

In a message dated 1/19/2009 9:34:01 P.M. Pacific Standard Time, trample>>@yahoo.com writes:

Hi Michelle,

We missed you at our exhibition. I wished you could have seen all the other beautiful and powerful 50+ artworks at F.O.B. II (that ran from Jan. 9-16) along with the "Black Room: Lost and Found" where the artworks in question were displayed. The room was a conversation among all the artworks that included images of paintings by Vietnamese artists that are censored in Vietnam by the gov't there.

Here's what my co-curator Lan Duong and I wrote about that room which we printed onto two 30"x24" signs that we hung at the entrances to the room:

THE BLACK ROOM: LOST AND FOUND

This room has highly sensitive political material.

As co-curators, Tram Le and Lan Duong have carefully selected these artworks to be included in this room with the express purpose of opening up dialogue rather than closing down lines of communication.

Our desire with this room, which features works by banned and censored writers, poets, and visual artists from Viet Nam as well as artwork by local and national Vietnamese American artists, is to bring together a critique of censorship – in all its multiple forms. We recognize the need to be sensitive to the history of our dynamic community. At the same time, we would also like to pose different questions about what constitutes art and politics and the nature of symbolic imagery such as national flags. We would like to have viewers consider the different ways that symbols can mean different things for different people in different moments of time. Detaching ourselves from the painful memories that these symbols may evoke is one way for us to heal and move forward as a community.

Parts of this room are multi-sensory. You can see what kind of powerful work is being banned in Viet Nam at the same time that you can hear the wonderful poetry and literary excerpts of writers who have been censored in the country. You are invited to ponder on the use of symbolism by Vietnamese American artists, such as Chau Thuy Huynh, Steven Toly, and Brian Doan. Also featured in this room is the work of video-artist Hong-An Truong who ruminates on Viet Nam's colonial history and warfare.

Here's an email I wrote to a concerned artist:

Don't worry, anh, we are definitely standing our ground as we have always stood our ground. I just want to remind you that we did not take down Brian's artwork--we closed down the entire exhibition. There is a difference. I completely understand that you may feel this is not fair for certain individual's artwork that were not "under attack" in the same way as Brian's was, but truly, the closing of the exhibition on Friday was out of our control. I'm just wondering if you are listening to Vietnamese radio stations? Don't listen to them, especially the sensational ones--they build their careers around inciting controversies and telling lies.

After these past two days, I realized that we could never be prepared enough. On Thursday around 4:30 p.m., Ysa received a call from the City Manager's assistant saying that we needed to shut down our "business" immediately and report to the City Manager at City Hall. Our hearts sank, and we tried to call certain people with whom we have connections with cases like this (permits, etc.). Those people tried to help us, but then their hands were tied. We met with the City Manager who took us into a conference room with 2 other city officials + 1 Chief of Police. Our hearts sank again because we knew that this was not just about a permit. The City Manager made it clear to us that they did not want a protest to happen during the weekend. He even said, "We have people in the community

(possibly someone we elected??) watching these things like a hawk, and we can't afford for deploy staff for that..." He went on to tell us how many employees he just laid off and how much he would have to pay staff in overtime if we were to have a protest. Basically, they sent out an inspector to find anything that could shut us down--it could be the lights were "illegal," no ADA access to the second floor, the second floor is not safe to occupy, etc., etc. The Chief of Police even told us that that maximum capacity for the ground floor is 49 people, so we cannot have large assemblies there. They ended by emphasizing that we were not to allow any public into our space until we "resolve" the permit issue which they were not going to approve until after the weekend. Ysa begged them to let us have at least the press conference on Friday morning since it has already been publicized. They allowed us access only to the patio area and only from 10:00-11:00 a.m. as you already witnessed when you tried to enter the building that morning.

One thing that we never got to say was that initially we had called the press conference because we were going to announce that we would be closing the exhibition one day early (Saturday after all the performances) because we recognize and are sensitive to the pain of some people within the community. But then the city called us on Thursday, and everything changed.

As Lan already wrote to you, we still had a huge victory/success:

- We were able to have this exhibition up for 7 days with NO protestors.
- We did not take down anyone's artwork.
- We were able to have conversations and dialogue with many people, not just protestors and not just at the exhibition space, but also within our homes where we don't usually talk about this subject.
- Artists were able to connect and meet new people.
- People were so impressed with the high quality of artworks and with the entire exhibition itself.
- More people want to join VAALA because of our strength in quality, conviction, and support of artists and art community.

I know that some artists may feel overshadowed by the controversy and that more attention was given to Brian or Steven (or even Long Bui's?!?) for the controversial nature of their artwork, but the flip side is that people who came just for the controversy ended up seeing all the other beautiful and powerful pieces. One gentleman even said, "Now that I have seen the exhibition, I have to go back (to my people) and tell them that we were wrong."

One final thing that makes me so sad is that we were not able to have any of the performances/activities that were scheduled for Friday and Saturday (open mic, Lan Tran, the gay musical, and smART t-shirt making). We had to make this difficult decision because we could not allow any of the artists or participants to be the target of bullying or having their performances videotaped and twisted/distorted to be used against them or VAALA because of their association with FOB II. We already got hints of that on Friday (vandalism on Brian's and Steve's artwork, vulgar phone messages, aggressive and taunting behavior, etc.), and we know that with the subject matter that the performances address (free speech, women's bodies, queer identity) the performers are vulnerable to being attacked, if not physically, then on websites and blogs.

Thank you again, for all your hard work and for being brave with us as we do not allow anyone to silence us.

We will not be moved!

Michelle, I believe that if our collective artist community would stand together and speak up for freedom of expression, then we would not be bullied by a minority yet vocal faction. It's one thing to say that "it's not our battle," but maybe tomorrow it will be. If we don't stand up for each other now, then there may not be anyone left

to stand up for you tomorrow. I remember attending the Trinh Cong Son/The Friends concert your organized and feeling like the protestors were being unfair to you, your organization, and what you were doing since the concert were great. If nothing else, this battle has shown me true courage in those who have stood by VAALA (especially Ysa, Lan, Jenni, and Thu-Huong) during the roughest times when the protestors were shouting obscenities into our faces and leaving vulgar and harassing messages on our phones.

I wish there were more art orgs in the Vietnamese community so that we can all collaborate with each other. I hope one day we could pull our resources (Viet Art Center and VAALA) and do something really cool in the community (o:!

I'd love to talk to you more about this art exhibition or other art stuff if you're available--please let me know.

Take care,

TRAM LE

626.627.6826

Vietnamese International Film Festival (ViFF) "Into View"

www.VietFilmFest.com

F.O.B. II: Art Speaks A MultiArt Show - January 9-18, 2009 in OC

VAALA "Make Art, Create Community"

www.vaala.org

From: Jean Libby <editor@vietamreview.net>

To: vietartcenter@aol.com

Sent: Thursday, January 15, 2009 11:42:54 AM

Subject: Viet Art Center Director tells the true story

A MESSAGE FROM VIET ART (VietArt ENews)

Friends of Viet Art,

Chúc Mừng Năm Mới!

Happy New Year!

VAC cordially invites you to our upcoming Before New Year Celebration - *Mừng Tết Niên* on Friday evening, January 16, 2009.

We hope you will come to join VAC and the other Vietnamese organizations bidding farewell to the momentous 2008 (politic, economic, Olympic...), year of the Mouse and welcoming a hopeful 2009 (politic, economic, Special Olympic...), year of the Buffalo .

As Executive Director of Viet Art Center, I am inclined to respect as well as to avoid commentary in regarding to the works of the other art organizations. However, a Vietnamese-American Art Organization, named VAALA, decided to spoil the New Year Celebration of their own Vietnamese community, in the name of ... Art and ... Freedom ... as they so claimed: (<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-vietarts10-2009jan10,0,4389762.story>).

Since this is the first Vietnamese-American art and culture organization officially exhibiting the most notable symbols of the Vietnamese Communist regime (ten years ago, it was a reckless and want-to-be-famous individual, Tran Truong), I am making an exception to voice my opinion regarding this matter. After all, ART is POLITICS as VAALA confirmed as one of their main reasons to create F.O.B.II.

Below are my messages to VAALA executive members and the organizers of “F.O.B.II: Art Speaks”:

In regarding to Freedom:

THE SOLDIER

Father Dennis Edward O'Brien, USMC

It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the soldier, not the campus organizer, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

It is the soldier, not the lawyer, who has given us the right to a fair trial.

*It is the soldier who salutes the flag, serves under the flag,
and whose coffin is draped by the flag, who allows the protester to burn the flag.*

So I add:

It is the South Vietnamese soldiers, who have suffered years in re-education camp, not you, who while in and out of prison, have persistently, sacrificed their life to teach us the truth meaning of freedom.

It is your parent, not you, who has risked their life to bring you to this country, so that you grew up in freedom.

In regarding to your “Arts”, “liberalism”, and your accomplishment in education:

Any 20 year-old who isn't a liberal doesn't have a heart, and any 40 year-old who isn't a conservative doesn't have a brain.” (Unknown)

It is a thousand times better to have common sense without education than to have education without common sense. (Robert G. Ingersoll)

You can get all A's and still flunk life. (Walker Percy)

So I add:

A Ph.D. in school does not automatically grant you a Ph.D. in life.

In regarding to your actions, here my last but not least words:

“Thou art a cat, and a rat, and a coward.” (Miguel de Cervantes)

I wish that you would take appropriate actions to remedy the pain that you have caused to our elders.

Peace and Love,

Michelle Phương Thảo

Executive Director of Viet Art Center