

## Vietnamese & Unapologetically Queer

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It started simple. Back in 2014, two Vietnamese-American artists, Aiden and Nu, came back to their hometown Saigon where they found the artistic and LGBTQ communities fragmented. Within but a few months of their summer holiday, Aiden, Nu, and Đăng Bù (an old friend who became the third team member) attempted to connect with other underground queer artists with the purpose of collaborating on a zine. The result was a global publication that focused on literary and visual arts produced by LGBTQ Vietnamese creatives. Its quirky title, *Vanguard*, is a play on words that combines the Vietnamese word *văn*, which roughly translates into literature and culture, and the English word “vanguard,” which means the forefront of an action or movement. After four issues, *Vanguard* continues to shape the local and international queer Vietnamese art scene with its unconventional approach to the artistic process and to community organizing.



From Maika Elan' s *The Pink Choice*, a photo series that won the World Press Photo award in 2013 to the decriminalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, Vietnam is recognized as a pioneer within the LGBTQ rights movement in Southeast Asia. Yet, despite such hopeful progress in gained rights and visibility, it' s worth noting that the representation of this marginalized group in mainstream media is largely produced for the sake of driving awareness on LGBTQ issues to the general public, yet not directly advocating for social change or full acceptance. For the LGBTQ Vietnamese artists who seek an alternative space to explore their sexuality, to discover community, and to share their artwork, there lacked a platform free from judgment, external validation, and the boundaries of censorship. Seeking to fill in this gap, *Vanguard* quickly evolved from a personal venture into a community project that connects LGBTQ Vietnamese creatives across the globe and is now commonly regarded as a bastion where queer artistic expressions are rightly celebrated and concerns openly voiced.



Their choice to use the zine as a medium boils down to its low production cost, which in turn makes *Vanguard* more accessible for everyone to obtain and participate its making. Its self-published and decidedly underground status allows artists to dodge the painstaking process of seeking approval either from the Vietnamese government, from the publishing house, or even from the audience. Since there are no rules, the potential is unfettered.



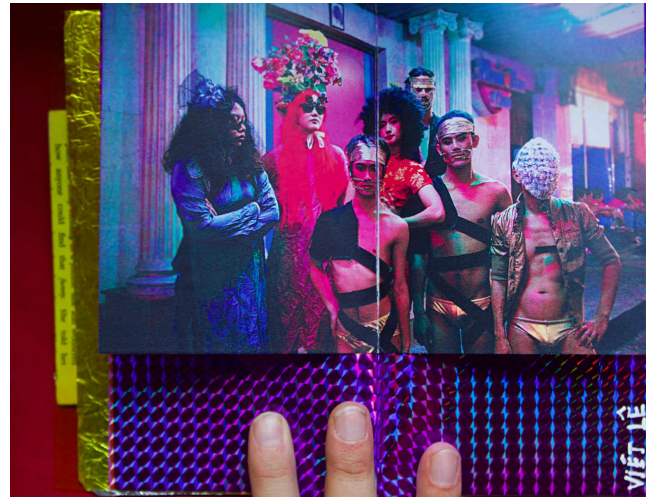
Artworks featured in *Vanguard* are selected through an open call, which reflects the breadth of issues and approaches pursued by queer artists with Vietnamese heritage. While the four issues revel in diversity both in form and content, what ties the works together is the commonality of subversion. Such transgression comes not only from the subject matter (identities, sex, politics, to name a few), but also from an in-your-face rebuttal to the mainstream media, which, for better or worse, has always rendered the LGBTQ community in a family-

friendly light. Rejecting the sympathetic trope of victims suffering from societal rejections and doomed romance, artists featured in *Vanguard* reclaim what it means to be queer through whimsical wordplay, unabashed imagery, and disarming recollections of personal experiences.



Catering to their international audience, *Vanguard*'s first three issues were designed digitally and published through both physical and online forms. In 2017 however, with the surge in local handmade zines and self-published art books throughout Vietnam, *Vanguard*'s fourth issue pursued a more innovative approach by paying tribute to the fundamental practice of zine making: manual assemblage. The latest issue is separated into two sections for writing and artworks. Still grounded in the signature cut and paste aesthetic of past issues, every individual page comes to life and transports the audience to a different space and time through the use of various techniques, materials, and textures. The zine is a piece of art in itself that retains the DIY spirit without compromising complexity. For the construction, "[we] used old books, common art supplies, sandpaper, votive paper, tin foil, chalk, duct tape, acrylic paint, thread, decal, binder clips, and much more," shares Aiden, the creative director of *Vanguard*. He points out the zine's chaotic visuals, bursting with colors and textures, are influenced by his own sporadic and spontaneous personality.





Behind this labor of love is not just the central team and the contributing artists, but also a motley gang of community members who spent countless hours putting it all together. After a prototype for each submission has been designed, an open call for volunteer assemblers was initiated. In 2017, for the entire month of June, Aiden' s apartment became an assembly line of queers with art tools in one hand and a can of beer in the other. As they bonded through this artistic process, the volunteers, organizers, and artists not only formed an intimate relationship with the final product, but they also forged lasting friendships with each other. *Vanguard* 's fourth issue is a proud product of communal collaboration, created for the community by the community.



Originating from radical movements like punk rock and third-wave feminism, zine culture has always been about challenging the status quo. For *Vanguard*, the point is less about creating a masterpiece and more about bringing people together and encouraging every artist to keep pushing their creative boundaries. While not



intentionally political, its very concept of being self-published, uncensored, and unpolished is rebellious to the core. The form of activism *Vanguard* pursues is through community building, and as the community grows, it becomes irrelevant to categorize their activism.

While physical copies of Vanguard Issue #4 were only made available to those who participated in the workshop in Vietnam, all four issues of the zine are available digitally to be read for free on their website. [Click here](#) to check it out.

Website: [www.vanguardzine.com](http://www.vanguardzine.com)

Contributor & Photographer: Ha Dao  
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