

Wednesday, January 21, 2009

Dear Trâm and VAAA executive members:

Thank you for spending time to write me a letter. Since you wrote the letter as President of VAAA, I would assume that the letter was from you and VAAA executive members. So this letter is to you and VAAA executive members.

After reading your comments, I thought to myself: "Oh, My God! They still have yet coming to their senses". My first thought was just to ignore your letter. You were "free" to organize the exhibition; I was "free" to express my opinion in regarding your exhibition; you were "free" to reply to me; and I was "free" to ignore your letter. It is so wonderful to live in this "free" country.

However, Trâm, although I do not know you personally, I knew of Ysa, Mariam, Brian, etc. and considered them as friends. Indeed, if I did not consider you as my friends, I would not bother to voice my opinion. Was it safer and better for me and Viet Art Center (VAC) to be silent in this matter? Why jumped into a boiled battle that had nothing to do with me? I could also go on the Anti-Communist Forums and joined the other anonymous writers to write my harsh and offensive comments to you all. Evidently, I did not do so since I wanted to take full responsibility and I meant every single word I wrote to you and the organizers of FOB II.

Anyhow, I am writing this letter to you instead of taking a safer and perhaps more peaceful road, which is "just ignoring your letter" and "you go your way; I go my way", because I am still considering you all as my friends. Moreover, if I refuse a fair and opened conversation to you, then how do we start the "Healing Process" for the community, which is not only your wish, but mine too?

There, a rather long intro for my letter to you.

First of all, I won't start with the immense sufferings (1968 Tet Offensive, 1954 and 1975 Exodus, 1975-1991 Subsidy Period, Re-education Camp, Starvation, Death, 1991-present, Imprisonment, etc., etc.) of the Vietnamese people, since you would tell me "Here she goes again! We already knew the story; we have been told more than a thousand times; biết rồi, khổ quá, nói mãi." So, I would like to share with you my life story.

I was born April 1968 in Vietnam. In 1983, when I was 13 and my country was very poor, my father sent me off on a small boat with my sister (16) to flee out of Vietnam. He believed it was for our better future. After about two months drifting on the boat, near death and yet miraculously, we (33 people including a 9-month

pregnant woman) made to Hong Kong. Then, I was held in a prison-like refugee camp. As a refugee girl, besides being the one of the poorest people on earth, I had no freedom.

After living in Hong Kong and then the Philippines refugee camps for more than three years, my sister and I finally arrived to the Austin, Texas in 1986 to join with my brother, who had also left on a boat (by himself at 18) and lived in US for 6 years. I was already 18 and did not know a word of English when I came to this country. I studied for two years in high school and was accepted to UT-Austin.

At that time, we did not receive regular news about my family in Vietnam. Once in a while, we received a letter from my father telling us that the family "...doing fine and we should not be worried about the family. We have to study as my dream is for you all to graduate from a university in the US". In November 1991, we received a short telegraph from Vietnam. In a few words, the telegraph sent by my younger sister told us that "our father is very ill but we should not be worried." Feeling something was ominously wrong; I dropped out of UT during the final days of the semester and insisted to go home with my brother. Going back to Vietnam at that time was a very risky thing because I might not be able to come back to the US. As I arrived home after a three-day journey, I found out that my father passed away while I was on the airplane. He called out my name three times as his last words. He waited for me till the last minutes because my family told him that I was on my way home to see him.

Beside unable to meet my father for the last time, I learned that he had cancer for a long time, and the family did not have any money for his medicine. Since we were still in school, he did not want my family to inform us about the situation; he was worried that we did not have any money as students. Seeing my country was poor and with so much grief, I stood by my father's grave and vowed to him that one day, I shall return and help the Vietnam for a better life.

As time went on, I graduated and advanced through the corporate ladder. Although I did not forget my promise to my father but the American way of life kept me from helping Vietnam much besides doing some insignificant charitable activities on my spare time.

In 1995, I came back to Vietnam. The country was still poor. Then again, I found some good excuses for not doing much for my country. However, while I was living comfortable in a big ranch away in San Diego from the Vietnamese-American community, in February of 2005, I coincidentally watched a "Dateline" report named "Children for Sale". The report was a Dateline investigation about the young Vietnamese girls who were kidnapped or even sold by their own parents to Cambodia

to become prostitutes. The shocking evidence for me was that the children were so little, only 5, 6, and 7, who were about the same age of my daughter at that time. As I saw my daughter in those girls as they was the same age, saw myself in those girls as they reminded me of the poorest days of my refugee life, saw my father in those girls as he had no medicine for his life, I could not sleep for days. I determined that I must do something to help Vietnam...

I assume that you will take a few minutes to read my life story. It was a normal life story that was similar to many other Vietnamese refugees. In truth, there were many stories that more tragic and less fortunate than me.

Perhaps since you were much younger and/or you were born here in the US, so that:

If you had lived in Vietnam for a few years under the communist regime after 1975, you might forget those days, but I still remember.

If you left on a boat like me, you might forget those days, but I still remember.

If you had been separate from your family and lived a few years in the prison-like refugee camp as one of the poorest person on earth like me, you might forget those days, but I still remember.

If you were born here in the US, you might not bear any of these pains, but your parents, brothers, sisters, and I still remember.

Because I still remember vividly, I am a wholehearted anti-communist. I am not even a communist sympathizer.

- Your quotes from <http://www.vaala.org/O90118-FOBII-Press-Release.php>

...We recognize that there is a lot of pain in the community and we are cognizant of how this has been a painful process for all of the community as well as for us.

... As a result, we would like to reiterate that we do respect and honor the traumatic stories of those who fought in the war, those who escaped from communism, and those who experienced re-education camps.

No matter how young you were when you left VN, no matter if you were born in the US, no matter how perfect you speak English, no matter how liberal you try to be, you should not just "recognize, respect, and honor" the pain. You must "feel" the pain. In another word, the pain is in your flesh

and blood; the pain is “you”; you are “the pain.” You are different from the other non-Vietnamese media reporters, the other non-Vietnamese artists, the other non-Vietnamese organizations, you are “Vietnamese refugees” and VAAIA is a “Vietnamese-American organization”; these were the reasons for me to voice my opinion in VAC E-news: you are “one of us”.

As I spent my entire teen years in the refugee camp (14 to 18), I am suffering a slight deficiency in my language skills: I am still learning how to pronounce Vietnamese words correctly and I have strong “Vietnamese” accents and grammatical errors in English. Therefore, I asked for you to forgive me if you should find many mistakes in my letter.

Since 2005, my life has changed traumatically. I went on a daunting journey to discover my birth connection with VN, my fatherland. In order to find a way to “help VN”, I sold a five-acre house in the Valley Center (San Diego), a beach house in Capistrano Beach, my entire 401(k) saving plan, together a thousands of dollars donated and loaned from my friends and family. Now, with the establishment of VAC, I am poor in finance but rich in spirit. I discovered myself as a born-Vietnamese through my endeavors. Nevertheless, I fell in love with our rich heritage of Arts and culture as well as I understood the ultimate sacrifice and vast resentment of my parents and especially, the South Vietnamese soldiers. Coming back to Vietnam many times in the last few years, I strongly believe in democracy for Vietnam as the only solution for the better future of my fatherland.

Now, let's discuss some of your comments:

Your comment to me:

- 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.”

I've seen enough via the Internet with these four art pieces - [\[Art Speaks 01\]](#) [\[Art Speaks 02\]](#) [\[Art Speaks 03\]](#) [\[Art Speaks 04\]](#) – Your message to the community and to me is loud and clear.

- Your Quote from <http://www.vaala.org/090118-FOBII-Press-Release.php> ...“They all raised provocative questions about sexuality, youth culture, democracy, human rights and racism in a post-9/11 context

I decided that I did not need to see any other artworks in this exhibition. Perhaps, it was my choice in disagreement with your exhibition. When I had the exhibition “Memories of Vietnam 1955-1975”, we had more than 40 Vietnam Veterans from around the country to submit their precious photos. Although we selected the honorary winners, the photos of all 40 Vietnam Veterans were presented fairly and admired by the public. Why did I and the community choose not to see the

other “beautiful and powerful” artworks? Perhaps, this will be a valuable lesson for VAALA and you as curators for future exhibitions that will call for many participants.

Your comments to me:

- 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.

If you were to believe that “Arts are for the Arts; *Nghệ thuật vì nghệ thuật*”, you should just hang these artworks in your home and praised to yourselves the greatness of your Arts. You should do whatever you wanted about Arts at your private home. However, you organized the exhibition under the name of a reputable art and culture public organization and invited the public to view with an intent to “...enable different understandings of art and the political (Quoted <http://www.vaala.org/O90118-FOBII-Press-Release.php>), then you must have believed that “Arts are for the humankind - *Nghệ thuật vì nhân sinh*.” Therefore, “good or bad”, “impressed or disguised”, “loved or hatred” it should no longer be for you to “praise yourself”, but it was for the public to judge, to interpret, and to “feel” your Arts. “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.” If the majority public, those common people with common appreciation of the Arts (including me since I am not an Art major), “misunderstood” your Arts, then the fault was on the artists’ inability to convey his true messages to the public (i.e. in the case of [Art Speaks 01]). By the way, with your despicable explanation of what [Art Speaks 01] actually meant, I could not help but to wonder with such high achievement in education of most of you, where were your common senses? Or how could you be to undermine the intellect of the general public?

Your comments to me:

- As co-curators, Trâm Lê 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.
- We were able to have conversations and dialogue with many people, not just protestors...

Ultimately, we *have* achieved our goals and feel accomplished for facilitating as much dialogue as possible in having this exhibit. We would like to say that it has truly been a celebration of art. (Quoted <http://www.vaala.org/O90118-FOBII-Press-Release.php>)

You were blinded with obnoxious presumption; the Vietnamese elders were overwhelmed with outrageous fury.

If there actually were some meaningful conversations coming out of this exhibition, especially with the Vietnamese community as your target audience, why was so that the community still successfully organized the big demonstration even after the exhibition was forced to closed? As “dialogues” were your intention, how did you define and predict “effective” conversations from your engaged symbols of extreme controversies?

You could not translate clearly an American survey result stated by Professor Jeff Brody (CSU-Fullerton) and caused misunderstandings from the Vietnamese community to him. How could you coordinate “dialogues” between VAAA members, artists, guest speakers, and the Vietnamese elders with topics of such grave sensitivities and required experts in both languages? You couldn’t get a basic permit for the exhibition, how could you claim that you were well-prepared for all these traumas?

How could you create “dialogues” when you did not allow for the community a chance to express their thoughts, instead, you slapped hard in their faces with those “unspeakable Arts” and blamed the community for their resentment and protest? Before the exhibition, shouldn’t you first ask them a polite question: “Are you ready for this?”

“We felt in the end,” Le said, “that we could not self-censor ourselves even at the risk that it may offend somebody.” (Quoted from <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/politics/cal/la-me-vietarts10-2009jan10,0,7044678.story>)

If these community members are political activists who must have a voice because the Vietnamese regime or a dominant culture will not allow them to have one, we as co-curators and arts advocates must also have a voice. (Quoted from <http://www.vaala.org/090118-FOBII-Press-Release.php>)

You have “voiced your opinion”; nobody had the rights or did anything to deprive you from your actions. You knew that the U.S. is one of the handful countries that “Freedom of Speech” is truly honored in the First Amendment. You knew that you were protected by the law to do this. You knew that the Vietnamese elders, your friends, and your own parents, when looked at your “Arts”, although raged with anger, sorrow, and felt betrayed, could only cry in lamentation. You knew well 2008 was a very difficult year for everyone, that this is the time to celebrate our most sacred holiday of the year, OUR TẾT...You knew what you were doing!!! You knew the consequences. And you decided firmly to do these outrageous acts to your community. Your actions and thoughts could not get any worse than this.

The community exercises its rights in response to your exhibition: “assembly and demonstration.”

I found it sarcastic when some reporters called your actions as “bold and brave”. On the contrary, since you knew there was nothing the community could do to you; (you would face bloodshed or imprisonment if you created such commotions in Vietnam), I will quote again: *“Thou art a cat, and a rat, and a coward.” (Miguel de Cervantes).*

Your comments to me:

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.

Since you mentioned the Trinh Cong Son (TCS) concert, I'd like to share with you some facts. Actually, the TCS concert was not organized by me. Nhom The Friends just asked VAC to help them to book the venue at Don Walsh High School since they did not have the business license, required insurance, and nonprofit status. Nhom The Friends organized the whole event and solely bore the financial risks of the concert. VAC and I had no other administrative responsibilities for the concert. Once I learned of the demonstration and the potential presence of more than 2000 people including the concert goers and the demonstrators, I volunteered (and was the only Vietnamese representative) to work with the Police Department to ensure there were no unanticipated incidents between the demonstrators and the concert goers. Although the demonstration went peacefully, after the concert, I wrote an article to publish in a Vietnamese newspaper to comment on the demonstrators' actions of holding the South Vietnamese flags while yelling profanity at the concert goers. I considered that was the act of dishonoring our yellow flag and asked the demonstrators to be mindful at their future protests. I did not hold any grudges against the demonstrators nor I felt that it was “unfair” to VAC or Nhom The Friends to face such demonstration.

Furthermore, due to the TCS concert, as I prepared the illustrative slideshow (using a historical film footage) for a song written by TCS in memory of the thousand victims of Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive, I understood why my parents had to migrate from DaNang to QuiNhon to escape from the killings with me as a two-month newborn on that same year.

Your comments to me:

- We were able to have this exhibition up for 7 days with NO protestors.

This comment indicated to me that you have yet coming to your senses. Didn't you know that you were facing a “sóng ngầm, smoldered surge.”? The leaders of the community organizations were planning for a huge demonstration last Saturday. Although it was your irresponsibility (to the 50+ artists and the public) to obtain the appropriate permit from the city, but also, it was fortunate that things turned out this way. It could have been worse with thousand more protestors. If the

exhibition was not forced to take down on Friday, the protestors would stay until those Artworks were taken down.

Your comments to your friends:

"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."

How ironical! Aren't you doing the same thing as you blamed the Vietnamese radio stations? That is "to build your careers around inciting controversies and telling lies." These artworks were not a descriptive truth, but were created out of provocative imaginations: [\[Art Speaks 01\]](#) [\[Art Speaks 02\]](#) [\[Art Speaks 03\]](#) [\[Art Speaks 04\]](#) – The intentions were not only "inciting controversies" and igniting outrage to satisfy your thirst of becoming famous, or whatever desires you might have, but also "telling lies" and mocking the core of the Vietnamese traditional value (i.e. ["\[Art Speaks 04\]"](#)).

I think that we were trying to confront that fear head on," said Mariam Lam, a UC Riverside assistant professor of literature and cultural studies, and board member of the art group. "We are trying to say that the community should be a safe space for people, even protesters."

The curators are both part of the so-called 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans, who were born in Vietnam but immigrated to the United States at an early age. They see their role as bridging the gap between the first generation, many of whom lived through the war, and the next generation, who may not understand the experiences of their parents (Quoted from <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/politics/cal/lame-vietarts10-2009jan10,0,7044678.story>)

With my opinion in VAC E-News and this letter, indeed, I am "standing up for our tomorrow", for what I truly believed in without fear. Same as you, I belong to the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans. The non-Vietnamese reporters were led to believe that only a handful of the Vietnamese elders or per your assessment above, a mere "minority yet vocal faction", were in disapproval of your actions. You were so wrong! If we would survey all the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese and the second generation of their opinion in regarding of FOB II, I can assure you that you will be greatly out numbered by those who were in disapproval of your actions and points of view.

You told the presses that the Vietnamese community is living in a fathom “fear” and running on a “slippery slope.” From my own observation, I believe that the community is thriving; it is a very “safe and sound” community. “Vạch lá tìm sâu - quét nhà ra rác”, you would definitely find some faults in every community. However, as an optimist, when looking at the Vietnamese community and my fatherland, I only saw “leaves”, not “insects.”

Your comments to me:

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... 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 harrasing messages on our phones.”

You referred to a “battle” that you asked me to join in for the fight. May I ask the battle is between “who” and “who”? Who is your “enemy”? Really, you are making me very worry.

It took two great buildings and many lives for President Bush to go to war against the terrorist. What did your “enemy” do to you? Are they “terrorists”? Were they were just “exercising their rights of speech and assembly” and were they your family members? If “yes” is your answer to these questions, I apologize that I can not join you in this “battle.” I can't fight against whom I love dearly. By the way, how can you take on the “[role as a bridging gap](#)” when you, supposedly “as mediator”, are considering one side, or perhaps both sides, are your “enemy”?

Your comments to me:

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 do have the same wish and it is why I spent some hours to write this letter to you. Then again, as stated above, the Vietnamese community is not my “enemy”, instead, I would do anything to contribute to the community to be stronger and better. If your mission is to fight a senseless “battle” with your own community and to pointlessly protect the “Freedom of Speech” of this country, then regrettably, VAALA and VAC will never be on the same path.

My dream is big and my ideal is noble: that is democracy and better economy for Vietnam. I vowed my heart and soul to realize this dream. I knew that many other young Vietnamese around the world are following the same dream. As I am trying to catch a star, even though I may not fulfill this dream

during my lifetime, I am certain years or centuries from now, my lifelong dream will be achieved by the Vietnamese posterity. With that being said, I have spent my time, even exhausted my wealth :=), and still treaded on this arduous road, I do not have time to deal with the other causes and commotions in the community. If VAAA decided to “go your way” to teach the Vietnamese community lessons of “freedom”, “fear”, and “Arts”, I will never again voice my opinion. I do trust the Vietnamese community will have many other 1.5 and 2 generation members to deal with your future similar actions.

With this rather long letter and I still have so much to say - seriously :=), I understand that communication is an essential element to the future of the Vietnamese community, between the young and the old, the young and the young, the Vietnamese and the non-Vietnamese, etc. There is no doubt that the community needs your leadership, your wisdom, and your courage. In particular, the “new established Vietnamese film industry” needs VAAA, the artists needs VAAA (by the way, congratulation on the VAAA Art Center), to help with the development and advancement of Vietnamese Arts and Culture. On the other hand, VAAA needs the support and the love of the Vietnamese community to carry out your mission. .

If you would like to join with the greater causes that many other young Vietnamese are in pursuit, then the first and mandatory action I would advise you is to “formally say sorry” to the Vietnamese community. You are the beloved children and the role models of the community. I am sure that the community members will open their arms and the hearts again to you.

Don't be stubborn! Since you grew up here, I hope you naturally inherit this great American trait (that the Vietnamese culture does not have) of say “sorry” as soon as a mistake (small or big) is realized. If you do so, just like the TC& concert, I would gladly go out of my way to work with VAAA for future “cool” projects” as well as to bring happiness to the Vietnamese community :=).

I leave you with a quote from Mother Teresa:

*Once you know you have hurt someone be the first to say sorry. We cannot forgive unless we know that we need forgiveness, and forgiveness is the beginning of love.*

All the best to you, VAAA, and Happy New Year! Chúc Mừng Năm Mới!

Michelle Dương Thảo  
Executive Director of Viet Art Center.