SIX LINES OF FLIGHT

SHIFTING GEOGRAPHIES IN CONTEMPORARY ART
BEIRUT

CALI

CLUJ-NAPOCA

HO CHI MINH CITY

SAN FRANCISCO

TANGIER
Contemporary art is no longer defined by the activity of a few traditional centers—such as New York, London, or Paris—but is instead shaped by a constellation of diverse communities, small and large. Published in conjunction with an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, this groundbreaking book explores the hybrid and shifting nature of today's international cultural landscape by introducing readers to the artist-initiated organizations and collectives that support the art scenes in six far-flung cities: Beirut, Lebanon; Cali, Colombia; Cluj-Napoca, Romania; Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; San Francisco, USA; and Tangier, Morocco. In presenting the artistic and organizational work of artists whose efforts have shaped these rising cultural centers, *Six Lines of Flight* explores the pathways between them, illuminating the global, interconnected spirit of twenty-first-century art.

Essays by curators and writers active in each region are accompanied by color images of representative artworks and brief texts on the artists in the exhibition, including Tto Barrada, Tiffany Chung, Wilson Díaz, Futurefarmers, Adrian Ghenie, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Helena Procucciones, Lamia Joreige, Dinh Q. Lê, Victor Man, Carlos Magolo and Luis Ospina, Oscar Muñoz, Ciprian Mureșan, The Propeller Group, Grazziella and Jalal Toufic, and Akram Zaatari. These introductory texts are complemented by thematic essays by Tarek Elhaik and Dominic Willsdon, Hou Hanru, and Pamela M. Lee that further contextualize cultural production in the featured cities by addressing such issues as the construction of contested histories, center-periphery dynamics, and the effects of economic and cultural renaissance.
The Propeller Group

Tuan Andrew Nguyen — b. 1976, Ho Chi Minh City; lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City
Phunam — b. 1974, Ho Chi Minh City; lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City
Matt Lucero — b. 1976, Upland, California; lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City

The Propeller Group (TPG) is an art collective founded in 2006 by Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phunam, and Matt Lucero. Working with local and international television, film, and music producers, the group creates multimedia projects that, while adopting the aesthetics and language of popular culture, also undermine existing strategies for the dispersion and consumption of cultural content. Like the Situationists (1957–1972), whose artworks often addressed political issues through provocative combinations of appropriated images and slogans, TPG believes that the most effective way to change a system is to work within it to create a shift in perspective. Engaging the same platforms and strategies employed by mass media, the collective aims to enact social, cultural, and political transformation by subtly and humorously challenging prevailing ideological systems, while also testing the boundaries of the art world.

The Propeller Group’s projects are characterized by a deep commitment to social and political awareness, expressed through irony and humor. *Television Commercial for Communism* (TVCC), for example, examines the contradictions between communist ideology and the realities of a global capitalist marketplace, exploring both historical and contemporary tensions in these disparate eco-political systems. For this project, ongoing since 2011, TPG commissions leading advertising agencies to create a series of marketing campaigns, which the group plans to release through various media distribution methods. Its first collaboration—with the advertising team of TBWA \ Viet Nam, whose clients include Apple, Nissan, and Adidas—comprises the commercial the firm produced as well as a synchronized five-channel video installation that documents the agency’s brainstorming sessions. Partially realistic, partially quixotic, TVCC provocatively pairs communist ideology with capitalism’s advertising machine, forging a seemingly paradoxical alliance to investigate the deeper questions raised by nation branding. TPG has thus sought to question the ways in which nationalistic and political associations are made, how those associations are perceived in the world, how they become filtered using the framework of mass media, and how they are consumed by the public. Significantly, the project tests not only the effectiveness of advertising and propaganda strategies but also the audience’s ability to discriminate between the two channels.

In the documentary film *Nhu câu vẻ bày* ([Spray It, Don’t Say It, 2006]), the short video *Uh . . .* (2007), and the media campaign *Viet Nam The World Tour* (*VNTWT*, ongoing since 2010), The Propeller Group focuses on Vietnam’s underground graffiti scene. Foregrounding the subversive and symbolic gestures of graffiti artists, these works explore issues including national and cultural identity, urban transformation, and the shifting boundaries between private and public space. Presenting alternative views of contemporary life in Vietnam is among the key strategies TPG has used to challenge the heavily mediated stereotypes of the country propagated by many Western media outlets. *VNTWT*—which has featured numerous local and international cultural figures in a series of projects presented on the internet—represents the group’s own initiative to rebrand the country’s identity. TPG’s ambitious efforts to work beyond the gallery and museum spaces that circumscribe the established circuit of the art world bring to mind conceptual artist Seth Price, who wrote: “Hasn’t the artistic impulse always been utopian, with all the hope and futility that implies? . . . It is demonstrably impossible to destroy or dematerialize Art, which, like it or not, can only gradually expand, voraciously synthesizing every aspect of life.” Precisely with the intention of merging art and life with communicative actions, TPG applies new means of distribution through which free debates and discussions are fostered. Ultimately, these efforts are not only about a different Vietnam but also the positioning of perceptions of culture, nation, identity, politics, and history in flux.

—Xiaoyu Weng

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Spraypaint on concrete mural on the wall of Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City. Courtesy The Propeller Group.
The Propeller Group, *Television Commercial for Communism*, 2011-ongoing

Multimedia installation (five-channel synchronized video and animatic) at the Singapore Biennial 2011, dimensions variable. Top: stills from five-channel video installation; bottom: stills from animatic

Courtesy The Propeller Group
The Propeller Group, *Viet Nam the World Tour* (2010–ongoing)

Kaba Modern Legacy (Ambitious Alex, Barry Goods, Trandrew, and Tony Transformer) freestyles for a crowd of tourists at Marina Bay in Singapore, 2010 (performance still)

Courtesy The Propeller Group