

# REPORT FROM HO CHI MINH CITY

## Outside the System

*Despite continuing problems with officialdom, the ongoing Saigon Open City exhibition series reveals the vitality of Vietnam's contemporary art scene.*

BY JOE FYFE

**H**o Chi Minh City, the largest city in Vietnam—which many locals still call by its former name, Saigon, especially when referring to the downtown district—has an economy that is expanding faster (10 to 12 percent annually) than markets in any other part of the country. Money is made here, and speculation on what might trickle down is such that the poor from the rural areas are flowing into the city seeking a better living. Twenty years ago the most common mode of transportation was the bicycle; now it is the motorbike. Cars are becoming more common, bought at discount prices and adding a new element to the dense flow of traffic. The former French colonial capital lives on in the restored splendor of the Hotel de Ville (now the People's Committee Building) and the Central Post Office, but downtown is filling up with the steel-and-glass towers of such international giants as Prudential, HSBC and Citibank. More are coming, both for the expanding corporate presence and the upwardly mobile locals who are demanding new apartments above the roar of the boulevards.

Close to three quarters of Ho Chi Minh City's residents were born after the end of what they refer to as the American War and they have interest neither in that war nor in the larger past. As avid consumers, they prefer fashion, dance clubs and MTV. Saigon after dark feels like a scene from *Bye Bye Birdie* or *American Graffiti*: young men and women idling on motorbikes at the stop-

lights playfully look each other over as they head for the neon-drenched clubs. Couples romance in the public parks near the light shows and pop concerts that promote new products. The country appears to have embraced international consumerism with its complementary values of youth and glamour; but, surreptitiously, government agencies maintain a decidedly parental control.

One person told me that these carefree materialists are living in a "fool's paradise." Internet sites are monitored and the general dissemination of ideas is made difficult by the authoritarian ministries. Books and magazines sent by mail from abroad are often confiscated. Although Starbucks is about to arrive, no license has yet been given to anyone wanting to open a bookstore. There are no privately owned radio or television stations in Vietnam. A recent Amnesty International report notes that Vietnam has "issued a string of directives and circulars in the past three years, attempting to close the window on greater freedom of expression which the Internet has brought to the country."

Ho Chi Minh City is very much about business and always has been. There is more official cultural life in Vietnam's capital, Hanoi, where the art scene has a history of adventurous exhibitions [see *A.i.A.*, Oct. '03] in alternative spaces and with foreign-funded entities such as Goethe Institute and L'Espace (connected to the French Embassy). Both cities lack the infrastructure that has been established for contemporary art in more developed countries, where critics, museums and the public all participate, to a degree, in the discourse. The fine-art museums in both cities are moribund. Art journalism in the heavily censored press makes no categorical distinction between paintings hung in restaurants for tourists and, should it be acknowledged at all, more challenging work.

The taint of counterrevolutionary resistance clinging to Ho Chi Minh City is still potent enough 30 years after "liberation" that the government continues to discourage the exhibition of work by the city's more innovative artists. A local returning Vietnamese (or Viet Kieu) artist, R. Streitmatter-Tran, who came back to Vietnam in 2003 following studies at the Massachusetts College of Art, received the Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant in 2005, the year it was created by the Hong Kong-based Asia Art Archive (AAA) with support from Martell



*View of Sue Hajdu's performance/installation MAGMA—We're Not Counting Sheep, 2006, showing participants sleeping in the window at the artist-run gallery albb. All venues this article, unless otherwise noted, Ho Chi Minh City.*



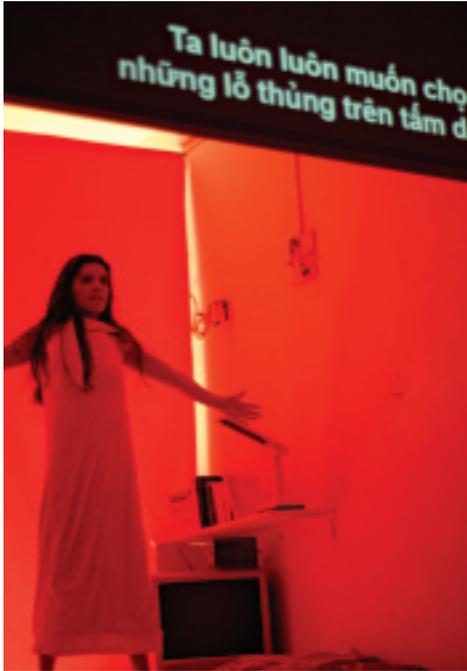
*Tran Trung Tin: Untitled I, 1973, acrylic on newspaper, 21½ by 15 inches. Courtesy Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi.*

Cognac. In October 2006 the AAA's online newsletter published *Mediating the Mekong*, Streitmatter-Tran's report covering a yearlong investigation of the state of contemporary art in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. In the section on Vietnam, he wrote that

just three years ago, cases where police would arrive and shut down exhibitions and performances were not uncommon. These types of interventions are far less common now. I do not expect any significant changes in the near term in spite of the relaxed environment this year. If Thailand is any indication, in this region, anything can reverse at any time. . . . Vietnam's artists have found ways to continue working outside the system.

In 2004, on my first visit to the city, I was informed that if a performance or reading took place, there were most likely government spies among the audience. Neighborhood blocks where poetry readings and performances were scheduled were known to mysteriously lose electrical power, even when the events had official approval. Vietnamese artists have been threatened with the withholding of visas needed to have exhibitions overseas. The operations of agencies within the government are opaque and it is close to impossible to pinpoint where the directives originate.

**N**onetheless, there is tremendous artistic vitality in Ho Chi Minh City. Viet Kieu artists have predominantly chosen to establish themselves there instead of in Hanoi, a more conventionally picturesque and "artistic" city, as have an increasing number of expatriate artists, architects and designers. From this group have come several "unofficial" artist-run organizations that serve as multifunctional hubs of artistic activity and as distribution centers of related infor-



*View of Karen Maldonado's performance Pendant la chute j'ai pensé (During the fall I thought), 2006; at Atelier Wonderful. Photo Hoang Duong Cam.*

mation. One of these, the coily named "a little blah blah" (albb), founded by Sue Hajdu of Hungary and Australia and Motoko Uda of Japan, describes its purpose as the promotion of contemporary art practice in "Saigon, Vietnam and beyond." Located on the ground floor of a residential building at the end of an alley not far from downtown, albb produces exhibitions and hosts lectures and discussions. In November 2006, Ashley Carruthers, a cultural anthropologist from Canberra, Australia, lectured there on how the Vietnamese diaspora is depicted in films. Later in the month, Kim Huynh, a Vietnamese-Canadian artist from Calgary, gave a talk on Asian contemporary art in Canada. In late December 2006 I attended "Seoul: Until Now!," a lecture in English by Swedish-based curator and critic Pontus Kyander, who presented online exhi-

bitions he had curated and showed images of the largest show ever of contemporary Korean art (it took place at the Charlottenborg Exhibition Space in Copenhagen). A translator was present for the predominantly young Vietnamese audience. The center also boasts a reading room with an array of art catalogues and magazines from Southeast Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Atelier Wonderful, a project space for sharing ideas about contemporary art, was begun by French nationals Bertrand Peret and Sandrine Llouquet, artists who moved to Ho Chi Minh City after attending art schools in Bordeaux and Nice, respectively. It was part of their larger art-development project called Wonderful District. The Atelier Wonderful events took place over five months, beginning in February 2006, in their apartment, up several sooty flights of concrete steps in a large working-class building. Every Saturday they reconfigured the space to accommodate art installations, documentaries, video screenings and films (including works by Bruce Nauman and Andy Warhol), and lectures and performances by resident and visiting artists.

I attended one event there that was written and performed by Karen Maldonado, also French, who had been in Vietnam for the previous year, teaching and holding workshops with the Ho Chi Minh City Circus. The performance took place in an improvised Robert Wilson-like blacked-out set and consisted of Maldonado tossing and turning on a red satin bed while reciting in French a solipsistic, incantatory monologue. Supertitles in Vietnamese were projected overhead. The text was also made available in English. There was a mixed audience of Vietnamese, French nationals and other Western residents and visitors, who stood outside the apartment during the breaks and stared abstractly at the neighbors' clotheslines hung over the stairwells.

These local arts initiatives combine the functions of the salon, the alternative space and the grad school seminar on contemporary art, offering experiences and information unavailable in regular

state-run art schools. Many of the administrators in those institutions are political appointees who have no knowledge of or interest in what goes on in the universities that they are part of, and are therefore of no value as advocates for a more open policy toward art and arts education.

Another arts initiative, Mogas Station, published a one-off magazine, *Aart*, for the 2006 Singapore Biennial. This came about as a reaction to a lack of critical and informative writing about art in Vietnam and the region. *Aart* was printed in a numbered edition of 5,000 and functioned as a portable alternative space, with projects and essays by artists and other arts groups. Mogas Station has contributed a publication project to the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany (through Oct. 21), and a video to this year's Venice Biennale (through Nov. 21).

Several resident artists of Ho Chi Minh City have international reputations. Dinh Q. Lê, who is best known for his works that use a traditional weaving technique to intermix photographic images of Vietnam from the international press and Hollywood films, is also a sculptor and filmmaker. Last year he had an exhibition at the Asia Society in New York that surveyed his diverse production [see *A.i.A.*, May '06]; he has also had two solo shows at the New York gallery P.P.O.W. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba is a participant in the Mogas Station group and has been included in numerous international showcases. His technically challenging films engage Vietnam's history through underwater footage, most notably of a race by young men riding the sort of "cyclos" used in urban areas across the ocean floor. He is represented in New York by Lehmann-Maupin Gallery. In June, an extensive survey of his recent work will open at the Museum of Art in Lucerne, Switzerland. Nguyen-Hatsushiba gave the clearest explanation of why artists seem to thrive in Vietnam despite official obstacles, calling the nation "a flexible place" that can offer artists "more than some developed countries."



*Hoang Duong Cam: Untitled, Tightrope, from the series "Fat-free Museum," 2006, digital photograph, 27½ by 36½ inches. Courtesy Galerie Quynh.*

Both Dinh and Nguyen-Hatsushiba were educated at American art schools but moved back to Vietnam within a few years of graduation and began exhibiting there. It should be noted that their U.S. passports have enabled them to travel and show internationally with more ease than Vietnamese nationals, who must seek permission for exit visas.

Earlier in his career, Dinh showed in Ho Chi Minh City at Mai's Gallery, run by Do Thi Tuyet Mai, a local businesswoman with an interest in contemporary art. The original gallery space, which has a history of showing both Vietnamese and visiting Western artists, was striking: a large columned white room with high ceilings and a white tile floor. One entered through Mai's Cool Saigon clothing store. The space has now become a music lounge and the gallery has been moved to the front, but its raw brick walls and a recent exhibition of celebrity caricatures indicate a falling-off from the gallery's earlier ambitions. (In the interest of full disclosure, it must be noted that I had an exhibition there in 2004—a happy experience, despite the



*Detail of Mella Jaarsma's installation This Place Is Mine, 2006; part of Saigon Open City. Photo Joe Fyfe.*



*Giang Khich: Carring Goods to the Front (detail), 1973, watercolor and ink on paper, 12 by 16 3/4 inches. All works this page part of Saigon Open City.*

necessity of submitting work samples in advance to the ministry of culture for approval.)

One of Nguyen-Hatsushiba's earliest installations was in the courtyard outside the Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center, located on the ground floor of the Fine Arts Museum. Under the direction of Tran Thi Huynh Nga, the gallery, which chiefly exhibits local painters, also encourages nontraditional forms of art such as performance and installation. Nguyen-Hatsushiba suspended a large semitransparent tent made from mosquito netting in the open space the gallery shares with the museum. Gallery director Nga is a painter in her own right and is married to painter Tran Trung Tin, who also shows at Blue Space. Tin, as he is called, is arguably the most important Vietnamese artist of the senior generation. He fought in the battle of Dien Bien Phu and then was a film actor in Hanoi. Between 1969 and 1975, Tin made hundreds of paintings on newspaper. This series was done in Hanoi at the height of the American bombardment. Later, he moved to the South, where he was born. Tin's 1969-75 paintings are simple, crudely brushed abstractions and figurative images done in rich dark colors that contrast with the newsprint. They are similar in mood to Picasso's still lifes done in Nazi-occupied Paris. Tin's personal, expressionistic works contrasted with the propaganda paintings and posters most artists of the North created during the war years and led to his ostracization from the Hanoi art scene.

A monograph on Tin by British art historian Sherry Buchanan, published in England, is not readily available in Vietnam. Though the artist has had exhibitions

at the Singapore Art Museum and is represented in museum collections there and in Europe, he is not officially recognized in Vietnam. When I visited him and looked at the work from the early 1970s, many of the paintings were deteriorating due to the tropical climate. Tin's work provides an extraordinary footnote to late modernism, but he remains an anomaly even among younger Vietnamese artists, who are predominantly engaged in video and performance.

The most notable commercial gallery at present is Galerie Quynh. Its director and founder, Quynh Pham, left Vietnam with her family at age nine and returned a few years after receiving a degree in art history from UC San Diego. The gallery began online in 2000 and opened a space in 2003. It publishes a catalogue for every exhibition. Quynh and her English husband, Robert Cianchi, began the gallery by exhibiting painters who were established in Ho Chi Minh City but did not have commercial representation. Among them are the abstractionists Nguyen Trung and Tran Van Thao and the figurative expressionist Do Hoang Tuong.

In the past year, the gallery has expanded its focus to include Viet Kieu artists such as Sandrine Llouquet, of Wonderful District, whose ambiguously banal drawings and animated short videos feature figures subjected to intriguing metamorphoses, and the 24-year-old Hoang Duong Cam, whose exhibition of a series of digitally manipulated photographs titled the "Fat-free Museum" quirkily document his first visit to New York by juxtaposing the hands of the artist holding postcards of traditional Vietnamese paintings in front of Western art from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is a good example of the kind of intelligent and authentically strange work that Vietnamese artists are now producing.

**C**am, as he is called, had a number of these photographs included in Saigon Open City (SOC), a multi-venue curatorial project that was both ill-fated and historically significant.

The idea for an international exhibition to promote the development of contemporary art in the city had been discussed on the local art scene for several years. Funding was secured from the Ford Foundation, the American Center Foundation, the British Council, the Goethe Institute, the Vietnam-Denmark Cultural Fund and the French Consulate General as well as other sources. The board of directors of Mai's Gallery, Dinh Q. Lê and the Hanoi artists Tran Luong and Do Thi Tuyet Mai decided that Vietnam's art infrastructure was still developing, and began looking for proposals from curators in neighboring countries. International Thailand-

## Vietnamese artists returning from abroad have predominantly chosen to establish themselves in Ho Chi Minh City, as have an increasing number of expatriates.



*View of Bang Lam's black-and-white photos and Liam Gillick's wall graphics.*



*View of Nindityo Adipurnomo's Tradisi Dan Tegangan (Transition and Tension), 2005-06, shampoo bottles, steel, mixed mediums, approx. 14 1/2 feet long, with Gillick's wall graphics. Photos this page Joe Fyfe.*

*Still from Christelle Lheureux's video A Carp Jumps in His Mind, 2005, 35 minutes.*



born artist Rirkrit Tiravanija and curator Gridthiya Gawee Wong, also Thai, were chosen, and they subsequently visited Hanoi and Hue as well as Ho Chi Minh City to become more familiar with Vietnam's contemporary art and artists.

Late last year I visited SOC board member Tran Luong, who has moved from painting to various forms of performance that promote social engagement. Through audience collaboration, Luong's work goads people into thinking about politics in new ways. He has been closely watched by the government, and his telephone and e-mail are monitored. In late 2005, Luong was with a group of younger artists on their way to Cambodia to participate in a performance workshop when they were detained at the border. No explanation or warrants were forthcoming. They were released after three days. The incident, he said, was to let him know that he

**At “Saigon Open City,” I sensed an underlying confidence among many of the artists, a belief that they are the generation that will transform the art of the region.**



*View of Phan Thi Thao Nguyen's Barbie House, 2006, including Barbie doll, fresh meat and plastic furniture, 20 by 20 by 20 inches.*

was still “under their thumb.” At the time I spoke to him, Luong said in 2006 the authorities had so far been benign. “The government has to look open and democratic to organizations like the WTO [World Trade Organization] if they expect to do business,” he told me, which boded well for the prospects of Saigon Open City.

SOC was to be implemented over two years, 2006 and 2007. It consisted of three parts focusing on three topics: Liberation, Reunification and Reconstruction. The first exhibition was held in November. For it, Tiravanija chose Vietnam-related works by artists such as Yoko Ono, Chris Marker and Martha Rosler. Gaweewong's selection was stronger on regional artists, such as Montien Boonma (Thailand), Mella Jaarsma (Netherlands/Indonesia), Nindityo Adipurnomo (Indonesia) and Nur Hanim Mohammad Khairuddin (Malaysia).

SOC rented the second floor of a former Navy warehouse near the Saigon River and enlisted British artist Liam Gillick to design the typographic logo that was used in all the brochures and on tote bags and T-shirts produced for the project, including the orange and white bilingual (English and Vietnamese) wall graphic at the headquarters. In addition to those chosen by Tiravanija and Gaweewong, a large number of Vietnamese artists were invited to participate. Among them were war artists, as they are called, who documented every aspect of Vietnamese life during the extended period of armed conflict the country faced between World War II and 1979.

By the time I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, one of the offices of SOC had been converted to a framing shop, and Tiravanija and his assistant, Tony Huang, were working with a group of volunteers—students from a number of colleges and universities around

the city—in reframing paintings and drawings and photographs by older Vietnamese artists, including black-and-white photographs depicting the camaraderie of soldiers and sailors at war by Bang Lam, along with watery sketches from troop life by the air force artist Doan Than and Giang Khich. The “Liberation” segment examined artistic events in both Vietnam and the rest of the world during Vietnam's wars, while also jumping ahead to the present with new art from the region by some of its youngest practitioners.

I was very excited when I saw the work that was being installed, and by the prospects of the show. One room at the museum, for example, paired the work of Hoang Duong Cam with that of Huy Toan. A former colonel in the Vietnamese government's ministry of information, Huy Toan is known for his comic books about the American War, publications the postwar generation of Vietnamese artists grew up with and admired for their exceptional artistry and draftsmanship. An ambitious film program was also scheduled, including the complete works of Martha Rosler, Guy Debord's film version of *Society of the Spectacle* and new films such as *A Carp Jumps in His Mind* by the French artist Christelle Lheureux, which is based on a manga narrating memories of the bombing of Hiroshima.

**A**s the opening date neared, more and more information was demanded by the ministry of culture. The staff, including the two assistant curators, Quynh Anh Tran of Vietnam and Cecilie Gravesen of Denmark, searched for transcriptions of all the films, which had to be translated into Vietnamese and submitted to censors prior to receiving the license which would be necessary for the show to open. In some cases, where there were no available scripts, volunteers sat in front of their computers for days, listening to films on disk and writing down dialogue line by line.

During a conversation with Tiravanija, I asked about the desire by the government to control information. He said that the problem was not so much organized government censorship as it was the actions of low-level officials who have the power to hold things up. In some cases, they were looking for a bribe or some other form of compensation, such as being hired to do the construction work required for an exhibition at a particular museum. The curators, Tiravanija pointed out, weren't always willing to go along with this usual way of doing things.

The day before the scheduled opening, news arrived that the show's license had been delayed. This halted installation work at two other venues, the Fine Arts Museum and the Southern Women's Museum. The War Remnants Museum—where the curators had planned to hang a piece by Yoko Ono and John Lennon, the *War Is Over if You Want It* banner—was the single most important space, in which a third of the show was scheduled to be installed. Ton Duc Thang Museum,

another location, had suspended any installations until the go-ahead by the government agencies had been given. This left SOC with a space called Studio, consisting of the rooms at their headquarters, and some satellite events. The curators decided on an unofficial opening on Sunday, the time when the official opening had been scheduled. The ministry of culture proposed opening on Tuesday.

By then, David Ross, former director of the Whitney Museum, who was acting as Yoko Ono's personal curator for this exhibition, had arrived from New York. A curator from Korea, a journalist from Hong Kong and artists from Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and at least 100 Vietnamese artists, many of them participants, were also converging on SOC. The board held an open meeting. Tiravanija said: “I am relaxed. This is not a problem. We will do what we can. Instead of fighting stupidly, enjoy each other. We have good volunteers, put them to good use. Talk freely to the press people if you like . . . go with the flow, when it gets done it gets done. We haven't failed yet, we haven't started . . . we still have to kick down the walls.”

A satellite event, “Fifteen Young Hanoi Artists,” curated by Tran Luong, opened the evening at the headquarters for the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts Association, a union of academic artists that has long been in existence and has good political contacts. The union had optimistically taken on this exhibition, even bumping a solo show by one of its members to accommodate it. This was likely the most provocative exhibition ever held within the Fine Arts Association's walls. Works included a Barbie doll figure among miniature pieces of furniture covered in fresh slices of red meat, by Phan Thi Thao Nguyen, and a large floor sculpture of transparent tape by Nguyen Phuong Linh.

On Saturday, Nov. 25, Ross gave a talk on Ono's art to a largely Vietnamese audience. He recounted John and Yoko's antiwar activities and then digressed, to the puzzlement of some, into a short presentation of Richard Avedon's photographs of Vietnamese napalm victims. Ross explained how the photographer had not released the work for publication during the war years. After handing out Yoko Ono mini-flashlights to everyone, he gave instructions on how to flash “I Love You” in Morse code. He closed while a recording of John Lennon's “Imagine” played, encouraging the audience to sing along. As Ross concluded his appalling presentation, I glanced

*View (outside window) of Ly Hoang Ly's The Monument of Round Trays, 2003-06, aluminum trays and mixed mediums; part of Saigon Open City at the Southern Women's Museum.*



at the faces of a few members of the audience and they looked pretty glum.

Later in the same space, curator Gaweewong and director of communications Dang Hoang Giang held a press conference. Giang spoke of the complex environment beyond the control of the curators and how they were continuing to work with their institutional partners. Gaweewong said the exhibition was a jigsaw—you had to see it all to put the pieces together—viewers had to be flexible; the purpose of the project was to build and nurture an audience for contemporary art.

Clear guidelines from the ministry of culture and information, Giang and Gaweewong said, were never put forth; things seemed to change according to the mood at the ministry. There never seemed to be a monolithic government decision against the proposal; many Communist party members wanted tickets, and

es overlapped, as did video portraits projected directly on the gallery walls. The interviewees were also shown individually on a video monitor. I asked Po Po about the SOC's problems with the government and he also said it was nothing unusual. He told me that the Myanmar government allows him to exhibit his work abroad as long as he doesn't show it inside the country.

Other artists from the region had similar stories. Nindityo Adipurnomo, whose spaceship sculpture made out of empty shampoo bottles was included in the show at the SOC space, has run an alternative gallery in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, for 18 years. His attitude toward his government seemed of a piece with that of many of the artists I encountered. Accepting that misunderstandings and censorship are part of their praxis, they were rueful, but also understanding and patient, characterizing those in power, almost indulgently, as so many senile uncles. I sensed an underlying confidence among many of the artists, a belief that they are the generation that, through its struggles, will transform the art of the region. Once they make their mark internationally, they seem to feel, there will be no turning back.

Several installations in the Southern Women's Museum were allowed to stand, despite the delay of an exhibition permit. On the grounds was a sculpture by Ly Hoang Ly, *The Monument of Round Trays*. A cone-shaped tent constructed of aluminum trays traditionally used for serving meals, Ly's monument was intended as a tribute to the perseverance of Vietnamese women facing daily challenges. The sculpture responds to the wind by rattling and vibrating, representing the inner conflict that Vietnamese women struggle with, specifically economic and societal changes. On the first floor, Truong Tan's sculpture *Wedding Dress* consisted of a skirt made from heavy metal chains and a white blouse. A work designed to highlight the ambiguous rewards of being

a Vietnamese bride, *Wedding Dress* gained resonance by being installed among traditional women's costumes from the museum's collection.

During the following month, Dinh Q. Lê had several meetings with the museum's board of directors regarding this particular piece. The museum directors said they were getting complaints about Tan's work, that some of the visitors didn't like it. Dinh explained that the sculpture was meant to be provocative, that the purpose of much contemporary art was to ask questions about societal values and conditions. The Vietnamese art community continues to face challenges in presenting to the more recalcitrant elements in the official cultural sectors the idea that openness toward experimental contemporary art indicates a healthy society.

"Liberation" was scheduled to run until Jan. 31, 2007. There were signals from the ministry of culture and information at various times from opening day through the following two months that approval was about to be given. As late as Jan. 13, notice went out to the press and the curators that granting of the license was imminent, but once again it was postponed. As the closing days arrived, plans for mounting parts two and three were put on hold. Around this time R. Streitmatter-Tran said that the government's mood toward artistic expression was at "low tide."



Truong Tan: *Wedding Dress*, 2006, metal chains, fabric, mixed mediums, life-size; at the Southern Women's Museum.



View of opening day performances by Le Ngoc Thanh and Le Duc Hai. Photos this spread Joe Fyfe. Works this page part of Saigon Open City.

many wanted to come down from Hanoi. What held things up, it seemed, were individual ministers who had asked themselves, "What will it do to my career if I approve this?" I asked Gaweewong if this was different from other places she had curated shows, such as her native Thailand, and she replied, "Not at all."

Saigon Open City opened the following day, Sunday, Nov. 26, at the Studio site, where a number of regional artists had installed work. The fact that SOC had been formed as a private non-profit organization was perhaps the sole reason it was able to open on its own premises. The only people present were the participants and those who had heard about the exhibition by word of mouth; no public notification was allowed. SOC's unofficial opening became an ad hoc convention of Southeast Asian artists and over the next two days the organizers hosted a series of conferences. There were also performances by Le Ngoc Thanh and Le Duc Hai, an artist team of twin brothers from Hue, and Le Vu from Hanoi, who does performances with his father [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '05].

Po Po, an artist from Myanmar, had a video and photography installation titled *Identity Lost*. For it, he interviewed 100 people from different countries about globalization and loss of personal identity, discussing the ideas in their mother tongues. Their recorded voices

The artist has recently been excluded from a government-approved exhibition in Hanoi, the result of his comment on censorship in Vietnam during a lecture in Cambodia (a Vietnamese government agent was apparently in the audience).

In a related development, a production of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *The Visit*, produced by the Vietnam Drama Theatre, the ministry of culture and information, the Goethe Institute and Swiss Embassy, was staged at the Hanoi Opera House, Nov. 24-25. It was set to move to Ho Chi Minh City for shows Dec. 5-6. The play, which is perhaps the best-known work by Switzerland's renowned postwar playwright, deals with the effects of greed on a small town in an unspecified European country. Swiss director Rudolph Straub spent a year working with the Vietnam Drama Theatre for the play, which was performed in Vietnamese. The government cancelled its dates in Ho Chi Minh City shortly before the play was to open there.

As I was finishing this article, I received an e-mail from Dinh Q. Lê. He informed me that his video installation *The Imaginary Country* had been banned from being shown in Vietnam by the culture and information departments in Saigon and Hanoi. Additionally, the catalogues for his series "From Vietnam to Hollywood" and "The Imaginary Country" had both been banned in Vietnam. He went on:

Tran Luong and I had a meeting with Jeab [Gridthiya Gaweewong] in Phnom Penh two weeks ago. We all agreed to go ahead with SOC's chapter II and III. So we are raising funds at the moment for the series of workshops with the communities for Chapter II.

We are not going to go away.

Dinh.

"Saigon Open City" was seen at various sites in Ho Chi Minh City from Nov. 27, 2006 to Jan. 31, 2007.

Author: Joe Fyfe is a Brooklyn-based painter who received a Fulbright grant for research in Vietnam and Cambodia in 2006-07.