The Professional Visual Artist in Vietnam

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**Keywords** Vietnam, artists, careers, dealers, national art museum, art market

**Abstract** What is at stake is the future of the professional artist in Vietnam. Vietnam has many talented artists and one of the strongest visual culture traditions in South East Asia. The Faculties of Art and Design need not only the financial resources to improve their buildings and equipment but are looking for assistance to develop new curricula for both artists and designers. Existing programs do not provide artists with professional practice information and skills to establish viable careers in their own country in the 21st century or to compete in an increasingly globalised art market. Access to new technologies is available but the conceptual and pedagogic basis for its use in new media and art forms is not. The Art World can be defined to include not only artists, but gallery directors and dealers, curators and museum professionals, art writers and publishers, art collectors and audiences. At present, the art world in Vietnam which could contribute to the development of distribution and consumption of the visual arts, lacks both professional skills and finance.

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**Concepts of professionalism in the visual arts**

A distinction can be made between the definition of an artist and the characteristics of professionalism in individual art forms. The definition of an artist that is most widely accepted was put forward by UNESCO in 1980. It accepts the artists' self-definition, which is their commitment to artistic creativity (Jeffri 1998). However, the art world and market are a dual system and there are competing definitions of the professional artist. As artists develop new career structures, the concept of professional is best defined by peer group recognition, in which 'The context, manner and location of the exhibiting of the work defines the professionalism of the artist, because the title 'professional' is one which is bestowed by peers in the group to which the artist aspires' (Jeffri et al1991). In contrast, a definition of the artist who sells his or her work in the dealer's market is based on the fact that they work full time at their art and make their living from selling it, but this definition admits no judgment about peer group recognition or the aesthetic value of the work. The differences in artists' goals, careers, reputations and income were acknowledged in a United Kingdom inquiry.

The definition arises from the fact that he or she works full time at their art, and earns his or her living from selling it. At the other end of the spectrum, the title embraces the artist who spends as much time as possible making (usually experimental and/or...
innovatory) art; rarely, if ever sells - perhaps never even attempts to - and incidentally earns their living from other art-related or non-art related jobs or subsidies. For all of these points in the spectrum, the context, manner and location of the work also define the professionalism of the artist, because the title ‘professional’ is also one which is bestowed by peers in the group to which the artist aspires. (Brighton and Pearson 1985; Wright 1986)

There is a link between artistic career development and the development of new forms of artistic expression that depends on tolerance and openness, and the recognition that artists rather than the state are the key players in a successful art world and market. At present, United Socialist Party of Vietnam members, many without qualifications in the arts, sit on the executive and boards of arts institutions and organisations, and this practice, in the author’s view, is stifling development. An agreed definition of professionalism in the visual arts that operates at arms length from the Party is essential to the development of artists’ careers and the potential of art as work. There are a number of factors that militate against the recognition of professionalism in Vietnam that I will examine in this paper. The first condition for professionalism is a national market in which financial and aesthetic values can be agreed upon, and the second is the development of the public art museum as a more professional and inclusive arbiter of aesthetic values. I will discuss these in turn.

**Artists’ careers and the market**

Artists working in a developing economy such as Vietnam’s, are not able to work full time at their primary creative activity. Their situation is not dissimilar to that of artists in developed countries such as Australia and the United States in which only 11% of artists earn their income solely from their artwork (Jeffri and Throsby 1994). However, the prices paid to Vietnamese artists for their work are far lower than prices brought by artworks in developed economies, so that artists in Vietnam experience a far greater pressure in developing their work or human capital. David Throsby argues that artists’ career structure, reputation and income are based on the development of their ‘human capital’. That is, the proportion of time devoted to art work, the length of time in arts training, and the amount of experience the artist has as a practising professional (Throsby 1986; Throsby and Thompson 1995). Throsby has also argued that his data on Australian artists shows that arts income rises approximately in step with the proportion of time devoted to the arts. The problem with Throsby's argument is that it does not take account of the function of the market. There are high prices for only a select number of contemporary artists in order to insure their investment potential, while the prices of most artists are low, and as a result so is their income. In economic terms, the price set at the fall of the hammer, or by the dealer, is the objective determinant of value (for an example of the narrow view represented by econometrics, see Ashenfelter, Graddy and Stevens 2002). In the field of cultural economics, which is more open to questions of value outside those determined by economic theory, the art market is defined ‘as a freely functioning market with little or no distortion, in which minor asymmetries in information can be taken into account’ (Throsby 2001:122) However, economic arguments do not take account of the determining role of price formation by the players in the art world and market; the question of the relationship between financial value and aesthetic value requires a more interdisciplinary approach. The lack of an effective interdisciplinary approach to the status of the artist is apparent in the lack of an informed public policy in Vietnam in relation to artists, artists’ education, art museums and the regulation of markets.

**Vietnamese art worlds**

In discussing artists in Vietnam I will use the sociological concept of an art world. ‘Art worlds consist of all those people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world and perhaps others as well define as art.’ (Becker:1982:34). The art world is a series of interconnecting relationships between an artistic tradition and its educators and practitioners, artists, dealers and curators, writers and historians, collectors and museums. Vietnam has three long established university faculties of fine arts, in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Hue, as well
as colleges of design or decorative arts such as the one in Dong Nai. The French colonial government provided the model of a Beaux Arts education that was expanded to include traditional Vietnamese forms such as lacquer painting and relief sculptural practice in wood, plaster, and metal.

Vietnamese painting and sculpture is still predominantly Modernist due to the centrality placed on formal aesthetics and techniques in all departments of fine art and design and the legacy of the French education system. Since 1964 there have been few resources available in the fine arts faculties or the Art Museum to enable expansion and change. Through these faculties and colleges and their artist graduates, the Vietnamese art world already provides the conditions to integrate professional artists. Integrated professionals have the technical abilities, social skills, and conceptual apparatus necessary to make it easy to make art. Because they know, understand, and habitually use the conventions on which their world runs, they fit easily into all its standard activities. (Becker 1982:229)

That is, they stay within the bounds of what potential audiences and the state consider respectable. The problem is that much of the art being produced by integrated professionals in Vietnam today also produces the conditions for hacks—that is, competent but uninspired artists who produce the large amounts of work on which an art world runs (White and White 1965). The predominance of technically competent artists whose work is only suitable for local audiences and cultural tourism, results, in part, from lack of resources within the faculties and colleges. However, there are other contributing factors, such as professional isolation and lack of a clearly designated role in the economy. Vietnam’s wars against the French and the Americans resulted in a period of virtual isolation until the liberalisation policy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, or Doi Moi, took effect after 1986. Even after that time the economy was conceived as either state controlled or designated free enterprise sectors, and there was no concept of a not-for-profit sector in which arts, education, and cultural organisations generally operate. Although Vietnamese artists, faculties, and colleges have had access to international art and design magazines and occasionally visiting artists and art critics since 1990, the lack of English language skills severely hindered access to contemporary art and design theory and critical debates in other third world countries (Araeen, Cubitt and Ziauddin 2002). In the 1990s, principals in the faculties and museums were given permission to travel abroad. In addition visiting artists and art and design staff from France, the United States, and Australia have made brief visits and in some instances, have established collaborations with universities, such as that between Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Art and the Harvard University School of Art Education. Professional education is changing, but too slowly because of the reluctance of the state to relinquish control and the resulting tensions and inevitable inertia that self-censorship creates.

Change began in 1987 when the General Secretary of the Politburo, Nguyen Van Linh, demanded higher quality and a greater variety of expression at an informal meeting with artists and cultural specialists. This meeting was the sign of the end of the era of state-run artists’ federations, which had enjoyed monopoly over the purchasing and commissioning of art-work. Artists became free to sell work to private buyers or on commission through private galleries, and over 100 galleries opened in the following decade. The opening up of the economy also stimulated demand in the country itself from foreign business people and diplomats opening offices, from the Vietnamese diaspora and tourists. A small number of Vietnamese artists in Hanoi and Saigon, such as Le Vuong and Nguyen Thanh Chuong, are successful in selling their work in Hong Kong or New York. For them the definition of an artist’s career is based on financial success. There are other artists, mostly mid-career artists, who are more active forces in the development of art world relationships. Their artistic aims include a cultural and social critique and encouragement of greater freedom of expression in Vietnam itself. These artists in this author’s view, are the most artistically interesting and show the greatest potential as agents of change. However at the moment, the political economy is not sufficiently liberal to enable them to develop both aesthetically and financially successful careers. The visual arts are in an important transition phase, however, and
the United Socialist Party of Vietnam could do more to develop strategic public policy to enable a sustainable career structure for artists.

**The conditions for the development of a national art market in Vietnam**

The growth in the number of private art dealer galleries provides one of the conditions for a national market. Dealers integrate the artist into the economy by transforming aesthetic value into economic value, thus making it possible for artists to live by their art work (Moulin 1987:37–65). In art market centres in developed countries, dealer galleries represent a complex typology based on the career stage of artists whom they represent, the characteristics of their collectors and their level of capital investment. Another way to identify galleries was proposed by Marcia Bystryn (1978), who identified a two-rung system in which artists’ progress from a first-rung gallery after their work and reputation develops, to a second-rung gallery. The second type of dealer has a high level of capital investment, and a well-established reputation with collectors and museums that enables them to establish artists’ prices and artistic reputations as more stable commodities.

Among dealers there are also differences between those who exhibit and sell established or historical art and those who sell contemporary art. As the supply of contemporary art has no limit, dealers in contemporary art must be entrepreneurs willing to take risks and be clear about their judgment and the style of work they will exhibit (Moulin 1987:51). Both types of dealers must have skills in exhibition programming and display that is rarely evident in Vietnam today. The dealers exhibit a select group of artists for whom they cultivate collectors or niche markets. In order to establish the aesthetic values of an artist’s works, certain professional criteria must be established through solo exhibitions that demonstrate the scope of the artist’s current work, their consistency of style and their ability to produce enough work to ensure their viability for collection and investment over time. The basis for the artist–dealer relationship is contract, consignment and intellectual property law that ensures both parties accept their contractual obligations to their mutual benefit. The introduction of arts laws or related civil law is one of the most important public policy developments necessary to support a national art market. Another issue that has become more important as the reproduction of artworks in catalogues and art publications increases, is copyright. For example, in Australia, the passing of Commonwealth Government legislation to establish artists’ copyright, and the establishment of the collection agency, Vi$copy, was important because of the recognition it gave to artists’ rights, as much as for the income artists derived.

At present, the art world in Vietnam lacks both professional skills and finance. Commercial galleries range from a predominance of picture shops for tourists, to a handful of dealers with professional skills in exhibiting, and arranging contracts or international subsidiary dealerships or exhibitions. The strongest art market centres in Southeast Asia are in Hong Kong and Singapore, and dealers from those markets are signing up Vietnamese artists on contracts that require them to deliver their full output for one year. Artists making contracts with multi-national dealerships are unaware of market prices in other countries and of the legal codes in developed countries. Vietnamese artists are vulnerable to unfair contract arrangements as there are no legal or contractual regulations or training for artists or their Vietnamese dealers, and indeed artists may bypass Vietnamese dealers by entering into parallel contractual obligations. It is also unclear in which jurisdiction any dispute could be settled.

**The role of the public auction**

A global market for art became possible when the auction houses Christie’s and Sotheby’s became established in developed countries. The auction houses were central to the operations of the market because they established public prices for art. On the basis of this, price indexes were compiled, categorising works according to selected schools or periods, and individual artists became recognised as market leaders. The establishment of accepted price levels for works of art rests on the interplay between auctioneers and dealers whose expertise enables them to be...
knowledgeable bidders and to represent others in transactions. The operations of the auction houses are central to the operations of the market, because prices for art form an index similar to that of the stock market. The auctions houses legitimised the art market in the broad market for financial assets, enabling it to become part of an international, now global, financial system.

In most countries there is a national market for art consisting of local dealers and auction houses. Prices in the national market are often high because collectors feel confident about values in their local tradition. Since the 1950s, art worlds and markets in many countries have been transformed. An important part of the process of change was the integration of national markets into a global system through sales conducted by the multi-national auction houses. In Vietnam there is no local auction house establishing prices, and so far there has not been sufficient scholarship or demand to hold international sales of Vietnamese art. The art market in Vietnam is at the stage in which it is essentially a dealers’ market, but it is a dealers’ market that is surrounded by, or historically and socially linked to, more developed and aggressively competitive multi-national dealers. As the level of capital investment in Vietnamese art grows more ethical and integrated, market processes must evolve for Vietnamese artists to develop sustainable professional careers in art and in art-related occupations, such as writing, curating, professional museum work, teaching and lecturing.

The role of national art museums in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi

‘Aesthetic principles, arguments and judgements are some of the conventions through which members of an art world act together to confer value.’ (Becker:1982: 131). The network of relationships between museum directors, a select group of dealers, critics and curators, who influence collectors and confer aesthetic values on historical periods and emerging styles, that supports artists in Australia, or in New York, does not yet exist in Vietnam. The influence of powerful taste-makers is always important in determining the acquisitions and exhibitions role of national art museums, and in Vietnam this is the United Socialist Party. However, the positioning of national institutions in relation to the developing market can be seen clearly in the expansion and changes at the Hanoi National Art Museum.

Even though museum directors have been prevented from large-scale acquisitions of contemporary art by conservative Party trustees, lack of funds and exhibition space, international financial and professional resources will effect changes. For example, in Hanoi, Halong Bay and Hue, a major project by UNESCO and the European Union aims to conserve cultural heritage in an environmentally sustainable way. The situation in relation to 20th century and contemporary art is more problematic. In the National Art Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, one of the constraints is the overall power of the state trustees, who have not defined the role of the Director and professional staff, a role that, in developed economies, was part of the organisational revolution in the arts. In Vietnam conflict is apparent in the contradictory demands of the museum's traditional role of conserving state-established aesthetic values and its new role in relation to a mass audience and the market. As a result, the key role of the art museum in validating aesthetic value in a developing art world and market through relationships with artists and other professionals, is not happening and the museum has become a symbol of frustration and neglect.

As change is not happening in national art museums, a network of new spaces for exhibiting is developing. The artists who pursue new aesthetic modes such as conceptual and performance art, video installation and experimental film have a more multi-faceted role than the career structure determined by the national art museums and the dealers’ market. These organisations allow more experimental art and also explore the intermediary functions of dealers’ galleries, state controlled art museums and magazines. Because of the slowness of national art museums to create regular exhibitions of new local work, other institutions, such as university galleries, may step in to fill what they perceive as a gap. However, as artists in other countries have found, the alternative gallery sector provides a historically important diversification in art
practice but is unable to effect long-term change in the directions that the market is taking. For example, Canadian artists came to this conclusion by the end of the 1970s: Parallel galleries exposed the importance of experimental art but because of their marginal status they haven’t been able to validate such work to the level that the more durable institutions can... all we are able to do now is to keep the traditional large institutions going and they can hardly be said to be even absorbing new roles (Robertson 1980). Professional and inclusive national art museums play the key role in validating both historical and contemporary art work in a developing market.

Conclusion

The future of the professional artist in Vietnam is at stake. Vietnam has many talented artists and one of the strongest visual culture traditions in Southeast Asia. The faculties of art and design need not only the financial resources to improve their buildings and equipment, but are looking for assistance to develop new curricula for both artists and designers. The existing programs do not provide artists with professional practice information and the skills to establish viable careers in their own country in the 21st century, or to compete in an increasingly globalised art market. Regulation of artist–dealer relationships, the opening of public auction houses and the development of national art museums as professional organisations could provide the infrastructure for a successful national art world and market.

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