

# Trans POP: Korea Vietnam Remix

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Up until a few years ago, there were very few exhibitions during summer and winter vacations for students, because of weather either too hot or too cold. However, with increasing understanding that culture is a major industry for lucrative profit in the 21st century, we have come to witness several exhibitions of classic paintings from the world, targeted as blockbuster vacation destinations. Such exhibitions, however, provided disappointments in most cases to the spectators, because of low quality that was not true to their advertisements.

I'd like to hope that this trend is part of the process of improving the level of our art culture. At the same time, I remain concerned. Exhibitions that lean largely on the classics and modern art may stimulate nostalgia for the 'modern' times and reinforce again the old modern values, which would end up leading spectators to turn their backs on contemporary art. Spectators mostly went to the works by Van Gogh, Modigliani and Picasso that arrived in Korea yet the "Trans POP: Korea Vietnam Remix" exhibition, that was held in the Arko Art Center, was a must-see for experts and indeed for anyone interested in contemporary art.

This exhibition took place in 2007 at the Arko Art Center, and was a collaboration between the Korean-American exhibition planner Min Young-soon and Viet Le, the American scholar with Vietnamese heritage. Since the 1980s, Min Young-soon has shown consistent interest in the Diaspora culture, and this time Min joined hands with Viet Le, of the young Diaspora generation, in a bid to look into several aspects of the bilateral relations between Korea and Vietnam. A total of 16 artists from Korea and Vietnam, including Diaspora artists, took part. It seems that the 'contact zone' art concept, presented by Mary Pratt, a literature theorist from New York University, is proper to explain this exhibition. The contact zone refers to a space where cultures with different backgrounds in geography and history get into contact and interact.

## Diaspora Crossed Culture

In this exhibition, the starting point of the bilateral relation's contact zone is the history of Korean troops sent to the Vietnam War, and the revelation of its trauma is part of the design. However, if that were all the exhibition had to offer,

Left: Sanghee Song, *Blue Hope*, 2004, c-print, 140×110cm  
 Right: Nguyen Manh Hung, *Go To Market*, 2004, oil on canvas, 101×101cm





it could have been nothing more than trite political commentary. Instead, there are two important reasons I can positively evaluate this exhibition.

One is that this exhibition did not ignore how the pasts of these two countries crosses with the present, and how it forms a new present. In this perspective, it is possible to see that the Korean troops sent to Vietnam in a way promoted the economic development and modernization of Korea, and to understand the modernization and the influence of the Korean Wave over Vietnam as part of the pop culture.

The other reason is that the exhibition broke free from the traditional 1990s Diaspora position, where the West stopped at advocating their mother countries. This exhibition let the spectators know how the Diaspora crossed each country's culture, and how Koreans and Vietnamese changed after the contact, in their own voices.

The works presented in this exhibition were created in various media such as video, photography, collage, objects and oil paintings. Korean artists were mostly in the middle of their established careers and therefore presented works whose qualities were even, whereas Vietnamese artists showed great deviation in quality among artists who were educated domestically or abroad.

#### Approach Traumas of History

Among Korean artists, Yoo Soon-mi is the only one who directly dealt with the bilateral relations, in the video work titled *Ssitkim (Cleaning the Souls of the Dead): Taking to the Dead* where people who were left alive recall the ruthless Korean soldiers in the Vietnam War and those who were killed during the war. For Korean-American artist Kwon

So-won, meanwhile, interests have been the oppressive regulations of the West against the Asian tradition and women's bodies, which were presented *Same Age*, depicting historical and political incidents that happened in the year of the artist's birth, as part of a self-portrait. Lee Yong-baek's video installation *Angel Soldier 1*, showed a soldier's movement slowly unveiled in the background of flowers that fill the screen the flowers and the soldier are symbols that represent femininity and masculinity, peace and war, nature and destruction.

Other works by Korean artists include Bae Young-hwan's objects from daily lives, especially of interest for pop aesthetics and expressing pop song lyrics with pills, Song Sang-hee's photography and video works based on Korean legends or historical incidents, and Choi Min-hwa's images of youth that give strong impressions by intentionally distorting the images. These works were fine in terms of their individual qualities, but it remains rather in question whether they truly fit into the theme of 'Remix' for each country.

Among Vietnamese artists, Dinh Q. Lê and An-My Le, who were educated in the United States, already have good reputations, and their works were outstanding in this exhibition as well. In the giant video installation work in three channels, Dinh Q. Lê sought to explore how the past history of Vietnam crosses the present daily lives through the symbol of a helicopter, by giving a comparison between the usage of helicopters in the war and in farming. An-My Le, meanwhile, presented a comparison between the memory and the reality of the two wars in which the United States was involved. To that end, the artist presented documentary-like photographic works of the war generation of Vietnam. To do so, the artist presented images of a mock Vietnamese war conducted by the present-day Vietnamese in order to soothe their nostalgia for the war. Then the artist also had the real-world mock training of the U.S. Army to be sent for Iraq on an American desert.

Meanwhile, Lin+Lam, the two artists who had joint works, used propaganda films related to the Vietnam War from the U.S. Library of Congress archive, and reminded the spectators of another side of the war: the media war. *The Story of a Portrait* by Ly Hoang Ly is a portrait of a woman divided into two on a dark screen, which tells spectators of the contradiction between war and ideology.

These works take the Vietnam War as a major starting point, whereas others – the installation work *Camouflage* by Tran





Luong, the post-modernist painting by Nguyen Manh Hung and the pop-art multimedia work by Tiffany Chung – tell us of the social and economic wind of change taking place in Vietnam.

Luong attempted to be a social critic by comparing the dark social reality and political choices, that are hidden by the widely spreading consumption culture and radical economic change of Vietnam, to a military uniform hidden by camouflage patterns. However, the artist's work was displayed only in part because of the limit in space, and this appears to have led to a weakened effect.

Hung's paintings, meanwhile, draw together in the floating image the reality of Vietnam in the course of modernization and industrialization with the die-hard remnants of the war. Chung made sugar cane, the symbol of the past colonial regime, into a lighthearted pop art style sculpture, and used pop culture icons such as a Vietnamese pop singer, which presents a positive perspective for the formation of pop culture and the urbanization of Vietnam. In general, works by Vietnamese and the Diaspora of Vietnam artists lack in sophistication in comparison with the Korean artists' works, but they more closely approach the traumas of history, war and pop culture, which are the themes of the exhibition.

#### Contact Zone of Nations

It is not easy to select works that fit into the planned intent of an exhibition. This exhibition was no exception, and the works that remained true to the presentation of the contact zone between Korea and Vietnam were only a few. The rest

seemed to have their own separate themes. A lounge that stood in the center of the exhibition site was probably installed by the exhibition planners and curators to make up for such a problem. This lounge has an archive where visitors can freely listen to pop songs of Korea and Vietnam and read each country's newspapers as well as magazine articles, academic papers, information on "Korean Wave" and literary works related to Vietnam. This lounge was truly the contact zone where both cultures of Korea and Vietnam were actively crossing, and in this sense, the space had an important meaning as a part of the exhibition.

Also, the symposium that took place from Jan. 18 to 19 hosted multiple nationalities of political scientists, anthropologists, feminist scholars, architects and culture theorists from Korea, Vietnam, the United States, Australia and Japan. These scholars could meet and exchange their views and opinions about the bilateral relations. After the symposium, screenings of feature and short films produced by Vietnamese and Diaspora artists offered a time to share their concerns for personal and social changes in life and identities. Such events were valuable enough to play a complementary role for the intention of the exhibition, which was hard to package within the restricted format of an art exhibition. This exhibition is soon to leave Korea, with a plan to move to San Francisco in December. Vietnam does not allow contemporary art exhibitions, and this is why the exhibition cannot travel to Vietnam. I'd like to show homage for the passion of the Vietnamese contemporary artists who have to work in such a poor environment.

Top: An-My Lê, *Rescue*, from the *Small Wars* series, 1999-02, c-print, 67.2 x 96.5cm

Opposite Top Left: Lin + Lam, *Unidentified Vietnam*, 2006, Video, 1:00 min

Right: *Unidentified Vietnam*, 2001-ongoing, mixed media installation, dimensions variable

Bottom: Dinh Q. Lê, *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, 2007, three-channel video installation