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6/6/2008

Cuong Le,  
Asian-Australian Community Cultural Development Officer  
Casula Powerhouse  
Locked Bag 7064  
Liverpool BC NSW 1871

Dear Cuong,

I have been very sorry to learn that members of the Vietnamese community are very distressed by *Pho Dog*, a component of the larger *I Love Pho* exhibition, which you curated in 2006 and is now touring nationally. I understand some community members consider it deeply insulting and are angry with you for fostering a project which seems to deride their suffering, denigrate symbols they hold dear and promote others associated with a regime which delivered immense loss and pain to their families.

In addition, the director of Casula Powerhouse, Kon Gouriotis, has not acceded to a request from community members that *Pho Dog* be removed from the exhibition – an action considered by community members to reveal profound insensitivity to their feelings. I know that you and the artist Mai Long have been deeply troubled by the community's reaction and after much consideration, decided to cover the entire exhibit with a black drape.

I am very sorry to hear of this unhappiness in response to the exhibition and while I may not be able to change these people's minds, I would like to offer another perspective. I am not Vietnamese but a fifth generation, largely Anglo, Australian with a deep interest in the cultural and spiritual enrichment offered by our increasingly diverse society.

As you know, I have recently recorded an interview with you. This was the last of 23 oral history interviews recorded for a history of arts activism in western Sydney I have been researching and writing for the past five years. I have been aware of your dedicated work for more than 10 years and greatly admire the warmth and enthusiasm with which you operate and your many quiet achievements.

I have only managed to attend a few of the events you have organised, but two I recall vividly are *Viet Pop* and *I Love Pho*. Attending the *I Love Pho* cooking workshop was illuminating and the *Pho Dog* sculptural exhibition was brilliant, clever and funny. I would love to have bought one of the dogs and given it prominent display on the stairs in my house as a constant reminder of the complexity, energy, humour and survival skills of the people it was intended to represent – not least the artist herself.

*Pho Dog*, with its cleverly constructed individual dogs, speaks to me about Vietnamese ingenuity, survival, independence of spirit. The reference to mongrels was clearly a self-mocking reflection of the artist's own experience of being a product of more than one culture, of conflict and contradiction and the classic dilemma of identity in those circumstances. The amazing collages of colour and commentary which make up the outer surface of each dog offer extraordinary satirical comment on her own sense of identity and current local and international issues. It's a brilliant idea, which as a non-artist, I can only stand back and admire.

Another oral history interview I recorded in 2005, was with Kon Gouriotis, director of Casula Powerhouse, whom I have now known for almost 20 years. Among the threads common to the interviews with both Kon and you was your shared concern for cultural sensitivities and the practice of community consultation as a constant in any community project development. I consider you both to have great personal integrity.

Kon has been actively exploring the role of cultural institutions and the opportunities they provide to communities, since his early years of study at University of Western Sydney. In our interview he talked about his experiences in developing the major Vietnam Voices exhibition for Casula Powerhouse in 1997.

*That's what we do. Cultural institutions create a dialogue for beauty.*

*It is beautiful, if you can talk about it in a peaceful way. If you can talk about conflict in a way – like we did with Vietnam Voices – brought difficult communities together, where we could talk about the beauty of humanity, talk about the reconciliation capacity of humanity and for people to . . . Friend and foe in the same place, hug each other and to talk about that environment and see that the majority of people want to have a space where everyone can get on with each other and not have these terrible wars and contain a made environment where people have genocidal . . . and have generic and generational impact on young people.*

*. . . what I'm committed to and always am committed to is a social cultural agenda and it's based on issues. As long as I've got breath in me, that's what I'll keep on doing.*

As a small nation which has successfully withstood invasion by outsiders and efforts to control the population for hundreds of years, Vietnamese people have every reason for pride. But there has also been untold suffering as recent history brought one part of the population into war with another part. Vietnamese people have been notable for their resourcefulness, resilience and adaptability.

It lies with the next generation after the conflict to try to reconcile those historic contradictions within themselves. It cannot begin without an honest recognition of the components of the conflict and the symbols which represent them. To an outsider like me, *Pho Dog* is a very clever expression of some of these characteristics. Far from disrespectful of the individual suffering, it uses humour to allow us to get closer to the issues involved that are simply too painful to acknowledge otherwise.

I hope community members will be able to accept artist Mai Long's intention that Pho Dog "embodies my wish for a healing, and a search for hope and humour" and that you have acted with compassion and courage to raise these matters within the Vietnamese community. Importantly, your actions also help the wider Australian community to have a better understanding of the issues involved.

If you think it would be helpful, I would be happy that you forward this letter to other people.

With admiration and respect,  
Yours sincerely,

Katherine Knight  
Historian