

Performance, Interrupted

Performance art is a form rooted in spontaneity and conceptual thinking, so with government oversight of the arts and limited contemporary study at the university level, there's a reason it's not indigenous to Vietnam.

Tom DiChristopher reports on the state of performance art in Vietnam.

The Cultural Development and Exchange Fund is a branch of the Danish embassy that provides support to contemporary artists and cultural performances in Vietnam. Each year, the CDEF holds a talent contest that spotlights young Vietnamese artists working within a particular art form. This year, the CDEF's board chose performance art.

"Performance art as an art form has become more and more important on the cultural stage of Vietnam," says Danish Ambassador Peter Lysholt. "Through this talent prize, we would like to give young Vietnamese performance artists an opportunity to enter a national competition and gain recognition for their talent."

In August, 10 applicants were shortlisted. They were then given a month to produce a DVD documenting the performance they intended to present at the final competition, which will be held in Hanoi later this month. The DVDs were not strictly for the CDEF panel's purposes; they were also submitted to the Ministry of Culture.

While oversight by the Ministry has long been a part of visual and performing arts in Vietnam, it can be problematic when applied to performance art. Performance art relies on spontaneous interaction between artist and audience. So how do Vietnamese artists engage with the form when their work must be vetted?

The state of performance art in Vietnam is exacerbated by other factors, as well. Contemporary art still occupies a liminal position in academic settings, and performance art is virtually nonexistent. Without a strong contemporary presence, few

artists have access to the kinds of international exchanges that can connect them to developed performance art traditions.

But the CDEF contest is proof that performance art is being practiced here. So where is the influence coming from?

"I think the way they research, the way they study," says Dao Anh Khanh, a well-known artist and 2008 CDEF talent contest judge, "maybe by the Internet, maybe by some artists that give information to Vietnam when they're working here... [performance art] doesn't yet have a place in Vietnam in a teaching form."

But these sources might not provide the kind of sustained immersion that gives way to substantial work. According to Huy Nguyen Nhu, an artist, curator and fellow CDEF judge, "... new practices of artists in Vietnam are only visual translations for what they've seen fragmentarily ... so the social or cultural nature, that is the vital means for all contemporary art forms, are not being seen so much in their pieces, so the social significances of their pieces also are not being seen clearly."

"But the first vital need that we need to do now," continues Hue, "is bridging the gap between audience and artists/artpieces. It is only when the gap between artists/artpieces and local audiences can be bridged, the articulation between new art forms and their social, cultural significations can be opened."

The case of 2008 CDEF talent prize participant Tran Huynh Trieu An seems to support these claims. After studying graphic design and working in Vietnam, Trieu An moved to England to study at the University College for the Creative Arts in Canterbury. When asked whether she ever considered studying performance art before moving there, she replied, "Never."

"When I moved to England I just realized that there was no barrier for me," says Trieu An. "So I was looking for a new way, like doing video or performance art or installation to express [my feelings]."

While studying at UCCA, Trieu An was simultaneously immersed in theory and exposed for the first time to performance and installation art. She also continued her five-year endeavor to translate the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong, an 18th-century poet who wrote on the liberation of women. She would later synthesize that theory, exposure and translation into original performance art compositions that incorporate high levels of audience participation.

Trieu An is primarily concerned with the space between the face that we present to the public and the one we offer to friends and family. Her performances aim to draw audience members into the performance space where Trieu An attempts to penetrate their public facade.

With four exhibitions under her belt in England, Trieu An held her first show in Vietnam this past June at the Institute of Cultural Exchanges with France. Entitled *The Imagination Contract*, the performance incorporated a 4-metre-high by 4-meter-wide bamboo bridge, which Trieu An used to promote the idea of a secure space. The performance encouraged audience members to consider why we feel more secure when boxed in and how that affects our ability to build bridges.

She says that Vietnamese audiences are often more hesitant to participate than are Western ones. But in Vietnam it's difficult to access the performance artist's workshop: the street.

"If I were in London and I had a small project," says Trieu An, "I can make a test on the street and no one will kick me out." Here, Trieu An must work out performances with friends. "I have to make a DVD and send it to the Ministry of Culture ... and they are the people who never understand what kind of art I am doing. How can they judge that this part cannot be in your show?"

"They want to be checking everything, but it doesn't work with this kind of art," says Khanh of the Ministry of Culture. "They're not open yet to accept the way the artist is thinking. They're still thinking in the same way with the other kind of art."

Huy believes that events like the CDEF talent contest can begin to provide a space for the form. "I think the meaning of such events should be viewed in this light, an endeavor to bridge the gap between audience and new forms of art practices, a way of contextualization ... new forms into local landscapes."

For Trieu An, that bridge could lead to bridges on a greater scale. "Maybe living in Vietnam has just made me understand that I need to transfer those cultures to the other culture and to let the two parts understand each other."

2008 CDEF Talent Prize

When: 25 October

Where: Van Ho Vietnamese Art and

Culture Exhibition Centre, Hoa Lau, Hanoi

For more information: www.ambhanoi.um.dk