, as I was an adoptee and my coming to the US was by plane as an infant. So, I never really identified with the refugee experience directly. In 2003, I finished my studies at the Massachusetts College of Art where I was then interested in performance work. I had the privilege of meeting two Vietnamese creatives in Boston, Ngo Thai Uyen and Nguyen Long, who were studying for a semester at the college. That set up for a discussion about the future and later that year, I found myself developing a video art pilot course at the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts University and forming a performance group. The reason I mention this background is that these early relationships would set a tone for practically everything I've done in Vietnam since. In the years say between 2003-2006, art seemed boundless and we had a lot of energy. It was a very exciting time for our art group of five people. But it was short lived. During those years, we had a few confrontations with the government, but ones we were able to work through and move on. I think the hardest challenge was to keep momentum. Unfortunately, our group dissolved a year later on good terms, and I was forced out of the University at the same time. So I had to reassess what I was going to do. I felt a connection with young artists then that I do not have now. I think connecting to young artists and relating to them now, particularly if I didn't have an institutional umbrella, would be difficult. So while I appear to be deeply ingrained into the contemporary art scene here, I feel my depth is rather limited. I have been in the processes of realizing what I can contribute to and what is beyond my scope, aptitude, ability or interest. Beyond simply producing work, I've also been asked to wear different hats from arts advisement, awards nomination panels, writing texts for catalogs and other publications and contributing to various research projects. While I appreciate these opportunities, if not properly aligned with my current concerns, they detract from time in the studio producing my work. It's not a line drawn in the

sand, but it's something that I've had to always negotiate - the role as an artist and my other responsibilities.

ZB: So this first group you formed in Ho Chi Minh City were all Vietnamese artists based here?

RST: Yes, that's right, with the exception of myself. I was inspired by the Japanese group Dumb Type.

ZB: What was the local reception to this kind of work in Vietnam? I imagine that this kind of practice was little known?

RST: In the beginning, it seemed really open. We were mainly doing performance. Hoang Ly had been doing performances already. Ngo Thai Uyen and I had developed work in Boston and Bui Cong Khanh had just begun to explore this side. The other member, Nguyen Pham Trun Hau was interested incorporating dance. I can't say it was well known in Vietnam, but a lot of Vietnamese artists seemed to have taken on performance as a viable expression. Though in retrospect, I have my doubts as to what extent Vietnamese artists valued performance. It seemed the "thing to do" at that time and it was seen as something that made you contemporary. Many of the artists have since appeared to distance themselves from performative work, myself included.



ZB: I am curious here about audiences. In my basic research it appears that the exposure to interdisciplinary artistic practices in Vietnam has largely been due to international visitors - either artists doing performances, or Vietnamese people returning from study. I wonder about the local audiences and the extent of their interest and curiosity - did this affect the momentum of the group?

RST: Well, I guess it depends on the type of performance. There haven't really been venues for performances here. Audiences like spectacle, which is why perhaps Dao Anh Khanh's performances attract so much attention, and continue to do so. Also there seems to be some sort of homogenization in the performance aesthetic, which I suspect is somewhat related to the international performance art circuit, where the form and duration of the performance work is rather prescribed. I think there needs to be a loosening up of what performance art is here and it might need to draw from other histories. I find a lot of performance artists have been allergic to theatre arts and I'm not sure why this is so. But there's a lot to learn from the theatre and particularly here where that tradition is firmly embedded and the general audience understands that vocabulary. The momentum of our group sort of died a natural death. Members expanded their families and others decided to pursue other forms. Also, if there isn't a space for speaking about new forms, the longevity is doomed for early death.

ZB: I very much agree with you that if there is no space to discuss new ideas, then these ideas either never come to fruition or 'die an early death' as you say. This question of a space for

speaking, are you saying that official spaces for art provide opportunities for a cross section of the community to work together, is this something you aspire to?

RST: I'm for a plurality of spaces. Which is probably a good segue into why I started dia/projects. But before getting into that, I am all for the establishment of official spaces. I like institutions, I admit it, and in fact most of my work is produced for institutions. Galleries have traditionally not been the main venue for the display of my work.



ZB: You mention you were forced to leave the university - why?

RST: My leaving the university and the story behind it is rather bland, but typical of the system here. I was allowed to develop the course and lecture when the outgoing president was still in charge. Presidents usually serve five or so year terms appointed by the Ministry of Education. When he left and was replaced, the new president didn't see me as a part of his plan for the university. I was teaching class at that time and they suspended my class mid-semester. They never technically fired me; they just never let me resume my class.

ZB: Why do you feel you do not have a connection with the younger artists now?

RST: Perhaps I'm not equipped to engage with young artists in the way I wish I was, I cannot express my ideas in Vietnamese the way I wish I could. It's a part of my life story that I have no control of. But with certain young audiences I am very effective.

I am working with young creatives now, but more aligned with the design community rather than the fine arts. There's a lot of room for hybridization and it's something I encourage, but very often the goals and ambitions of design students, and indeed the way they relate to things, is different from the typical art student. I think the operative term here is art student specifically, rather than students in general or young people. There is a chasm between the active art community I am involved in and the young art students/recent graduates. These young creatives don't feel my art community to be accessible. With me no longer having a personal relationship with these young artists via the art university, I can no longer help bridge that distance directly. This may change however and I'm hoping it does. There is a new director at the university and I've recently begun some discussion with the Faculty at the Fine Art University for some brainstorming and we're all optimistic that we may be able to close the distance shortly.

But not having a direct connection with young art students anymore has limited my network and I instead look to others who are better enabled than I, such as Nguyen Nhu Huy. Also too perhaps, is that I'm not a community artist.

ZB: How do you define 'community' artist?

RST: I am interested in social issues, for sure. It's the heart of my work, but I am not very effective working in large groups, or organizing people. Yeah, that's an amoebic term. For example, I think I'm more effective at interpreting social and community issues in the work rather than working collaboratively with large communities. But that's about to change to some extent with some of the dia/projects. I think I've figured out a way to reconcile some of these issues and hope to reestablish connections with young creatives in this city with the help of a lot of good people. Essentially, I become a matchmaker. I've just helped a young artist to Prague and another urban designer/architect to Japan.

ZB: If I look at your artistic history of production, you have been very much a catalyst for the germination of artist groups working collectively, or the cog that spurs a network of people across geographical distances, as a teacher working and assisting students, as also recently being a kind of curatorial artist where you work with large-scale institutions and branded biennales. It strikes me here that you do perhaps believe in the spirit of collaboration . . . but there is still an element of control you aspire to as an individual that you've not found the locus for in such collaborative practices?

RST: Yes. I agree. There's a lot of contradiction in there and I'm willing to accept that. I think such matchmaking absolutely necessary, particularly in Vietnam.

ZB: I'm wondering how, as an artist, this came to be so important to you?

RST: I mean, like you've said, I'm usually working with multilayered projects/institutions, but my own proclivities are rather more narrowly focused in the work itself. My whole trajectory has been the benefactor of matchmaking by others.

ZB: ... and so you want to equally give others around you opportunities and you see this as the basis of dia/projects?

RST: I've seen how it works and how important networking is. I've been able to adapt to that way of working and in turn have used it to both expand my practice but also the networks of others. Allow me to be circumspect... the best teachers I've had were the ones that shared knowledge and gave opportunities to their students. It's also common sense. I always use the Socrates-Plato-Aristotle-Alexander lineage as an example. The better the students are, the better the teacher is. I'm not a teacher in arts, but using a similar analogy, the better projects people are involved in and the better their work is, and if I had some small part in that, well...that's basically what we're all after. A better arts community and yes, that's what dia/projects intends to be, at least for now. An umbrella for a number of initiatives that at times fall outside of my own arts practice and at times are directly attached to it. Perhaps similar to some of the initiatives that Rirkrit has done, his art yes, and sometimes more that.

ZB: I completely and utterly agree. I think the building of a community is essential to the discussion of culture. In my work as a curator at San Art, many people have referred to my work as a community-based field of work, discussed along the lines of social work nearly. I find this framework of understanding culture problematic. I have had numerous arguments with people in China and Australia who thinks that curatorial work is not about community building. While I understand that there are a number of privileged people working in environments with knowledge and funding capacity, putting on challenging exhibitions, I think that there needs to be more talk about other contexts where the systems of art and philanthropy operate on a whole other level, where artists and curators need to work together in the building of environs and platforms for sharing ideas. I think dia/projects is a very interesting initiative in this regard.

RST: Exactly and I think that by defining different territories and expanding them is important. In fact, 'dia', in Vietnamese also means 'territory/area'.

ZB: I think this question of territory/area is a good next topic. You are a Vietnamese with a US passport. Locally labeled as a Viet Kieu. Has there been much friction for you living in Vietnam with that kind of mindset?

RST: I don't think so. I'm not alone in this condition. For better or worse, it's my lot in life. I must do the best work that I can do and follow my own intuition. I am privileged only in the respect when seen from a certain angle, but I am compromised in others. I don't complain about it. I think there has not been a lot of friction as I have followed a path that many of the VK artists have paved - engagement. I think the longevity of the relationship between local artists, Bui Cong Khanh and I are an example of that. We have our own paths and conditions, sometimes they cross, others are parallel, but we move on. I might sometimes be seen as an outsider, but I suspect that I'm also seen as a very approachable outsider as well. I'm not one for essences, so what is Vietnamese is not an ontological problem for me, it's more of an abstract one.



ZB: Whose responsibility do you think it is to create more openness within the discussion of what constitutes 'contemporary' in Vietnam? I ask this in light of the fact that in Vietnam, potential censorship is an expected consideration. I found it interesting that Nguyen Manh Hung's interview in DISPATCH states that it has become a near 'natural' condition that artists self censor their own work.

RST: Yes. I agree with Hung to some degree. Whether this is an artificial construct or not is another question. Censorship is like war in the respect that it seems deeply ingrained into the fabric of humanity. What can be done about it is the struggle - it's about negotiation, both internal and external.

ZB: Censorship is an ingrained phenomenon in Vietnam?

RST: It's an ingrained phenomenon worldwide. I just read an article about comedian Sarah Silverman the other day that really affected me about this whole issue of censorship. It's not unique to Vietnam, but how it is perceived and how one reacts to it can be a very local thing. I'm also disturbed that it can be a crutch at times. I hate to be so blunt about it, but I feel that it's also an excuse. Artists must adapt and move ahead. They must develop their own strategies for dealing with it.

ZB: I feel that what is lacking is an understanding about how important artists and creative thinkers are to society in Vietnam

RST: Yes. This is true on a very raw level. But the next question should naturally be, how do we do it and not get censored, but lack of appreciation is also global in that respect. I don't mean to sound dour here, but if those who do not value artists (meaning those in power to affect change) they only

need to look at the knowledge gleaned from ancient civilizations and almost all we now know is through traditional archeology of culture.

ZB: I agree. Test and push boundaries. I think that spaces for discussion and experimentation prompt such considerations, which is why I find it fascinating that in Vietnam, artists are initiators of spaces. They struggle in this creation but it is the basis of a different kind of system of culture that sits entirely out of the radar of the official recognized forms of cultural languages in Vietnam - this phenomena is also of course not unique to Vietnam - artist run spaces have long been catalysts to social movements

RST: Culture is the communicator, and only more recently, has science been able to begin to catch up.

ZB: Exactly!

RST: I sort of see my space as being a little shack on the highway, an outpost and that's fine with me. I actually am not equipped to be in the center.

ZB: I don't believe in centre and periphery anymore

RST: Yeah. I agree with you.

ZB: I believe we all operate in contexts that need to create our own systems of meaning and value, but we MUST exchange. We must have external influences. That in itself is a scientific fact. A foreign body challenges the immune system. The body works out a way to control - medicine, natural proclivities etc. - evolvment

RST: Yes. External influence is a must, even if it comes internally. An object at rest tends to remain at rest until acted by an outside force - the law of inertia. (laugh) we are both thinking about science. To get our cultural idea across, we need external references to define, clarify - which is exactly the point we're trying to make.

ZB: But I think what you are trying to say is that here in Vietnam, the artists need to start thinking that their 'condition of limits' is not unlike those of many abroad and so we must refrain from using censorship as the cause of no action, to consider other ways of working, other ways of talking and making

RST: I think it is very simple, every artist needs to come to terms with their own condition, whether an external framework defines it, and to find a way to relate.

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Richard Streitmatter-Tran is an artist living and working in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. He received his degree in the Studio for Interrelated Media (SIM) at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. His solo and collaborative work has been exhibited internationally including Kandada Art Space in Tokyo, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Hong Kong, the Singapore Biennale (2008/2006), Ke Center for Contemporary Art in Shanghai (2008), Singapore Art Museum (SAM), Eslite Gallery in Taiwan, 52nd Venice Biennale (2007), Shenzhen and Hong Kong Bi-city Biennale (2007), *Thermocline of Art: New Asian Waves* at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, *Asia Art Now* at Arario Beijing, 1st Pocheon Asian Art Festival, Gwangju Biennale (2004), the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, Chula Art Center in Bangkok, the Asiatopia Performance Art Festival, and Art Tech Media 06 in Barcelona.

He was an arts correspondent for the Madrid-based magazine *Art.Es* and and Ho Chi Minh City editor for *Contemporary* and has been published in several catalogs and periodicals. In 2005 he received the Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant from the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong for his year-long research project, *Mediating the Mekong*. He was Teaching Assistant at Harvard University (2000-2004), conducted media arts research at the MIT Media Lab (2000) and a visiting lecturer at the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts University in 2003. He is an advisor to the Para/Site Curatorial Programme in Hong Kong. He is currently a lecturer at RMIT International University Vietnam. Upon relocating to Vietnam in 2003, he helped form *ProjectOne*, a Ho Chi Minh City-based performance art group now defunct. Two years later he became a founding member of *Mogas Station*, a group of international creators (artists and architects) based in Ho Chi Minh City, working to promote and present contemporary art in Vietnam. Its members came together in 2005 to create *Aart*, the very first artist initiated bilingual contemporary arts magazine in Vietnam launched at the Singapore Biennale 2006. As a co-curator he developed *The Mekong* exhibition with Russell Storer of the Queensland Art Gallery for the 6th Asia Pacific Triennale (APT6) in 2009. In 2010, he established *dia/projects*, an independent studio and contemporary art space in Ho Chi Minh City.

Zoe Butt is Curator and Director (Programs and Development) for San Art, an independent artist-run gallery space and reading room in Ho Chi Minh City. She is also Curatorial Manager for Post Vi-Dai, a private collection of contemporary Vietnamese art based between Ho Chi Minh City and Geneva. Previously she was Director, International Programs, Long March Project – a complex, multi-platform, international artist organization and ongoing art project based in Beijing, China. Prior to this she was Assistant Curator, Contemporary Asian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia where she assisted in the development of the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT); key acquisitions for the Contemporary Asian art collection, and other associated gallery programs. For over 10 years she has been researching contemporary Asian art and has both independently and collaboratively curated exhibitions and contributed to various international art publications that have reflected the dynamic art of this region.