

# No, you are not dreaming.

## *Nhasan Studio and the Emergence of Experimental Art in Hanoi*

### **An Introduction to Nha San studio.**

The main room is stacked high with buddhas. It is as if we are sitting inside of a giant altar, treasure upon treasure, balanced on top of one another. One buddha wears sunglasses. Green tea is continuously brewed and poured. There are hives hand-fashioned out of wire and mud in the corners. Video monitors glow from inside them, one loops the slow flick of a tongue through teeth. This is part of the accumulated debris of past art shows here. Wooden benches and tables are lacquered and sanded in the workshop below us. The roof is thatch. The walls are mud. The house is elevated on stilts. Welcome to *Nha San Studio*: Vietnam's longest running experimental arts studio; where many of the first generation of artists from reconstruction era Vietnam have been nurtured, and taken flight.

### **The History of Nha San: How an experimental arts space grew in a flower field.**

In 1992, Nguyen Manh Duc, a former soldier, graduate of the Hanoi Fine Arts University, and a collector and reproducer of antiques by trade: bought, disassembled, transported and rebuilt a *Nha San*, a Muong ethnic minority house on stilts. Duc transplanted the house from the mountains to a plot of land surrounded by flower fields and graves in the outskirts of Hanoi. Within a decade, the graves and flowers were exhumed and overlaid with a dense complex of government housing blocks, and this *Nha San* became known as *Nha San Studio*, or "Duc's House on Stilts".

Initially, *Nha San* doubled as a showroom for Duc's antique reproduction business and the family home for Duc, his wife Le Thi Luong, and their young daughter Phuong Linh (who, twenty years later, is the curator of "*Skylines without Flying People*"). Duc also held concerts of traditional Vietnamese music in the house. In 1998, *Nha San* had its next incarnation. An artist named Tran Luong proposed opening up *Nha San* as an experimental arts space. *Nha San* fast became a nexus for international art exchange: hosting lectures, and workshops, sound, video, installation and performance art, and becoming "an underground streamline for Hanoi's contemporary art scene" connecting artists to opportunities for exchange abroad to exhibit and partake in residency programs.

### **Tran Luong: Going out and Coming Back**

Tran Luong has been the central force central in organizing venues, and developing networks for Vietnamese contemporary artists. Born in 1960 in Hanoi, Tran Luong graduated from Hanoi Fine Arts University with a degree in painting in 1983. He was a member of a group of young graduates publicly promoted as the "Gang of Five" in

Hanoi galleries. In the early 1990s, the “Gang of Five” received international attention as iconic of Vietnamese art’s ‘melding of tradition and modernity’ (an orientalist characterization that continues to be a selling point for Vietnamese art work today). Tran Luong was one of the first artists permitted to travel abroad. Tran Luong links his desire to break away from the painting style that garnered him commercial success to the reasons he decided to focus on building up a support system for experimental forms of expression.

*I was “like a soldier with a new weapon”...I came back to Vietnam, and started to concentrate more on digging into my own art, trying to create something new...life was more interesting, more complicated... We had to develop the infrastructure needed for a new kind of thinking, and community to emerge...*

And so, with the intention to open up a new kind of world in Hanoi, Nha San turned into an experimental arts space. Distinct from the strict pedagogy of the Hanoi Fine Arts University, away from the escalating pressures of a swelling commercial market which mainly demanded tourist dreams of village life and colonialism, and operating below the radar of government censorship of public exhibitions - *Nha San* grew space for the imagination in a flower field.

### ***Art Education and Historic Roles in Vietnam***

The majority of artists who have worked out of *Nha San* are graduates or former students of Hanoi Fine Arts University (HFA), formally the *L’Ecole Des Beaux Arts D’Indochine* (EBAI), established by Victor Tardieu in 1925. The college followed the 18th century curriculum of the *L’École Des Beaux Arts* in Paris, a five year program that taught anatomical drawing, perspective, and oil painting. Along with the strong emphasis on technical mastery, the EBAI introduced students to major European art movements of the day, such as like Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism and Surrealism. Currently, HFA is the home to multiple generations of “*gia dinh hoa si*”, the families of artists who are faculty members at the school. The pressures of kinship and a strict adherence to an academic program steeped in technique continue to define what art and artists should, or can be in Vietnam.

Technique and pedagogy mediate ideologies. Nora Taylor’s publication *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* provides an excellent lens for understanding how artists roles have changed dramatically through the 20th century. Taylor situates the shifting relationships between power regimes and changing definitions of ‘Vietnamese Artists’ according to four basic intervals of time. Taylor

delineates them as the Colonial period (1925-1945), the Revolutionary period (1945-1975), a Post-reunification period (1975-1986), and an Open Market – *doi moi* (1986-present). Her study develops the argument that each of these periods can be paired with different understandings of artistic identities and functions. These roles are loosely generalized as follows: artisans in the colonial period, workers during the revolutionary period, and with the post-reunification, and in the *doi moi* periods, comes the emergence of multiple, and competing categories of contemporary ‘Vietnamese artists’ in a more anonymous global community. In each of these periods, Taylor argues that artists have played a crucial role in regulating, gauging and disseminating the changing forms of nationalism, identity and of power in Vietnam. The style and content of artwork produced in each period act as mediations of the political, and societal context in which they are immersed.

### **Doi-Moi – Open Door Policies**

*Doi moi*, (renovation, open door, or the literal translation ‘new change’) is the set of economic policies set forth in 1986 at the Sixth National Communist Party congress that replaced central planning with a regulated open market. Before *doi moi* private business was illegal. Private sales existed clandestinely before *doi moi*. What the policies did was endorse and make public these economic transactions, and cultural productions. Pre-*doi moi* artists relied on state commissions through the Artists’ Association for daily sustenance, as well as for access to art materials. The rapid growth in the Vietnamese economy throughout the 1990s, is mirrored in the art market, with a surge in international demand for Vietnamese artwork – making some young artists “among the first beneficiaries of the market economy” with prices for their work multiplying tenfold over the course of five years.

Alongside *doi moi* policies came the gradual loosening of cultural restrictions on exhibiting work with styles and content that had been publicly banned. In 1992 the first national exhibition of abstract works took place in Ho Chi Minh City. The first exhibition of nudes also took place around this time. Salon Natashe opened in 1990 as the first post-*doi moi* gallery in Hanoi. Russian expatriate Natashe Kraeskaia and her visionary artist husband Vu Dan Tan, hosted exhibitions, installations and performances in their home and atelier. In 1994 German artist Veronika Radulovic received funding from the German government to teach courses at HFA. In her small drop-in class, she held discussions, and screened VHS tapes she brought along in her suitcase. These young students soon

became the core members of a group doing the first experiments with installation, video and performance at Salon Natashe, other private studios, and eventually making their headquarters at Nha San Studio.

Artist Nguyen Minh Thanh attributes his changing idea of what art could be to increased contact with people, and the practices they brought from other parts of the world. He stresses the influence of his teacher at HFA, Truong Tan. Born in 1963, Tan graduated from HFA in 1989. He took on a post as a lecturer at the University from 1989 until 1998. When controversy surrounding his artwork ended his job, he took off to France to escape the repressive environment in his home country. Tan has since returned, and now lives in between Paris and Hanoi.

### **Truong Tan: Testing and Teaching**

Truong Tan has consistently pushed the edge of acceptability and expression in Vietnam. Vietnam's first openly gay artist, Tan has been described as a "hero", and "the fountainhead of Vietnamese contemporary art" by younger artists. In the early to mid-1990s Truong Tan did his first performances in a private studio shared by his students. Nguyen Minh Thanh explains that the way he conceptualized art was fundamentally changed when in 1995, Truong Tan's exhibition was dismantled by the police before it opened to the public. Truong Tan had planned to show his paintings depicting men having sex with men, and talking penises spewing profanities and semen.

The show, originally named "Cultural Collision" is known in Hanoi art circles more commonly as "*Xin Loi*" (Vietnamese for "I am Sorry"). "*Xin Loi*" references Truong Tan's reaction to the censorship of his works. Nguyen Minh Thanh explained "*Xin Loi*" in a 2007 article protesting another instance where Truong Tan's work was taken down from exhibition.

*In place of the pictures he was not allowed to display, Truong Tan hung large pieces of classical Vietnamese dó paper with the words "I am sorry" written on them in Vietnamese, French, and English... these apology-paintings became powerful works of art... Indeed the words, "I am sorry", were written at a time when Vietnamese society was yearning to relearn how to apologize, an element of Vietnamese culture which had all but disappeared after years of fanaticism and hatred, of teaching people only to worship victory and heroism. For those of us involved in the arts (particularly those of us who were students of his at the time) Truong Tan's "I am sorry" was a deeply moving and inspiring gesture on many levels. Indeed it*

*was a gesture that seeped into our souls and changed the way we saw the world. It also helped us begin to understand what art was.*

With “*Xin Loi*” Truong Tan apologized directly to the audience, in effect creating a new audience that was separate from the arts association, from the cultural police, and “the traditional national aesthetic”. The original artwork could not be exhibited, but like Tran Dan’s poem “Skylines without Flying People”, the evidence of its lack was a powerful statement in and of itself: proof of what was missing, and what could be. Like Tran Dan, Truong Tan, and the band of artists in this exhibition are pushing the limits of expression in Hanoi, are opening up space for the for the imagination, in the present day and in the future.