Between Heaven and Earth

Dreaming about an ideal space for creative liberty, art-practitioners in Vietnam found common ground with a poem written by Trần Dần in the early years of Đổi Mới during the late 1980s. It evokes a place with no room for imagination and freedom.

"I cry for skylines which do not have flying people
cry again for flying people who do not have skylines"

Skylines With Flying People was derived from this as the title for a series of multimedia art projects, the first iteration of which was organised in Hanoi in 2010 by Nhà Sàn Collective, followed by a second in London in 2012.

Continuing on from there Skylines With Flying People 3 (hereafter Skylines 3) takes as its departure point notions of 'journeying' and 'border' to open up the participating artists' practices in two directions: visualising artistic ideas and having an academic discourse. This is Nhà Sàn Collective's first project in the course of which social issues were made visible by putting fieldwork at the centre of research-based artworks. An academic angle came into play at public debates on themes that both artists and scholars share an interest in. These were hosted as a series of seminars titled Knowledge Exchange.

In its entirety, Skylines 3 is a body of artworks that expands its boundary to the fields of social sciences. The artists' 'journeying' is an attempt to reach diverse ethnic groups across various areas and aided Skylines 3 to expand its own cultural and geographical limitations. Simultaneously, during the fundraising process, regulations of financing and political systems were circumvented to realise the project and in the process perceived restrictions of the art field vanished.

By way of reaching out to a variety of communities, Knowledge Exchange created an alternative platform for discussions amongst equals. Interactions between artists, scholars and the public were encouraged to produce new perceptions. In the highly controlled and self-censored society of Vietnam, Skylines 3 - due to its form of a mobile body of work that exists outside the usual legal framework – was able to make use of any available physical space and take on the role of a public educational institution opening a skyline of liberty for everyone who dreams of free and equal debates.

Being implemented in a social context that lacks methodological approaches to research as well as critical public discourses, Skylines 3 witnessed experimentations of partnerships among Vietnamese artists, who were born and grew up in Vietnam during Đổi Mới, as well as Vietnamese curators with a background in higher education obtained in Europe. Such collaborations do not always guarantee to yield the desired outcomes, but they provide a mirror accommodating a diverse range of reflections of individuals with differing backgrounds. This collaborative process resulted in numerous new perceptions that in turn expanded the responsibility over the authenticity of artworks from their creator – the artist – to a wider inventory of hard working practitioners ranging from curators and project managers to individuals and institutions that played part in visualising and realising the project through their financial and im-/material support. Without them Skylines 3's artworks might have remained in the form of sketches and concepts.

The support from a circle of friends came with no strings attached and was made possible through personal contacts and a willingness to volunteer whereas the political and educational institutions' involvement in the project had specific agendas. Commitments to certain institutional politics due to dependence on practical and financial aid were unavoidable and subsequently these supporters also had a level of control over the whole project from the international to the national level.

The international level of support/control from cultural and educational institutions subjected the project to promote democratic values, freedom of expression and giving a voice to marginalised communities. Meanwhile on the national level of support/control in the form of semi-independent and private art spaces and cultural authorities had requirement for exhibition permits with obligations not to violate "national values and beautiful traditions".

Departing from a desire for creative freedom, Skylines 3 challenges the boundaries not only of legal structures but also of the personal realm of the artists who left their comfort zones to explore unfamiliar territories. Administrative borders between different geographical areas and nations were blurred as issue of colonialism, habitation, migration and identity were addressed in sub-projects such as Day by Day by Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai, Across the Forest by Trương Công Tùng and The Last Ride by Nguyễn Phương Linh. In these artworks, questions of cultural fragmentation and human destinies afloat between national and legal borders are raised against the backdrop of the current global crisis resulting from the upraising of populism, wars and refugees across all continents.

In order to visualise temporary social issues of Vietnam, Skylines 3 has to berth itself in-between the lines of nations. Transnational spaces like the Goethe Institut Hanoi or The Japan Foundation for Culture Exchange in Vietnam as well as private galleries have become harbours for these kinds of artworks. But how far can a skyline of freedom for such artistic creativeness expand given the national and international political systems, financial regulations and the rampant development of local capitalism? The answer to this question for Skylines 3 in particular and for contemporary Vietnamese art in general still remains far off, lodged somewhere between heaven and earth.

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