

INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL

# DISPATCH

The pilgrimage of inspiration - artists as engineers  
in Vietnam

**Interview with Nguyen Manh Hung, artist and Nha San Studio  
manager**

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The gate of Nhasan Studio.

**Zoe Butt:** My various visits to Hanoi have always included an evening at Nhasan Studio. Tran Luong and Nguyen Manh Duc always present with a steady rotation of other 'family' members dropping by to share tea or food. This 'family' of artists is quite unique in Vietnam, sitting in a traditional stilt house surrounded by so many antique Buddha figures. You have been an artist nourished by this community and now a part of the second generation to manage this space - from your perspective, are their particular differences between the older and younger generations expectations of this space today?

**Nguyen Manh Hung:** I have known Nhasan Studio and observed Nhasan activities since 2000. I have seen the development of the Vietnamese art scene through exhibitions of artists and the relationship between them at Nhasan Studio. A lot of generations of artists have participated in and brought many experimental ideas and concepts here. The difference between the younger and the older generation in Vietnam is the freshness and confidence of youth. The older generation (those born in the 1960s) often used the material that concerns their past - the historical past of the country, of living a social ideology. Up until the late 1990s, information, education and networks with the international community outside Vietnam were very rare. Artists had to research and experiment by themselves. Sometimes they misunderstood the languages of media that they were dealing with: installation art and design or decorative objects, performance and theater or improvisational dance. Anyway their experimentation led the path for the new generation to search for experience and develop more professionally. Examining history is not the only reason or material referred to create art by the younger generation. A lot of young artists focus on their own life and physical body. The

young artists bring art to the public and give better influences to their environment. So the idea of making art is still also coming from the social sphere, just more diversified.



"A Gap Between Two Houses" group show by Karine Fauchard, Lazar Lyutakov, Michael Weidhofer (artists from Vienna), June 2009.

ZB: Nhasan Studio was one of the first alternative artist-run spaces in Vietnam. It nurtured one of the first groups of artists to be discussed internationally as 'Vietnamese contemporary artists'. Is there an identified desire for Nhasan Studio to help Vietnamese contemporary artists gain recognition abroad? What do you see as Nhasan Studio's most significant contribution to the discussion of art and culture in Vietnam? What do you see are its weaknesses?

NMH: Nhasan Studio has always aimed and tried to maintain a constant flow of exhibitions, art events and activities throughout the years. We understand that in doing so we will be able to establish a concrete foundation for the Vietnamese contemporary art scene to be built on and mature. After having been active for the last 10 years, we realize that although Nhasan Studio does not function like a professional art space, it has become one of the most respected artists initiatives in Vietnam. A lot of the key foreign cultural foundations (Ford Foundation, CDEF (Cultural Development and Exchange Foundation) of Danish Embassy, DongSon Today Foundation, Goethe Institute, L'Espace – Alliance Francaise, British Council) that are based in Hanoi have supported our art events. Moreover, Nhasan Studio has always been able to attract and build good relationships with other independent artists, which in turn helps build a great art community in Northern Vietnam.

However there are many disadvantages and issues Nhasan Studio has to deal with, such as lack of financial support and human resources. The artists themselves have funded most of the exhibitions and events held here. Although we understand that asking for grants is one of the most vital steps we will have to take, we don't actually have anyone who has the required skills to do so. As a consequence, this has closed up many opportunities for us to become acquainted with and ask for grants from overseas cultural foundations and art organizations.

Another downside to Nhasan Studio is the space itself. It is partly a house, partly an art space, but it can never be only or fully one thing or another. This means if artists decide to hold their events or have works exhibited here, they would have to take into account not only the visible and strange architectural aspects of the house, but also the unusualness of the space itself. However this very disadvantage is also something that makes Nhasan Studio one of a kind.

ZB: Many artists have told me that censorship in Hanoi was once more relaxed than Saigon. What

are your thoughts on the role of censorship in art making in Vietnam?

NMH: I don't really know about censorship in Saigon in comparison with Hanoi. But in Hanoi now it is more relaxed than before. Performance and installation art has now been shown at official exhibition spaces of the Fine Art Association Of Vietnam, which is unusual. In my opinion real artists do not create these activities at these venues, as they are mere opportunists. It shows that Vietnam's cultural policy is acknowledging the cultural trends of globalization. But this policy always follows the creativity of artists. The government has no administration, management direction or expertise in contemporary art to adapt the trend. They think contemporary artists are dangerous. Censorship in Vietnam has now become the permanent thoughts of the artists. For some artists, the first step of art making is self-censorship before showing their works to public, it is almost like a 'natural' condition. For me censorship is the most apparent evidence to show how uncertain and somewhat frightened the state is when it comes to administrating cultural and art activities. When the authorities lose control over the fast and diverse development of art and culture, they will do anything in their power to limit art spaces, art communities and artworks. This is so that these individuals and collectives won't be able to make as much of an impact on the public, and even if they do, it will still be under the state's control and won't slip outside of the so-called traditional social structures and moralities. This fact also proves that the idea of art and cultural development is highly unlikely one of the state's main priorities.

Personally, I think artists must use whatever drives and inspires them the most to make art. They should never just make art in order to please the majority; neither should they make art to promote a kind of policy or trend. Censorship has now become one of the mediums for art making. In a way it forces artists to push themselves further and requires them to look for other ways to express their artistic languages and viewpoints. Those who don't or can't figure out these "other ways" will eventually shake hands with censorship and consequently, with the state. They will then in turn produce works that are more pleasing and acceptable within the state's policies and laws.



"Naked Still life" by Nguyen Huy An at group show 2005.

ZB: Does Nhasan Studio openly discuss this situation of self-censorship with the local artistic community?

When artists came to Nhasan Studio to propose their ideas for new projects, we also mention self-censorship with them. In our way of communications, we still suggest artists to consider the purpose

of transforming the ideas an artwork as a priority. But these discussions are not held with an open audience.



Artist talk by Bophaxorigia Le Huy Hoang at his solo exhibition "Rain" March 2010.

ZB: Vietnam's artistic community is small, though fractured into those who follow the 'official' system of art making (eg. As member of the Fine Arts Association); between those who seek representation by local Vietnamese art galleries catering for the tourist market; and those few spaces such as Nhasan Studio who cater for the experimental practice of art making (ie. the artwork that is not popularly perceived as financially viable). As one of Vietnam's rising young contemporary artists, who has shown locally and abroad, whose work is now a part of various private and public collections, and now your role as manager of Nhasan Studio, how do you see artists as changing the above system of art in Vietnam – what kind of exhibition or cultural space do you dream for Vietnam?

I believe that those who have innate sense of creativity will naturally appear (through the exhibitions, discussions, workshops...). I'll meet those people and suggest desire to collaborate. The results of these collaborations benefit us in future bigger exhibitions. There is a farce in Vietnam is: we believe in the evaluation of the West and Chinese. If an exhibition of Vietnamese artists receives good reviews internationally then mainstream media in Vietnam will follow with press. So it slowly changes the system of art in - the long round way. I do not dream about art spaces for Vietnam, I dream about people running the system with clearer policies of culture.

ZB: You speak of your dream for cultural policy change in Vietnam - how do you think this change can occur?

NMH: Well, to "change" we need Obama, haha! Actually, Vietnam needs a change in its education system in general. Children need to study more art (as much as other subjects) in the schools. When they grow up, they will not be strange to art. Therefore they will be good students in art school, and of course they would be then be better artists. But I think this mission is too big for the Vietnamese Government now, because such change would bring too much freedom and knowledge to people. To me, I will work and hope... and I bet the same with others!

**Nhasan Studio** is a traditional wooden house on stilts that was built in 1992 by Nguyen Manh Duc in Hanoi, Vietnam. In 1998 Tran Luong and Nguyen Manh Duc turned Nhasan Studio into an experimental art space. Nhasan Studio was between the first alternative and non-profit spaces for contemporary art not only in Hanoi, but also the whole country. It opens for local and international

artists to present new kinds of media such as video, performance, sound, music, installation and much more.

**Nguyen Manh Hung** is currently manager of Nhasan Studio. He is also an artist whose work encompasses painting, sculpture, installation and sound, whose work has been included in numerous local and international exhibitions.

**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.