

Starting a Queer Revolution

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Vanguard, Issue 1

In 2014, Aiden Nguyễn arrived in Saigon. Coming from New York, he was surprised by the lack of a unified art scene and a visible LGBT community. Wanting to find and build a community of queer Vietnamese artists, Aiden and his friend, Nu, started *Vanguard*, a zine of Vietnamese LGBT artists and writers. Since 2014, *Vanguard* has already published two issues, featuring Anh Trần, Đăng Bùi, Đạt Phan (Khi), Đinh Công Thành (Thanh Coco), Gùi Nguyễn, Kim Cỏ, Nam Nùm, Phước Thái and Thanh Mai. While the art is diverse, all of them carry a transgressive aesthetic that is intense and striking. *Vanguard* aims to provide a platform for non-mainstream LGBT Vietnamese artists and give exposure to their work in Vietnam, and because of its digital presence, the world.

You can read issue one [here](#) and issue two [here](#). *Vanguard* is already working on issue three and is [fundraising for its publication](#); it is now [open to submissions](#) (Vietnamese version available [here](#)).

Editors Aiden Nguyễn and Đăng Bùi spoke with *diaCRITICS* over email about the zine, its origins and future, and the queer movement in Vietnam.

What were your intentions with Vanguard? Why did you start it?

Aiden Nguyễn: To give a little bit of a background: when my roommate and I arrived in Sai Gon during the summer of 2014, we were quite underwhelmed with the art scene and the queer scene. We both had been living in New York for the last 4 years so we were used to its thriving art scenes and vibrant queer communities. We thought to ourselves, since we were going to be spending the next 3 months in Vietnam, we needed to find a solution to our problem. Thus came the conception of *Vanguard*.

For me personally, one of my first intentions with creating *Vanguard* was to both find and build a community of queer Vietnamese artists. Queer visibility within the Vietnamese community is very limited in America and I have always felt a lonely and empty isolation. I also wanted to be connected with independent artists and to cultivate the underground art scene. This project went from me trying to find my tribe to us forming a community for other queer Vietnamese artists to find each other.

Our intentions and our mission have definitely expanded since our conception in 2014. *Vanguard* now acts as a platform for queer Vietnamese artists to be published and recognized. It is a catalyst for creating more spaces specifically for queer Vietnamese people. On the most basic level, I hope to encourage creativity and individuality through *Vanguard*. I have noticed that most of the art produced in Vietnam is commercialized. People no longer make art to express themselves, they make art to feed our capitalistic culture. So I guess I saw a bit of an urgency to remind people that art is not a means to a profitable end.

Finally, even though our zine may come off as political, I would say that our goal has never been to please anyone or prove anything. That is why it's very important for me to always remind people that this zine was created mainly for the queer Vietnamese community, by the queer Vietnamese community. Although we try to increase the visibility of queer Vietnamese artists, we do not try to represent that community as a whole. In an age of censorship and cultural tyranny, we stand to support those who chose to express individuality and those who seek a different answer. For me, *Vanguard* was a beginning to a queer revolution.

Dăng Bùi: Reading materials in general in Saigon seem indifferent, very little words and full of “instant-noodle-y” sellable images. Flicking through a gay magazine, or any magazine or book, you’ll quickly get sweaty and self-conscious with fashion models and dating/sex master plans – frightening beautified things you know. So the idea of *Vanguard* as an art and literary zine where the creatives can express their true selves, as queer individuals, without being confined to sellability and heteronormativity intimidation, immediately excited us.

Why a zine? What makes a zine different from other forms of curation?

Aiden Nguyễn: While living in New York within the last 4 years, my roommate and I were very influenced by the robust art scene and the zine culture. The first time that I was ever really interested in zines was when I started to do research on queer Vietnamese people. The first person to pique my interest was a zinester by the name of Mimi Thi Nguyen who produced a zine called *Evolution of a Race Riot*. After reading Mimi’s zine, I knew that it was the perfect medium for what we wanted to do.

There are many great benefits to use zines as our method of curation. First of all, zines are very cheap to produce. One thing that I was very mindful of was accessibility to art for the common people. Growing up, I always thought that art was a bit pretentious and inaccessible. *Vanguard* is a type of art publication that anyone can obtain and participate in. Second, since zines are self-produced and self-published, it exists in the realm of underground art where we can dodge the requirement of acquiring permission and approval from the Vietnamese government. This helps us to maintain the zine’s unlimited potential and to keep the content unrestricted

(politically, visually, etc.) Third, part of the zine culture during the punk movement have always been about challenging and subverting traditional media and culture. *Vanguard* existing as a zine instead of a book published under a company is way of saying fuck you to the mainstream art culture and to society as a whole.

Dăng Búi: In terms of implementation, a magazine, or book would be impossible because content that explicitly reveals too much skin, or too much freedom, or “rebellion” in thinking will be banned. An underground DIY zine is doable and more fun to us. Amongst indifferent reading material, *Vanguard* subtly stands out. It has pictures and words that mean something to some ones. Seeing the reach grow between two issues we know that *Vanguard* zine is the right intention and curation of making art both visual and literary.

You mentioned Mimi Thi Nguyen and her zine Evolution of a Race Riot. What about that zine inspired you? How has Mimi Thi Nguyen influenced your work at Vanguard?

Aiden Nguyễn: As one of the very first queer Vietnamese people that I knew of, Mimi indirectly became sort of a role model and an idol. For me, the most influential thing that Mimi did besides her politics and her involvement with zines was her presence.

What intrigued me most about Mimi was her punk background and her unabashed punk attitude. I never felt that Mimi ever needed approval from anyone, especially not from those whom her zines criticized. She seems like the type of person who was never afraid to speak her mind and to always tell it as it is. Although the political scope and goals of our zines may differ, I felt that both Mimi and I wanted to create and build up our communities. For her it was more broadly, people of color; for me it was queer Vietnamese people. I even quoted Mimi in the very first issue of *Vanguard* because I felt very inspired by her dedication. We both were doing it for our community and our community alone, “... so this is about us doing for us.” Mimi and her zine also took part in sparking my interest in punk culture. Although I don’t claim punk, it has definitely influence my politics and how that translates into *Vanguard*. For me, punk is very critical, subversive, anti-assimilationist and revolutionary.

At the end of her introduction from *Evolution of a Race Riot*, Mimi wrote, “And maybe I’m just bitter. Go ahead, then. Prove me wrong. Change something. I double dare ya.” Even though *Vanguard* had nothing to do with addressing racial and identity issues in punk culture, I felt compelled to prove to her that I could change the world and that she inspired me to do so.

She wanted to start a Race Riot. I wanted to start a Queer Revolution.

How would you describe the aesthetics of your zine—visually and literarily? When you put an issue together, what is your vision?

Aiden Nguyễn: *Vanguard* is heavily influenced by punk’s cut & paste and DIY aesthetic. Since I am the current lead designer for *Vanguard*, its visual aesthetic is very reflective on my own personal style. As you can tell from the second issue, my style is as sporadic and incoherent as my personality. It is all very much chaotic, but a sort of ‘pretty’ chaotic.

Literarily, we have no fixed objective for *Vanguard*. In contrast to our culture of censorship, we hope to portray the queer community how they would like to be portrayed. Personally for me, I love receiving submissions that are strange, personal and original. I am interested to see how one’s intersecting identities as a queer Vietnamese

person affect their art. But overall, when it comes to putting together an issue, there is no vision. We kinda let the project takes us where it wants to go and honestly, it just happens.

Vietnam has often been praised as a leader in LGBT rights in Asia (for example, there was [this article](#) from earlier this year). From your experience, what is it like to live as LGBT in Vietnam?

Aiden Nguyễn: Reading that article reminds me of the reason why I try to steer clear of the mainstream LGBTQ community in Vietnam. They all seem to be obsessed with same-sex marriage! This is something that I have always been critical of about the activist movement in Vietnam. Even though I am not 100% knowledgeable about the work that is being done within the LGBTQ community, this seems to be the one that has the most priority and money put into it. They are just blindly piggybacking off the LGBTQ movement happening in the United States. I think the strategic planning for these organizations are elitist and one-dimensional. Also, to assert that Vietnam is more progressive than the US based solely on the fact that Vietnam no longer criminalizes same sex marriage is simply silly and myopic. You need to look at the rest of the community (bisexuals, trans, gender-nonconforming, asexuals, etc.) and the real issues that affects many of us. Same sex marriage is incredibly elitist and beneficial to only a small fraction of the queer community. I can sit here and discuss with you all day about queer politics but I'll just end it by saying that *Vanguard* takes a much more radical approach towards activism.

Regarding your other question about my experiences as an LGBTQ person in Vietnam, to fully understand it, you must acknowledge that I come from a place of privilege. Even though I am Vietnamese, I am also a foreigner with a lot of money (in comparison to the average Vietnamese person) to support myself. Many LGBTQ people in Vietnam who are dependent on their family for support (both financially and emotionally) are not able to take the risk of being out or live freely. I have a family that is completely supportive of my sexual identity and I am able to express it freely. After saying all that, my experiences were pretty safe as an LGBTQ person when I presented myself as a gender-conforming male. When I presented myself as gender-nonconforming, though, the amount of stares and harassment skyrocket. Vietnam does not seem like a safe place to be if you are trans or gender-nonconforming. I also find that the queer nightlife community is quite unfriendly towards outsiders. I hated that scene because I thought they all were trying too hard to be pretentious. There seems to be no effort to mingle or create a community, which saddens me because in New York there is a strong sense of community. Lastly, I must mention that on occasion, I had to go back into the closet and pretend that I was straight. This is a common situation when I am around a friend's homophobic family. Many of these families still believe that homosexuality can either be spread or influenced to their children."

Đặng Bùi: Legislative rights in Vietnam, especially regarding LGBTs seem to me indecisive regarding its deficient conduction as of other laws. On the theoretical note, thus, Vietnam could be among the progressive Asian countries regarding LGBTs rights.

For me personally, LGBT experience in Vietnam, or more precisely in Saigon, is more likely about the collective thinking of it and how it has changed in the past few years. And it has changed, positively, I would say. Negative perspective and behaviour such as bullying and insults directed to LGBT individual in public have decreased in

the past few years. People seem more accepting and open-minded with LGBT matters. Some people are curious about the subject but not all of them act offensively.

Also there's another side – the LGBT's family. Still an Asian country with traditional moral standards which value the social perception, in Vietnam there seems to be more difficulty for the LGBT individual or their family to feel comfortable with the subject as they might be concerned of what the society might think. For a Vietnamese LGBT it might be easier to express their own identity to their peers rather than their families.

An excerpt from Aiden Nguyễn's essay in Vanguard, Issue 1.

Aiden, in your essay in issue one, you wrote: "My coming out story was only one of many incidents that made question the linguistic limitations of the Vietnamese language when it comes to describing LGBTQ and gender variant people." You go on to describe how homophobia in Vietnam might be shaped by language and colonialism. What kind of work do you think needs to be done to tackle homophobia in Vietnam? And more generally, what kind of progress would you like to see in Vietnam in terms of LGBTQ rights? What is possible for the LGBTQ community in Vietnam in, say, the next year?

Aiden Nguyễn: There are many ways to tackle homophobia. I believe that on the most fundamental level, however, it must start with the questioning of traditions and examining our culture. My piece on the word "Be De" was inspired by a simple question, "why do we refer to homosexuals this way and what does that word even mean?" It boggles my mind how we impulsively use language without really understanding its roots and history. This also applies towards our complicity to culture and traditions. We must cast aside the "it has always been this way" mentality and start thinking more critically.

More specifically, if Vietnamese activists continue to use the queer liberation movement in the United States (or other "Western" countries) as their foundation, I will say this: if they want to effectively approach activism, I advise them to use that foundation as a place to learn and grow, instead of blindly following them in their footsteps. Similar to a lot of the activism in the United States, the prominent activist scene in Vietnam seems to

favor a top-down approach rather than the more radical bottom-up approach. Just to sum up these approaches, top-down refers to the ideology that if those who are at the very top (those in power with the most privilege) receives their benefits first then it will 'trickle down' to those at the bottom. As you are probably aware, there are hierarchies among all groups of people and identities, even within the LGBTQ community. At the very top you have the upper-class, cis-gender, able-bodied, neurotypical, monosexual, documented gays and lesbians (with whiteness being applicable to the community in the United States). At the very bottom you have low-income, trans, physically and mentally disabled, non-monosexual, undocumented, ethnic minority individuals (with people of color being application to the community in the United States). The list goes on, but for the purpose of this interview, I'll just name those for now. Here are some examples of how the activists have used the top down approach religiously in Vietnam:

- **The New Civil Code on Gender:** This new change only extends to Trans* people who have undergone gender reassignment surgery. Even within the most marginalized group of the LGBTQ community there is a hierarchy in play. In this case, it's a class issue. How many people do you think have access to and have the financial means to pay for gender reassignment surgery? To me, this seems like a luxury that most people cannot afford. Although this is a crucial step in the right direction, I do not think that it is enough. It also makes me question the movement's priorities. How much effort, if any exists, is being dedicated to address pressing issues such as a lack of access to health care, homelessness and violence within the Trans* community?
- **Work With Pride Campaign:** On the surface, this seems like an amazing idea but there are actually a lot of flaws and potential for disaster. For example, instead of emphasizing the protection of LGBTQ people in the workplace as a protection of their basic human rights, the prominent rhetoric seems to stem from a business and capitalistic standpoint. The activists and the businesses argue that creating a safer work environment will boost productivity and overall prevent a decrease of revenue. This is all about them, not about us. The activists also state that one of the purposes of this initiative is to increase corporate involvement with the LGBTQ movement. I really do hope that they are cautious with where this could potentially lead. Here's one thing that I have learned from the movement in the United States: corporations (and any public figures) only care as long as they have something to gain. They don't really care about our livelihood or our human rights, but what they do care about is exploiting our communities to boost their bottom-line. All they need to do is add a couple of rainbow flags to their products and they got us all hooked. To them, we are seen as workers and consumers, not human beings. Another issue is that most, if not all, of the corporations that support this campaign are huge multi-million/billion dollar international corporations. How many LGBTQ Vietnamese people do you think work for these companies? I personally would start with building smaller communities of local Vietnamese businesses and work my way up. Even though I support a more inclusive workplace and more visibility of LGBTQ people, I don't believe in this approach. Finally, I would like to ask how come there isn't more of an initiative to train LGBTQ individuals and help them find employment? Once again there is a hierarchy at play and those at the very top continue to benefit first.

- **Same-Sex Marriage:** To tie it together with the top-down approach and the hierarchies that I have been mentioning so much about, the main group of people who will benefit from this will be those at the very top – upper-class gay and lesbians. There's a misperception that if same-sex marriage is legalized in the country then society will become more tolerant and homophobia will be gone. There may be some sliver of truths to this by chance, but otherwise it is completely misguided. Look at all the states in the United States currently fighting to deny same sex couples their rights even after the Supreme Court ruling. There is still violence against members of the LGBTQ community and murders among Trans* individuals are at an all-time high. By prioritizing the fight for inclusion of the LGBTQ community within the institution of marriage, the activists are upholding a system that benefits monogamously married people and deny those rights to everyone else. Maybe instead of fighting to be included, we should fight to dismantle the system instead. It also confines the unlimited potential of the LGBTQ community to love one another and to define our own relationships. Love should not only be recognized under the law as a monogamous marriage. Same-sex marriage is not the answer.

Some progress that I would like to see in Vietnam includes:

- More access to free contraception such as condoms
- More access to queer friendly (LGBTQ-inclusive trained staffs) health services
- More campaigns against bullying, discrimination and violence towards the LGBTQ community
- More community building and organizing on a local level
- More queer focused and inclusive spaces (community center, health center, schools, etc. etc.)
- Queer history being taught in schools
- More discourses and discussions on the intersectionality of identities such as class, queerness, disability, being in the ethnic minority, religiosity, etc. etc.
- More radical alternatives to organizations such as [ICS](#) and [ISEE](#)

I guess what I would like to see most from Vietnam, the community leaders and the youths, is for them to be more radical instead of assimilationist. I want us to create our own futures instead of aspiring it to be the same as a Western country.

Đặng Bùi: LGBTQ rights progress I'd like to see: educational action that can transmit the unconventional perception on genders and identities as two unrelated things, more campaigns to address the minor underprivileged groups of queer people such as homeless queers, disowned queers, working class of trans etc, more queer inclusive and queer focused resources such as education, health care, job opportunity, etc.

What has been the reaction to Vanguard, both in Vietnam and the United States?

Đặng Bùi: *Vanguard* has been having considerable exposure and encouragement since the launch in July 2014. Copies of *Vanguard* have recently been featured in the artists books exhibition, Kệ Project, curated by Nhung Walsh and Nha San Collective in Hanoi, followed with social media posts by fans showing Vanguard's artists' works. Vanguard is also absolutely honoured to be included in a research archiving queer movements. So far Vanguard has been contacted by queer artists showing interest in contribution.

Aiden Nguyễn: The research that Đặng mentioned is a queer Vietnamese anthology that's currently in the works by Hoang Tan Nguyen and Mariam Lam. In addition, *Vanguard* has been featured on *Saigoneer*, shared by the

POC Zine Project and shared in a Vietnamese American Identities Class at the San Francisco State University.

I will have to agree with **Đặng** that most of the reactions and feedback have been positive so far. People value the kind of space that *Vanguard* has shaped and the community that it has created. It gives them the chance to meet new friends and be connected. Since the release of our second issue, we have garnered a lot of attention from the queer Vietnamese communities both in Vietnam and abroad. I am so thankful for all the people that I have worked with and met while working on this project. What I am most proud of with this project is that it sends a message to other queer Vietnamese artists that there is an entire community out there comprised of people just like them.

There was, however, a situation where we received an email from someone asking if we were also accepting works from Westerners in addition to Vietnamese people. After confirming that we only accept works from Vietnamese people who identify with the LGBTQ community, he expressed that moving forward I should take into consideration that, “There is a large number of expats here such as [him]self who are gay or LGBT, who are often excluded from a lot of LGBT things here. Remember we all need to work together for the benefit of all.” I admit that I do not share the same experiences as a non-Vietnamese expat living in Vietnam. Therefore, this is not something that I can comment on exclusively, but in regards to *Vanguard*, it turned me off: There are some people who truly feel that the purpose of *Vanguard* is to exclude heterosexuals and non-Vietnamese people. Just to set the record straight, that is not our goal. We don’t have time and effort to dedicate to something so counterproductive and trivial. Our goal is to create a space specifically for queer Vietnamese people because such spaces are rare and limited in society. That is one of the issues that we are trying to address. This is not a special privilege either. This is about us creating a space for ourselves to survive in a world that wants to see us fail.

Vanguard, Issue 2

What’s next for Vanguard? What can we expect from the zine in 2016?

Đặng Bùi: We are currently looking for interested artists to contribute to issue #3. As of now, we are cooperating with various LGBTQ artists on their projects (currently working with Xuan Ha (@grandmadeadxh) as well as coordinating more events for the queer community – for instance, *Vanguard* was part of an art and music event at The Cube Bar Saigon. With the growing number of queer activism and arts, *Vanguard* hopes to partake and become a platform for not only artists but also the queer society.

Aiden Nguyễn: I find that one of the beauty about *Vanguard* is that we never really know what to expect. I can probably name a list of things that we would like to see in 2016 but the future rarely accommodates to our plans. As **Đặng** mentioned, there certainly are plans of a third issue to be released in the summer of 2016. As *Vanguard*

continues to grow as a publication and a community, we are expecting more artists and writers to join us in our queer revolution. I would say that *Vanguard* isn't here to take people on a journey, but rather we are all already part of the journey and I can't wait to see where it takes us.

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Khanh “Aiden” Nguyễn is a radical queer activist, community organizer and quasi-artist. As a self-described rebel and social transgressor, he unapologetically accepts himself in all his complexity and lives freely without giving a fuck. Born and briefly raised in Việt Nam, he immigrated to the states with his family in 1998. He is a graduate from Pace University in New York where he has received numerous awards such as the “Advocacy, Leadership & Service Award,” “Student Leadership Award,” and the “Dean Marijo Russell O’Grady Officer of the Year Award” for his dedication and service to the LGBTQ community. Through his advocacy work, he envisions a collective future for all people to be liberated from oppression, from the patriarchy and from all systems of power. Currently he is an active volunteer at AIDS Action Committee, Boston Cares and The Prison Book Program. In addition, his work also extends to his position as an intern for the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence.

Born and raised in Sài Gòn, **Đặng Bùì** is a writer who currently works as a contributor for Saigoneer. He believes that people should not perceive each other through the lens of a rigid gender dichotomy. As an avid reader, he encourages the younger generation to read more books, especially by older authors from the generations that preceded them.

Eric Nguyen has a degree in sociology from the University of Maryland along with a certificate in LGBT Studies. He is currently an MFA candidate at McNeese State University and lives in Louisiana.

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