Poetic Politic

Ten voices theatrically captured with the camera lens illustrating the diasporic reflections of contemporary Vietnam and Cambodia by artists KHVAY Samnang, An My Lê, Dinh Q Lê, NGÔ Đình Trúc, Uudam NGUYEN, PHAN Quang, Phunam, VANDY Rattana, TRẦN Minh Đức and VÕ An Khánh.

What does it mean to live in a country like Vietnam whose streets boast the booming voice of communist capitalism and yet the family lounge room still echoes with the memory of war? What does it mean to live in a country where traditional art forms lacking innovation struggle for contemporary relevance; where educational curricula and public event lament the era before the Khmer Rouge wiped out intellectual life, or before Communist propaganda replaced one’s right to freedom of speech? What does it mean to...
An My Lê

Patient Admission, US Naval Hospital Ship Mercy, Vietnam 2010
possess ethnic and cultural attachment to a country whose complex memory you better recall through trauma, image and text rather than a current lived perspective? The use of photography and video by artists from Vietnam and Cambodia poetically captures the contradictions and inconsistencies of belonging, living or dreaming about contexts they are intrinsically connected and yet perhaps, also removed. What is evident in this collection of works is the power of mobility providing reflective perspective on the social state of play in communities these artists share, care and relate. From the theatre of war, territorial conquest, the pressure to politically conform and acquiesce to authority; to the touristic monopolies and mythological superstitions that perpetuate popular cultural stereotype - this exhibition is a glimpse of the talent that visually and metaphorically rephrases the presence of a political voice.

—Zoe Butt, Curator

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Photography by Mariko Reed
Thanks to Moira Roth for her kind support and correspondence with Zoe Butt

Curated by Zoe Butt, Executive Director and Curator, Sán Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
Dinh Q Lê
South China Sea Pishkin 2009
ZOE BUTT & MOIRA ROTH
POETIC POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE AND CAMBODIAN ART: A CONVERSATION ACROSS TIME & SPACE, September 21-October 12, 2012

PART 1, REFLECTIONS IN BERLIN

Moira Roth, email, Saturday, September 21, 2012, Berkeley, California

After the pleasure of spending time with you recently in the Bay Area, while you were visiting here, I love it that we will conduct this exchange as you move around the world, from San Francisco to Berlin, to Japan and finally back to Vietnam.

By the way I imagine that you often travel internationally – yes? May we, while you are in Berlin, briefly begin our exchange about “Poetic Politic,” the Kadist Art Foundation exhibition that you are curating in San Francisco about Vietnamese and Cambodian artists? When did you come up with the idea for the exhibition, and what were the circumstances? How did you choose the artists and are there certain underlying themes/subjects that run through the exhibition?

Zoe Butt, email, Sunday, September 23, 2012, Berlin, Germany

Hello from a very chilly and windy Berlin. My skin is crying out for the warmth and humidity of Vietnam!

Yes, I do travel internationally quite a lot, particularly this year, as it seems that there is a growing interest in the contemporary art and curatorial dilemmas of South East Asia.

I look forward to our exchange as I hope it will help to offer awareness of the various issues artists face today in this region.

I came up for the idea of the exhibition “Poetic Politic” in May, 2012, in response to the Kadist Art Foundation’s invitation for me to curate an exhibition for their San Francisco space (the Kadist Art Foundation operates between Paris and San Francisco). They had a particular interest in the socio-political context of Vietnam and asked if I would be interested in putting a show together that engaged relevant issues.

They knew that I had a personal interest in this subject, as I am a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics of the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. They also knew that the artist-initiated, non-profit contemporary art space and reading room called Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City (previously and still fondly referred by locals as ‘Saigon’) had numerous times in the past faced difficult circumstances with exhibition license restrictions imposed by the Vietnamese Government’s Ministry of Culture. For example, our Vandy Rattana show, “Bomb Ponds” in 2011 (co-organized with Sa Sa Bassac, Phnom Penh) was not granted a license for complicated reasons concerning content; and our educational programming during “Open Edit: Mobile Library” in 2011 was also met with significant resistance by the local authorities. In this latter project we had wanted to engage a particular poet of the war period, Mr. ####, to address his unique writing techniques, but cultural officials misunderstood our intentions — thinking we wanted to discuss his previous anti-government stance.

The idea behind “Poetic Politic” engages the way socio-political messages are embedded in image making in Vietnam and Cambodia, particularly within two media that are popularly perceived and circulated, namely video and photography.

As a curator, I am continually challenged in my reading of art in these two incredible countries where artists face enormous obstacles in the realization of their practice due to resource limitations and limits on freedom of expression.

In some cases artists are possessed by a fear of authority and thus their art is not a space in which they consider themselves safe, and could be honest with their views—or perhaps it is rather that they do not see their art or themselves as possible political agents (such attitudes are respected of course!).

Meanwhile there are others who in times of great frustration, anger or inner turmoil, use the space of art as an abstract tool—rich in metaphor with symbolic references that carefully address issues they consider important to their communities.

This “Poetic Politic” exhibition engages the latter voice and consists of two interweaving artistic approaches.

Firstly there is a group of artists (NGÔ Đình Trúc, Phunam, Dinh Q. LÊ, KVAY Samnang and TRẦN Minh Đức) who refer to particular social narratives, be they advertising trends, tourism or mythological tales, through which to cunningly insinuate a critique of contemporary Vietnam.

Secondly, there is another group of artists (PHAN Quang, UuDam Tran NGUYÈN, An My LÊ, VÔ An Khánh and VANDY Rattana) who speak directly to the theatre of “war”, be it in process, in aftermath or in our rehearsed imaginations that marry military surrealism with humanitarian mission.

I chose these artists for the ways in which their practice consistently challenges the order of their social fabric.

And now all the best from Berlin’s Mitte area, as I must go off to find that bowl of ramen that I am craving.

Moira Roth, email, Sunday, September 21, 2012, Berkeley, California

I know the Mitte area well (having stayed there several times, beginning in 1981) so I can imagine you wandering through its streets, searching for ramen while you reflect on your fascinating exhibition that will open next month in San Francisco.

Berlin must be an interesting city—it is now almost twenty-five years since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989—for you to reflect on these “Poetic Politic” artists from Vietnam and Cambodia.

As you have been living in Ho Chi Minh City since 2009 (and before that you were the Director of International Programs for the Long March Project in Beijing for three years).

I imagine that you met all or most of the eight “Poetic
PART 2, REFLECTIONS IN THE SKY

Zoe Butt, email, Sunday, September 27, 2012

Greetings from the air—somewhere over the Pacific Ocean I imagine—moving from Bangkok to Fukuoka to Kitakyushu.

I am sitting in the dark and trying to work out where my time is inside my body. I think it’s quite confused. The head is a swirl of visual similarities where geography starts to mean less and attitudes become the character that marks a place.

Were I to try and comment on the recent histories of Berlin and Saigon/Phnom Penh, I would say that, looking back to the late 1980s, Berlin has done much, not only to reconcile its bloodied past but also to thrive as a cultural destination, whereas Saigon and Phnom Penh are still struggling to articulate their dreams as their memories sit under political lock and key. Needless to say the poesis of such comparison rests in the irony that Vietnam and Cambodia are two of the most internationally desired holiday destinations in South East Asia.

Yes, I have all met all the artists in the “Poetic Politic” show, and also Vandy Rattana and Kvay Samnang from Cambodia, and have had the pleasure of spending time with them. Some I have known since working as the Assistant Curator of Contemporary Asian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia (2001-2007), while others have been slow friendships built since I started moving between China and Vietnam from 2007.

Inside “Poetic Politic” there are numerous sites from which these artists hail—VÕ An Khánh (b.1936), the most senior of these artists in the show, is from Bac Lieu in Southern Vietnam; An My LÊ (b.1980) from Phon Peng, is now relocating from Paris to Taipei; while PHAN Quang (b. 1976) moves between his home in Saigon and his “studio” in the countryside of Bao Loc. This is just an example of the range of the ten artists in the show, which does not set out to be a survey, but rather an introduction. The community of artists in Vietnam is small and there is increasing interaction with the equally small, yet vibrant art scene in Cambodia. Many of these artists are friends and have collaborated in the past and continue to do so.

And, as I reread it, I also keep remembering my own visits to Cambodia (1999) and Vietnam (2005) and the texts I wrote in an attempt to capture my memories of these and to explore further in detail what I had earlier addressed in my summer 2001 Art Journal essay: “Obdurate History: Dinh Q. Lê, the Vietnam War, Photography and Memory.”

The first was “Oan Hon (Lost Souls), Lament for Cambodia, Vietnam, Hiroshima, Kosovo and East Timor” (Performance Research, Spring 2001) and the second “Letters from Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, August 10-16, 2005” (a section in my essay, “Remnants & Reverberations: Drawing(s) in Time and Space,” in Catherine de Zegher’s Drawing Center exhibition catalog, Persistent Vestsiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War, 2005-2006).

I remember in Cambodia my horror at seeing the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide and the Killing Fields, and in Hanoi visiting four North Vietnamese artists who told us about their experiences of the American-Vietnam War, and showed us drawings and paintings they had made during that time: Van Da, Truong Hieu, Nguyen Thu and Vu Giang Huong. After Hanoi, I flew down to Ho Chi Minh City, and stayed for a while with Dinh Q. Lê, while he was feverishly at work creating a second version of his Mot Coi Di Ve, his “tapestry” of hundreds of photographs. (See my “The Obdurate History of Mot Coi Di Ve: ‘Spending One’s Life Trying to Find One’s Way Home’, in A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê, Bellevue Art Museum, Washington, Fall 2007).

PART 3, AN AGITATED BUTTERFLY SEARCHES THE INTERNET

Moira Roth, email, Thursday, September 27, 2012, Berkeley, California

And now let us return to an exchange about your exhibition in San Francisco!

Can you tell me more about the five “Poetic Politic” artists you selected who speak (as you wrote in an earlier email) “directly to the theater of ‘war’”: PHAN Quang, UuDam Tran NGUYEN, An My LÊ, VÕ An Khánh and VANDY Rattana.

Like an agitated butterfly, I have been flitting around the Web, looking for material about them.

For VÕ An Khánh (born in 1938, Vietnam), I found a pdf of your 2010 essay about him and online images of the two photographs (“Mobile Military Medical Clinic” 1970 and “Extra-curriculum Political Science Class” 1972) that you described in your text. I studied the highly informative website of VANDY Rattana (born in 1980, Cambodia) and looked at a review describing his 2009 Bomb Ponds series.

I also read about ‘Stiev Selepak (Art Rebels)’ and ‘Sa Sa Art Projects’, the artist-run initiatives he had co-founded in 2007 and 2010 respectively, in Phnom Penh.


Perhaps we could begin with these three artists: VÕ An Khánh, who is still living in Vietnam; VANDY Rattana, who is now living in Taipei; and An My LÊ, who left Vietnam as a teenager with her family in 1975, and since then has lived in New York.
Ah, it is so good to be back in the land of monsoons, humidity and the ordered chaos of Saigon after my hectic global meanderings. I wish for the time with Pacific Ocean stamps on envelopes and the hand-written personalities of sharing information. I completely sympathize with your feelings of being an “agitated butterfly” in reference to wanting more information about this part of the world. Indeed the great lack of text is what prompted me to move to Asia!

The surreality of space over email, the near fictive quality of reality, is incredibly alluring and indeed is of great motivation for me in my oft rather obstacle-laden work.

The role of our imaginations today has never before had such room to maneuver and it is this sense of imagined capacity, the idea of preparedness through rehearsal and forecast, that is of particular influence inside this “Poetic Politic” exhibition.

The sliding of time between 2006-2010 (An My Lê) and 1970 (Võ An Khánh) is given further comparison in the work of Cambodian artist Vandy Rattana, whose photographs equally comment on similar contexts and historical praxis. In 2010, Rattana traveled to ten provinces most severely scarred by the over 200,000 ton of bombs dropped by the US across Cambodia between 1964-75. His Bomb Ponds series of photographs and documentary film captures his conversation with local villagers about this traumatic history - for in the work of Vandy Rattana, the silence of history in Cambodia can be seen, heard and felt.

This idea of history being absent, annihilated or controlled speaks to the photographic work of Saigon-based artist Phan Quang. In his work we see the typical loudspeaker that roams the streets of Vietnam eschewing Communist Party policy imprisoned within a bamboo cage. Such cages are common on the street corners of this country housing the roosters used for not only eating, but also the gambled sport of cock fighting. Artfully placed on a length of red carpet, an icon associated with government functions and celebrity galas, Phan Quang satirically questions the basis of power in contemporary Vietnam.

Such theaters of rehearsal and military action, and of political strategy and social propaganda, is heightened with the work of UuDam Tran Nguyen’s Waltz of the Machine Equestrians, a video piece that opens the door to the poetic references of the exhibition. Inspired by the folklore tale of Thánh Gióng, who upon hearing the news of his country being invaded, suddenly spoke up, asking for an iron horse that can spit fire, an iron armor and an iron rod.

For UuDam, the thousands of scooters across Vietnam are the country’s new iron horses who must fight poverty and pollution. However their plastic raincoat ponchos (typical transport attire in Vietnam) and motorbikes that eschew smoke, rather than fire must battle the call for conformity in their fragile participation in a global economy that suffers restriction on freedom of expression.

I have just studied with great attention and admiration your description of these five artists, who speak (to use your own words) “directly to the theatre of ‘war’, be it in process, in aftermath or in our rehearsed imaginations that marry military surreality with humanitarian mission.”

Could you now please describe some of the themes and concerns of the other five artists in the exhibition: Phunam, Dinh Q Lê, KHVAY Samnang, NGÔ Đình Trúc and TRAN Minh Đức.

These artists all satirically and poetically comment on their re-interpretation of historical facts, everyday phenomena and cultural anomalies.

In Phunam’s Patination photographic series we see an abstract swathe of peeling beige paint (the typical color of Vietnamese government buildings) eroded by the choking color of soot, fuel and grime created by the thousands of motorbikes and scooters that transport the Saigon’s population (and indeed the whole country) each day. This is a study of the southwest wall of the Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism in Ho Chi Minh City, which houses the key personnel who monitor public activity in Vietnam. The title of ‘Patination’ is a deliberate pun with obvious referral to the texture of a surface, but also questioning the substance of a nation.

While Phunam creates an abstract linguistic metaphor, the work of Dinh Q. Lê draws on two historical occurrences of similar structure. In Lê’s video animation South China Sea Pishkun, numerous helicopters crash into the sea. “Pishkun” refers to the American Indian Blackfeet term used to describe the killing of roaming bison as they are forced in their panic towards a cliff and, ultimately,
their death in the sea below. This act for Lê recalled the thousands of Southern Vietnamese helicopters which fell to their end in the South China Sea on April 30, 1975 as they fled the encroaching Northern Vietnamese Army, which was marching towards Saigon.

The re-staging of a historical moment and the reflection on strategy, outcome and ensuing remorse for the loss of human life and ambition is also visible in the photography of Khvay Samnang.

In his Untitled images we see the artist standing chest-deep in one of Phnom Penh’s central lakes. Sympathizing with the local community—who continue to live on or close by the increasing polluted conditions of these waterways that were once inner city sanctuaries—Khvay’s images are testament of the social cost of industrial modernization. In 2007, Boeung Kak Lake was leased to a local developer who has since filled the entire expanse with sand, forcibly removing thousands from their homes, many of them imprisoned for refusing to relocate.

In Khvay’s performances, he observes and mimics the survival techniques of living on water in silent protest of the space his people must unjustly be forced to call “home.”

In Vietnam, as in many other “rising tigers” of Asia, the urban landscape is chaotic with images and text-messages expounding consumer luxury items, fast food and government propaganda.

Images of past icons become stereotypes, bi-lines and soundbites twice removed from their contexts as can be seen in the work of Ngô Đình Trúc where Ho Chi Minh stands labeled as a Communist Stylist. Dressed in his typical Vietnamese dress-coat and scarf, Ngô infers Communist ideology as just another social bureaucracy akin to the fickle trends of the global world of fashion (a social trend of great popularity for the nouveau riche of Vietnam). Tourism is also one of Vietnam’s key economic strategies and, in 2012, the country’s coast remains dotted with the concrete remains of developers’ dreams in pause. There is just not enough consumer confidence to sustain the high levels of infrastructure desired.

Trần Minh Đức began collecting postcards upon completing his studies in Ho Chi Minh City. These images of Vietnam’s natural wonders, traditional life-style and official government buildings were proud sites for an artist who longed to travel. He soon became aware, however, that these postcards were not of today’s Vietnam, but rather of a decade or more ago.

Recalling his country’s history of occupation and invasion he reflects on his nation’s vision of the future by placing a pink crystal growth on postcards that seem to lament Vietnam’s past—like an alien intruder creating its own kind of “civilization.” His use of pink refers to the Pomacea Canaliculata (Apple Snail) eggs that were officially imported in the 1980s into Vietnam believing them desirable by the domestic consumer market. These snails were later listed as one of the most dangerous invasive species in Vietnam. Pink also recalls “Agent Pink”, a little known powerful herbicide and defoliant used by the US military in its chemical warfare program during the Vietnam War.

PART 6, CARING

Moira Roth, email, Wednesday, October 10, 2012, Berkeley, California

As you know in the last few days we have finished editing this exchange—with emails flying back and forth during the night between Berkeley and Ho Chi Minh City. And now all we have to do is to wait (you in Vietnam and I in California) for the “Poetic Politic” opening at the Kadist Art Foundation, which will be exactly a week from now.

As I reflect on our exchange, I keep returning, with profound admiration, to your commitment to curating.

You also explain to Anh Do that the word curator is derived from the Latin word curare (meaning to care for) and tell him that “For me, a curator is someone who cares about the work of artists and about why they have chosen to do what they do.”

Clearly, Zoe, that is what makes you such a remarkable curator, and clearly that is why your “Poetic Politic” exhibition is so remarkable in its choice of artists, who themselves care deeply about the subjects and ideas they address in their work.
PHUNAM
Pati-Nation No. 10 - Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Ho Chi Minh City. South West wall 2008

An My LÊ
US Naval Hospital Ship Mercy, Vietnam 2009
TRẦN Minh Đức

WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING PHÔ? WE ARE XE ÔM DRIVERS OF THE MIND SÀN ART IS THE MOST ACTIVE INDEPENDENT ART SPACE IN VIỆT NAM A SÀN FOR ART, SANS MONEY HÔ CHÍ MINH WAS A VIỆT KIỂU THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS 'NOT-FOR-PROFIT' IN VIỆT NAM THE WORD FOR INSTALLATION IN VIETNAMESE, IS 'INSTALLATION', IT WAS COINED IN 1998 TẤT CẢ MỌI THỦ ÂM THANH TỔT HƠN TRONG VIỆT [THIS STATEMENT HAS BEEN CENSORED BECAUSE WE'VE GOT IT LIKE THAT]
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

KHVAY Samnang
b. 1982, Svay Rieng, Cambodia.
Lives and works in Phnom Penh

Untitled 2011
Digital C Print
80 x 110 cm, ed. 7

Courtesy the artist and Sa Sa Bassac, Phnom Penh

NGÔ Đình Trúc
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City.

Untitled (Communist Stylist) 2007
Digital C Print
120 x 80 cm, ed. 5

Courtesy the artist

UuDAM Tran NGUYEN
Lives and works between Los Angeles, USA and Ho Chi Minh City.

Waltz of the Machine Equestrians – 
The Machine Equestrians 2012
Single channel video: 3 mins, color, sound, ed. 5

Courtesy the artist and Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City

PHAN Quang
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City

The red thread 2012
Digital print on paper
30 x 80 cm, ed. 3

Courtesy the artist and Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City

PHU NAM
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City.

Pati-Nation No. 10 - Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Ho Chi Minh City. South West wall 2008
Digital print on color photographic paper
150 x 100 cm (comp.), ed. 3

Courtesy the artist and Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City

An My Lê
Lives and works in New York, USA.

Patient Admission, US Naval Hospital Ship Mercy, Vietnam 2010
Archival inkjet pigment print
101.5 x 143.5 cm, ed. 5

US Naval Hospital Ship Mercy, Vietnam 2009
Archival inkjet pigment print
101.5 x 143.5 cm, ed. 5

Courtesy the artist and Murray Guy Gallery, New York

Dinh Q Lê
b. 1968, Ha Tien, Vietnam.
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City.

South China Sea Pishkin 2009
Single channel video: DVD, 6:00 mins, color, sound, ed. 7

VANDY Rattana
b. 1980, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Lives and works in Taipei, Taiwan.

Takeo from Bomb Ponds series 2009
Digital C Print
90 x 105 cm, ed. 5

Courtesy the artist and Sa Sa Bassac, Phnom Penh

TRẦN Minh Đức
b. 1982, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
Lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City.

Ink and digital print on paper
Three components: 13 x 18 cm (each)

Courtesy the artist and Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City

VÕ An Khánh
b. 1936, Bac Lieu, Vietnam.
Lives and works in Bac Lieu.

Mobile Military Medical Clinic 9/1970 2010
Archival pigment inkjet print
59 x 40 cm (comp.), ed. 50

Extra-curriculum Political Science Class 7/1972 2010
Archival pigment inkjet print
56 x 40 cm (comp.), ed. 50

Courtesy the artist and Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City