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Vietnam's artists try to break free of their 'Velvet Prison'
By Jonathan Napack

HO CHI MINH CITY 'I saw an ambulance the other day," the artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba said. "Stuck in traffic. Somebody was dying in there. But nobody wanted to move, they're afraid of the police. Afraid of getting out of line. The question for Vietnam is: When will their sense of themselves, and their responsibility to society, be stronger than that fear?"

Nguyen-Hatsushiba represents a little-noticed revolution in Saigon (officially Ho Chi Minh City). The 37-year-old is part of an influx of artists, from overseas and from Hanoi, into Vietnam's biggest, richest and most open city. This is challenging Hanoi's cultural dominance as Vietnam takes its place among modernizing Asian nations.

One of the great drivers of the Saigon opening is the return of Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) like Nguyen-Hatsushiba. Easily Vietnam's most internationally known contemporary artist - this month he will participate in his second Venice Biennale - Nguyen-Hatsushiba came to Saigon, where his father grew up, in 1996. He was born in Tokyo to a Japanese mother, and raised in Texas from age 9. In the late 1990s, he focused on the ubiquitous Vietnamese cyclo, or trishaw. "It was about how cyclos relate to people," he said. "Who survives, who doesn't."

Global attention came with some serendipitous failures at the 2001 Yokohama Triennial: "I wanted to create a museum of cyclos. But there wasn't enough room. Then I had the idea of a performance in a water tank. But the insurance and regulations in Japan made that unfeasible. Then I thought, why not stage the performance in Vietnam and film it? So we shot the piece off Nha Trang, using local fishermen as actors." The result, "Memorial Project Nha Trang," featured cyclos resolutely pedaling across the seabed, a striking metaphor for struggle and survival.

For Venice this year, Nguyen-Hatsushiba's contribution will be a "waterfield" of more than 20,000 Pepsi and Coca Cola bottles filled with water. The audience will be looking down into the space from five meters up, about 16 feet.

"I never really fit in" in America, said Dinh Q Le, another Viet Kieu artist in Saigon. Le was born in Ha Tien, near the Cambodian border. His family stayed after 1975, until the

Khmer Rouge started attacking villages in their region. After a year in a Thai refugee camp, the family made its way to Simi Valley, California. Le was 11.

He studied at the University of California at Santa Barbara and at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He came back to Vietnam in 1994. Inspired by his aunt, a weaver of grass mats, he began to "weave" photographs. His breakthrough came with "Mot Coi Di Ve," in 1999, a huge quilt woven from thousands of discarded photographs. The title comes from a popular Vietnamese song, "Spending one's life trying to return home."

A year later, "From Vietnam to Hollywood" interwove images from the real Vietnam War with Hollywood war movies. Le then started "Texture of Memory," in which portraits from Tuol Sleng (the infamous Khmer Rouge prison) were embroidered in white thread on rough white cotton (white is the color of mourning in Asia). Viewers were encouraged to touch the pieces so that over time, as they left behind the oils from their hands, there would be traces of the remembering process.

Despite many exhibitions overseas, Le has shown only informally in Vietnam. Artists in Vietnam still need permits to mount even innocuous exhibits. "I'm sorry," said Le, "I refuse to let someone who knows nothing about art judge my work."

Nevertheless defiance is hardly Le's style, and mostly he feels optimistic. "You have to understand," he said. "These people were fighting for 20 years. They had no idea how to run a country. So they move forward, they freak out, then they move forward again. But you also have in this society something that makes it distinct in Southeast Asia: a drive to improve yourself, to make something of your life."

The performance artist Rich Streitmatter-Tran has a different story. Adopted by an American family, raised in Cape Cod, he spoke no Vietnamese when he first visited in 1992, but immediately took to it. "I was brought up as totally American," he said. "I could have ended up in Bangkok or another city. But somehow I felt comfortable here."

He was born in 1972 in Bien Hoa. "For some reason, never made clear, I was abandoned," he said. He was adopted at eight months by what he described as a blue-collar American family. After high school, he served in the army, fighting in the first Gulf war. "I did odd jobs," he said. "Then I enrolled at Massachusetts College of Art under the GI Bill."

In 1998, he found his original family. "They were living in New Jersey, of all places," he said. "My father had been an NVA officer. That's when I started hyphenating my name." But the mystery only deepened. "Funny thing is, I don't look like my siblings," he said.

"Nobody's clear on what happened. They can't even agree where I was born."

In late 2003, Streitmatter-Tran founded "Project One" with five collaborators - artists, fashion and graphic designers - on the model of Dumbtype in Japan. "We were concerned about the lack of serious art criticism here, the weakness of education," he said. "We managed to organize a panel discussion at the art school. I led a workshop on video art. I thought, Wow, we are finally getting somewhere!" Then, in December, the police closed a performance by some Japanese artists. "We really had to assess how far we could go working within the system," he said. He is now developing an underground space with some Viet Kieu from France.

"Hanoi is still the center for experimental art," said Quynh Pham, a gallery owner and a Viet Kieu. "But momentum is shifting here." There is a new nine-story building for the art school; an international biennial tentatively planned for December; even a trend of local property developers using art to lure the new yuppie class, like the Phu My Hung space in "Saigon South."

"Saigon actually had a biennial" in 1962, said Sue Hajdu, director of the art space known as A Little Blah Blah. "But because it was a defeated city, it was not allowed to remember" its history.

What little international exchange existed was channeled through Hanoi. State patronage led to the comfortable stagnation that Miklos Haraszti, writing about Communist Hungary, memorably called the "Velvet Prison."

"Hanoi is an institutional city," said Nguyen Nhu Huy, an artist from Hanoi living in Saigon. "You can't survive in the marketplace, only as a salaryman with the government."

When Vietnam opened to tourism in the early 1990s, an art market of sorts developed, putting cash in artists' hands but hindering real artistic development. Demand came not from serious collectors but from tourists or expatriates attracted to the superficial prettiness of painters from art schools still teaching 19th-century French practice.

When Quynh Pham opened Galerie Quynh in 2003, hers was the first gallery to represent artists, rather than just trading their work. Born in Danang and raised in San Diego, Pham works with just seven artists. One of them is the installation artist Hoang Duong Cam. "I moved to Saigon first of all because it's easier to find a job," Hoang said. "But I was also fed up with Hanoi. Too many dark, depressing memories. Whereas society here is fresh and new."

"As students, we were so angry. The professor had nothing to teach us. Painting like Impressionists? We listened to music instead, everything from Yanni to Nirvana. We hassled one professor with graffiti on his door: 'Live Free or Die.'"

The Internet was one way out. But until recently, connections were slow and access expensive and scarce. "We had no information about the outside," Hoang said. "We had to go to foreigners' houses to read books." There was an art circle around Hanoi's Salon Natasha, but it was "stuck in the early 20th-century avant-garde."

Those inside this "velvet prison" are not taking this lying down. Nguyen-Hatsushiba is a particular target, both for his international success and his mixed ethnic background. A lecturer at the Hanoi Academy of Art attacked him for using Vietnam as "a marketing strategy." The lecturer argued passionately that Vietnamese art was excluded from international exhibitions like Documenta in Kassel, Germany, not because of its own weakness but due to inferior "marketing."

Most Vietnamese, however, welcome the presence of Viet Kieu in the art scene. The complaints "are just jealousy," Hoang said. "I love the Viet Kieu. They don't care. They don't think, I'm Vietnamese, so I must do things a certain way." There's a feeling that, just as Shanghai captured China's momentum, Saigon - another colonial trading city - is capturing Vietnam's.

"Hanoi is a real pretty town," said Le. "They have a lot of artists there. Some of them are even pretty avant-garde. But real life in this country is happening here. This is where the next Vietnam is being created."