

THE ART OF CENSORSHIP IN VIETNAM

Samantha Libby

Vietnam now participates in a capitalist market and keeps its borders open, but it still imposes a dated yet effective communist matrix of control over the country's media outlets. This article examines the effectiveness of this system of control with respect to visual art. I find that contemporary art in particular is able to communicate—and express frustrations with—the tensions between rapid economic development and political stagnation, and between cultural traditionalism and modernization. Art can speak with relative impunity because its meaning is more difficult to pinpoint than written criticism of the regime. However, it is important to note that few, if any, Vietnamese artists advocate a change of regime. Instead, they emphasize their concerns about tensions in society caused by rapid development and its effect on centuries-old traditions. The current one-party regime certainly contributes to this tension, but it would be an oversimplification to call these artists “protest artists”; rather, they act as a lens through which both Vietnamese citizens and outsiders get an honest and unbiased view of a country that is too often thought of in terms of colonialism or war.

In Vietnam, all art exhibitions must apply for an official exhibition permit from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The purpose of the board is to regulate the exposure of art to the general public according to the state's wishes and needs. In interviews for this article, several artists and art dealers—all of whom asked to remain anonymous—said that the Ministry is so disorganized and steeped in corruption that it does not do a thorough job of censoring content. As a result, the artist has possibly the freest voice in Vietnam.

In December 2010, I was working at the Bui Gallery in Hanoi and submitted

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The Andrew Wellington Cordier Essay features the finest work received by the Journal from students at Columbia University. This section memorializes Andrew Wellington Cordier, who served as dean of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs from 1962 to 1972 and president of Columbia from 1968 to 1970, in addition to having a distinguished diplomatic career. The essay prize was inaugurated in 1982.

two paintings, “Stop” and “The Last Party” by the artist Pham Huy Thong, to the Ministry. Only one was approved. The police insisted that the gallery remove “Stop” from the exhibition but had no complaints about the second picture. Foreign guests of the gallery expressed shock at “The Last Party,” wondering how such a piece could be displayed in a public, for-profit art gallery in a communist country. (Reproductions of the paintings discussed in this article are located in the “Images” section of this issue on pages 238 to 240.) The decision to remove

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one painting and ignore the other highlights the failure of Vietnam’s policy of control and demonstrates the fundamentally self-defeating nature of censorship.

Vietnam is in a unique position historically; it embraces Western capitalism and development and shuns the value system that brought the elites of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to power. The push and pull between modernity and Confucian and communist traditionalism can be felt in every corner of Vietnamese society, and contemporary art has become the clearest outlet for this tension.

However, this conflict is largely hidden from those outside Vietnam. Tourists enjoy their steaming bowls of *pho* and *cyclos* and marvel at the maddening traffic and cheap souvenirs. They would be right to wonder, amid rising skyscrapers, bustling shops, a growing economy and the well-dressed, mostly well-fed population: Where is the oppression? Where are the gross human rights abuses? Is freedom of speech really possible in a communist country?

In fact, human rights activists have recently called attention to an upsurge in the arrest of bloggers, religious figures and activists and to a host of constraints on freedom of speech.¹ How then can art—specifically contemporary visual art, a discipline that prides itself on freedom of expression—sustain itself and thrive in a communist state?

To understand this duality, it is necessary to discuss Vietnamese history before the “American War” or the Communist Revolution, when the fine arts tradition, the backbone of the contemporary Vietnamese art movement, first developed.

THE AO DAI FIXATION

Vietnamese fine art dates back nearly a century, when craftsman-like woodcutting and lacquer work were the dominant forms of expression. Art was purely decorative and was meant to be an object of beauty rather than a vehicle for the ideas and perspective of the artist. Though lacquer and woodcutting remain

popular mediums for both traditional and contemporary art today, this period of Vietnamese art is often disregarded, but the pastoral ideas of beauty, the idealization of the farmer and a patriotic love of the homeland are all ideas that were instrumental in the political life of the country during the twentieth century. This is also the vision of Vietnam that dominates the Western imagination.

Fine art was formalized during the period of French colonization, from 1858 to 1954. The French founded L'École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine in 1925, which encouraged experimentation and exploration, and helped Vietnamese craftsmen make the transition from artisan to artist.² Perhaps the most famous artists to flourish under this system were Bui Xuan Phai and To Ngoc Van, whose iconic "A Girl by Lilies" became internationally synonymous with Vietnamese art and who is still beloved today.

Trying to capitalize on the old master's style and his ability to capture the beauty of colonial Indochina, present-day artisans work tirelessly to create knockoffs for tourists looking for a token picture of a rice field or a woman in a conical hat. Serious Vietnamese artists jokingly refer to these pieces as "rice paddy" art. It is not uncommon to hear these artists explain to collectors that their art is different from what is sold on the street and is of intrinsically higher value.

Sadly, unlike in China, contemporary art is very difficult to sell. "Rice paddy art" is what tourists and locals are most interested in buying. The market for decorative souvenirs is bloated with such pieces, as a simple Google search for "Vietnamese art" confirms. Tourist art shops that crowd the old quarters of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City happily cater to these tastes, selling a romantic vision of Vietnam—sometimes for thousands of dollars—that no longer exists. As a result, the market for truly contemporary art has dwindled, with most interested buyers overseas. Tourists and Vietnamese citizens may find it difficult to access contemporary works; artists do not paint sentimental landscapes, rice paddies or women in traditional Ao Dai dress but rather, find ways to portray the complex socioeconomic conditions of the present day that are ignored by guidebooks and the local media.

Vietnam is one of the most rapidly developing countries in the world and strives to participate in the global marketplace with heavyweight players like China, Japan, the United States and Europe.³ While the mood in the West is ominous, the streets of Vietnam are flourishing, filled with high-end boutiques and imported goods headed for the countryside. Day and night, the sound of jackhammers cuts through the air as cities transform themselves.

In present-day Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City, the stereotypical Ao Dai-style

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of dress is no longer “in”; Gucci knockoffs are. Bicycles are for children and the poor; a car, preferably a Bentley or a Rolls-Royce, is the ultimate status symbol. Like China and other communist-capitalist hybrid states, Vietnam is now largely governed by the *nouveau riche*.

Contemporary Vietnamese artists, most of whom were born during or immediately after the American War, are in a unique position to bridge the cultural divide created by the sudden transformation of society from its traditional, agrarian roots to a bustling, commercial economy. Ha Manh Thang, regarded as Vietnam’s premier pop artist, uses traditional symbols layered with luxury items and kitsch to illustrate this pressure between old and new in contemporary Vietnamese society, just as Andy Warhol did nearly fifty years ago for America’s changing social landscape.

DOI MOI

For many Vietnamese artists, it is easy to recall a time when exhibiting their artwork was nearly impossible. Following the reunification of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1975, expressionist art essentially disappeared. Only state-sanctioned, socialist-realist art was acceptable, a style that is still used on billboards throughout major cities today. Privately owned galleries were virtually non-existent because of the collectivization of land and the ban on private business.⁴ This meant that an artist’s only chance to show his or her work was through the state-managed Vietnam Fine Arts Association. Since the country was closed and the state was the only patron of the arts, exposure to the contemporary art world was minimal at best, and nationalistic art portraying courageous workers and Ho Chi Minh in various poses inundated the scene.⁵

However, this period was short lived. In response to a near-famine in the early 1980s and ongoing conflicts with Cambodia and China, Vietnamese economic planners saw no choice but to end the agricultural collectives and price controls in order to endorse private enterprise and open the country to foreign investors in an economic plan known as “Doi Moi.”⁶ Doi Moi was implemented in 1986 and was the fourth in a series of five-year economic plans—socialist policy-planning tools that were usually ambitious, unrealistic and ineffective. By opening the country to global investment, Doi Moi distinguished itself from previous policy failures and allowed Vietnam to become one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.⁷

Doi Moi also had a profound effect on the development of contemporary art. While most other forms of expression were rigidly censored, art found its voice once private enterprise started to grow and for-profit galleries were free to conduct business and sell artwork. This provided artists with a place to exhibit their talents and speak without state sponsorship. Long dormant, the art community surged

with new exhibition spaces and quickly absorbed developments in contemporary art from around the world.⁸ The downside was that art “stores”—for-profit-at-any-cost operations—opened alongside galleries to sell copies of both contemporary and modern artwork at a steep discount. This damaged the market for authentic works of art, and artists could not prevent copies of their works from finding their way onto the streets in the Old Quarter or prevent commercial “artists” from capitalizing on their individual style and technique.

Despite these setbacks, private galleries continue to play a dominant role in the contemporary art scene. In Ho Chi Minh City, Galerie Quynh and San Art are regarded as premiere venues for contemporary pieces, while in the north the avant-garde Nha San Duc regularly houses installation and performance art. The Bui Gallery, also in the north, regularly sends artists abroad to art fairs such as Art Abu Dhabi and Art Basel. In addition, both young and established artists receive support from foreign embassies, especially the Goethe Institute, Alliance Française and the Danish Embassy. One of the oldest contemporary galleries is Salon Natasha, which has served as a meeting place for intellectuals and artists since 1990.⁹

THE RULES OF CENSORSHIP

Despite all these advances, the question remains: is the contemporary artist in Vietnam freer to examine and question his society than a writer, activist, politician or journalist? The answer is both yes and no. One artist, who wishes to remain nameless for safety reasons, explains:

“Censorship in Vietnam has complicated boundaries. The most important thing for Vietnamese visual artists is to know where to push against boundaries and where [to] hold back. So sneaking is an important skill for the provocative artist in Vietnam. Many of us create artwork with multiple layers of meanings so we can explain it reasonably and differently to different audiences. It is a dangerous but also exciting game for us.”¹⁰

I recall instances before a show at a gallery when a policeman would appear and insist that papers were not correctly filed or that the permit was not in order until 500,000 VND, or about \$25, resolved the matter. Other times, a policeman would simply stand unceremoniously and wait to be paid. Such practices are not unique to Vietnam. Therefore it is unclear how much the Ministry of Culture wishes to curb statements of artists and how much it wants to line its own pockets.

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Widespread corruption in Vietnam is no secret.¹¹ In fact, many politicians acknowledge the problem openly. It is commonly known that the people in power have sometimes paid large sums of money for their jobs, creating a self-reinforcing circle of corruption. Any anti-corruption policy would be a direct threat to their power. Vietnam's rapidly developing economy has placed people who were once among the world's poorest in the back seats of luxury sedans.

However, visual art is still not considered a luxury good. The same artist explained:

"It's about history and culture. As war after war continued for decades in Vietnam, high culture was badly destroyed, and the Communist Revolution, technically made by farmers and workers, was not friendly, with well-educated people who mostly came from [the] middle class or rich class. As the war went on, we saw a lot of noble, elite and well-educated people run from the north to the south in 1954 and from the south of Vietnam to other countries, mostly in 1975. The people who chose to stay were then killed in the land reforms or in other sociopolitical movements. The rich people today, the elite class of Vietnam, are basically [the] offspring of farmers [during the] revolution. There is no link with the noble or elite class of the past. So their understanding of art is zero."¹²

The difficulty is that as the economy inflated, so did the exposure to western influence and political sensibilities, especially with regard to human rights. However, as the newly opened country climbed out of record poverty, social and political sensibilities did not progress as quickly. Therefore, Vietnam is strained by its attempt to balance a Confucian-based model of society with a Western market economy. Contemporary art has emerged as one of the best ways to examine the fluctuating nature of present-day Vietnamese society, as long as it remains abstract enough to avoid censorship.

IS THE PAINTER THE FREEST MAN IN VIETNAM?

Year after year, Vietnam sits near the bottom of the World Press Freedom Index created by Reporters Without Borders, below many worn-torn countries, including Somalia.¹³ And yet artists enjoy relative freedom, which is surprising given the level of control levied on nearly every other aspect of Vietnamese society.

Almost everyone in Vietnam watches the same television station, known as VTV, and around dinnertime it is not uncommon to hear the same program echoing from different houses when walking down the street. Vietnam has a rigid system in place for regulating information, with news programs produced under the supervision of the government's Institute for Journalism and Propaganda,

which also trains the majority of the country's journalists.¹⁴

When looking at the Institute's curriculum, the intended use of journalists in the public sphere becomes clear. In addition to expected coursework in print, photographic and broadcast journalism—including specialties in television, radio and the Internet—students are also trained in philosophy and scientific socialism, politics and political economics, history, party and government foundations, sociology and international relations.¹⁵ According to the school's mission statement, its purpose is to create journalists that will support the Communist Party and its cadres:

“The Institute is responsible for training lecturers of Marxism, Ho Chi Minh Ideology, ideological and cultural, and media and mass communication cadres for the [Communist] Party and nationwide.”¹⁶

Therefore, the press in Vietnam operates as an arm of the state, not as an independent critical body. Any written work that does not adhere to this ideology is strictly censored.

Any type of art that does not display a positive view of the current political direction of the country is censored (along with art that depicts nudity or sexuality).

While Technicolor images of Mao are allowed and even celebrated in China, such an alteration of Ho Chi Minh would not be tolerated. And yet, the practice of censorship is not as successful as some might think. Corruption, lack of education and the changing view of art all make censorship difficult for the average official. One of the most powerful defenses of contemporary art is that it is more difficult to pinpoint the message of the artist largely because of the abstract nature of the medium.

As of October 2011, there were no Vietnamese artists in jail, despite their open willingness to examine their society; yet the number of imprisoned religious figures, bloggers and journalists has recently increased.¹⁷ There is no blanket explanation for this phenomenon, but one reason may be that visual art is a common human language that, based on metaphor, can bear the weight of Vietnam's complex social, economic and artistic history. Other disciplines such as writing or lyrical music generally require a greater clarity and precision of expression in order to communicate their ideas. In addition, the written word requires translation to have international appeal and relies on linguistic formalities to express itself. Visual art can be powerful in its abstractions—therefore only the most blatantly subversive art is forbidden.

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A lack of education among government officials also helps artists engage in veiled social commentary. In order to properly censor art in a market economy, officials must be able to understand art history and how the past and present socio-economic climate has led to an unspoken malaise within society. The reality is that those who censor do not have backgrounds in art history—their generation was

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raised amid the devastation of decolonization and war and was not exposed to the arts. Visual art is designed to arouse emotions and passions, but unlike the written word, these conjurations happen inside the viewer and are impossible to track, manipulate or extinguish.

ADVANTAGES OF APATHY

Sadly, the lack of widespread exposure to the humanities has created art's best protection: apathy. The attention of the purchasing class is focused on luxury goods, while the poor are concerned with class advancement. I once asked a Vietnamese colleague to attend an art exhibition with me and her response was, "I don't know how to look at art." When I explained that there was no correct way to look at art she still declined, saying that no one had taught her how to "see" art correctly and she did not want to make a mistake.

Contemporary art is still foreign to most Vietnamese people, and many, if not most, have never been to a contemporary art gallery. As one artist explains:

"Nowadays in Vietnam there is no incident exactly like the case of Ai Wei Wei. Provocative artists are sometimes invited to have coffee and to explain, to answer questions. Sometimes they are forced to sign documents where they promise not to do this or to do that again. Some artists like Truong Tan [and] Vo Xuan Huy now have to live and work outside of Vietnam. But so far, there are no visual artists in jail now—or not yet. Police in Vietnam are now focusing [on jailing] writers, poets, bloggers or other social activists, as those people's works have more effect [on the] public. Sadly, [neither] people nor police in Vietnam look at visual art seriously."¹⁸

These advantages have largely protected Vietnamese artist-activists while intellectuals in other disciplines have suffered. Human Rights Watch reports that dozens of activists, religious leaders, union members, opposition-party affiliates, journalists and professors have been systemically detained for years.¹⁹ Facebook is prohibited, though many still access it through proxy servers. According to many

sources, human rights violations in Vietnam are on the rise, which some attribute to fears of a Jasmine Revolution in East Asia.²⁰

Contemporary art is the only existing forum in Vietnam where these issues can be discussed without reprisal. Vietnamese art has yet to embrace a more individualistic, Western style of art and is more attuned to broader sociopolitical issues. The paintings are secret codes, carefully crafted metaphors conveyed on walls rather than in newspapers. Art is a way for the Vietnamese to express frustration with contemporary life, the demise of traditional culture and—almost always—a deep love for a country that is changing rapidly, so much so that entire streets seem to be rebuilt in a matter of weeks. Censorship exists and is enforced by a state bent on conforming information to its will in order to transform itself into something between a capitalist economy and a one-party state. This delicate balance can only exist as long as people have faith in the regime and as long as no information available to the public questions this belief.

Yet, as it turns out, it is very difficult to censor a metaphor. 

NOTES

¹ “Free Influential Democracy Activist,” Human Rights Watch, 22 April 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/22/vietnam-free-influential-democracy-activist>.

² Joyce Fan and Natalia Kraevskaia, *Post Doi Moi: Vietnamese Art After 1990* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2008), 1–35.

³ Arnold Wayne, “As China Rises, So Does Vietnam,” *New York Times*, 21 December 2010.

⁴ Fan and Kraevskaia, *Post Doi Moi*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Khai Nguyen, “Foreign direct investment and economic development,” in *The Vietnamese Economy: Awakening the dormant dragon*, ed. Binh Tran-Nam and Chi Do Pham (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 176; “Vietnam’s Doi Moi dissected,” *Southeast Asia Globe*, 21 February 2011.

⁷ Wayne, “As China Rises.”

⁸ Fan and Kraevskaia, *Post Doi Moi*.

⁹ Jennifer Conlin, “The Awakening of Hanoi,” *New York Times*, 18 February 2007; “Viet Nam: Salon Natasha,” Visitng Arts Cultural Profiles Project, www.culturalprofiles.net/viet_nam/Units/673.html.

¹⁰ The interview was conducted by e-mail in several messages from July to August 2011. The artist asked to remain anonymous.

¹¹ *Bulletin of the Corruption Perceptions Index 2010* (Berlin: Transparency International, 26 October 2010), http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results.

¹² Interview with a Vietnamese artist, July to August 2011.

¹³ *Bulletin of Press Freedom Index 2010* (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2010), <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html>.

¹⁴ On the English-language version of the school’s webpage, its name is translated as the “Academy of Journalism and Communication.” However, the literal translation from Vietnamese is “Academy of Journalism and Propaganda.” Home Page, Academy of Journalism and Propaganda, <http://ajc.edu.vn>.

¹⁵ “Faculties and Subject Units,” Academy of Journalism and Propaganda, <http://ajc.edu.vn/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=153>.

¹⁶ Ta Anh Tuan, “Role of Communication in the PR Bachelor Program at the Academy of Journalism and Communication,” (unpublished manuscript, Hogeschool, Utrecht, December 2007), 2–8, <http://hbo-kennisbank.uvt.nl/cgi/hu/show.cgi?fid=12560>.

¹⁷ “Vietnam: Free Religious Activists Immediately,” Human Rights Watch, 30 September 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/30/vietnam-free-religious-activists-immediately>; “Vietnam: Free Political and Religious Detainees,” Human Rights Watch, 7 April 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/node/97905>.

¹⁸ Interview with a Vietnamese artist.

¹⁹ *Vietnam: The Silencing of Dissent* 12, no. 1 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1 May 2000); “Vietnam” in *World Report 2011: Events of 2010* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011); “Vietnam: Free Religious Activists Immediately”; “Vietnam: Free Political and Religious Detainees.”

²⁰ Phil Robertson, “Silent spring in North Korea,” *Washington Times*, 24 June 2011; Michael Bengel, “Vietnamese Communists’ Fear Factor is Rising,” *American Thinker*, 3 April 2011, http://www.americanthinker.com/2011/04/vietnamese_communists_fear_fac.html.