

Panel proposal EUROSEAS - 2010

Culture Wars: Contemporary Art, Music and Media in Hanoi, Vietnam

It has become common to view contemporary cultural practices in Vietnam today through the lens of globalization. The influx of tourism and expatriate consumers combined with the increase in foreign television shows, musical genres and so-called “western” art practices, has given the perspective that Vietnamese traditional culture is under siege or at least rapidly disappearing. This panel will look at cases where the meeting between conventional cultural practice, popular culture and art making and “outside” forces has produced innovative experimental forms of expression. Rather than seeing “Vietnamese” culture as more diluted and less authentic, we will consider its enrichment, diversity and transformation. Other issues discussed will be the role of the State in negotiating art practices and the popular debates in the media over high and low art, tradition and modernity, East and West.

Face-off Over the City: Bui Xuan Phai takes on Do Tuan Anh

Lisa Drummond, York University and Natalia Kraevskaia, University of Moscow

Hanoi has been represented by artists in different ways at different periods and according to the temperament, understanding, and objectives of the artist. Two of the most popular treatments of the city are one, to represent it nostalgically as a sad but lovely relic of colonialism, à la Bui Xuan Phai, and two, to expose and critique social, cultural, economic inequalities produced in and through the city, à la Do Tuan Anh. Both of these artists have been lauded for either representing something ‘essential’ about the city (Bui Xuan Phai) or for grappling with a ‘real’ Hanoi (Do Tuan Anh). And yet, both of these artists (and those working in a similar vein) have been critiqued for producing works overly redolant of ‘Western influences’. Clearly, throughout the praise and criticism are unspoken assumptions about what is or is not Vietnamese in Vietnamese art. In this paper, we pose two central questions: Can we say that either of these artists is truly “Vietnamese”? Can we say that neither of these artists is truly “Vietnamese”?

“I am cultures:” Hybridity and Transnationality in Ea Sola’s Performance Praxis

Rivka Eisner, National University of Singapore

Ea Sola’s movement-based performances are hailed, claimed, and critiqued as “Vietnamese,” “European,” “French-Vietnamese,” “Western,” and/or “Asian.” A transnational citizen, whose life has been dramatically shaped by legacies of colonialism, imperialist war, and neoliberal globalization, Ea Sola and her artistic works are difficult to categorize. As a teenager in the early 1970s, Ea Sola fled Vietnam with her French-born mother, while her Vietnamese father stayed to fight for the communists. In the 1980s she returned to Vietnam to reunite with her family, remake home, study traditional performance, and continue her choreographic career. Drawing on “Eastern” and “Western” performance styles and philosophies, Ea Sola’s early work focused on war-

torn histories and marginalized memories from Vietnam while the subject matter of her recent projects take on global problems of violence and inequity. This paper will address such questions as: are Ea Sola's performances "Eastern" or "Western," and are they even "Vietnamese"? Are her choreographic works made solely for international audiences? Do Ea Sola's performances problematically use "traditional" Vietnamese cultural practices for commercial gain or are they examples of vibrant new forms of artistic production? This paper will explore aspects of cultural hybridity and transnationality in Ea Sola's performances, challenging reductive notions of globalization as necessarily producing cultural deterioration and homogenization. Rather than falling into an either/or binary regarding claims of cultural authenticity, how might Ea Sola's performances be understood as enactments of a vital trans/national performance praxis that is always working on multiple levels to open possibilities for change within and beyond Vietnam?

Performance, Performing and Performative Art: Exhibitionism or Exhibiting What?

Nora Taylor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

When performance art made its debut in Vietnam in the mid-1990s, it was seen by most artists, art critics and art observers to be part of yet another trend of experimental art originating from Europe or America. Young artists, still relatively unfamiliar with the medium, took turns trying it out. Some of the earliest examples remained relatively innocent but gave the authorities, as the director of the Institute for Art and Information once said, "a headache." Unsure of whether or not it was permissible, let alone whether it was art at all, most cultural officials decided to scrutinize performance events and keep a close watch on artists who "performed." While some authorities found no better reason to prevent performance art from being exhibited than to call it "un-Vietnamese," most artists find it not only suited to Vietnamese cultural practices, but also the very embodiment of Vietnamese artistic expression. Most artists, however, knowing its "danger" in the eyes of the authorities, choose to perform simply as an act of defiance. In challenging the government in that manner, those artists might miss the opportunity to express themselves in a more daring manner: to use their body as a form of narrative to retell their stories of oppression and not one that merely contradicts the board of censors.

Learning *Quan ho* Folk Song in an Age of "Authenticity"

Lauren Meeker, State University of New York, New Paltz

For two weeks each June, Students in the *quan ho* faculty at the Bac Ninh Province Secondary School of Culture and Arts travel daily to Diem village to study traditional *quan ho* with elderly folk singers. The two weeks in the village aside, the *quan ho* curriculum at the school consists primarily of the modernized style of *quan ho* folksong, which is often framed in opposition to "traditional" *quan ho*. Some scholars concerned with "authenticity" see the modern style as a rupture with the past. However, how students and their teachers speak about their experience of *quan ho* indicates that they find themselves embedded in *quan ho* practice that is just as "real" and as local as it has

ever been, even though the ground for the local is today just as often found in the mass media as in the village. The students and the professional Bac Ninh Quan Ho Folk Song Troupe into which they feed, historically and experientially form a bridge between several interconnected notions of authenticity: that which sees the modern style as a rupture with the traditional (and hence a form of degradation), that which sees the modern style as a form of evolution (and hence a representation of the past), and that which is embedded in the national project of cultural preservation. In this paper, I foreground the lived experiences of these students of *quan ho* in order to present a picture of Vietnamese folk music that highlights not rupture but continuity of practice.

Performing Contemporary Music in Hanoi: The Making of the Ethnographic Film, “Dai Lam Linh”

Barley Norton, Goldsmiths College, University of London

This paper gives an account of the process by which the ethnographic film “Dai Lam Linh: Making Music in Hanoi” was made and contextualises the musical experimentation of the band, Dai Lam Linh, in relation to other recent developments in Vietnamese contemporary music. The film documents the creative process involved in rehearsing, recording and performing Dai Lam Linh’s debut album and references the institutional, political and cultural restrictions that performing artists face when trying to experiment with new forms of expression. As well as providing an insight into the filming and editing process, in this paper I will situate the film within the broader context of the creative output of Ngoc Dai, the ex-soldier and composer who founded the band Dai Lam Linh (with two female singers Thanh Lam and Linh Dung). Ngoc Dai has courted controversy during his career due to his daring musical style, his choice of sexually explicit poems as song lyrics and his fiery personality. The controversies surrounding Ngoc Dai raise questions concerning musical aesthetics and artistic freedom in Hanoi and debates about tradition, modernity, globalisation and Vietnamese identity. In order to contextualise Ngoc Dai’s music and the film Dai Lam Linh, the paper will also consider these debates in relation to the recent work of two other contemporary Vietnamese musicians, Kim Ngoc and Nguyen Manh Tien.

*Please note that Barley Norton will be screening a working version of the film at the conference.

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Barley Norton, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Screening of the film, “Dai Lam Linh: Making Music in Hanoi”, (55 minutes)
followed by a Q&A session with the director, Barley Norton

The ethnographic film “Dai Lam Linh: Making Music in Hanoi” investigates the contemporary music scene in Hanoi through a portrait of the controversial band, Dai Lam Linh. With vivid footage of the band living and working in the city of Hanoi, the film documents the creative process of rehearsing and recording Dai Lam Linh’s debut album and features a concert of the album in the Hanoi Opera House.

Dai Lam Linh was established in 2008 by the songwriter and pianist, Ngoc Dai, and two female singers, Thanh Lam and Linh Dung. Together these three musicians came together to realise their dream of creating a new, experimental style of popular music, which dared to be different from the mainstream. The result of their collaboration is a unique form of musical expression, which is both international in outlook and rooted in Vietnamese traditions and aesthetics. Through portraits of Dai, Lam and Linh and interviews with other key band members, we gain an insight into their lives and motivations, and the personal, political, financial and aesthetic difficulties they faced making their debut album. The story of Dai Lam Linh also gives an impression of the cultural and political environment in Hanoi and a sense of what it is like to be a performing artist working in Vietnam today.