

Bui Nhu Huong - Pham Trung

# Vietnamese ART Contemporary 1990 - 2010

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# ART

## Vietnamese Contemporary

1990 - 2010

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Trần Trọng Vũ,  
*For a long life*, 2007, Nylon,  
Dimensions variable, L'Espace Hanoi

gained the approval of more people, becoming accepted, and has gained some standing in the Fine Arts Universities. Contemporary art events and courses, implemented by the schools and supported by the students, shifted the perspective on beauty, on arts, as well as the role of artists in the formation of Vietnamese art of the new era creating national art events. A few notable events were the *National Young Art Festival I, 2007*, the *Talent Prize for performing art 2008*, and the *Young Art HCMC Biennale 2009*.

The development in expanding quantities does not mean there is equal development in depth and quality as a result. During this process, there were works that left a deep impression, interested many, had deep messages, alongside with many works that were bland, easy, and with little content. There were truly talented artists, devoted and passionate about their work, as well as many artists who approached contemporary art as a fad, a way to quickly become famous.

### Installation art:

Among the different forms of art such as installation, performance, video, and digital, perhaps installation is the form most widely embraced and rapidly used in Vietnam. It gradually became something of interest, utilized and studied by young artists as well as attracted a small portion of the public.

Đinh Công Đạt,  
*School boys*, 2006, Mixed media,  
Dimensions variable







Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng,  
*Cocoon*, 2005, silk Cocoons, Dimensions variable,  
Goethe Institute Hanoi



Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng,  
*Cocoon* (detail), 2005, Dimensions variable,  
Goethe Institute Hanoi

There are a few reasons for this particularly fast adoption:

- It is a form that allows a wide array of expression, is flexible, employs material that are cheap and widely available in the proximity to reflect complex issues in life that are not easily expressed solely by painting or sculpture.
- It quickly conveys the artist's ideas and messages, appropriate for the pace and lifestyle of the era of rapid information, industrialization, and materialism.
- It is a game of new materials, a chase to find an unprecedented form of expression that is aesthetically surprising, shocking, funny, or ironic. It is also possible to apply scientific progress and development in technology into installations, reflecting abilities to keep up to date.
- Installation art has a simple, ordinary language, able to adapt to outdoor environments in public spaces, and are accessible to the viewers, encouraging them to participate in the artistic process. This is the common global trend of engaging with the public in tackling social issues.

According to Blue Space Gallery's documentations, in 1989, the artist Trần Trung Tín displayed a work titled *Memorial against Fascism* (Đài tưởng niệm chống phát xít) in the form of an installation. From



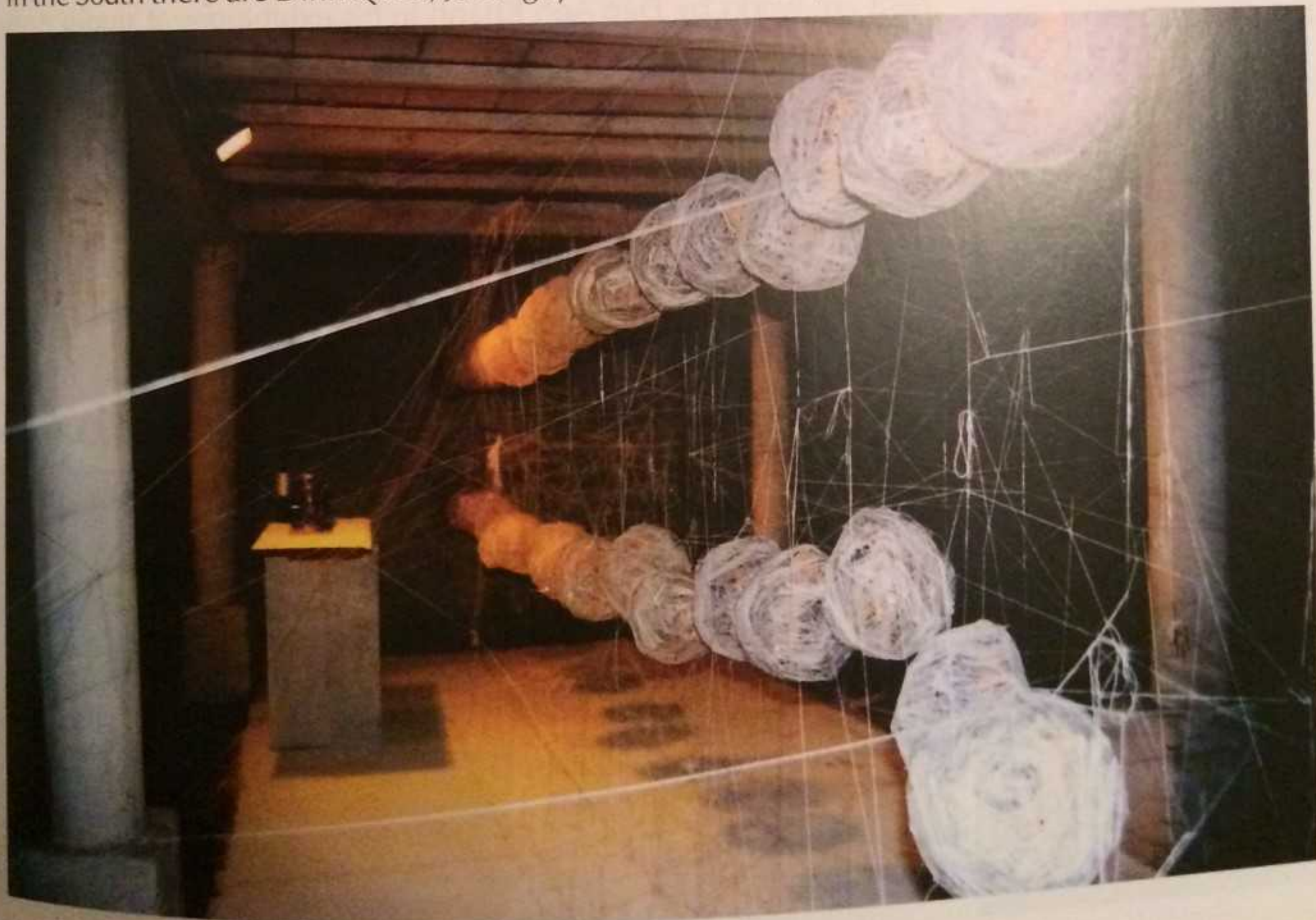
the trunk of a tree, the artist hung paint tubes that are torn apart.

In 1994, Nguyễn Bảo Toàn's ceramic exhibition *Earth through Fire* was recognized as one of the first novel installations. In the same year, Trương Tân had the exhibition *Friday the 13* (Thứ Sáu ngày 13, 16 Ngo Quyen Hanoi) combining paintings with a few small installations.

In June 1996, Mai Nguyen Long (Vietnamese Australian artist) did the first official exhibition of an installation at the Hanoi University of Fine Arts. In October 1996, Nguyễn Minh Thành had an exhibition titled *Installation* at 29 Hang Bai, Hanoi. Later in March 1997, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba had an installation at the same location.

Installation art developed sporadically and spread widely to other cities like Hue, Danang, HCMC, and Nha Trang. A number of artists who has had important works and have been consistent with their practice in the North are: Trương Tân, Nguyễn Minh Thành, Bảo Toàn, Trần Lương, Đào Anh Khánh, Phạm Ngọc Dương, Lê Vũ, Nguyễn Quang Huy, Nguyễn Minh Phước, Nguyễn Trí Mạnh, Hoàng Dương Cẩm, Đinh Công Đạt, Vương Thạo, Đinh Gia Lê, Vũ Hồng Ninh, Nguyễn Văn Phúc, Oanh Phi Phi, Nguyễn Phương Linh, Lê Quốc Việt; in the South there are Dinh Q. Lê, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Ly Hoàng

Nguyễn Đức Lợi,  
*Art around me*, 2004,  
Mixed media, Dimensions variable,  
Nha san Duc, Hanoi





Oanh Phi Phi,  
*Specula*, 2009, Mixed media,  
720x270x390 cm,  
93 Dinh Tien Hoang, Hanoi



Ly, Nguyễn Minh Phương, Lê Thừa Tiến, Lã Huy...

Installation art in Vietnam can be divided into two main types: installations outdoors and installations indoor.

Outdoor installations are mostly decorative in nature, are grand and create a unique atmosphere that are aesthetically pleasing and visually attractive. People who pursue this path are few and usually are people with a special sense of space composition. The most prominent are works by Đào Anh Khánh in his exhibitions at studio Anh Khanh in Gia Lam. They were elaborated, consisting of many symbols, and images of people flying; the attractive colorful lighting was also very professionally used. Bảo Toàn is another artist who makes predominantly outdoor installations. His works *Gold season*, *Teammates*, and *Convergence* left deep impressions in terms of aesthetics, as well as content in the moving messages and his ability to create spiritual spaces that are tied closely to tradition. His other work *The Day of Wandering Souls* was originally meant for outdoors display but due to lack of location it was

Oanh Phi Phi,  
*Black Box*, 2007, Mixed media,  
Dimensions variable, Vietnam Fine Art Museum







moved indoors. Then there is Ly Hoàng Ly with her breakthrough installation *Monument of Round Tray*. Other artists such as Nguyễn Minh Phương, Lê Thừa Tiến, Đinh Khắc Thịnh also had noteworthy outdoor installations.

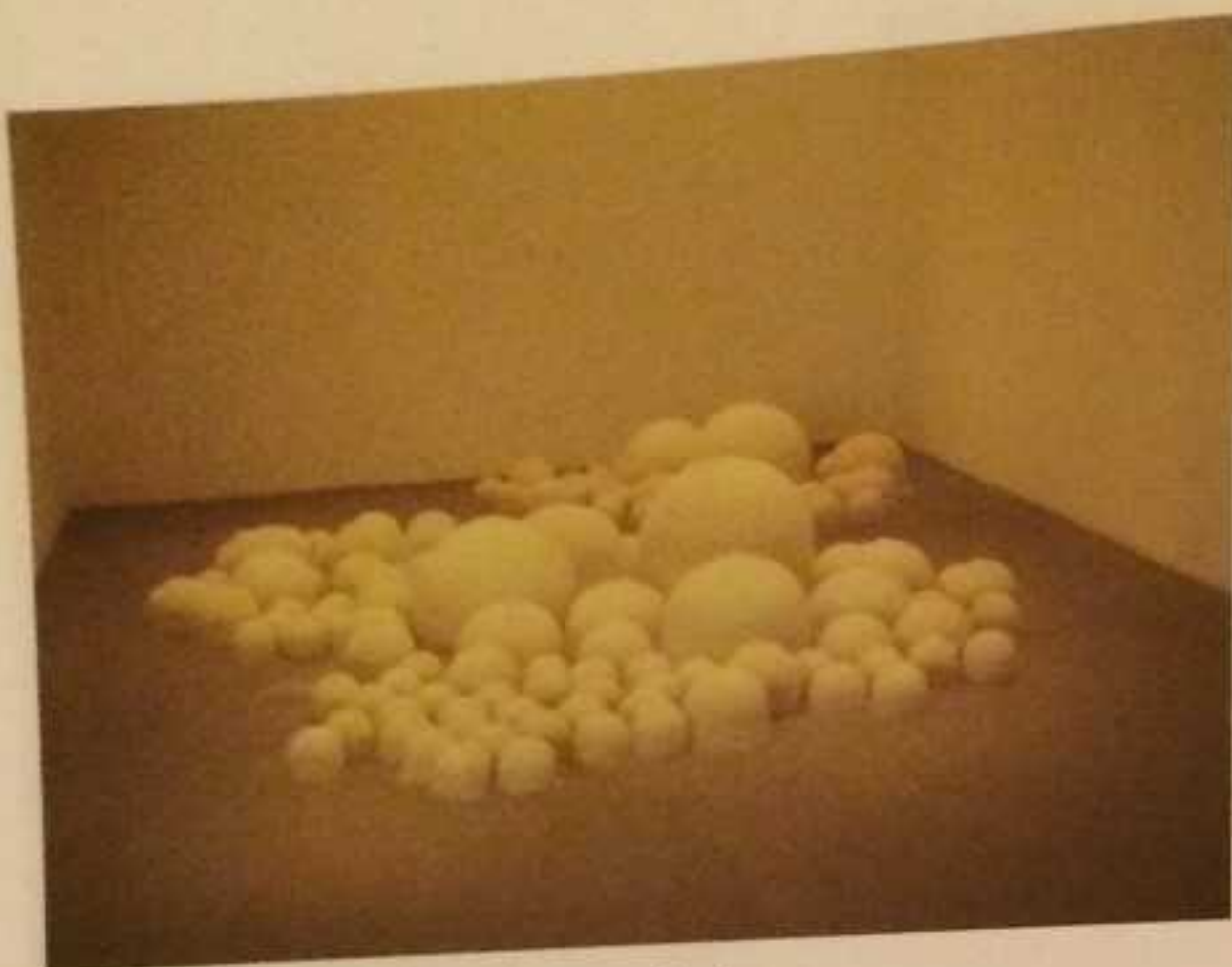
Most other installations in Vietnam are small, compact, and for displaying indoors. In the beginning, most of the installations are decorative, illustrative, or unfocused in their narrative. Artists like to display paintings in combination with installation, or the painting becomes a part that supports the installation. In a sense, this indicates the beloved position of painting in Vietnamese art, something that was constantly returned to – an undying interest among Vietnamese artists. Another reason is that the chance to exhibit are far and few in between and artists took every chance possible to show what they have. Paintings were often on display in exhibitions by Minh Thành, Trương Tân, Bảo Toàn, Trần Lương (*The Beginning*, 1997), Nguyễn Minh Phương (*Country market*, 1999), and Phạm Ngọc Dương (*Butterfly and Flower – Bướm và Hoa* 2001). Paintings combined

Lê Huy Hoàng,  
*Rain*, 2010, Mixed media,  
Dimensions variable, Nha san Duc  
Hanoi

Lã Huy,  
*Phở*, 2011, wax and cut poetry printed on paper, Cactus Gallery, HCMC







Nguyễn Phương Linh,  
*Mountains*, 2009, Salt,  
Dimensions variable,  
Quynh Galerie, HCMC

with installations often add beauty, and in combination with installations can have extraordinary effects. Other times, the paintings distract the viewers, making the content undefined and dilute the entire show. Regardless, it is possible to say installation in combination with paintings is a particular characteristic of Vietnamese installations.

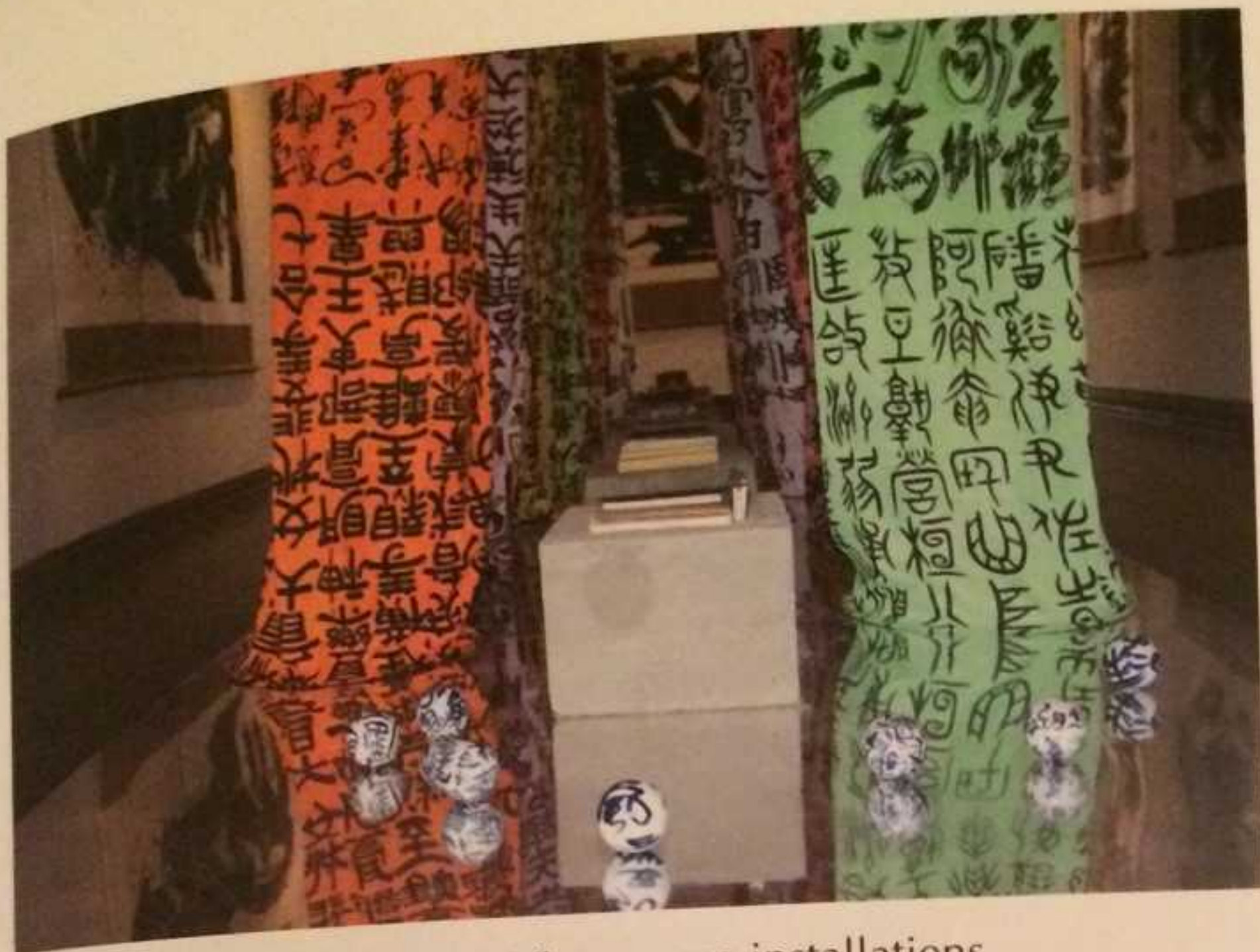
There are a few installations in conjunction with performances, such as in the case of Trương Tân, Ly Hoàng Ly, Đào Anh Khánh, Phạm Ngọc Dương; some are combined with video work such as Dinh Q. Lê, Trần Lương, Hoàng Dương Cẩm, Nguyễn Quang Huy, and Nguyễn Minh Phước. In these cases, the performance or video is a direct part of the installation. The combination of performance, music, and video art within installation in Vietnam are sparse, and mainly experiments carried out by a few artists.

Another clear characteristic of Vietnamese installation arts is that most displays are static. An example of this would be using a static still source of lighting that is immobile, without the aid of any advance technology. The use of common objects like oil lamps, candles, music, wooden clogs, cone hat, hay, baskets, ceramic jugs, altar related materials, paper offerings, things made from bamboo, mosquito nets, nylon, and rice paper are particularly widely used, even emphasized by Vietnamese artists, as a mark of their traditional heritage. This shows that Vietnamese society is still very closely tied in with folk craft and agricultural lifestyle, removed from technology-oriented lifestyle. People's interactions with each other resemble village connections, and they still closely follow traditional religious practices. This is a big difference compared to Western counterparts where artists use industrial junk, discarded objects to create new aesthetics, sometimes resembling high-tech strange games, or simply to entertain. However, many of their works directly refer to current environmental, political or social issues. Meanwhile, the lack of depth in ideas, and unclear concept is a rather big com-

Nguyễn Phương Linh,  
*Melting*, 2009, Salt, Dimensions  
variable, Quynh Galerie, HCMC







Lê Quốc Việt,  
*Wordless*, 2010, Mixed media,  
Dimensions variable, (*Wordless: Zenei Gang of Five exhibition*),  
Art Vietnam Gallery, Hanoi

mon problem seen in many Vietnamese installations.

Vietnamese installations are often vague, fragmented, and different parts of the work do not connect very well to create a defined image that is clear in concept. Many artists reach a dead-end after reaching the stage of trying unconventional materials, or finding new forms of aesthetics, beautiful and strange. Is this, perhaps, due to cultural restrictions, a lack of philosophic understanding, a lack of critical thinking, and the Vietnamese's tendency to simply stick to aesthetic and beauty? Or is this form of art still too new and Vietnamese artists need more time and experience to make better works?

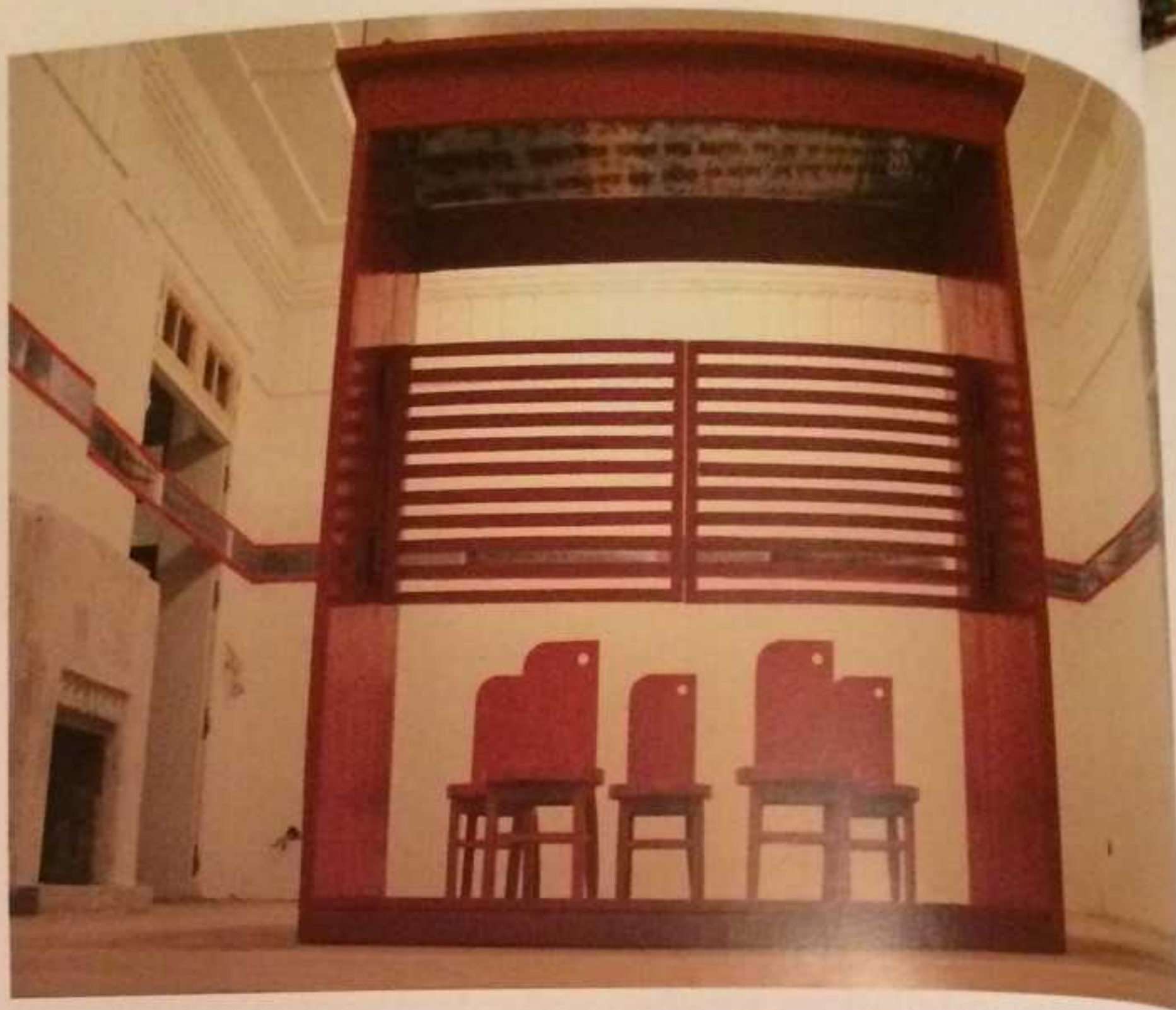
In the process of experimenting with materials, it is worth noting some works that achieved interesting visual impacts. Some of these works are: *Go West (Đi về phía Tây*, 1999, Nha San Duc) by Nguyễn Minh Phước; *Flower and Flower* (2001, Nha San Duc) by

Trần Tuấn,  
*Cancer*, 2010, Aluminum cans,  
Dimensions variable, Festival Hue





Nguyễn Trí Mạnh,  
*Contrast*, 2003, Mixed media,  
Dimensions variable,  
Goethe Institute Hanoi



Phạm Ngọc Dương; *Migrating birds* (*Những con chim di cư*, metal and mirror, 2003, Blue, Red, and Yellow group exhibition, Goethe Institute Hanoi) by Trương Tân; *Cocoon* (*Kén*, silk cocoons, 2005, Goethe Institute Hanoi) by Nguyễn Xuân Hoàng; *Rain* (*Mưa*, acupuncture needles and vegetable sprouts, 2010, *Nha San Duc*) by Lê Huy Hoàng; *Salt* (2009, Galerie Quynh) by Nguyễn Phương Linh.

The most important works are the ones with profound personal or social messages, which are humorous, critical and resonate with the viewers. These are Trương Tân's *Dancer* (*Vũ công*, 2005) and *Diaper* (*Cái bím*, 2007) addressing the issue of personal freedom and corruption in society; Nguyễn Minh Thành's *Playing Cards* (2004) and its message regarding human nature and how a thirst for power and for title could inflict pain on themselves and everyone else on earth. Thành's other work *Happy Citizen* (*Công dân hạnh phúc*, 2006) is his dream of a truly free, happy utopia where everyone is equal, where there is no need for passports or borders between countries. And the world like the "Buddhist world", has no violence and no censorship. Lê Vũ's *The Disguise* (*Cái lốt*, 2003), made from instant noodle, is a humorous warning about the 'instant' lifestyle, quick and without quality, which we've become accustomed to. Phạm Ngọc Dương's *People in the City* (*Người trong thành phố*, 2010) is a message addressing children education, where kids are forced



to grow according to a very restricted formula, lacking in imagination, stiff and tiresome. Nguyễn Trí Mạnh's *Contrast* (Tương phản, 2003), consisting of a red room with red doors, a red table, and lots of familiar propaganda statements "for the people" stuck to the wall, overwhelmed viewers upon entering with a strong "authoritative bureaucratic" atmosphere. Bảo Toàn's *Teammates* (2000) and Ly Hoàng Ly's *Monument of Round Tray* (2001) are also works that are often analyzed.

During this time, Đinh Q. Lê, a Vietnamese American artist, haunted by the sadness of war and the past created the work *Lotusland* (1999) addressing children who suffered from Agent Orange. Đinh Q. Lê also created an installation work using photography, *True Voyage is Returned* (2000). The installation was 3m height and 6m width, consisting of thousands of old black and white photographs joined together into a wall of faces and inscribed notes. In this way, the artist wished to preserve a bit of the history that is slowly fading away, at the same time express sympathy with people who had to leave, who were lost, whose existence were erased due to the war. This is another very humanistic aspect of contemporary art.

Currently, installation art in Vietnam is in a new phase. Installation is more widely experimented, with growing interests from a new generation of artists. It has also received more acceptance from the public and the government. However, a new generation of artists who can create better works than the pioneers is yet to come.



Trần Việt Đức,  
*Performance art*, 2000, closing of the  
"Party" exhibition of Nguyễn Minh Thành,  
Nha san Duc, Hanoi