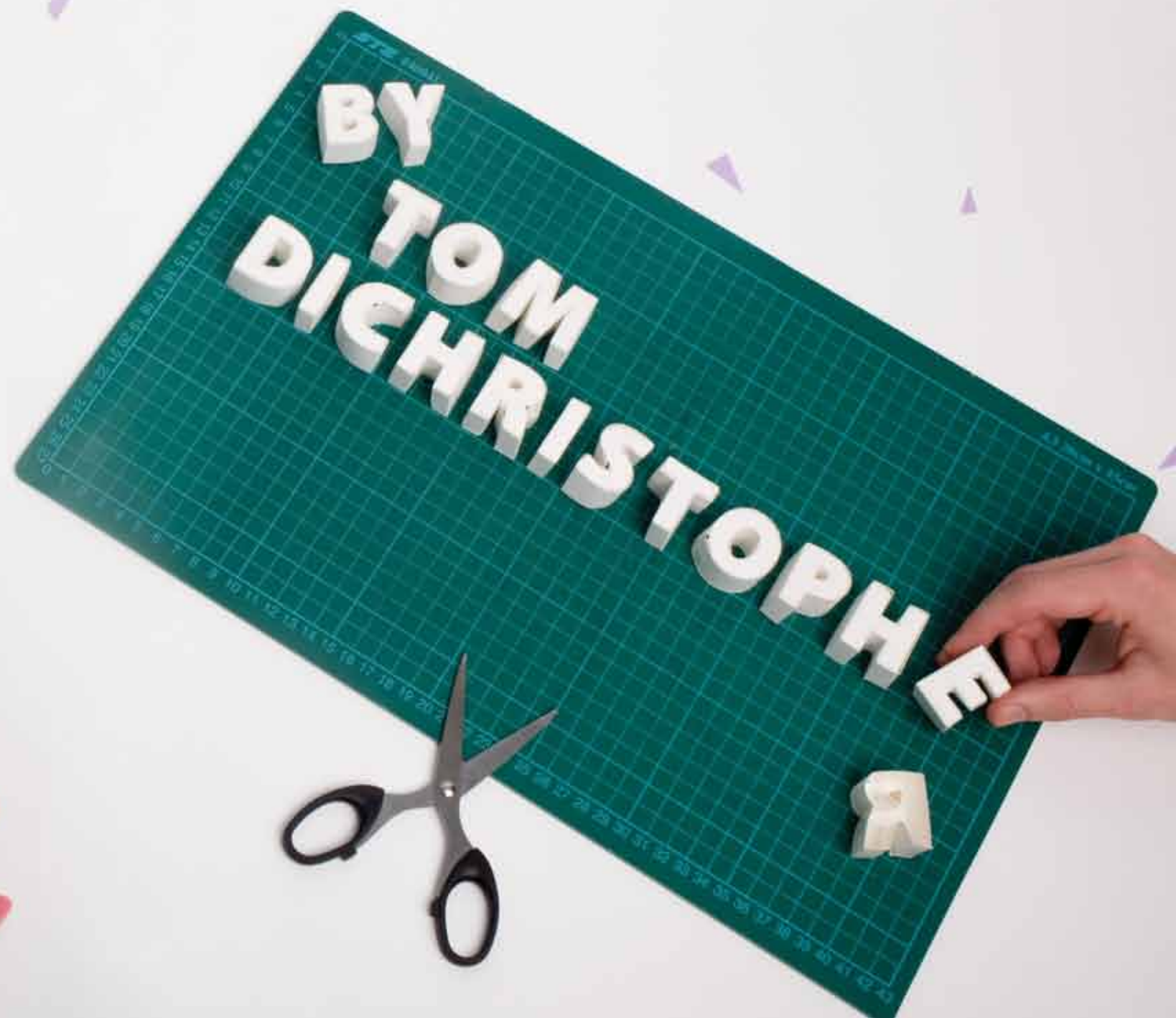




WORK  
IN  
PROGRE

OVER THE PAST DECADE, THE CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE IN HCM CITY HAS QUIETLY FLOURISHED. BUT LIMITED INFRASTRUCTURE, A LACK OF FUNDING AND THE ENDURING CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITHIN THE CONFINES OF STATE OVERSIGHT HAVE PRESENTED OBSTACLES TO PROVIDING SERVICES TO ARTISTS AND ATTRACTING COLLECTORS. ASIALIFE PROVIDES AN OVERVIEW OF THE SCENE AND A VIEW INTO SOME OF THE WORK BEING CREATED AND EXHIBITED IN THE THANH PHO.

*PHOTOS BY NAM QUAN*





**Tammy Nguyen**  
Born: San Francisco

*Untitled Altar Box*, 2010  
black thread, silk

*“One of the things about the support for contemporary arts in Vietnam is there’s confusion as to what contemporary art is”  
- Zoe Butt*

In a building at the end of a small street in Binh Thanh District, a crowd threatens to spill out onto the road on a Friday evening. Inside the white-washed exterior wall, the mood is jovial and cans of beer are being plucked from a cooler and passed around. It is at first difficult to reach the doorway and pierce the threshold of the ground floor.

The scene is typical of a weekend at a new restaurant or a performance by an international band at a local watering hole. But the crowd is gathered out of appreciation for another of life’s pleasures: art.

The venue is the nonprofit art space Sân Art, and the exhibit opening tonight is *Syntax + Diction*, a group show that features the work of seven local Vietnamese and Viet Kieu artists. One of those artists is Sân Art co-founder Dinh Q. Le. In June, New York’s Museum of Modern Art will premiere Le’s video installation, *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (2006), the first major installation by a Vietnamese artist ever purchased by the MoMa.

Given the turnout and Le’s celebrity in the art world, it is perhaps difficult for those from countries with thriving contemporary art scenes to understand why spaces like Sân Art are constantly in peril of closing down.

While contemporary art—not just art being produced *today*, but art that demonstrates an awareness of art history and advances the practice of art—has thrived in small pockets of HCM City, a number of factors to do with education, culture, politics and history have kept the infrastructure from growing, leaving it to a small group of individuals and initiatives to keep contemporary art practice afloat.

#### Ready for Contemporary Art?

To some, importing contemporary art practices into Vietnam might at first seem like a form of cultural imperialism, but according to Zoe Butt, who joined Sân Art as curator and director of programmes and development last year, it was enquiries from artists working in Vietnam that brought her to HCM City.

“The feedback I was getting from artists was there were no spaces in Saigon particularly for artists to experiment and to exhibit and have a dialogue about what contemporary art is,” says Butt, “And there was no experienced curator who understood how to talk about art and could help artists actually find themselves capable of talking to international art workers.”

In any corner of the art world the role of

the curator is integral, but for Vietnamese artists who are earnest about developing their practice, it is doubly important given the state of arts education. The curriculum in Vietnam still focuses almost exclusively on traditional forms—drawing, sculpture, painting—and bypasses critical theory, the foundation of contemporary art practice.

This is not lost on those who set the arts management curriculum. In early 2008 while she was still based in Beijing, Butt was invited to speak to the Center for Development of Research of Culture. At the time, the Center was looking at China as a model, which had developed a lucrative tourist trade around its thriving art scene. What was perhaps not apparent was exactly how difficult it would be to replicate that success.

“One of the things about the support for contemporary arts in Vietnam is there’s confusion as to what contemporary art is,” explains Butt.

Much of Butt’s presentation focused on the ways in which art works are assigned value in developed art markets. Since collectors and auction houses largely follow what’s being exhibited and purchased by public spaces, she explained that it was necessary to know how museum curators assess a

work of art, and what they’re often assessing is how the artist interprets the society in which he or she is working.

This view of art’s relevance is, at least on the surface, at odds with the opinion of the Ministry of Culture, the body responsible for granting permission to exhibitions. As recently as last year, the ministry reasserted that its priorities are “to raise the cultural and spiritual life of the people, promote traditional and cultural values and teach the tradition of patriotism to build a better country.”

The state is not the only sector that finds this concept of art problematic. Having been founded by four Viet Kieu artists, Sân Art sometimes suffers from the perception among local Vietnamese that it is just for Viet Kieu. While Butt says reaching out to Vietnamese who may not have the opportunity to travel is a concern, she acknowledges that many are intimidated by more conceptual forms of art for which they seldom have any reference point. More worrisome, though, is the perception held by some local Vietnamese artists.

In at least one case, an artist expressed to Butt that he believes work that does not depict subjects familiar to Vietnamese people is not Vietnamese, an opinion that is out of sync with the zeitgeist of an increasingly transnational art world and a market that takes into consideration an artist’s foreign residencies and international exhibits when pricing art.

Whatever the root of opinions such as this, they threaten to fracture HCM City’s art scene and undermine the support that young artists who are embracing more contemporary practice might otherwise receive from their peers.

#### Market Pressure

Since the market liberalization of *doi moi* in 1986, what constitutes Vietnamese art has also been complicated by the influence of commerce. As Professor Nora A. Taylor explains in her seminal book, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, the shift from state patronage of the arts to



**Tiffany Chung**  
Born: Danang  
Co-founder of San Art

*Sugarcane Kumquat Mixed Juice*, 2007  
Polyethylene foam, pompoms,  
MDF, wood, wire, thermoplastic  
adhesive

*below: Enokiberry Creators in the lab*, 2008  
Digital c-print  
150 x 100 cm

a free market model, as well as the influx of Western tourists led to an art boom in the mid-90s that would have far-reaching effects on contemporary art production.

“In the decade between 1990 and 2000,” Taylor writes, “art became such a lucrative source of income that, understandably, everyone wants their share of the profits ... This has meant that artists have gone from being reclusive, potentially politically sensitive, educated but economically poor individuals to wealthy, socially desirable personae.”

This transformation, explains Taylor, contributed to a situation in which commercial interests began to compromise artistic integrity. Since Westerners were often more





**Sandrine Lloquet**  
Born: Montpellier, France  
Founder of the arts collective  
Wonderful District

*Untitled, 2008*  
Plexiglass, steel and acrylic  
85 x 75 x 30 cm

*below: Untitled, 2005*  
Marker pen and enamel on  
Plexiglas  
31 x 21 cm

*“Most galleries,  
it’s just about  
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It’s not really  
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these artists and  
being a mentor to  
them” - Quynh  
Pham*

“They’re taking the mediocre work and they’re promoting that as really strong work coming from this Vietnamese artist. And they’re also they’re encouraging that artist to continue making that mediocre work because they’re able to sell it.”

Galerie Quynh began as an online art resource in 2000 and moved into a physical space in 2003. It originally promoted several important abstract painters, but in recent years has focused on showing a more diverse range of work by artists working locally and hosting international artists.

While it functions as a commercial operation, Galerie Quynh has contributed to contemporary art infrastructure by holding its artists to the standards of the international art market, and in doing so, teaching them how to build a significant body of work.

“[Many artists] don’t realize that the price for the artwork—how we establish the price—it’s very much rooted. It’s grounded in the fact that these artists have had certain shows, they are in certain collections. They’re of a certain age so you can see the history, that they are steady. They have been practicing regularly.”

Sán Art is, in some ways, a response to the prevailing scene of art shops, as well. It’s primary occupation is exhibiting contemporary art—a valuable educational tool in itself—but the organization also provides a reading room and exhibition programming. The goal is not only to mentor Vietnamese artists on how the international system of exhibition and acquisition works, but also to increase the knowledge of international contemporary art practice.

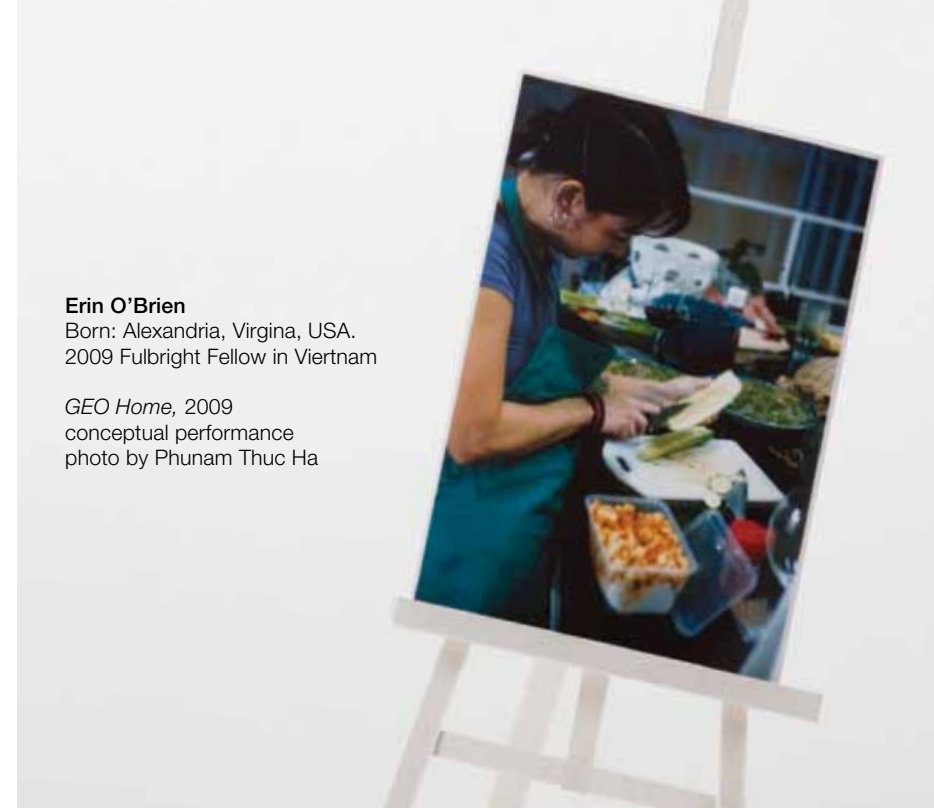
“One thing Sán Art is trying to do is educate the artist on the importance of considering how you give value to your work, not only in the market, but also culturally,” says Butt. “You can’t just go and say ‘I’ve created

concerned with the art’s representation of a certain “Vietnameseness” than the process of the artist, it became relatively easy for galleries—which operated more like tourist shops—to cater to their tastes, which tended towards pastoral scenes and Oriental urban landscapes.

As more shops opened and demand increased, the pressure to produce became tremendous. One artist reported to Taylor that he was turning out completed paintings within hours. Eventually, successful work began to be copied, sometimes with the permission of the artist himself. As it became more difficult to distinguish genuine work, the reputation of Vietnamese art eroded.

While Hanoi was at the heart of the mid-90s art boom, there’s evidence of its legacy in HCM City in the many art shops displaying paintings from floor to ceiling. These remain tremendously popular with foreigners, but they do not attract important international curators and collectors.

The reason, says Quynh Pham of Galerie Quynh, is simple. “Most galleries, it’s just about promoting the work, selling it. It’s not really about pushing these artists and being a mentor to them, as well,” she says.



**Erin O'Brien**  
Born: Alexandria, Virginia, USA.  
2009 Fulbright Fellow in Vietnam

*GEO Home, 2009*  
conceptual performance  
photo by Phunam Thuc Ha

one series of work and I give that series to a particular dealer.’ And then you can’t just go and copy it and give it to somebody else. There’s a responsibility on the part of the artist to keep the integrity of what you’ve done whole.”

Both Pham and Butt acknowledge that they alone cannot support contemporary art development. In the absence of more curators and arts management professionals, HCM City’s artists have begun to entertain novel solutions and models used by artists who have faced barriers in other countries.

#### Agile Spaces

If you speak to anyone from HCM City’s art scene about recent history, the subject of the failed inaugural biennale Saigon Open City (SOC) will likely come up.

First organized in mid-2004 and set to open at the end of 2006, SOC was slated to draw in curators and artists from around the world over the course of three themed installments. But it was felled to varying degrees, depending on who you ask, by mismanagement and bureaucratic wrangling that delayed the first installment well beyond its official opening date and doomed the second two to non-existence.

There have been many assessments of what went wrong, but according to Richard Streitmatter-Tran, a Viet Kieu artist who moved to Vietnam in 2003 and has since conducted arts research throughout the Mekong sub-region, it’s worth considering what that failure yielded. Before SOC, he says, exposing contemporary art in so ambitious a manner had been viewed by many as too problematic for the cultural climate.

“It was sort of like being in a nuclear shelter—‘It’s still radioactive up there. We’re not going to check. Just wait a couple of years’—and never actually sticking your

head up to see that there was never war in the first place. So finally Saigon Open City was sticking your head above the ground. And yes, it was pretty bad, but at least you knew it was bad.”

Knowing the terrain, says Streitmatter-Tran, may have informed the strategies that artists developed in the years following SOC.

“We all kind of suffered from that. It was traumatic for the community here,” he says. “In some ways that kind of trauma gives us what we have today. We don’t have the Contemporary Arts Centre of Saigon. We have little spaces that are agile.”

In the midst of SOC’s planning phase, the

artist-run initiative a little blah blah began its series of talks, workshops and presentations. Today, co-founder Sue Hadju runs a reading room and organizes one major project per year (*a window until the rains come: albb Open Studio program* is on through May 2 at Pi-Channel). Himiko Visual Saloon, an independent exhibition space and popular hangout among artists, also opened in 2005. Sán Art opened its doors in October 2007.

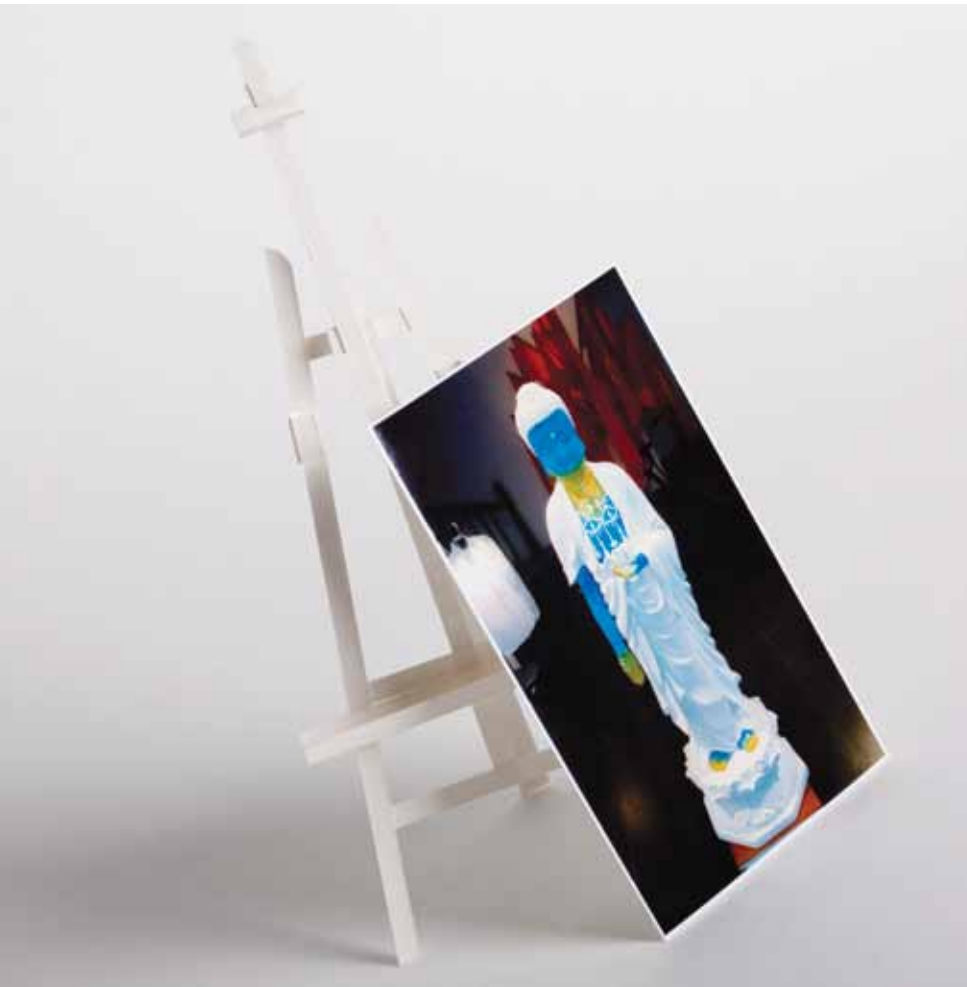
Another initiative that embraced agility at the time was Wonderful District. Inspired to move to HCM City after hearing about the burgeoning art scene, artists Sandrine Llo-

**Richard Streitmatter-Tran**  
Born: Bien Hoa, Vietnam

*Lao Tzu Dreams of the LHC, 2009*  
stainless steel, copper, brass



*"If we think of art as responding to some sort of problem or an issue, well, those are eternal. There isn't really actually a remedy. There will never be" - Richard Streitmatter-Tran*



**Tuan Andrew Nguyen**

Born: Ho Chi Minh City  
Co-founder of San Art

*Sugar-Coated Karma, 2010*  
Plastic buddha, acrylic nail paint

but Peret does admit some exhaustion and a desire to focus more on his painting. Moreso though, he expresses disappointment that so few artist initiatives exist in HCM City today.

**Evolving Responses**

In a studio space in the suburbs of District 7, Streitmatter-Tran has recently established another of these agile spaces. While it primarily functions as his personal studio, it also serves as the home for Dia Projects, an initiative that will allow Streitmatter-Tran to draw on his considerable network to invite artists and curators to Vietnam and facilitate meetings that could enable the right people to plan future projects.

When asked if he sees Dia Projects as a remedy for arts infrastructure in HCM City, he instead answers a different question: "If we think of art as responding to some sort of problem or an issue, well, those are eternal. They're always coming around. So art is a kind of evolving response to different types of things then there isn't really actually a remedy. There will never be. So I think this space is a part of that response."

With the prospect of an arts education overhaul or major changes in civil society unlikely in the short term, it seems that those involved in HCM City's contemporary art scene will have to continue to respond to the current climate. Fortunately, some pieces seem to be falling into place.

The Dinh Q. Le show at the MoMa, which will last six months, will certainly raise inter-

quiet and Bertrand Peret sought to open a contemporary arts centre in HCM City. However, when this proved unfeasible they took another route; each week for six months in 2006 they hosted exhibitions and art talks in their home, literally transforming the space from week to week. The consistency allowed them to develop close relationships with attendees, including Vietnamese art students. "Some of the students who were coming at this time were very interested, even if they really didn't know at all about contemporary art," says Llouquet.

What the project provided was an

alternative to the gallery scene, which can be intimidating to young students, some of whom would return throughout the week to read through their library or talk more. It also provided an example of how artists collectives can advance the scene when few other avenues exist to develop contemporary art. "To be independent to me is what's most important," says Peret. "What we wanted to show in the way we've done the [Wonderful District] projects was really more than the content—it's the way we do it."

Wonderful District has continued its programming in various forms since then,



**Hoang Duong Cam**

Born: Hanoi, Vietnam

*He doesn't feel angry or sad, 2007*  
Acrylic on canvas  
115 x 115 cm

est abroad, but according to Zoe Butt, it could help matters on the local level, as well.

"What we're hoping is that this showcase of Vietnamese culture at this level brings people to mind that the contemporary cultural identity of Vietnam is something that people are very interested in," says Butt, adding that it could convince investors of the value in supporting San Art.

Also of note, Galerie Quynh has been invited to the Hong Kong International Art Fair in May. The timing is opportune. Despite a rough year in 2009 due to the global financial crisis, Quynh Pham says she's seen a lot of interest from international curators in Vietnam in the last three years. Just recently, Sun Jun Kim, the commissioner for the Korean pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale made an extended visit to HCM City.

"She wasn't here specifically to source artists for a particular project. She was just coming to research what was happening," says Pham. "Meeting high profile curators like that is phenomenal. They're definitely coming. There's increased interest."

If things don't turn around immediately, that is not a bad sign, says Pham, who warns of the dangers of speculators and art market bubbles. "I'm all about the steady growth. In an ideal art market it's about people really doing their research." The time it has taken to build what infrastructure exists has perhaps given curators and collectors enough time to rethink Vietnam since the mid-90s and approach it with fresh eyes. ■



**Khanh Cong Bui**

Born: Danang

*Juice of the Past, 2009*  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 x 40 cm