

How attitude becomes form: Collaboration in Asia

What I am about to share was first given in excerpt, and written initially, for a seminar held jointly by Columbia University and the Asia Art Archive in America, in New York in April this year. That panel, aptly titled ‘China in Asia, Asia in China’ is a neat interlude to today’s discussion that focuses on the idea of ‘collaboration’ in Asia, indeed continuing a topic that hopefully will offer prescient considerations and insight into the necessity for new frameworks of showcasing contemporary art and culture. For me, critical to the idea of ‘collaboration’ is exchange and dialog – how can these two transit lanes offer rich ground for new histories to emerge and thus new patterns of economy. We should not be blind to the role money has to play in marking out ‘successful’ collaborations while also paying due respect to the role of context and historical memory and custom as integral to meaningful exchange and dialog.

I believe the success of an artistic project often arises at the moment of a culture collision and in late July 2009, in Beijing, at an evening of much bai jiu, cigarettes and cringe-style canto-pop, while sitting in the antique wooden chairs of a country long proud to be named the ‘Middle Kingdom’, I found myself in a curious conversation about the nature of a cultural and artistic alliance. Confronted by a room full of very successful Chinese contemporary artists, I asked one of the most respected artist/curator of his generation, of his thoughts on collaborating with artists from South East Asia, to which without pause he asked ‘Why would we consider it a good strategy to partner with the rear of the vanguard?’

I was not surprised by the logic of such a statement as it did reflect several years of particular research and experience of working between China, Vietnam and Cambodia. I was disheartened at how clearly this cultural attitude has affected the nature, form and potential of China’s cultural and artistic contemporary exchange. I found it disappointing that China who I believed had significant potential to model a new regional paradigm for the discussion and circulation of contemporary art history and production, should be so hoodwinked in historical chauvinism, laced with the lure of global (read Western) economy. Just where this chauvinism is anchored is a question. Perhaps some essentialists would remind us that the Han Chinese as early as the 4th Century, considered South East Asian people to be an ‘unhistorical’ barbarian race destined to be subjugated by others (largely determined by their darkness in skin tone and perceived failure in forming cohesive national groups)¹. Though this view is historically worthy of one interpretation, the issue at hand – namely the complex possibility of cultural collaboration in Asia, looking particularly at China, Vietnam and briefly Cambodia – cannot be so easily determined.

In today’s ever expanding circuit of curatorial intelligentsia who travel the globe in search of talent, who land in cities with little arts and cultural infrastructure (particularly places like Vietnam or Cambodia), artistic value is largely determined by the benefits of the international art market with its colonial overtones that dictate preferred aesthetic, dismissing a great amount of local art production as derivation rather than arguing a contextualized originality (one could look at Vietnamese artist Nguyen Trung and the resemblance of Cy Twombly; or the influence of China’s cynical realism and pop aesthetic comparing the work of the Luo Brothers with Ha Manh Thang). In greater Asia particularly, the issue of appropriation and derivation, coupled with a market-driven landscape is dangerously limiting the growth and development of a critically thinking, locally specific, contemporary cultural discourse and infrastructure.

So firstly to give a little background on these various art scenes and how their social context affects the interpretation, understanding and collaboration within contemporary art ... in contrast to the explosion of hardware and software in China’s contemporary art scene (its museum buildings, commercial galleries, contemporary art precincts and art fair halls; its collectors, sales

managers, bank sponsors and experimental artist-initiated university contemporary art curricula), Vietnam has little 'ware' to speak of. It has no dedicated contemporary art museum, no collectors purchasing contemporary Vietnamese art that is circulated abroad; a French university curricula that has not changed since 1924 and does not teach contemporary art history; it also has no critical comparative resources or textual/visual archives of 20th Century culture and society. Vietnam's first millennia were under subjugation to China and the country remains proud of their ability to oust China's rule single-handedly. Vietnamese Ministry of Culture officials look to the dollar success of their artistic big brothers in contemporary China and question how Vietnamese artists can do the same, but they are extremely hesitant to engage China on such a cultural conversation when political tension between the two countries remains at one of its highest points in the last decade over territorial disputes over the South China Sea. Despite the rare occurrence of permitted public protests in 2011 in Hanoi and Saigon over this territory, the Vietnamese government is also very mindful of China's much needed investment in various resource industries (such as the mining of rare mineral) that greatly affects policy making in the country.

In contrast in Phnom Penh in Cambodia, where China is today the country's leading investor of infrastructural development, where Pol Pot's Chinese-backed regime destroyed 95% of the intellectual population and its resourcesⁱⁱ; where the current Prime Minister is considered the puppet of the Vietnamese government; there are a total of 10 students enrolled in the Fine Arts program of the University of Fine Arts; and the country is problematically controlled by foreign NGO who are also the sole supporters and interpreters of the visual arts. There is no financial support for artists and most 'collectors' are expats who would rather spend 500 USD on a fancy meal than support local culture and thus the price point of a sale is not consistent with what it would possibly gain abroad. Though China's contemporary art landscape is diversifying with a strong network of differing players on the production, collecting and educational end, private museums in Songzhuang still languish with the scampering feet of the sales-pitch 'curator', where providing any critical form of interpretation of an art object is either a flowery nonsensical paragraph evincing the stereotypical power of Chinese tradition; or at the opposite academic end it is an algorithm of theoretical jargon, attempting to challenge Western theories with Chinese thought, which makes the art-loving pundit shrug with confusion.

While exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art in Vietnam and Cambodia are next to null, there are relatively few exhibitions of South East Asian Art seen in China, save for a handful of commercial galleries, artists and independent curators such as 'Pekin Fine Arts' and 'Tang Contemporary'; Biljana Ciric's exhibition 'Strategies from Within' in 2008 and the collaborative programs of Caochangdi Workstation initiated by film maker and documentarian Wu Wenguang. What is of crucial question for all these contexts here is audience – to who are artistic and curatorial endeavors and collaborations important on the local level? If an artist can gain critical reception in New York or Berlin, on terms that are relevant to a Western argument of aesthetic history, how is this made relevant on a more local or regional level of production? Where does the role of interpretation and its possible political persuasion hold affective power and influence on this local level? Particularly relevant to this discussion is how does the hardware and software of a local or regional arts infrastructure, its formation of relationship between producers and interpreters, affect an artist's social attitude towards foreign artistic exchange and dialog.

Within Vietnam, China is perceived as a success story – not because they are particularly compelled by the messages within their art, nor that they particularly respect its various forms – their determination of success largely resound with the auctioneer's gavel of sale. In Vietnam particularly, what concerns the Communist Party's Cultural Ministry is how to make Vietnamese contemporary art a financial and tourist asset in the same way of China. However their key issue is how to ensure the artists, patrons and public do not critically challenge the relationship between

production, discourse and display as practiced within the international art market (artists such as Ai Weiwei are well noted in Vietnam and it is not mere coincidence that his manipulation of social media is encouraging Vietnamese fire-walls and now also censoring local website content such as the recent show of Nguyen Thai Tuan at San Art which I will talk about further on). The systems that generate interpretation of culture are kept under relative political surveillance in China, Vietnam and Cambodia and increasingly in my experience it is through independent intercultural collaborative exchange and the necessity of translation in this context, that new modes of dialog, new praxis of making can open up discursive space - locating knowledge networks, practical infrastructure and embracing flexibility in project goal are paramount to ensure productivity.

A pertinent case study here is the artist-initiated entity called the 'Long March Project' and its initiation of the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project (begun in 2009)ⁱⁱⁱ. This complex and controversial undertaking has had exhibition/discussion platforms unravel in Beijing, Phnom Penh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vientiane and Shanghai. The 'Long March' entity is composed of the 'Long March Project' charged with the mission to investigate critical discourse surrounding art and culture, and 'Long March Space', a commercial operation set up initially to financially support the artistic experimental non-profit endeavors of 'Long March Project'.

The 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project endeavored to '... be a collaborative contemporary arts project whose mission was to implement physical, discursive, and artistic activities among China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.... [calling] for a questioning of fixed relations within social production as determined by ideas of history, identity, market logic, and the subconscious effects of a geographically imposed divide.'^{iv} It encompassed public and private forum, workshop, curatorial residency, research trips, a month-long physical journey through these countries and was also recently prominently featured in 'Rehearsal: 8th Shanghai Biennale' 2010.

In 2008, in my then role as Director of International Programs of 'Long March Project', I was excited for this project as I thought it would challenge the persisting narcissism found at the heart of a great quantity of Chinese contemporary art – an opinion also shared by the founder, Lu Jie. I thus set about creating a network of collaborators in this region who would co-implement the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' project's mission. Funding was found, and the project began in July 2009 with an intense one-month 'Long March Education' residency program with artists and curators from this region. What I learnt from this 30 days of discussion with individuals from Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Seoul, New York, Hangzhou and Beijing was that this project marvelously encompassed so much historical trauma and disconnected cultural memory, so much subsequent social distrust, nationalistic pride and psychological misgivings that I could see how this dialog was starting to break down many local cultural and political assumptions that I believed held great potential for the subsequent creation of provocative art works and re-inventions of historical moments.

However the founder of Long March Project began to doubt the plausibility of collaboration with these parties in concern that the ensuing aesthetic and dialog would not be of 'international' critical relevance and translatability. Constructive, yet heated discussions were had in Beijing concerning the problematic 'democratic' framework of an art collaborative project; about the need for a directed curatorial vision in the success of an aesthetic and intellectual project; about the complex need to move on from the historical prejudice of the past and look towards new forms of social interaction and partnerships – but how to maintain quality and standard? Consequently, the whole framework of the project was changed with the decision to have Long March Project dictate the shape and form of all encounters. I understood the need for these questions and the 'push-pull' relationship between satisfying local and international project goals

for a growing organization gaining national and international credence - but in realizing that the basis of my securing this regional network of friendship – namely giving the chance particularly for Vietnamese and Cambodian people to speak and direct action and form on an equal contributing platform with Chinese participants, was not a possibility – I found myself in an ethical dilemma as the curatorial facilitator of the project. While I acknowledged that the curatorial cohesion of a project based on so many conflicting opinions and differing contextual realities would be tough to conjure a visual exhibition or intellectual discourse with the expected international rigor, I also knew that this project opened up the possibilities for a new form of cultural engagement that could on a local level enact dynamic social change that would greatly benefit the artistic communities involved in the long term. But the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail’ project was a curatorial endeavor, an artistic statement with a desired aesthetic that ultimately was about China.

The accompanying catalogue (which attempts to document the history of the project, particularly the physical journey through this region by participants) is an art statement unto its own as image after image of Chinese artists in romanticized travel mode, production mode, discussion mode command. Only Nguyen Nhu Huy (from Ho Chi Minh City) and Viet Le (Vietnamese descent, living between Phnom Penh and LA) were actively participating in this project that was largely a philosophical and rhetorical exercise largely prioritizing Chinese perspective. While I feel the intellectual strength of it and could see the coherence in such a strategy, I found it also greatly contradicted the Long March Project desire to open up the ‘pandora’s box’ of interwoven cultural histories in this region. My own misgivings were matched by the skepticism of artists in Vietnam and Cambodia, many of whom preferred to refrain from organizational involvement and participation as a result of the change in project direction. Their skepticism arose from various issues such as the titling of the project (the trail known as the ‘Ho Chi Minh Trail’ is of great political sensitivity in Vietnam and any local examination of its history and relevance is vetted by the government); general confusion about what they were expected to contribute to this highly theoretically-anchored series of discussions that asked more questions about China’s perspective of history than their own; it was also about the lack of time and interpersonal sincerity and equal collaborative participation that made a large number of the artistic communities in Vietnam and Cambodia feel like they were yet again mere props for a well-rehearsed play that spoke about them not with them. The Chinese wanted the international accolade more than they wanted to sincerely and genuinely ‘march’ on a road where their own sense of time and urgency would have to be re-aligned.

Soon after the residency intensive in July 2009 in Beijing, I decided to relocate to Ho Chi Minh City to take up the Directorship of San Art. The week before I left, a good friend and very well-respected Chinese artist and curator sincerely challenged me by asking ‘What are you – a curator or a social worker?’ It has been a question that continues to resound in my head. If desiring to work in contexts where access to critical resources are null, where artists are resilient despite these odds and thus seek to have their stories, their experiences heard on a local and international platform – if working in such environments means that as a curator one must help that artist understand the international context of where their work is about to be exhibited and why; in return curators re-learning methodologies according to local contexts? ; that as a curator to sit with a group of artists and encourage each other to work through our relationship to self-censorship in the face of a society governed by heavy political restriction; that if you desire to introduce other artistic ideas as form of knowledge production in the face of a great public lack of access to resources; if you picture a world where globalism can nurture new discursive and financial models of localized knowledge and art production - are these curatorial strategies, often dependent on the ethos of ‘collaboration’, deemed ‘social work’? Does the concept of cross-cultural artistic engagement necessitate social and political negotiations that demand a

psychological re-assessment? In my experience – yes – an experience particularly endured in the creation of San Art in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

The opening night of the first exhibition at Sàn Art (on October 3, 2007) in Saigon was a significant moment: The crowds that gathered for the event were an eager and genuine lot, buzzing with energy and keen to embrace the social friction that came with combining the three tiers of the community: local, foreign, and Viet Kieu.^v (Viet Kieu literally translates as “Vietnamese sojourner.” It commonly refers to the overseas Vietnamese diaspora, particularly the boat refugees of the Vietnam War. Locals and government alike heavily ostracized the Việt Kiều community, until mid-2000s. The need for specialist expertise in trade and communications, qualifications earned by Viet Kieu abroad and now employed within Vietnam, are greatly contributing to a positive and inclusive national shift in social attitude.) This first exhibition at San Art showcased the skill of Saigonese draftsmen, and it is this constituency—the local—that Sàn Art has continued to nurture and promote. As an artist-initiated, independent, nonprofit contemporary art space and reading room, Sàn Art (sàn meaning “platform”) offers a space for artists to participate in and collaborate and transform, operating as an essential hub for experimentation and the meeting of talent, both local and foreign.

The personal reflections of the Viet Kieu artist founders on their experience of present-day Vietnam, coupled with the great lack of contemporary art expertise and resources in the local community, were central to the founding of San Art. When Dinh Q Lê (whose work will feature in the next dOCUMENTA) relocated to Saigon from the United States in 1996 he was struck by the resilience of Vietnamese artists, who continued to create even in a country where humid libraries without Wi-Fi access offered little glimpse of the world after c.1954, and travel demanded so many queues, stamps, and seals that any hope of exploration beyond the borders was quickly extinguished by red tape. Lê remembers realizing how much of the distant and recent past was mentally reconstructed by artists who shared the cultural blindness of the hand-painted propaganda signs that circulate continuously throughout the country.^{vi} Tiffany Chung and Tuan Andrew Nguyễn recall similar impressions of Vietnam when they returned from the U.S. (in 2000 and 2004, respectively). They were fascinated by the ways Vietnam’s past was being reinterpreted through popular culture—namely Korean, Japanese, and American music, film, fashion, and graffiti—and became interested in exploring how young Vietnamese were using gleanings from a mishmash of random, decontextualized visual signifiers to come to grips with the country’s history. Phunam could relate to those who battled to make the inconsistencies of history profitable. A self-taught photographer who trained in Thailand in fine art conservation, he was fully aware of the controversial practice of making copies of art and artifacts as a strategy of “cultural” survival.^{vii} Determined to find some way to contribute to the local art scene, Lê founded the Vietnam Foundation for the Arts (VNFA) in Los Angeles in 2006 with his LA dealer, Shoshana Wayne Gallery (“nonprofit” status for cultural activities does not legally exist in Vietnam). The VNFA’s mission was to promote and support the discussion and production of Vietnamese contemporary art and culture within and beyond the nation’s borders. Its first project, a response to the limited textual and visual resources on contemporary art and culture in the country, was to establish a reading room in Saigon. However, finding a home for this contemporary art material proved inordinately complicated. As a Viet Kieu, Lê was treated with suspicion and his project was ultimately buried in “official” paperwork. Frustrated, realizing not only the political limits of showing critical work in Vietnam but also the social difficulties of being a Viet Kieu, it was a logical conclusion that four friends who shared similar backgrounds, interests, and motivations would come together to create their own platform, or sàn, for art.

One of the most exciting aspects of this challenging new Director position for me at San Art was not only my sense of this small organization’s international potential nor my belief that it served a

crucial role in the diversifying landscape of Vietnamese contemporary art. It was the realization that I, as a museum-trained curator, would once again be employed by a group of artists in a communist country greatly lacking in any arts infrastructure, who were collaborating their own ideas and experience of contemporary art production to fashion a platform of their own - not that it doesn't come with its own considerable risk and seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

For example, in April 2011, San Art, in conjunction with SA SA BASSAC in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, had organized a solo exhibition by Khmer photographer; Rattana Vandy entitled 'Bomb Ponds' (a project that will also feature in the forthcoming dOCUMENTA). This single channel documentary video and suite of 9 color photographs illustrates the bomb scars left behind by US bomb raids during the Vietnam War. Rattana Vandy interviewed more than 20 farmers, witnesses who recall this atrocity that triggered the rise of the Khmer Rouge militia and the ways in which these extremely large 'ponds' have become a particular physical and psychological feature of the rural Cambodian landscape. In order for San Art to secure the appropriate exhibition license, the Vietnamese Cultural Ministry threw an unexpected request – a signed letter of introduction by the Cambodian government vouching the integrity and value of the artist. Rattana Vandy, being one of the few outspoken critics of the Cambodian government, understandably was not at all willing to seek such a document to justify the value of his work - this unexpected and never before requested procedure could be read a number of ways. At that time in April 2011, the Vietnamese government were anxious to not offend the US government for reasons of trade and influence in the South China Sea territorial disputes; also the Vietnamese government had only once month before threatened San Art staff with arrest for programming an educational talk of a once anti-government writer (whose work is actually today about fiction); but it could also be about the fact that like San Art, SA SA BASSAC is an independent gallery space that pushes the mission of independent thinking. Founded in 2011, SA SA BASSAC is the joining of two entities – SA SA Art Gallery, run by the Khmer artist group 'Stiev Selapak (Art Rebels)' and Bassac Art Projects, run by Fulbright-Humphrey fellow, curator and scholar Erin Gleeson. Combined, SA SA BASSAC was initiated from realizing emerging Cambodian artists needed commercial expertise in engaging Cambodian and international publics. SA SA BASSAC is one of the country's only contemporary art organizations that support curatorial and educational practices in the visual arts, doing exhibitions locally and abroad.

Today, the collaborative practice between artists and curators in the establishment of contemporary art infrastructure, networks and projects in Asia is a dynamic innovation of western methodology with local knowledge and practice, a collaborative exercise that is creating new definitions for the idea of curatorial labor particularly.

In November of 2011, San Art held a solo show for Vietnamese self-taught painter Nguyen Thai Tuan, whose enigmatic canvases delicately critique the changing seats of power in Vietnam since the abdication of the last Emperor Bao Dai. This exhibition was a cunning juxtaposition of pre and post Communist Vietnam, with Nguyen Thai Tuan manipulating his signature motif of the bodiless figure as metaphor for the lack of substance he sees in contemporary Vietnamese society. A carefully engineered statement was written for the purpose of exhibition license, however the Cultural Ministry surprised us with their reason to censor the show as they stated if you place objects of before and after Communism together in the same room you are giving space for critique, which they would not allow. They informed us we could only show the work that refers to before or after Communism – not both. Considering that San Art never receives explanation of restrictions ordered on its activities, we were shocked and begrudgingly impressed with their feedback though concerned of what this would mean for the show – a show where the critical story was in the comparison of time.

San Art decided to show all the work, placing half the work in our storage display area, arguing this back room as not part of the official exhibition. For this exhibition an in-depth critical essay was written for international audiences; two different press release for local and international press was written and a basic summary essay with no political content was written – the latter of which was translated and posted on San Art's website. The exhibition was met with huge success, however we were slapped with a fine for our method of showing the work and also told to remove all textual information from the show completely. It is this latter request that continues to dog my work in Vietnam. In the desire to generate new audiences for culture, how can a curator speak about an artist's intention and perspective truthfully in Vietnam; how to encourage critical thinking when all forms of the written word lie under so much scrutiny? How to communicate and promote the work online internationally, while also having to provide different information locally and not bring this difference of information to the attention of government?

Ever since this exhibition, the Vietnamese Cultural Ministry have been particularly stringent on all our educational programs, limiting the number of people permitted on the premises to 5 at any one time without a license. Our strategy to cope with this crucially relies on collaboration with other local organization whose commercial license (companies and organizations who do not have a cultural mandate) permits the hosting of our activities. It is ironic that the government's restriction of our activities to curb public participation has actually caused our audience numbers to increase, for by holding our activities in different sites across the country we plug not only our own networks, but the host's clientele as well. This kind of collaboration may seem an obvious resolution to people working in the developed world, however in my experience there is a great lack of collaborative spirit in the visual arts on an institutional level that seems more determined to control the brand of their activities rather than nurturing and indeed promoting the access to information for a broader society.

Recently, I was happy to hear that the TATE Modern have established Adjunct Curatorial appointments that see the employment of local talent on the ground, without the need to remove them from the very networks desired by that institution – such as Bogota-based Jose Roca in Colombia who is now the Adjunct Curator for Latin American Art to TATE Modern and remains stationed in the context he lives to support. I see these kinds of appointments as mutual collaborations for it not only gives great asset to TATE to have such access to local knowledge but it also increases the scope of visibility of TATE programs in Latin America and its artistic producers. This spirit of collaboration that respects the placement of knowledge and production is crucial to the development of a contemporary art in great parts of Asia and for that matter, the global south. There are very interesting conversations beginning between major institution and grass-roots organization across Asia, Middle East and Africa that will hopefully demonstrate that we do indeed live in the 21 Century where communication technology and outsourcing of production is the perfect climate for new modes of art institutions and artistic production to flourish. It is such kinds of respect for local knowledge and the ethos of collaboration that will also further problematise this question of derivation, value and lack of historical rigor perceived by Western institution in the contemporary art of the South.

It is this latter matter of history that needs to be thoroughly challenged and provoked across greater Asia, where the dominance of market is causing a mass erosion of cultural memory and shared historical consciousness. This contemporary erosion coupled with a great amount of cultural prejudice and antagonism, largely due to the exploits of colonial rule, war, economic disparity and social assumption is breeding a rising nationalism that prefers cultural elitism (read isolationism) as opposed to cultural openness – this is particularly contradictory when daily life is visually confronted by market openness that encourages international trade relationships and yet fails to acknowledge where those various trades are innovated/influenced through cultural custom

or technique (eg. Louis Vuitton's, 'Bombay Sapphire' collection). We must not forget the essential need for the expertise of people with experience in the cultural sphere that can connect the dots with the wondrous tools of the 21 Century. Within Asia it is a need to greatly respect the matrix of friendship and personal relation in the cultural sphere, in order to achieve the spirit of collaboration with just results.

Zoe Butt, June, 2012

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ⁱ Michael J Sullivan <http://www.africaspeaks.com/reasoning/index.php?topic=7445.0;wap2>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Phnom-Penh:-thousands-of-people-displaced-by-booming-Chinese-investments-21250.html> (viewed July 16, 2012)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.hochiminhtrailproject.com/html/e-main0.html> (viewed July 16, 2012)

^{iv} 'Introduction: Long March Project – Ho Chi Minh Trail' in YISHU, Vol. 10, No. 2, March/April, 2011, p. 4.

^v **Việt Kiều** literally translates as "Vietnamese sojourner." It commonly refers to the overseas Vietnamese diaspora, particularly the boat refugees of the Vietnam War. The **Việt Kiều** community, until mid-2000s, was heavily ostracized by locals and government alike. The need for specialist expertise in trade and communications, qualifications earned by **Việt Kiều** abroad and now employed within Vietnam, is greatly contributing to a positive and inclusive national shift in social attitude.

^{vi} Conversation between the author and Lê, December 2011.

^{vii} Many of the works in Vietnam's museum collections are considered by the international art community to be copies, or fakes. The need to protect the original works from destruction or looters during wartime was cited as justification for the practice of producing and displaying forgeries.