Zoe Butt: In 1993, you returned to Vietnam for the first time since your family in the border town of Ha Tien had fled the horror of atrocity during the Vietnam and Cambodia War in 1978. Your study in Southern California, as a refugee and an immigrant at this time could be said to be heavily influential in guiding your principles and opinions as a practicing artist to this day. As this series of interviews for DISPATCH seeks to give insight as to how the processes of movement (as an experience of tourism, necessity or education in living/traveling to different locale), how would you say your movement between Vietnam and the USA has shaped the kind of work that you do today, particularly in relation to your establishment of the Vietnam Foundation for the Arts and the independent art space and reading room, San Art in Ho Chi Minh City?

Dinh Q Le: My movement between Vietnam and the States is frequent and desired. Much of my immediate family resides in Southern California. As a child growing up in Simi Valley, California with the distant memories of a country whose culture and imagery was being fed back to me via mainstream television and film, it was at times difficult to pinpoint which memories were mine or popularly inherited (this was a topic I pored over in “From Vietnam to Hollywood” a photo-tapestry series and “The Imaginary Country” a 4-channel video installation). This was also one of the reasons I chose to return to Vietnam – to determine for myself my own memories and contexts of who I was as a Vietnamese.
When I first returned in the early 90s, I found the local community rather unwelcoming. I am considered Viet Kieu in Vietnam, which means ‘overseas Vietnamese’. In the 90s particularly, ‘Viet Kieu’ was a term used with derision and envy. It held connotations of betrayal, that as refugees who had chosen to leave the country and that we were in some way not believing in the motherland. Many Viet Kieu during this time were also sending money home to support their families and it is this perceived sense of wealth that also exacerbated people’s reception of me. At local train stations and many other venues there were always two prices – one for the local and one for foreigner. As Viet Kieu we were considered foreigners and charged as foreigner sometimes more than double the local price.

This attitude has changed greatly in the last few years as the government recognizes their need for the skill-base of these foreign trained Viet Kieu, particularly in science and technology, but the cultural sector in Vietnam is still very much considered a potential dangerous area. The government has done little to encourage Vietnamese overseas artists to come back but they also do not forbid it either. They are keeping a distance but also a weary watchful eye over the small community of very active Viet Kieu artists in Vietnam.

I would say that my movement between Vietnam and the USA has enabled me to identify what the possibilities and needs of the art community are here in Vietnam. With my connections to an international network beyond Vietnam; knowledge of the art scene in America; and English language capability, I felt I was in a position to offer some assistance to my local community.

With regard to starting San Art and the Vietnam Foundation for the Arts, I think it necessary to explain what the art system was like back then (and still very much remains so) in Vietnam. The biggest and most important part of the art scene in HCMC at the time was the government-supported HCMC Fine Arts Association. They would organize annual exhibitions on national holidays and its members could rent their gallery for group or personal exhibitions. Most of the members were traditional painters. There was no alternative art scene back then; most of the young artists in HCMC were working in isolation. They gathered at the HCMC Fine Arts Association’s events, but were not really working together. At the time, the government was very watchful of southerners. After all, the south was on the wrong side of the war. The artists were scared stiff of the cultural police, which is why the southern artists at the time did not organize themselves to create an alternative scene. They were fearful of being accused of being subversive by the government and didn’t want to end up in jail.

Young artists had started dabbling with performance and installation, but they were basically searching in the dark. There was very little access to information on contemporary art at the time. Internet usage was illegal in Vietnam and the U.S. embargo against Vietnam was still on, so southern artists were completely disconnected from the rest of the world.

The biggest reason I wanted to do something to help was because of the respect I felt for young artists at the time. They were well trained as painters and traditional sculptors and could actually make a decent living by creating works catering to the emerging tourist art market. But they decided to abandon their traditional training and try out installation and conceptual art, even when they had little information on these practices. I thought they were very brave.
As someone who came back to Vietnam as “Viet Kieu,” I did not want the local artists to think that I was trying to take over their territory or, as we say in Vietnamese, dai doi (“teaching them the facts of life”). The challenge was how to get the local artists to trust me and to understand that I was just trying to help.

This is where the idea for starting a reading room began, which later grew into the idea of a combined gallery space and thus ‘San Art’ was formed. It could not have been made possible without Vietnam Foundation for the Arts (VNFA). The VNFA started in 2006 with the help of my LA dealers Shoshana and Wayne Blank of Shoshana Wayne Gallery. Knowing that I wanted to bring more information on contemporary art practice to Vietnam, Wayne and Shoshana helped me to set up VNFA as a ‘not-for-profit’ organization to fund San Art’s educational program. We have very wonderful supportive and generous collectors, museum curators and directors on our board, who donate funds and advise us on various projects.

Entrance to San Art, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

ZB: As an artist who was trained in the US and is aware of the trend across Asia where practicing contemporary artists are respected teachers at local universities – have you ever considered sharing your experiences and knowledge in this way?

DQL: I have always wanted to teach at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University, even for free. Unfortunately, the law in Vietnam only allows foreigners to teach technical practice. Yes, today Viet Kieu’s are still considered as foreigner. If I were to teach an art class here, I can teach all the techniques I want to but I am not allowed to discuss the content. The government still thinks that we will poison the Vietnamese youth with our Western contaminated mind. What we are doing at San Art is much more interesting and we have been able to find ways to get around this paranoia policy. We have been able to hold lectures and discussions on contemporary art practices by some of the top people in the field.

ZB: San Art is a non-profit arts organization in Vietnam. This is a tough status to maintain when there is little to no government support for avant-garde / experimental art in the country. In fact, the support for these languages stems largely from the artists themselves in Vietnam. Do you see this community of artist-run initiatives as a kind of system of art making that is sustainable in Vietnam?

DQL: From a pragmatic point of view, it is a hopeless situation. But we artists are never practical in the first place. Many artists here in Vietnam have been making work for years in obscurity with zero support and recognition. They still survived. I think artist initiatives like San Art might not survive long term but there will always be other artist initiatives ready to continue this journey. Artists will always find a way to keep their dreams alive.
ZB: You will soon have your major installation ‘The Farmers and the Helicopters’ premiere at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York in late June. As one of the world’s most reputable collections of modern and contemporary art, do you think this achievement will be something discussed in your local community?

DQL: Yes I am quite excited that MoMA have acquired this piece. It is a significant work for me as it tells the stories of everyday people in Vietnam – their fascinations, memories and dreams of a machine (the helicopter) that carried both terror and hope. To have these voices a part of this historical collection of
the 20th and 21st Century is important and I think worth celebrating in the context of the relationship between Vietnam and the USA.

As for how the local community in Vietnam will perceive this event, I believe the artist community is already talking about it. I hope this exhibition will make them believe that what they are doing here in Vietnam is not ignored by the art world and it could end up in places like MoMA.

As for the community at large, the national newspapers will definitely write about the exhibition. The national television stations might even report about it since they have always televised San Art’s openings. I think a mixture of curiosity, puzzlement, and a sense of pride will be the reaction of the community. The community here is still trying to wrap its’ mind around this thing named “contemporary art”.

The artistic community in Vietnam is fractured between those who seek an international dialogue for their work in the museum system; and those who seek to make money from the tourist market. There is a lot of work to be done in terms of education in the arts in Vietnam, where appropriate resources are available that share the history and development of art post 1975; where expertise is shared of how an art work gains value and credit. There are many young artists today who are eager to take a different path from the previous generations for inspiration and opportunity and it is this generation that I have high hopes for, it is this group that San Art strives to nurture.

Josh Harris, artist and museum professional, with artist Dinh Q Le, talking about preservation and conservation concerns in contemporary art at San Art in July 2009.

Dinh Q. Lê was born in Ha-Tien, Vietnam in 1968. He received his BA in Art Studio at UC Santa Barbara in 1989 and his MFA in Photography and Related Media at The School of Visual Arts in New York City in 1992. In 1993, Lê returned to Vietnam for the first time, settling in Ho Chi Minh City in 1996. Lê’s work has been exhibited worldwide. His recent solo exhibitions include, ‘A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê’; Bellevue Art Museum, Washington State and Tufts University Art Gallery, USA, 2009; ‘Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium, The Art of Dinh Q. Lê’, Asia Society, New York. In June 2010, his work ‘The Farmers and the Helicopters’ will premiere at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. His work is held in numerous public collections. Lê co-founded the ‘Vietnam Foundation for the Arts’ (VNFA) based in Los Angeles, an organization that supports Vietnamese artists and promotes artistic exchange between cultural workers from Vietnam and around the world. With funding from VNFA, Lê co-founded San Art with three other Vietnamese artists (Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn, Phú Nam Thúc Hà and Tiffany Chung) - the first not for profit gallery in Ho Chi Minh City. He is currently a member of the peer committee for Art Network Asia, and a member of the Asia Society’s international council.
**Zoe Butt** is Curator and Director (Programs and Development) for San Art, an independent artist-run gallery space and reading room in Ho Chi Minh City. She is also Curatorial Manager for Post Vi-Dai, a private collection of contemporary Vietnamese art based between Ho Chi Minh City and Geneva. Previously she was Director, International Programs, Long March Project – a complex, multi-platform, international artist organization and ongoing art project based in Beijing, China. Prior to this she was Assistant Curator, Contemporary Asian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia where she assisted in the development of the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT); key acquisitions for the Contemporary Asian art collection, and other associated gallery programs. For over 10 years she has been researching contemporary Asian art and has both independently and collaboratively curated exhibitions and contributed to various international art publications that have reflected the dynamic art of this region.

**Sàn Art** is an artist-initiated gallery space and reading room in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Established in October 2007, Sàn Art (sàn meaning ‘platform’) aims to promote, facilitate and showcase contemporary art through exhibition and discussion. Vietnam has few contemporary art spaces that are not commercially driven. Sàn Art was established in response to this lack of experimental platforms for the exhibition and discussion of contemporary art and culture. Recognizing this country’s art education system possessed little expertise and knowledge concerning international developments in contemporary art practice since 1975, Sàn Art’s founders decided to create a space where artists from Vietnam and abroad could gather together to share ideas and inspiration.