

INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL

DISPATCH

The pilgrimage of inspiration - artists as engineers
in Vietnam

**The Propeller Group interview with Tuan Andrew Nguyen,
Phu Nam Thuc Ha, and Matt Lucero**

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Zoe Butt: The Propeller Group (TPG) was founded by Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Phu Nam Thuc Ha in late 2006. It was formed as collaboration between creative individuals who wanted to work together to create more ambitious projects in the art context as well as support each other in a commercial context. You were two independent artists interested in the youth culture of Vietnam and fascinated with the way Vietnamese society used television as the key artery for learning what was happening in the world. In 2008, you started to work in collaboration with Danish artist collective Superflex in the making of 'The Burning Car Movie', which has subsequently toured internationally. In 2009, LA artist and close friend, Matt Lucero joined forces and moved to Ho Chi Minh City (Matt and Tuan had been collaborating since their Cal-Arts days in 2002). The Propeller Group have gone on to produce a diverse range of work from popular music videos with top Vietnamese pop singers, to producing and writing television content for local audiences, to co-producing with Superflex, a collaborative video/television piece for gallery and television audiences with 'Porcelain', which is your most recent work and will air in the USA and Vietnam in the coming months, while also enjoying a museum focus in the Netherlands. This is an elaborate process of communication and production. If there was one sentence or a word that you would want to use to describe the way that you guys work – what would it be?

Phu Nam Thuc Ha: Collaborative.

Tuan Andrew Nguyen: I've been thinking about our process a lot lately.

Matt Lucero: Multivalent.

Tuan: Voltron.

Phu Nam: Agreed Tuan, that's also part of the process—to spur.

Matt: It's a loaded question actually because our process is sort of dependent upon the method of distribution, so I feel for television and film we collaborate differently than say an art piece that is going to be shown in a gallery. I feel that there are a lot more variables at play with work produced for popular culture.

Tuan: Actually, I feel like our process is also a process of figuring out our work process. It might sound funny, sometimes it's a very rigid process, like running a business. Other times it's very free flow, like painting. but it's always a process of listening, "keeping an ear out for things". What the other propeller is saying, or press are saying, things that happening out on the street, on the interweb... etc.

Matt: I feel the same way Tuan, it starts getting complicated when we begin to mix up the process of making art with the process of creating something that is seen in popular culture.

Zoe: I think it interesting that you see a divide between art and popular culture. It becomes a question of audience. Who is the desired audience for 'The Propeller Group'?

Tuan: We're quite conscious of audience, but I think what we're trying to do is blur these lines between audience, between high and low, between popular and high culture. Because once you classify your work and your audience according to those extremes, i.e. high vs. low culture, then you limit the possibilities of how your work functions in the world and at how many different levels it can function at or have affect on. We used to think that our "desired" audience was something dependent upon the expected results of specific projects, but we've come to challenge that notion even amongst our own crew. Audiences are so complex these days; people have multivalent interests and complex backgrounds, and to "assume" they fit into a certain landscape of thought, education, etc. is very narrow and limiting. People are at times completely invested in working in a gallery or academic context, but at most others times they are a part, or drawn to, popular culture. For example, everybody loves a good movie.

Matt: A lot of things that I see in popular culture I find way more interesting than things I see in the art world, and no matter how good or interesting things are in popular culture it seems like the majority of people use the lowest common denominator to deal with it whereas it wouldn't stand up for a second under the scrutiny of the art world.

Zoe: What do you mean by lowest common denominator?

Matt: I mean, entertainment for entertainments sake. You have to be entertaining in popular culture... always. But when you go look at an art film screening you expect not to be entertained. Or I should say you can tolerate being bored because there are other values that are at work there in the gallery, values that are not defined by your lack of patience. That is not to discredit the work that goes into popular culture. Something can be very entertaining and just as meaningful if not more so than a highly subjective piece of art. If you look at all the variables that go into producing that content, investors, the amount of collaboration involved and how much an original idea can become 'sacrificed', it is still impressive that you can come out with a really powerful meaningful piece of work

Tuan: I'm talking about access and affect being a part of the conceptual impetus of each work. As well as injecting relevance, meaning and critical thought-processes into mass media communication. It'd be great if some of these big advertising companies had similar discussions that artists have about meaning, context, politics, history, violence, propaganda, etc. to expand on the mass messaging they're doing in public. Vice versa, it'd be nice to talk to some of our friends who aren't artists and not have to hear them say, "Oh, that's just some high-art stuff, there's no meaning in it," or "Don't think too hard, that's too advanced for us to understand."

Matt: It's a way of working in which you are engaging a multitude of people on various levels so that different people can find an investment in it, from high art to low brow. To just a regular viewer who wants to be entertained. Superflex and the 'Porcelain' project is a great example of this.

Tuan: So our works run the gauntlet, we'll do film collaborations with groups such as Superflex, where we end up broadcasting on television or distributing on-line... and we'll do video installations that may only be shown in galleries. In our collaboration with Superflex, they were approached by a historical museum in Holland, called the Zeeuws Museum. Superflex examined the museum's collection of objects, objects "important" to Holland's history, they took their interest in economics and different economic systems towards a focus on a complicated part of Dutch history that has had a direct effect on Dutch economy to this day. The first large shipment of porcelain from China, being transported by Portuguese sailors, was hijacked by Dutch "pirates". Porcelain was a very desired phenomenon during those days, it was like high technology, and due to this fact the Dutch were able to raise a lot of money when they auctioned these pieces of porcelain off to the rest of Europe. Superflex was interested in these ideas of "piracy" in

different "economic" environments and they approached us to help produce some of these ideas into a television show. we were also very interested in playing around with different notions of "history" and "mass media".

Matt: In the case of 'Porcelain', we helped produce it as though it were a television show but we were also highly aware about it existing in the gallery as well. Porcelain was shown in Holland in the same way that Superflex's other projects have been displayed. In the gallery, they displayed the documentation, the actual television show, the props, the production notes, etc. etc. But when it aired in Vietnam in the beginning of April I felt like there was an imaginary barrier that had been broken, where we had actually collaborated between the institutional framework of the media in Vietnam and that of the art world.

Zoe: Was the fact that you guys were based in Vietnam a draw card for Superflex? Do you think that this project could have been as powerful were you, say based in the States? I ask this as I am curious about your decision to make Vietnam your base. Is being based in Vietnam critical to the way in which you desire to work, particularly in regard to this question of audience as Vietnam has little platform for the discussion between high and low forms of art.

Tuan: Exactly because Vietnam has little platform for the discussion between high and low forms of art makes it an interesting place for us. I think that distinctions between high and low forms of art is something that can hinder the creation and the reception of meaning, but in terms of being based in Vietnam.

Matt: I think that TPG being located in Vietnam is a factor for various reasons, cost of production is cheaper, access to distribution is easier, or at least my perception of it from an outsider, we have a lot more freedom to do these kinds of projects than if we were located elsewhere. But I don't think a project like 'Porcelain' is limited to Vietnam though. The decision to make Vietnam TPG's base was a meeting of similar minds between Tuan and Phunam and they happened to be working in the television and film industry in Vietnam at the time. So I think we can and should have these discussions outside of Vietnam, the discussions between high and low forms of art, and we are to some extent by being able to distribute media online and have a project like Porcelain air in the US. It is very exciting to think of the possibilities of branching out even further. As Tuan said, Vietnam does have a very small platform for the discussion between high and low forms of art which makes it that much more compelling to be here doing these kinds of art projects.

Tuan: Vietnam is a developing nation. The rate of change like what's happening in Vietnam doesn't happen much in developed nations. It's rare. There's a certain magic that comes with places that are changing this fast. There's a strange energy that fills the air here (besides the pollution) I'm drawn to that. Working out of Vietnam I feel more tapped into larger and more international dialogues here than I did in the U.S. for some reason. The U.S. is very isolated in many regards, probably because it's so large and so centered on itself a lot of the time. And yes, lower costs of living allow us more freedom to take risks in our processes, to experiment more. As with everything else in Vietnam, contemporary art and the dialogues surrounding 'contemporary' are developing, morphing. There are certain discussions that could be had here that wouldn't be as relevant or as interesting if they were had elsewhere. Different histories give way for different concerns. And different concerns allow for a variety of perspectives on a variety of things to open up.

Zoe: As an established company working with crew and creative types (stylists, choreographers, designers, actors) that usually work across the mainstream end of film and video, how do you see your projects opening up a larger idea for what these genres can be? For those who have only worked in Vietnam, do they see differences in the purpose between art or TV production? Is there dialogue in the process? I ask this

question in knowing that you guys are the only in Vietnam doing this kind of bridging between fine art and mainstream media

Tuan: When we are working with different crewmembers on projects, most of the dialogue that happens at this level is very specific to the work that has to be done. Once in a while, when we get to meet with different members of the crew over coffee or something, conversations arise that touch upon distribution methods. Some of our distribution methods are not usual or traditional, and most of the conversations that arise are questions about "why" we don't follow these more expected distribution methods. But the work is the same when we are producing projects.

Zoe: I think this question of distribution with your work is central. It is the crucial factor of difference between you and most other art collectives working in moving visual media. You are wanting to bridge the divide between mainstream culture and fine art – you are asking the question 'what is the difference'? and I guess I am curious as to the meaning of the messages you are trying to send out. Fundamentally I think you are all enamored by the power of moving images, but what are you wanting to say or twist?

Matt: I am really interested in distribution, specifically allowing the system of dissemination for our art projects to come from within the institutions of popular culture, cinema, television, advertising, the web, instead of the art market, even though we clearly are riding that fine line of existing in both worlds. Personally, I'm not even sure I want to exist in that art market any more. But this is a whole other discussion. I recently read a great interview in Bomb magazine with Edgar Arceneaux regarding his Watts Community Project. The interviewer opens up with a great question: What does it mean when the artwork itself assumes the guise of an institution? With Edgar's project, he is working with the city and architects to rebuild sections of the neighborhood. We are doing something similar where we are producing art projects that exist within a framework of an institution, television and the methods of distributing popular mass media. Here's a link to the first part of the article: <http://bombsite.powweb.com/?p=9572>

Tuan: In many of our projects, we try to create disorder, hoping that disorder in such particular instances can become another "sense of order" to an audience that may be all too afraid of change, or unaccepting of other possible ways of engaging with their current cultural/social structures. We like to play. We align ourselves with different cultural producers. We like to let ourselves get ingested into the bellies of big social beasts such as television or the various manifestations of pop-culture. We feel that true criticality is from the change that can happen from the insides of a system, and not from analytical discourse from external positions.

The Propeller Group is a collective composed of visual artists from Saigon and LA — namely Tuan Andrew Nguyen; Phu Nam Thuc Ha and Matt Lucero. Working as independent artists who shared the same concerns and aesthetic slants they realized one day their like-minded thinking offered the potential to create ambitious collaborative projects. They wanted to create art that everyone could understand, that would take delight in what was copied, re-modeled, removed or drawn over, reflecting on the irony of everyday life that seeks stability but is forever in a state of constant change. Drawn to television, film, video and the Internet in its ability to make information attractive and desired on a mass scale, 'The Propeller Group' are masters of the language of the moving image, keen to reach a larger audience that takes the presentation of art beyond the world of gallery spaces and museums. Working with local and international film, television, music and artistic producers in the realization of collaborative statements that re-define the social, cultural and political understanding of contemporary culture. Their work has not only been aired on mainstream television and international film festivals, but also in major museums and galleries abroad. Most recent projects include 'Porcelain' 2009 (3-part television series and video installation), Zeeuws Museum, Middelburg, The Netherlands; and 'The Financial Crisis (Session I-V)' 2009, a series of public service announcements created for Frieze Film 2009 (UK) and screened on the UK's Channel 4

(both produced in collaboration with Danish art collective 'Superflex'). www.propeller-group.com

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 (www.san-art.org). She is also Curatorial Manager for Post Vi-Dai, a private collection of contemporary Vietnamese art based between Ho Chi Minh City and Geneva (www.postvidai.com). 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.