

No War No Vietnam: A Multimedia Art Exhibit in Berlin

The fiftieth anniversary of the 1968 movement in West Germany has produced numerous events, debates, and exhibitions in Germany.¹ One major driver of the “68 Movement” were protests against American military involvement in Vietnam. Many West Germans experienced “Vietnam” as a series of slogans, chants, and images of war. Similarly, in other Western media, “Vietnam” was solely a war, not a broader cultural idea. The art and multimedia exhibition *No War No Vietnam* aimed to fill an important gap in the German public art scene by exploring Vietnam as both a subject and an agent in the broader memory of 1968.

Curated by Veronika Radulovic, Veronika Witte, and Đỗ Tường Linh, the exhibition opened in Berlin at the gallery Kunstverein Nord on August 24, 2018. Seeking to represent the artists’ views on the war in a self-critical way, the exhibit “juxtapose[d] artistic anti-war positions from the [19]60s in the form of photomontage, videos, painting, photography and original documents, with current art from Vietnam.”² Several young artists from Vietnam’s post-war generations found spaces in the exhibition to show their works. However, it was not easy to juxtapose two post-war generations since there were not only two Vietnams, but two Germanys as well during the Cold War. Despite the attempt to include German and Vietnamese artists, the exhibit fell short in adequately representing the artists’



FIGURE 1: Demonstration of refugees from South Vietnam—at the opening of the Nord Galerie. Photograph by Bùi Kim Đĩnh.

diverse backgrounds, conceptual artwork, and artistic processes. Though the exhibit highlighted the artists' different backgrounds, it nonetheless silenced some voices from East Germany by integrating them into narratives about 1968 dominated by West Germany. It also placed all Vietnamese artists under the category “Vietnam,” rather than highlight different historical and political positionalities. This move provoked a demonstration by former Vietnamese refugees at the gallery opening, who felt that the exhibit privileged northern Vietnamese artistic perspectives over other historical experiences (see Figure 1). This review examines the extent to which the juxtaposition of art from Vietnamese and German post-war generations achieved this goal of inclusion. In examining the content and arrangement of particular works of art, we argue that the exhibit failed to do justice to specific historical and social contexts and to the identities of individual artists.

The exhibit referenced, and perhaps conflated, different historical periods. On the German side, the post-war generation grew up in the aftermath of World War II. On the Vietnamese side, their aftermath was the Vietnam War. Despite having a common motive (critique of war), there were many differences between—and even within—the generations of artists from Germany and Vietnam represented in the exhibit. The consciousness of

being on the wrong side of history during World War II has long shaped German identities and their strong anti-war beliefs. In East Germany, fascism and the Second World War served as inspiration for anti-colonialism under the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). Many in the GDR thought that Vietnam was the victim of imperialist warfare that demanded international solidarity. In West Germany, the fact that many former Nazis were still in government positions even after World War II mobilized the anti-war movement of 1968. Both Germany and Vietnam were countries divided by war whose national divisions remained long after the battlefields fell silent. Post-war conflicts in Vietnam led many to flee to West Germany, an experience represented by some of the protesters outside the exhibition's opening.

The exhibition, however, highlighted German and Vietnamese artwork from only two sides of a much more complex narrative, even as a select few works from other countries were also included. From the German side, the exhibition privileged works from the West rather than from both Germanys. Among the twenty-three artists from France, the United States, and Germany, only three were from East Germany. Their East German nationality at the time remained unacknowledged in the captions, however, as their identities were subsumed under "Germany"—a category historically claimed by the West to erase the East. While the exhibition displayed the works of East German artists involved in the Solidarity movement (including Thomas Billhardt, Matthias Leupold, and John Heartfield), it excluded their political motivations and personal biographies that shaped their works of art. In so doing, the unique social and historical context in which the artists worked and travelled to Vietnam was effectively erased, if not co-opted by the 68 Movement. Moreover, despite the aim to portray the 1960s-generation's viewpoint, seven of the German artists included in the exhibit were not even born at the time. We can only surmise that they were included as examples of the lasting impact of this generational politics on younger post-war artists.

The same imbalance happened on the Vietnamese side. "Why didn't they mention the Huế massacre?" one of the protesters angrily questioned. Given that there were two Vietnams during the war, the exhibition neglected to include any South Vietnamese viewpoints. Works of art from German perspectives represented the North Vietnamese as victims during the war.

South Vietnam was entirely missing from these representations. For example, the 2004 video *Die Narbe* [The Scar] by Jan Zabeil included the story of people who fought for the north only. Focusing on a female revolutionary who had been tortured by South Vietnamese soldiers, the video reinforced that there is one dominant perspective deemed worthy of showing.

Among the West German works of art, however, there were expressions of irony to be found, which was a welcome intervention. For example, in Sarah Haffner's portrait of a bourgeois leftist's bookshelf (her own), we see a criticism of anticolonial solidarity movements located in the West (see Figure 2). On the bookshelf, there was just one small book on Vietnam among many others by Frantz Fanon and Herbert Marcuse, as well as literature on the Black Power movement and Latin America, bookended by works from Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg. This bookshelf was clearly a place where stories from and about the world were framed by Western liberal ideology, in which Vietnam was just one topic of global concern.

The diversity of the exhibit was reified mainly through the curators' public introduction at the opening, rather than the visual display. The juxtaposition of artwork came across as a bricolage of paintings, activist videos, performances, political posters, and documentary photos without a clear narrative (see Figure 3). As a visual commentary, two works of art in the gallery's front windows showed American icons that included the Statue of Liberty and the Coca Cola logo, as if only Americans had been involved in the war. In the latter case of a poster collage, entitled *Leap in Time*, the curator and artist Veronika Radulovic juxtaposed two parodies of famous images: a satirical black and white photomontage by Jürgen Holtfr-eter from 1970 of American soldiers at Iwo Jima waving a Coca Cola flag, and a Vietnamese girl in front of a colorful Coca Cola advertisement from 1996 after Vietnam welcomed back the soft drink. These pieces emphasized American globalization as imperialism across time and space. But it left out other viewpoints.

Context was also made difficult to grasp due to the spatial arrangement of the artwork. Phi Phi Oanh's sculpture, *Armor Piece*, applied a Vietnamese natural lacquer technique [*son ta*] that inlaid traditional figures and abstract color patterns (see Figure 4). The piece embeds the artist's identity as someone who is "often called upon as bearer and custodian of



FIGURE 2: Sarah Haffner, 1969. Painting on a bookshelf of a bourgeoisie leftist. Oil on canvas. Photograph by Bùi Kim Đĩnh.

contradictory thoughts and ideologies.”³ But such fine and tenuous details, form, and material, as well as hidden metaphors, were difficult to see when the display was distorted and placed too close to the floor. A higher display position with more explanation about the artistic process would have



FIGURE 3: The surrounding display of *Song to the Front*. Photograph by Bùi Kim Đĩnh.



FIGURE 4: Phi Phi Oanh. *Armor Piece*, 2013. Sculptural painting, “son ta” lacquer on epoxy composite reinforced with carbon. Photograph by Bùi Kim Đĩnh.

allowed for a closer look and interaction with the piece, along with a much needed historical and cultural context.

Moreover, formulaic statements in the surrounding display also upstaged the artwork’s subtle meanings. The display of *Song to the Front* by

Nguyễn Trinh Thi is an example. As a five-minute recut of the North Vietnam propaganda film with the same title, *Bài ca ra trận*, originally made in 1973 to praise soldiers on the battlefield, Nguyễn Trinh Thi's film offers two layers of meaning. The recut shows a violently changing world as an object under a woman's gaze. Looking out of the frame, she becomes witness to a war in which the soldier appears as a victim of his time. Nguyễn Trinh Thi combines the images with music from Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*—a composition about a sacred pagan ritual where a young girl dances herself to death to propitiate the God of Spring. This dramatic music in the background seemed to question the meaning of sacrifice when a soldier fired a machine gun and released maniacal laughter after the music stopped at the end of the film. Compared with the 1973 film, the recut shifted the focus from the man to a woman. Gendered beliefs about ideology are reversed: The soldier is not a hero but a victim, and beliefs about what is right or wrong are no longer clear. However, these impressions were locked in a tiny black display box and overshadowed by strong political statements against American imperialism presented in photography books about the anti-war movement and the video *Nicht löschesbares Feuer* by Harun Farocki on the violence of napalm in the war industry (see Figure 3). With more space and explanation of the artistic elements or broader ideological intentions, the dialectical character of *Song to the Front* would have been easier to perceive.

Even for the German visitor with some knowledge of the 68 Movement, these meanings were difficult to grasp without some familiarity with contemporary Vietnamese society and politics. Curator-led tours of the exhibit were provided to offer the viewer a wider historical and social perspective. Without these explanations, however, the underlying political meaning of the works of art, and their attempt to challenge hegemonic narratives, was not as clear as the organizers intended.

While the exhibit was organized by three women, it was not possible to cover the travel costs for Đỗ Tường Linh—the only Vietnamese curator. We wondered: to what extent can a curator contribute to an exhibit she has never set foot in it? Perhaps this was one reason that the curator Veronika Radulovic decided to use her own works on Vietnam in dialogue with colleagues from both Germanys. Though she considers herself



FIGURE 5: Veronika Radulovic. *Souvenir, Dong Hoi 2003/Berlin 2018*. Postcard leporello. Photograph by Bùi Kim Đĩnh.

“an important link between German and Vietnamese contemporary art,” her works seemed to lack a deeper cultural understanding of Vietnam.⁴ For example, juxtaposing a photograph of children taken by East German photographer Thomas Billhardt in Đồng Hới in 1969, Radulovic’s *Souvenir* is a 2003 postcard with a commentary on children in the same place more than thirty years later selling souvenirs (see Figure 5). Inscribed on the postcard is the slogan “Viva President Ho Chi Minh,” which suggests

that the children are uncritically patriotic. Vietnamese words and names are written without diacritics, showing a western interpretation and critique of their seemingly ironic economic activities.

Fifty years after *Good Morning Vietnam* and “Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh,” how have stories about the war and representations of Vietnamese experiences changed? In our view Vietnamese and German-Vietnamese narratives are too often sidelined in the art scene even as Asian diasporics increasingly make themselves heard. The exhibition thus made an important intervention. The creation and juxtaposition of undefined categories, such as “German” and “Vietnamese,” at times undermined this goal, however. For example, in the 15-minute experimental video and manifesto of the show, *Moon Over Đà Nẵng*, from 2016, the German filmmaker Bjørn Melhus depicted a rapidly changing Vietnam. The film shows how tourism and the mass production of marble sculptures have destroyed the region’s landscape. Traveling from the moon, the protagonist, in the form of a Westerner, lands in the waters off Đà Nẵng in search of “China Beach,” as named by foreigners during the war. He approaches the shore in the same way as French and American “invaders” once did, conjuring images of their arrival in Vietnam. Staring into the lens, he asks: “How can we resolve the past?”⁵ Rather than a colonial or imperial history, here, a white man stands in the foreground of a changing landscape. In this scene, Vietnam appears as the backdrop of Western concern. Similarly, in this exhibition, Vietnamese art becomes the background of German political debates.

After viewing *No War No Vietnam*, many questions remained. Why did the curators decide to construct general categories like “Vietnamese” and “German” at one point, but not to open others like “East Germany” and “West Germany”? This seems like a confusion of historical specificity among the different contexts presented in the cultural production. What challenges of representation did they face? Most of the artwork in the exhibition were unique and engaged with contemporary social and political discourses. With a limited budget, the curators successfully collected and displayed a range of artwork from generous donors and personal archives. Still, some of the works from among the chosen forty pieces might have been removed to help the other works of art better speak for themselves.

Despite its limited budget, the exhibit's venue—the well-equipped, 350-square-meter Nord Galerie—is a dream for many artists and creative practitioners.⁶ With such an advantage, the exhibition succeeded in drawing a large crowd eager to re-engage with an era and a distant war that came to define their generations even as “Vietnam” remains just an image related to war.

*Julia Behrens, Humboldt University and
Bùi Kim Đĩnh, University of Göttingen*

Notes

1. We would like to thank Christina Schwenkel for her invitation to contribute this essay. Thank you also to friends for reading earlier drafts.
2. Our translation from the printed brochure and online introduction of the exhibition, which reads: “Ausgehend von der Bedeutung des ‘Vietnam-Krieges’ für die 68er Bewegung stellt dieses Ausstellungsprojekt erstmalig künstlerische Antikriegspositionen der 60er-Jahre in Form von Photomontagen, Videos, Malerei, Fotografien und Originaldokumenten aktuelle Kunst aus Vietnam gegenüber.” <http://www.kunstverein-tiergarten.de/?cat=ausstellung> (accessed September 12, 2018).
3. <http://www.phiphioanh.com/other> (accessed September 12, 2018).
4. Written on personal website of Veronika Radulovic: <http://www.radulovic.org/wordpress/vietnam/> (accessed September 12, 2018).
5. Citation from the video.
6. <http://www.kunstverein-tiergarten.de/?cat=galerie&id=4> (accessed September 12, 2018).