



**B.B.P. HOSMILLO:** Hi Aiden. Thanks for giving me this opportunity to talk to you about your publication, *Vanguard*. It says in its website [www.vanguardzine.com] that it is “an underground literary and art zine made by the LGBTQ Vietnamese community for the LGBTQ Vietnamese community.” While the term “underground” isn’t surprising to be used when a publication is intrinsically related to a culture of dissent, could you help us understand just where your project is culturally situated and how it operates?

**AIDEN:** It should be noted that the term “underground” was more fitting during our inception in 2014 up until the release of our second issue during the summer of 2015.

When we used the term “underground,” it meant that we operated outside of mainstream culture and the legality of the law. We were a bunch of people, unknown to the world, who wanted to create change. We are very proud to say that thus far, this project has been funded through individual contributions from the community. After participating in a few interviews (such as this one) and talks (one being at the American Center - U.S. Embassy,) we feel that we can no longer claim the status as an underground project. If it hasn’t already, our zine will sooner or later be dissolved into mainstream culture and there is no stopping it. None-the-less, our zine still



exists outside of the law and there is a constant fear that we will face backlash from the government.

**B.B.P. H.:** Where were you and what were you doing when you started *Vanguard* and how has this project uniquely changed you?

**A:** This is a question that we have answered numerous times in the past, but it is also one that we feel can never be emphasized enough. To start it off, both Nu (the other co-founder) and I returned to Saigon in 2014. For me, this was the first time back to the homeland in 17 years and a lot of the motivation behind the trip was to reconnect with my Vietnamese roots and to discover other queer Vietnamese people. You see, when I was in America I felt very isolated because it was a struggle to find others who shared the same intersectional identities. As artists, this problem persisted as Nu and I struggled to find others who shared our same identities AND our interests. Ultimately the solution came to us in a form of a zine where we would actively work to bring together a community that was scattered. I proposed the name Vanguard and Nu suggested using “Văn” as a play on word. “Văn” roughly translates into literature and culture in Vietnamese and as a play on word in our title, *Vanguard* was conceptualized as a zine and a group of people who would advance art and culture within the queer Vietnamese community. In terms of how this project has changed me, it has strengthened my value in queer kinship and finding one’s tribe. It has helped propelled not just me, but the entire community further towards our collective goal to support one another.

**B.B.P. H.:** How do you think an on-line magazine such as *Vanguard* could effect crucial social and political change in Vietnam?

**A:** Although our main goal is not to create any political or social change, we cannot discredit the effects that *Vanguard* have had. The way that we conduct the zine is very similar to our own personal politics; we exist and we use our willingness to live openly as encouragement for others to do the same. We hope to inspire others to start their own projects and to focus on what is important to them. I would say that our presence has done just that.

We have also been able to diversify the narrative of queerness and Vietnameseness, even if it is just within our own community. We want everyone to have the option to define their own identities and to choose how they wish to engage with those identities in our own lives. As long as we are still able to create a difference in one person, we will always feel that *Vanguard* is a success.



**B.B.P. H.:** It is surely important for any project that aims for social transformation to represent and protect a particular community. *Queer Southeast Asia* and *Vanguard*, I believe, have strong ties to communities which are dispossessed almost always naturally by the State and other hegemonic heteronormative institutions. On a personal level, I find it quite difficult to relate myself with the “LGBTIQ community” concept or any community for that matter. Most probably because I write a lot, which means I need to spend most of my time alone, and I haven’t had the chance to participate in any protest, pride parade or public outcry for human rights. That doesn’t mean, of course, that I don’t know anything about what the LGBTIQ community is standing up against for. In Vietnam, specifically, what is your understanding of the LGBTQ community?

**A:** Specifically for Vietnam, since the LGBTQ liberation movement is still very young, I believe that many of us yearn to connect with others who can relate to our experiences because we have been oppressed and silenced for so long. On the surface, it is important to exercise solidarity within the LGBTQ community, but it is also important not to compromise any part of yourself. The best example to give would be myself; although I stand in solidarity with the queer Vietnamese community, there are a lot of things that I don’t share with them such as queer politics, methods of activism and overall interests.

In a sense, however, I find that there is more real value in expressing yourself and expanding on the meaning of queerness and Vietnamese-ness rather than focusing on our differences. As I conduct my work, I am starting to accept that it is not possible for concepts such as “underground” or “radical” activism to exist if the “mainstream” activist community does not. Overall, just because I am a queer Vietnamese person doesn’t mean that I will vibe well with everyone who shares these same identities. I would advise everyone to understand the differences you have with others, but to focus your energy on those who you actually connect with.

**B.B.P. H.:** Because of the promise of literature and art, mainly in empowering our creative expression as free individuals, they have been extensively used as platforms to give our losses, feelings, transgressions, and desires a sharable structure. For people like us, literature and art sometimes are the only forms through which we can have ourselves depicted; they are artifacts which help this generally abusive world to understand us, even the most obvious part of our body and existence. In contemporary Vietnamese literature and art, do we get to see queer lives? Where is queerness in Vietnamese literature and art?

**A:** It is interesting that you ask this question because we asked ourselves a similar question, “Where are the queer Vietnamese artists and writers?” It was



essentially this lack of representation that served as one of our motivations to start *Vanguard*. To be honest, I am not the best person to ask about queerness within contemporary Vietnamese art and literature because I do not have the necessary knowledge.

I feel that queerness exists everywhere in Vietnamese literature and art, but just like the cis-hetero-centric history that we are taught, we need to actively look for it. One thing that we try to accomplish through *Vanguard*'s Facebook group is the dissemination of information, especially anything that relates to queerness in Vietnamese culture. As a community member, I feel an obligation to contribute to the base knowledge of that community.

**B.B.P. H.:** How do you see the future of *Vanguard*? What are other things you'd like to accomplish through it?

**A:** To be honest, I am not quite sure how long *Vanguard* will last for. I guess it really depends on the need of our community and once that need is gone, *Vanguard* will probably disperse. But before that happens there are certainly a few things that I would like to see happen. One as such is that as the *Vanguard* community grows and acquires social influence, I hope for us to one day procure the capacity to provide funding for our contributors. For me personally, I would like to hold workshops on the art of zine making so that others may start their own projects.

**B.B.P. H.:** What are the difficulties you face in keeping the project alive, it being in Vietnam?

**A:** An issue that we share with other art projects and art institutions is how to make our work sustainable, but at the same time accessible to low-income individuals. Who should and shouldn't carry the burden of funding this project? For the first two issues, Nu and I personally funded its entire production; it was highly unsustainable. Fortunately for our third issue, we were able to rally together the queer Vietnamese community, internationally, and raise the funds that we needed to continue with our project. For us, that was the true meaning of a collective effort to serve and support one another. I wonder if we will be able to do the same for our next issue.

In terms of accessibility, how can we reach low-income individuals who will not be able to afford the zine or those not living in the proximity that our zine operates in? If we provide physical copies of the zine for free (which we have done in the past), then the financial burden to create accessibility falls onto us. Although we provide free online access to our zine, this form of



accessibility implies that the reader has access to electricity, a computer/laptop, and internet.

Specifically as a project that exists in Vietnam, we face the issue of legality and how to safely navigate that situation. What we do is not illegal, but it is also not legal. As one of the co-founders of *Vanguard*, I am under constant fear that I will either be reprimanded under Vietnamese law or banned from the country. The risk that we take, however, validates our activism and gives it much more value. Can you call yourself an activist if you have nothing at stake? Even if this project were to be shut down by the government, what I hope for is that our presence would inspire others to start similar projects, thus creating a chain-reaction. Once that has started, it cannot be contained.

**B.B.P. H.:** In my observation, *Vanguard* holds nudity and genital exposure complicit to its aesthetics. What is the role of “unveiling the body” in your publication and why do you think it is necessary?

**A:** This is not something appropriate for us to elaborate on because we are not the artist(s). We have always had an appreciation for nudity within art and so instead of prohibiting it, we encouraged it. If you want to talk about unveiling, it’s more about unveiling queerness within Vietnamese art and culture, unveiling individuality within commercialism, and unveiling our desire to be seen.

**B.B.P. H.:** The best way to know your project is to read an issue of it. Since its founding *Vanguard* has already three beautiful issues. Could you select two or three works of these issues, which best represent the publication?

**A:** This is an impossible task because *Vanguard* is a collective effort and no single piece of work is representative of the zine. In the past, people have asked me how I conceptualize the vision for each single issue and in turn I would tell them that my vision is guided by the contributors. I am not here to represent the community, but instead they are here to represent themselves.

**B.B.P. H.:** Thanks a lot again for this opportunity. I wish you and *Vanguard* all the best! I will surely keep supporting your work.

**A:** Thank you for your support and for giving us the platform to tell more people about our project!