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## EARLY CONTEMPORARY ART IN VIETNAM: *ĐỔI MỚI* SHIFT AS SPUR OF INNOVATION IN GLOBALIZING 1990s-HANOI

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**Abstract.** The social impacts of 1986 *Đổi Mới* economic reform in Vietnam are well-studied. However, connections between *Đổi Mới* change and 1990s artistic transformation are not. This study examines these ties to reveal how post-*Đổi Mới*, outside Vietnamese mainstream art, and in not yet globally-open Hanoi, vanguard expressions emerged. Using artwork analysis and cross-disciplinary literature, this paper spotlights how material and social landscapes of 1990s-Hanoi impacted art. It uncovers parallels with Southeast Asian contemporary art to conclude that Hanoi vanguard practices constituted early Vietnamese contemporary art expanding regional 20<sup>th</sup> century art history without obligatory recourse to outside models.

**Key words:** Vietnam, globalization, Vietnamese and Southeast Asian art, avant-garde, *Đổi Mới*, urbanization.

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### Introduction: historical context

At its 6th Party Congress in 1986, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (hereafter Vietnam) instigated *Đổi Mới* (renovation) reforms that transformed the country's centrally planned economy into a socialist-oriented market system [Beresford 2006]. By 1995, after trade sanctions were lifted and Vietnam joined ASEAN, foreign goods and businesses were more visible. Art historians agree economic opening altered the Hanoi art arena, which integrated international markets [Taylor 2009: 133; Huynh-Beattie 2006: 277]. Yet what of the art itself? Some scholars note only moderate evolution in 1990s painting [Nguyễn Quân 2008: 11-12; Taylor 2012; Bùi Thị Thanh Mai 2014], a stasis ascribed to continued government control on culture, and absent foreign models [Huynh-Beattie 2006: 275; Taylor & Corey 2019: 25]. Yet is political freedom requisite for expressive innovation, and must artists rely on foreign models to invent fresh forms? Some may, but shift is seldom led by mainstream creators. While mainstream painting evolved moderately, scrutiny of 1990s-Hanoi art uncovers practices sufficiently aesthetically and conceptually original and *contemporary* to be included in exhibitions of contemporary art in Europe and Asia-Pacific [Lenzi 2020: 2].

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Drawing on recent research, this paper spotlights academically overlooked vanguard art sprouting in 1990s-Hanoi, asking what inspired its production if not foreign models, and how it circulated pre-internet and on mainstream margins. Unlike Vietnam's rural, grassroots-driven 1980s economic adjustments [Kerkvliet 2005], *Đổi Mới*-fostered economic expansion brought sweeping change as Vietnam rose from very poor to lower middle-income country [Thoburn 2009: 1–2]. Abrupt growth yielded prosperity but also social and urban disruptions [Beresford 2006: 204–208] that this study connects to new art. Linking 1990s innovation to its Vietnamese context understood through a multidisciplinary literature, it establishes how artists pioneered practices outside institutional frames by harnessing *Đổi Mới* images and paradigms. This vanguard, generating art comparable to Thai, Indonesian and Singaporean contemporary practices, is thus located in Southeast Asian contemporary art historiography. Since Vietnamese contemporary art emerged without a plethora of external models, the study contends Southeast Asian capacity for endogenous artistic innovation. The paper recalls artistic conventions in Vietnam and contemporary art definitions, then traces Vietnamese contemporary art emergence connected to *Đổi Mới*, inserting it in Southeast Asian art history.

### Early-1990s transition

After 1956, Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) painters produced socialist realist images of farmers and workers—impressionism and abstraction linked to French colonialism were taboo. *Đổi Mới* reforms didn't significantly loosen cultural rules, especially after the fall of European communism and the Tiananmen events of 1989 [Abuza 2001: 17–18]. Yet by the late-1980s Hanoi painter-reformers Nguyễn Quân (b.1948) and Đặng Thị Khuê (b.1946) were advocating expansion beyond socialist realism. Already in 1984 Bùi Xuân Phái (1920–1988) had exhibited his Hanoi landscapes, manifestly *not* socialist realism, that he never embraced.<sup>2</sup> As in rural life, cultural directions could be altered through grass-roots activism [Kerkvliet 2005: 240], so anticipating *Đổi Mới*, Vietnamese art renewed itself organically. But this renewal was not innovation, rather a return to 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese modern painting supported by foreign dealers sourcing old-fashioned but technically virtuous painting in Vietnam [Huynh-Beattie 2006: 275]. Significant for this study, once popular with the international market, this painting was officially endorsed, evidenced by its Vietnam publication. From this one infers market-friendly anachronistic abstracts and landscapes were adopted as suitably “reformist”, the 1990s mainstream.

Yet a few creators, disdaining mainstream appeal, seized *Đổi Mới* contradictions as content of new art like other Southeast Asian artists who drew on social shift as material. This vanguard included Vũ Dân Tân (1946–2009) who served as a cartoon draughtsman for state studios, and lived in Perestroika USSR 1987–1990 where his work was formally exhibited;<sup>3</sup> and younger Hanoi University of Fine Arts alumni Trương Tân (b.1963), Nguyễn Văn Cường (b.1972), Nguyễn Quang Huy (b. 1971), and Nguyễn Minh Thành (b.1971).<sup>4</sup> Of distinct generations, education and social backgrounds, these independents congregated at *Salon Natasha* which Vũ Dân Tân and his wife opened after returning to Hanoi in 1990 [Asia Art Archive10.05.2021]. Vietnam's first private gallery, Salon Natasha was by 1995 a magnet for vanguard artists who translated intangible *Đổi Mới*

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<sup>2</sup> Paintings by Bùi Xuân Phái, Vietnam Association of Visual Artists, Hanoi 22.12.1984-22.1.1985.

<sup>3</sup> House of Vietnam Friendship, Culture Centre & Cinema, Moscow, 1988; State Gallery of Fine Arts, Penza, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Other non-conformists were Đinh Thị Thẩm Poong, Lê Hồng Thái, and others.

frictions and promise using images and paradigms of opening Hanoi to invent visual-conceptual languages engaging the complicated times.

### New times new art

Art historical shift occurred as modern Vietnamese art went contemporary.

#### *Contemporary art defined*

Contemporary art as a global genre, not period, designates contextually forged praxis connected to contemporary life transitioning from modern “art for art’s sake” in a multipolar world [Smith 2011: 82]. Southeast Asian contemporary art is multi-media, content-driven, and concerned with social issues [Clark 1998: 290-291; Turner 2005; Lenzi 2011], sometimes espousing oppositional modes [Lenzi 2014]. My transregional research has uncovered distinctive Southeast Asian formal-conceptual methodologies for engaging local contexts and addressing social-political status quo. Though national specificities vary, artwork analysis has found comparable strategies surfacing throughout the region from 1970 onwards that reveal Southeast Asian modern art becoming contemporary as aesthetics integrated conceptual underpinnings to create critical conversations on shared issues [Ibid.]. Traits of post-1970 Southeast Asian art probing collective reality include storytelling; literal-metaphoric juxtapositions where concept underpins form; aesthetic appeal; viewer-familiar/vernacular materials, media, and iconography; public space coopting. Vanguard Hanoi art examined here shares features of Southeast Asian contemporary art as elucidated in writings since the 1990s, so is included in an existing Southeast Asian contemporary art discourse where aesthetics has critical function drawing audiences on the contemporary condition.

In Hanoi, the transition to contemporary art was connected to urban *Đổi Mới* shifts. Works are analyzed to show how, unlike mainstream painting, vanguard art deployed familiar or vernacular materials and signs to enlist audiences on the complex contemporary condition; and how, via public circulation pieces altered reception, marshalling viewers into critical dialogue.

#### *Material innovation for conceptual methods and criticality*

In the early-20<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese modern painting, a Vietnamese-French hybrid merging European oil on canvas techniques and genres with Vietnamese aesthetics was developed. Vietnamese saw the form as progressive, particularly in its introduction of individualized signing painters, who with new *fine-art* supplanted craftsmen producing functional objects. But by the 1990s modern painting as conventionally taught and practiced in Vietnam struggled to address *Đổi Mới* complexities. Some art historians [Taylor 2012; Bùi Thị Thanh Mai 2014] have proposed field rejuvenation post-2000, once Vietnamese painters were exposed to foreign currents accessible after the country opened fully and became digitally connected. This is well-founded for most creators. Yet 1990s artistic innovation occurred *despite* Hanoi’s semi-closed status, as evidenced by the inclusion of 1990s vanguard art in global curated contemporary shows. This indicates that artists pioneered new forms through their personal response to altering circumstances, independent of overseas trends.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Before Vietnam’s 1990s opening, some Hanoi artists travelled to Eastern Bloc countries where they acquired knowledge of modern art, and sometimes modern painting styles—for example Phùng Quốc Trí (b.1957) who studied at Surikov Art University, Moscow, 1980-1986; Nguyễn Quân (b.1948), a painter, educated in mathematics in East Germany; Lê Thông (b.1961), educated at Kiev State Art Institute, now teaching at the Vietnam University of Fine Arts.

Vũ Dân Tân, Trương Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường and a few others adopted urban novelties motorcycles, cars, Karaoke, AIDS, consumer packaging, speed, rural-urban tensions and more as components of home-grown contemporary art that enlisted viewers in answering 1990s-Hanoi. Works' aesthetic-conceptual construction, siting, and circulation innovated by recasting communication modes and audience relationships. Moreover, the low-art/high-art Asian modern art divide was abandoned, and pieces, though not utilitarian craft, acquired agency, a central feature of contemporary Southeast Asian art [Lenzi 2014].

By 1995 painters such as Đặng Xuân Hoà and others in the group 'Gang of Five' were heralded for renewing fine art in Hanoi. But their expressionist landscapes and abstraction, while emancipated from socialist realism, didn't evidence critical function or conceptual underpinnings emblematic of contemporary art. Vietnamese contemporary art in the above-defined sense came to global attention in 1996 when Vũ Dân Tân showed *Monsters, Devils and Angels* (1992–1996) and *Suitcases of a Pilgrim* series (1996–2009) at Australia's Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT2). These series comprised discarded cigarette and film packaging, bearing shop-style labels. Significantly, *not* mimetic painting, these pieces were made with trash, which in the case of *Suitcases*, was enclosed in glass-lidded Hanoi street-vendor display cases, all banal objects repurposed as art (Fig.1).

If formally unorthodox, these series attracted audiences via their unpretentious elements that recontextualized from life, introduced social meanings into art. Plural meanings opening to myriad interpretations are crucial to the allusive underpinnings that distinguished these series from standard paintings. Instead of canvas and paint, without inherent significance, or the random objects of Dada, *Monsters* and *Suitcases*, by borrowing deliberately selected social objects such as discarded cigarette packs and hawker boxes, produced polysemic art figuratively "conversing" with viewers. Western cigarettes Marlboro were recently available in Hanoi, while Vinataba brand was local, so cigarette boxes operated as code alluding to consumer choices and empowerment, new in globalizing Vietnam. Likewise dangling pseudo-price-tags humorously interrogated consumerism in Vietnam, transforming these artworks into handleable "merchandise". Few touched, but participatory options were implied, driving critical engagement with Đổi Mới. Long spurned, capitalism was now welcome in globalizing Vietnam, these pieces prompting scrutiny of this ideological contradiction. The peddler cases used for *Suitcases of a Pilgrim* harbored significance too, recalling illicit street trading, which for some tested authority: "pursuing a living via street vending are (...) Hanoi residents who feel fully entitled to their small slice of public space(...)vendors' entrepreneurship and everyday politics combine in a flexible mix of compliance and subaltern resistance" [Turner & Schoenberger 2012: 1029].

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Modernist paintings by returning artists were possibly influential for some artists in Hanoi. However, analyses of early contemporary artworks produced in 1990s Hanoi, the focus of this paper, reveal no aesthetic or thematic connection to modernist works by returning artists or others. Instead, 1990s vanguard Hanoi works exhibit a new critical and conceptual aesthetic language engaging with Đổi Mới Vietnam in non-descriptive ways, art by Vũ Dân Tân and others forming early contemporary art [Lenzi 2020: 290–297; 139 (note 375)]. Likewise, while after North-South reunification of 1976 Southern painting styles, themselves influenced by American 1960–1970s art, infiltrated the Hanoi art world, analysis demonstrates that early contemporary art in Hanoi draws on local social-aesthetic shifts to develop new languages of art, not on Southern formalism [Lenzi 2020: 30–33].



**Fig. 1.** Vũ Dân Tân. Suitcases of a Pilgrim. 1996.  
Mixed media with text, part of a series.  
*Photo: JL Morisot*

What did Vũ Dân Tân intend with such work? From discussions, interviews [Were 1997] and his art, one gleans his goal of making art part of dynamic, complicated life: via their new polysemic construction so distinct from descriptive painting, these early-1990s pieces cryptically raise the possibility of freedom in globalizing Vietnam.

Similarly, through function and associated references, Trương Tân's 1995 tactile, multi-piece *Nappes* (tablecloths), emerging from contextual requisites, bridged the viewer-object separation. Painted predominantly by Trương Tân, *Nappes* was produced for a restaurant party during which the work altered as food stains accrued.<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 2). Site and event-specific, and numerically and spatially-adaptable, the work suggests installation. But it is *Nappes'* blurring of the art/function (or high/low art) divide that marks it as Southeast Asian contemporary art, as through integrating ordinary life by operating as tablecloths, *Nappes* compels users to observe its iconography and so countenance issues of transforming Vietnam: mobility, choice, sexuality. Recently exhibited, *Nappes* still engages viewers observed clandestinely caressing the formal-functional cloths, so demonstrating how materials can draw audiences into exchange.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Referenced [Bùi & Phạm 2012: 31].

<sup>7</sup> Author witnessed at *Moving Pledges-art and action in Southeast Asia*, ICA Singapore, 2018.



**Fig. 2.** Trương Tân. Nappes. 1995  
Acrylic paint on cloth, part of a series.  
Photo: Iola Lenzi

Nguyễn Văn Cường too adopted low-art materials that derived critical function from their embedding in Vietnamese social life. *Porcelain Diary*, 1999–2001, which Cường produced in the ancient kiln village of Bat Trang, comprised 80 porcelain vases referencing the underbelly of globalizing Vietnam – louche bargirls; barking businessmen; disenfranchised peasants. Porcelain vases are culturally significant in Vietnam for their ritual and domestic functions, so the medium operated as a disarming foil for presenting *Porcelain Diary*'s rambunctious images questioning *Đổi Mới* sexual freedom and capitalism [Lenzi 2013: 132]. *Porcelain Diary* took no position, but via innovative material-iconographic alliance evoked the story of opening Vietnam too complex for mere mimetic picturing, thus embodying a new visual idiom for accessible critical engagement (Fig. 3).

These examples, and others using money, pianos, clocks etc., illustrate how vanguard art deployed non-conventional imagery, materials and media linked to 1990s life. Through associations such components with social links provided aesthetic-conceptual entry to difficult-to-picture, intangible aspects of *Đổi Mới* such as capitalism, consumerism, corruption, and choice. Yet vanguard artists continued to paint, inferring their expanded material repertoire was not a reaction against painting, but instead spawned by shifting contexts that necessitated new art languages of all media spurring critical exchange: the artwork-audience relationship became active, unlike conventional gaze-absorbing painting.



**Fig. 3.** Nguyễn Văn Cường. Porcelain Diary. Mixed dates, 1999, 2000, 2001.  
Polychrome hand-painted porcelain vases, part of series, approximately 80 pieces, 1999–2001.  
Photo: Iola Lenzi

The Hanoi vanguard was not alone inventing such idioms. From the 1970s onwards, across Southeast Asia and mostly unknown to each other, artists speaking back to evolving times excavated materials in everyday city life to forge art with critical purview. Field study shows this literal/figurative play devising critical meanings via social associations of materials was a particular expressive method of Southeast Asian contemporary art post-1970 [Lenzi 2014]. Filipino art in the 1980s, and Indonesian in the 1970s evidenced appropriated objects advancing social criticism and citizen empowerment. FX Harsono and Jim Supangkat of Indonesian collective Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB, New Art Movement) produced *Paling Top* and *Ken Dedes*, both 1975, respectively incorporating toy guns and a copy of a sculpture of Javanese queen Ken Dedes as means of referencing contentious social issues. Vanguard Southeast Asian visual idioms departing mimetic painting answered the specificities of regional contexts where citizens sought more voice. Artists, few of whom had travelled, often had limited awareness of contemporaneous Euramerican art, FX Harsono asserting the term *installation* was unfamiliar in 1970s-Indonesia when he first coopted objects to produce art with conceptual underpinnings [Ibid.]. While GSRB formal novelties challenged both the institutional academy and social discourses, the Vietnamese vanguard did not repudiate painting or confront official art institutions, but rather innovated with and outside them [Lenzi 2020].

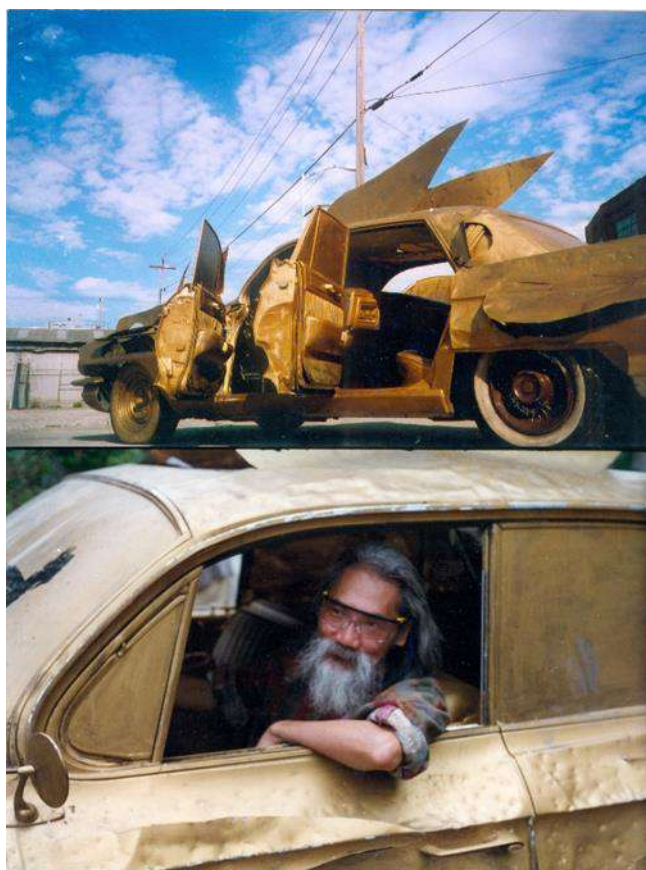
In addition to art's material evolution, *Đổi Mới* changes triggered new modes of art circulation by rallying the city and its dwellers.

*Vanguard art circulation: tussling with the public-private tension*

Nineties exhibition launches saw canvases formally unveiled to invited guests in closed locales. But vanguard artists conceived alternative modes of artistic encounters, exploiting shared city space by installing works in public or semi-public zones accessible to ordinary Hanoians. This permitted art's direct dialogue with co-citizens: "my work was for everyone, about what we were all experiencing" said Cường.<sup>8</sup> Trương Tân's *Nappes* was unorthodox both for its material and accessible restaurant siting where many used it. His 1995 street banners, briefly adorning a Hanoi building façade, presented queer imagery to *all* Hanoians, not a select few in an exclusive gallery. Vũ Dân Tân

<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Văn Cường personal communication with author Hanoi 16.12.2014.

was yet more deliberate in his engagement of anonymous viewers in public space. Perched in the window of his street-facing Salon Natasha studio-living-room-gallery space, he made art in full-view of pedestrian traffic, exposing his expressive process to all. This suggests Tan saw artmaking as part of urban fabric, an occupation as vital to ordinary citizens as that of tradesmen who plied Hanoi pavements, corroborated by his words: “My work is part of the street, with its constant audience and ambivalence” [Were 1997: 39]. The artist infiltrated the city with sound pieces, 1998, and materially with his 1990s *Money* series, mock-paper currency designed for public trading. It was however his 1999–2000 *Cadillac/Icarus* installation/performance that best exemplified his commitment to new circulatory and reception modes that marked the inception of Vietnamese contemporary art. Produced in California in 1999, at the Pacific Bridge Art Residency, *Cadillac/Icarus* was a 1961 Cadillac that Tân transformed into art with cut-out wings and gold paint – part of the exhibition *RienCarNation* with Lê Hồng Thái. Filmmaker Nicholas Brooks hatched a plan to ship *Cadillac/Icarus* to Vietnam to film the car in motion, but the plan floundered when Vietnamese customs confiscated the engine. Undeterred, Tan placed engineless *Cadillac/Icarus* on a flatbed truck and “drove” his work through Hanoi (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** Vũ Dân Tân. *Cadillac/Icarus*  
Installation 1999 Oakland, California, Pacific Bridge Residency; performance Hanoi streets, 2000.  
*Photo:* Natalia Kraevskaia



This performance, astonishing in Hanoi where automobiles were still rare, with the vast golden Cadillac overwhelming narrow streets, referenced the shock of US consumer culture brought by *Đổi Mới*. Tân's word game—*Icarus* played phonically on “car”—signaled the Greek myth allegorizing misguided ambition, revealing playful probing of outcomes of capitalism, now welcome despite its defeat a generation before. By infiltrating public streets *Cadillac/Icarus* brought complex ideas and contradictions to all, embodying the accessible critical language of contemporary art.

Nguyễn Văn Cường also innovated with vehicles by producing sound performances with motorcycle wheel-spokes.<sup>9</sup> Motorbikes emblemized late-twentieth century Asian urbanization, so Cường's Hondas operated as critical code signifying opening, mobile Hanoi and *Đổi Mới* shift, a connection later explored by sociologists [Hansen 2015]. But more than bikes it was Cường's pop-up murals that drew audiences with location and public accessibility (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Nguyễn Văn Cường.  
Artist painting a mural at House of World Cultures, Berlin, 1999.  
*Photo:* Natalia Kraevskaia

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<sup>9</sup> *Motor-Rad-Klang* 1995, with Til Schonherr.

Performative works such as *Cadillac/Icarus* and *Give it a Title* took fractious questions about Vietnamese life and nation in the globalizing era directly to ordinary citizens by enlisting the street, or village square in the case of Trương Tân and Nguyễn Quang Huy's 1996 Moc Chau village performance *Water Buffalo*. In 1990s Vietnam such aesthetic tactics were unprecedented, only the US-trained artist Dinh Q. Le adopting such a device in his 1998 *Damaged Genes* sited in a Saigon market.<sup>10</sup> Methods used by Vũ Dân Tân, Trương Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường, Nguyễn Quang Huy and Nguyễn Minh Thành are analogous to those of Tang Da Wu, FX Harsono, Amanda Heng, Vasan Sitthiket, Lee Wen and other Southeast Asian artists who post-1970, answering local contexts, developed globally innovative aesthetic-conceptual methods. No label existed for such art in Vietnam, yet pioneering mechanisms such as public siting and circulation, deployed by the Hanoi vanguard to answer local conditions, engaged ordinary viewers on fraught social paradigms to foster agency, a core feature of Southeast Asian contemporary art.<sup>11</sup>

Nineties-Hanoi boasted few spaces for unconventional or large art, so installations, murals, and sound pieces were likely displayed in public zones from necessity. But the *Đổi Mới* condition demanded art forms whose shifting function, synched with their formal-conceptual evolution, precipitated inclusive, public presentation. *Give it a Title* and *Cadillac/Icarus*, as open exchanges problematizing novelties of globalization, accrued meaning in public loci.

Political and material analyses of globalizing Hanoi's landscape posit public spaces as contested zones where commercial interests, the state, and citizens cohabit, the latter encroaching on public space for various forms of self-empowerment, engendering citizen-state friction [Thomas 2001; Kurfürst 2012: 101–103]. This perspective makes sense of 1990s vanguard artworks that both articulated and utilized Hanoi's new public-private tension, pulling viewers into their indirect questioning of status quo. Anywhere open and accessible was usable. While social geographers grappled in the 2000s with Hanoians' struggle for urban space, a decade before works by Vũ Dân Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường and Trương Tân enlisted the city and its associated power, mining the critical possibilities of public zone infiltration, and thus speaking back to the times [Lenzi 2020: 130–137].

*Đổi Mới* changed everything for everyone, thus vanguard artists responded by using elements from life and public siting that through familiarity marshalled audiences: *Đổi Mới* tensions were topic, driver, and materials of innovating practices. The premise of social change as a nurturing force of artistic innovation is supported by studies examining post-*Đổi Mới* challenges to status quo as public zones became stages for evolving citizen-state relations “fraught with contradictions and anomalies” [Thomas 2001: 306]. In Hanoi as in wider Southeast Asia, burgeoning contemporary art by vanguard artists and characterized by audience critical engagement disrupting the conventional viewer-picture separation, was connected to late-twentieth century social shifts—such relationships, existing across Asia, have been analyzed in national contexts since the 1990s.

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<sup>10</sup>Analysis doesn't evidence works by USA-trained Dinh Q. Le as influential on the Hanoi vanguard. Dinh returned to live in Vietnam in 1997 when contemporary art in Hanoi was already established, he exhibited in HCMC where Hanoi vanguard artists seldom went, and finally, artists examined in the paper produced works inspired and driven by local contextual shifts in Hanoi, unrelated to Dinh's pieces of the 1990s.

<sup>11</sup> Some dispute Vũ Dân Tân and Nguyễn Văn Cường as globally vanguard since they ignored New York trends [Taylor & Corey 2019: 25].

## Conclusion

Despite Hanoi vanguard artists' diverse biographies and expressions, 1990s pieces by Vũ Dân Tân, Nguyễn Văn Cường, Trương Tân and their colleagues are comparable for their dialoguing aesthetics probing *Đổi Mới* social novelties—works asked but didn't tell or describe as did mimetic painting. While but a fraction of visual art in 1990s Vietnam, these practices that eroded conventional viewer/artwork separation, jettisoned the high/low art divide, employed conceptual strategies, and forged critical viewer exchanges, constituted early Vietnamese contemporary art.

Pragmatically, risk-taking idioms could flourish in the broadening Vietnamese art arena. Yet it was powerful paradigm shifts in 1990s Vietnam that, requiring answer, prompted new aesthetic-conceptual alliances and art-life melding. After fifty years of war and isolation, innovation was spurred by social changes caused by *Đổi Mới* opening that saw Hanoians swap bicycles for Hondas, and Vinataba cigarettes for Marlboros. Creators had no artistic model – commercial opening did not bring current global art until the 2000s – but *Đổi Mới* promise and paradox were propeller and subject of novel approaches, even as political control persisted. This corroborates individual creative response to shared local context as a key shaper of expressive renewal. Vanguard practitioners were few, and formed no group, but in making pieces responding thoughtfully to the shifting era, they redirected Vietnamese art history by producing contemporary art. Moreover, inventing conceptual aesthetics endogenously, they disrupted the notion that innovation in Asian art inevitably springs from Euramerican models, as was the case with the transfer of Euramerican oil painting to Asia. Vietnamese contemporary art reveals capacity for self-renewal, so holds a key place in post-Cold-War Southeast Asian art history.

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