

The Oddball, The Rebel, Maverick

From the NAF collection, The Outpost borrows and displays a selection of works from artists who were active and prominent in the Hanoi art movements in the post-Đổi Mới ^(*) period (1980s - 2000s). This time frame is considered by observers and researchers as the heydays of Vietnamese contemporary art, marked by a vibrant landscape of artistic experimentation.

“The Oddball, The Rebel and the Maverick ” offers a non categorical perspective on the art landscape of this period. Rather than categorizing works based on artist groups (such as the Hanoi Triad), the exhibition organizes artworks according to aesthetic processes and gestures, emerging within the parameters of the Nguyen Art Foundation collection. Instead of presenting these artists as pillars or “spearheads,” the exhibition leaned into the creative processes and materials to guide the exhibition’s spatial layout. These artists, collectively, have shaped the atmosphere of a time. The artworks on display invite contemplation on the fundamental questions: what is art and the role of the artist in a society marked with constant changes.

Simultaneously, instead of providing individual artwork descriptions, the curator has decided to draw out a selection of keywords that are key to understanding the processes, materiality and gestures of the artists. This approach hopes to foster a more open-ended way of reading about preexisting art practices, documented within the Vietnamese art landscape at the time. Additionally, we encourage viewers to actively engage with the artworks through the terminology they deem appropriate or even propose their own terminology.

(*) Referring to the Renovation period or the “Open Door” policy when Vietnam introduced economic reforms (in 1986) with the goal of creating a “socialist-oriented market”.

toàn cầu hóa | globalisation

In a broad sense, globalization refers to the intensifying interconnectedness and interdependence of the world’s cultures and economies. From a cultural standpoint, globalization manifests as the enhanced interaction and dissemination of ideas, value systems, and aesthetics, thanks to the consumption and popularization of diverse cultures via mass media and the rise of international travel and exchange. This phenomenon has facilitated the spread of concepts, styles, and the interaction of artistic mediums. However, the influx of external resources has resulted in an excessive amount of information, yet a superficial understanding of it. The booming of biennials, festivals, art fairs, and contemporary art practice trends that directly address global issues exemplifies the rapid pace of globalization in the art world.

đương đại | contemporary

In juxtaposition to modern art, contemporary art marks a significant shift in its focus from aesthetic appearance to the conceptuality within an artwork. Artistic ideas now hold equal weight to technical proficiency and formal experimentation.

Besides having a strong concept, contemporary art practices often extend beyond the artist’s studio, engaging with and responding to the surrounding environment and pressing social issues. This evolution has also brought about a transformation in the definitions of both artists and audiences. The audience of contemporary art has expanded and diversified, encompassing individuals who may not necessarily be traditional art connoisseurs. Consequently, the approaches to engaging with an artwork have also undergone a significant shift. Contemporary artists embrace a wider range of materials, forms, and even create and practice art in groups or collectives.

tính vật chất | materiality

In the past, the common materials used in art making were often chosen due to durability and stability. In contemporary art, there has been an expansion in materiality as artists now create using everyday, ephemeral, transient, ever-changing materials, or even immaterial, intangible forms of expression. The final form of artworks are also extremely diverse as a result, for example, performance pieces can be recorded and presented in the form of video art or documentaries.

The change in the concept of materiality in art has led to the expansion of artistic media (medium). From traditional media such as drawing, sculpting, carving, engraving, printing,... now art media can also be filming, photography, body gestures, sound, language, internet, technology, algorithms,...

công phu | technicality

Artwork was believed to possess the highest level of technicality. This old-fashioned understanding of technicality, in association with flawless execution, rules compliance, and standardized techniques has often led to the dismissal of experimental or unconventional works of art that deviate from these norms.

Not just with contemporary art, when conceptual art forms such as installation and performance art first emerged, they were perceived as jokes or anti-art, immediately rejected due to the perceived lack of technicality. Even within the realm of modern art, many works have been denied recognition not for their aesthetic merits but for their failure to conform to the conventional definition of technicality.

ý niệm | conceptual

The shift from the notion that artwork as a physical object, an aesthetic creation, to the acceptance of an artwork as an idea marks the early formation of conceptual art practice. In understanding conceptuality (distinct from conceptual art or conceptualism), some propose the growing focus on the concept behind an artwork rather than its physical form or material used. Following this line of thought, works that do not belong to the practice of conceptual art or conceptualism, such as installations or performances, can also be considered conceptual.

Perhaps this understanding is also a characteristic of “conceptuality” adaptation in contemporary art practice in Southeast Asia, different from the categorizing framework and the practices of conceptual art in the Western world.

chơi | play

“The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.”

Carl Jung, Psychological Types (1921). Playing is a creative activity in that it gives the players a playground to freely express themselves on different levels.

Playing is about accepting the rules, following the requirements asked, the character and structure of the game, but also about responsive acts of creativity and spontaneity with the world, its context and objects. As such, playing is also about the creation of a world that is creative, interactive, collaborative but also personal.

To artists, playing equals moments of improvisation with materials, ideas and forms - a quintessential state of mind in the process of the experimenting and making process.

chữ | text

The correlation between textual form and art has existed for centuries, spanning eras from the inscriptions on folk paintings to the slogans on propaganda posters, and continues to manifest in contemporary creations. Words are employed in artworks with multiple expressive purposes. Beyond their conventional role of conveying information, such as names, messages and slogans,... words are also utilized to explicate and recontextualize the known alphabet. As a crucial tool for contemporary artists, texts have evolved into subjects of form (using words as lines and forms, devoid of meaning) or become the focal point of concepts. Artists have dematerialized words and elevated them to the status of art objects. In essence, words possess the inherent ability to draw us into artworks in a very natural manner.

We encounter the inhere and are compelled to read them. The audience is no longer passive but rather becomes active participants in a direct dialogue with the artwork.

tự học | self-taught

The notion that a visual artist should be someone with professional training and knowledge of the art, is still a prevalent and prevailing one. However, it is undeniable that self-taught artists, or those involved in art-making despite their non-art background, have always been a part of the picture. The emergence of self-taught artists has always challenged the concept of what it takes to be an artist, along with the reevaluation of purity in creativity, as well as freedom in artistic expressions.

không gian | spatial

The space referred to here is not an exhibition space (museums, galleries,...) but rather the internal space within an artwork and its treatment. This could be the space within a painting, the spatial considerations in the form of a sculpture or installation pieces. With paintings, space can be constructed through perspectives and the laws of foreground and background, but it can also be flattened using lines or shapes devoid of contrast or hierarchy. In sculpture, installation, and conceptual art, space sometimes becomes the deciding factor in an idea, giving rise to new forms of artwork that are site-specific: formed and attached to a particular space/place.

sự lệch | divergence

Here, divergence doesn’t refer to the negative connotation of straying or going off track, but rather signifies things that can’t easily be categorized, named, or labeled according to conventional standards of evaluation. Some individuals continue to create without adhering to a particular art movement, or a single category.

Some artworks, or series of works, by artists even deviate from their own established style, embodying a character that is distinctly different from the work they are known for and defined by. Deviation can also come from a place of individuals who do not practice art themselves, but rather construct environments or spaces for artistic endeavors to take place. This deviation, perhaps, has always existed and is representative of art, since creativity constantly seeks to challenge all definitions and destabilize institutionalized norms.

châm biếm | satire

Satire is a creative approach expressing the artist’s mocking, sarcastic irony towards contemporary social phenomena. Many contemporary artists employ satire to address social, economic, political topics and similar issues. Satire can stimulate critical discourse, at the same time, poses questions about the boundaries and reference points between art and society. This approach is not just about negativity, but also an artist’s playful and insightful perspective on reality.

biểu hiện hội họa | pictorial

Pictorial expression refers to the compliance, utilization of techniques, methods, and principles specific to art-making. Pictorial expression is constantly in flux as artists seek new forms of expression, creating form, and new approaches to composition within a painting. In other words, pictorial expression encompasses both the inherent characteristics of an art form, and the artist’s personal reflection and questioning of those very characteristics. All of this is visually expressed through the artwork. Pictorial expression can also be adapted and transformed into the painterly quality in other creative forms.

tính xã hội | social

Art is inherently social because it always reflects our perceptions of the world we live in. Cultural identity, equality, freedom of expression, globalization, climate change... are some of the socially charged themes that artists reflect and interpret.

Through their creative sensitivity, artists sometimes create works that act as gateways, addressing complex issues, presenting unique interpretations, and posing challenging questions to the audience. This stems from each artist’s own sensibilities and personal beliefs about social values. The truth is that throughout history, there have been many artworks that have profoundly impacted and transformed society. Artists step into the social scene, no longer just observing, recording, and drawing inspiration, but actually living, breathing and creating together with it. As contemporary art moves beyond the limit of exhibition space and makes its way into everyday life, the viewer’s experience is usually a ‘direct experience in time’, which makes its method and impact on social life more diverse, drastic, and ‘immediate’.

hành vi | gesture

Is an artwork an object, a process, a matter or a trace? Changes in art practice have challenged modern notions of art as an object with fixed meaning and value over time. The gestures that happen in the art-making process now become part of the meaning or even the work itself. Gesture, in its broadest sense, refers to a body movement. But gesture, in art, is a meaningful movement of the body.

Sometimes, it reflects the artist’s emotional state or outlook, other times, it can be an act of rebellion. An artist’s mark-making can be indicators of their presence in place of the artist. Aside from showcasing a specific denotation, the repetition of a gesture during the creation of the work can be a telling of time spent or a state of mind, all of which transforms the viewer’s experience.