



What About Vietnam – S4-12 - Contemporary art in Vietnam - A window to the future

SPEAKERS:

Suzanne Lecht, Kerry Newsome

Kerry Newsome: 00:00

Xin Chào, and welcome to [What About Vietnam](#). Today's subject is Contemporary Art, and I guess you might be thinking as a traveler, not sure whether that's of interest to me? How is that going to impact my trip? Or how will that help me make some decisions? The fact of the matter is, that contemporary art or art of any kind really, is a form of storytelling. The reason I am thrilled to have my guest on the show today is because she's one of the greatest advocates of contemporary art in Vietnam. I'm talking about Suzanne Lecht.

00:47

Now, just a little bit more about what to expect from today's show. You're going to hear a lot about the evolution of contemporary art. The storytelling depicts war-torn and poor Vietnam through building bridges of hope and prosperity to a thriving Vietnam. When you're traveling about and you're looking at architecture, you're looking at monuments, or you're looking and visiting various cities, which are absolutely steeped in history. You're trying different foods, you're seeing families live in different situations. Some of them may appear to you like they're kind of lost in time. You're going to get a really good feel for just how that comes to be. You've got some insights through the storytelling in today's show, and just how Suzanne Lecht has come to know Vietnam, since coming to Hanoi, in 1994.

02:05

She actually came to Vietnam in 1994, and prior to that in 1992, in Tokyo, she'd lost her husband. Obviously devastated after that loss, she formed an innate love of art. She had a desire to live and work with artists. Now at this point in time, she's in Tokyo, but she knows nothing about Vietnam. It's kind of strange when she's willing to ring the packers and ask them to pack up everything and she's going to move to Hanoi.

02:50

She's very intrigued by an article she reads, picturing a group of individuals called the '[Gang of Five](#)'. She then follows them and joins them to help promote their work around the world. She goes on to build a house with them, which is called 'The Salon'. It's a beautiful, intimate,

creative reflection of the culture of Vietnam. It's where she holds many of her exhibitions. It's only open by appointment, and she offers:

- Private Parties
- Art Consultations
- Poetry Readings
- Music Events

Her real strength is in curating exhibitions, and she shows in Vietnam and other cities worldwide including Hong Kong, Paris, New York, The Hague, London, Miami, San Francisco.

03:59

I hope what you're going to tune into is her love of Vietnam. Intrinsicly that is the key thread to this and how she learned about Vietnam through living and working with these artists and seeing their work and their artistic expression. You are going to love the show. There's a lot to it! She's a delightful guest and storyteller. I got to meet her in Vietnam on my trip, and I'm so glad I did. I got some time with her one on one in her beautiful Salon, [Vietnam Art Space](#), which you can arrange by appointment to visit, the links will be in the notes for you to do that. Without further ado, let's welcome Suzanne to the program.

05:07

Suzanne, Welcome to the What About Vietnam podcast!

Suzanne Lecht: 05:11

Thank you, Kerry, thank you for inviting me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Kerry Newsome: 05:17

Suzanne, you certainly have a very deep understanding of Contemporary Art in Vietnam. I'd like to explore that with you a little bit, if I may. I'll begin by asking you, how you developed that interest in art that you have, and how that found you to be in Vietnam?

Suzanne Lecht: 05:47

I guess that would be kind of like the magical carpet ride, so to speak.

Kerry Newsome: 05:55

[laughter] That's okay. That is good to start with.

Suzanne Lecht: 05:59

My very first interest in - I mean, my family's been involved in art. My father's sister was a well-known artist from Montana, who actually went to art school in Paris in the 40s. She was a big influence on my life. As I was growing up in a small, tiny town in Kansas, my mother had me take painting classes. I was always just creative, I suppose, and interested in art. Then I studied art in school, and I moved to New York and moved to Tokyo. I was working as an interior designer, not as a practicing artist, because my father made it clear that eventually, after my education, I was going to have to support myself. Of course, he knew the struggles of an artist. So, it was when I was living in Japan with my husband. Shortly

after his death, a friend of mine brought me an article about a group of painters in Hanoi. I read the article, and that is what inspired me to go to Vietnam.

Kerry Newsome: 07:24

Well, you've brought up a group of individuals, and I'm presuming this group of individuals is named the Gang of Five. I believe there is a deeper story to them, maybe you can expand on that for us, so that we can better understand their plight at the time when you first met. I do believe you actually had to try and track them down to begin with. So maybe talk us through that and give us some context to the times or that era of art in Vietnam.

Suzanne Lecht: 08:05

I'm very happy to, because that was a really important part, like the fire to my mission, I would say here. As I mentioned, after my husband died, I was living in Japan and had given up my life in New York and really wanted to stay in Asia. I had no idea where to go, what to do, and went to many places. I went to Hong Kong, Beijing, Chiang Mai, looking for some big passion, you know, to pull me out of my sorrow and to start a new life and nothing was really working. Then a dear friend of mine, Mary Walsh, who was a producer for CBS News at the time, had just been invited in October of 93 to go to Vietnam on Cathay Pacific's, one of their inaugural flights from Hong Kong to Saigon.

09:09

She didn't come to Hanoi, but she returned with her magazine called [The Vietnam Investment Review](#). This was the first English language newspaper in Vietnam at the time. It's the early 90s, Vietnam is just beginning to open up to the outside world, still very poor and completely ravaged by the war. In this magazine, I saw this article that said, it was written by Nora Taylor. She was pursuing her PhD at that time in Asian Art studies, and particularly in Vietnamese Art. She is now one of the foremost specialists in Vietnamese Art in the world, quite well known. She teaches at the Art Institute in Chicago.

10:02

Anyway, she had written this article, she was just a young girl then writing her thesis. She mentioned this group of painters that she had become friends with called the Gang of Five. The title of the article was: Art from the Heart - The Gang of Five holds their third joint art exhibition. Then the article goes on to talk about these five male artists, very hip and handsome, and showed some of their works and spoke about how this group of artists represented. They were the first generation of artists to paint in a time of peace in over 1000 years. The Vietnamese were at war with the Chinese for 1000 years, then the French for nearly 100 years, then the Vietnam American war, another 20 to 25 years. When they got out of art school, it was 1980.

11:09

The war's over. The Russians had ceased their support of Vietnam. They were trying to get back on their feet, it was very poor, so that artists were no longer supervised, and they were no longer required to do propaganda work. All of a sudden, they were free. These artists were all born between 1960 and 1962. They were just young children during the war, and unlike all the children in Hanoi, they were evacuated to the countryside. They lived with oftentimes people they didn't know, just really old people, that just had farms and had simple existences. Their lives were very tenuous, so they only had the day to believe in.

12:07

All of a sudden, they're free, they graduated from school, and they don't want to paint about the war. They're beyond the war. They want to paint about hope, the future and joining with the world. It was such a spirit of like - For me, especially as I looked at the work, I could see influences of Matisse, Picasso, Van Gogh. It wasn't art that was so foreign, as other Asian art might be. There was a western context, and yet, it's Asian art. Of course, it had that wonderful fusion of East and West. I saw the work and I thought to myself, *"Wow, we Americans, as a culture, know nothing about Vietnam."* Vietnam is just this tragic, terrible war, which was such a tragedy for both sides, for all sides.

13:11

So, I thought,
"Wow, this is amazing."

This is something that I could go to this country, and I could work with these artists. I could make a bridge between the two countries, America - my country, America and Vietnam, through the spirit of art. Art that had nothing to do with a war, art that was about the power of the spirit, and how art can transcend and transform suffering. With that impetus to that emotion, I just simply picked up the phone and I called the moving company and said,

"Pack me up. I am moving to Hanoi."

My mover was quite shocked, Japanese, he had moved me a couple of times in Hanoi. And he took a long inhalation and then just said,

"Oh, my! Mrs. Lecht. Have you ever been to Vietnam before?"

I said, *"No."*

Another deep inhalation, long silence, and he came and packed me up. A month later, I arrived.

Kerry Newsome: 14:33

So, Suzanne, you arrived in Hanoi, obviously, with all great intentions that you've just spoken to us about. I think they sound fantastic, and I agree with you. I think art can transcend and tell stories of people's lives in so many ways. You've arrived in Vietnam, and it is Hanoi. Tell us about what that felt like.

Suzanne Lecht: 15:00

So, I woke up. My first day in Hanoi and unbeknownst to me, Hanoi is cold.

Kerry Newsome: 15:10

Nobody thinks of it as being cold, do they? It's freezing!

Suzanne Lecht: 15:14

We thought of it- I thought of it as a jungle and tropical and it's really cold. It was January 8, 1994, lightly raining, really cold. I wake up and if I look out my window, I'm in a small little mini-Hotel. Nobody speaks English, there's nothing in English at that time, no guidebooks or anything. I must say, I looked at that,

"What in God's name am I doing here?"

[laughter]

"What was I thinking?"

It was really quite glorious because now when I reflect on what happened. I went to the window and looked down with all those apprehensive feelings. I see a little old man in his pajamas, cotton striped pajamas, which you often used to see in those days. He was a cyclo driver, and he was going really slow. His entire cyclo was covered with a piece of plastic, and because it's lightly raining.

16:25

As I looked more closely in the seat of the cyclo, instead of a passenger, there was like this pristine white architectural model that looks sort of like the Hong Kong Yacht Club. I just thought,

"Wow, this is so amazing."

It's like watching the past peddle the future. He's going really slow, like a turtle, and it was just like that. It was like watching a turtle emerge from the mud in the spring to have this new life. So, I really thought to myself,

"Suzanne, you are here at this extraordinary moment in time, when Vietnam is just crawling out of the debris of war and suffering and trying to connect with the outside world."

So, I was so heartened by that. I thought,

"I've just got to get out of the hotel and see Vietnam."

I don't think I got in the same cyclo, of course, because he had a passenger. I got into a cyclo, and I went to see Ho Chi Minh. It was the only thing I knew to do. That was a very solemn, really beautiful experience for me.

17:55

I know it'll sound a little crazy. But my husband was a Russian Jew, his family was from the Ukraine. He had a beard, and he had these beautiful brown eyes. When I looked at Ho Chi Minh, because he was a small, thin little man, with this beard and these beautiful brown eyes. I don't know, there's some kind of mysterious feeling that I had. I just felt, I don't know, I felt-

Kerry Newsome: 18:26

Connection.

Suzanne Lecht: 18:27

I felt connection. Yeah, I felt a really strong connection to this country that was a little bit intimidating, intriguing, exotic, strange and wonderful. Then I went to the back of the Mausoleum where the Ho Chi Minh Museum is, and I don't remember anybody being there. It was just - it's all writing, his writings and different stories about his life and artifacts. Then on the top floor, there was a wonderful display of video and photographs. I could see Hanoi in the 1930s and 20s, and it was very sophisticated.

Kerry Newsome: 19:15

Yes, I have seen similar photos.

Suzanne Lecht: 19:17

Such a surprise to me, because as I said, my image had always been in the context of war. I even saw, I think it was something like 1910, there was a World Design Fair in Hanoi. Where countries from all over the world brought their design objects to this building that was built by the French in about 1905. It looks like the Grand Palais, it's extraordinary. I was just so surprised, intrigued, and then all of a sudden, a young man came up to me and started talking to me. It turns out he was Vietnamese, and he was 25 years old. We sat down and started talking, and he spoke English very well. Of course, I'm delighted to have someone to talk to. Then as he's telling me his story, he left when he was seven, on a boat, a very difficult journey as most all refugees. He was finally allowed to emigrate to New Zealand, where he was in and out of high school, working his way through life, as a car mechanic, and a ballroom dancer. So, I thought,

"Wow, that's kind of a great Yin and Yang combination."

Suzanne Lecht: 20:46

So, we sat down and started talking about dreams. And he said,

"Well, my dream is to come back to Vietnam and discover my childhood and do something to help my country."

And I said, *"Well, my dream is I want to live and work in an art colony."*

And he pipes up and says,

"Oh, well, I'm living with Phạm Quang Vinh, one of the Gang of Five. How would you like to come home and have lunch with us?"

So, it's some kind of- I mean, on my very first day, I went to have lunch with Phạm Quang Vinh. And of course, I as a Westerner, and my western friends say,

"Oh, my goodness, that's such- what serendipity?"

Kerry Newsome: 21:32

Oh, coincidence.

Suzanne Lecht: 21:36

Asians, as you probably know, they just say,

"Oh, that's nonsense, which was your destiny, and you belong here",

and like, *"What are you doing? Get to work."*

Kerry Newsome: 21:48

"What's holding you back? You've just been given your path."

Suzanne Lecht: 21:51

Exactly. Yeah, so that was my splendid entry point.

Kerry Newsome: 21:56

For everyone listening, I have the benefit of doing some reading about you. Obviously, your journey with the Gang of Five and in supporting them. I like the wording you use 'building that bridge', in the sense of between America and between Vietnam, in exposing this kind of art. I think, as you rightfully say, in the 90s, and really even into the early 2000s, Vietnam was coming to the radar of a country, rather than known just for being a war. I can remember my first tour guide actually said, "This is Vietnam, we're a country, not a war." I thought that there's a point in that to take home. I think, in that era for you to accidentally, purposely stumble on one of the Gang of Five. That obviously led you further down the track. For my listeners, can you talk about the journey with the Gang of Five and the art and how you brought that to the rest of the world? I know, there's a building involved, there's lots of things in this. Maybe if you can just draw us a picture of just how you started to work with them and bring their art out to all of us, to the world.

Suzanne Lecht: 23:37

Thank you. Well, like I said, meeting Phạm Quang Vinh was this really splendid invention of my future life, I would say. Of course, I knew nothing about art in Vietnam. So then from the very first day that I met him, these artists were so eager to be- there was no internet yet at that time, and everything was controlled. You couldn't get books or music, or it was very difficult to have access. I had to leave the country every month and a half to get a new visa. So, I only came the window to the outside world, and they became my window to this enchanting world of Vietnamese culture. Not just in art but in music, literature, traditions and folk art. Eventually I hired this young overseas Vietnamese, because I needed a translator.

Kerry Newsome: 24:52

Yeah, to get around the language.

Suzanne Lecht: 24:54

Yes, exactly. I said,

"I will pay you to be my translator, so that you can stay here. And I can explore and discover Vietnam."

He worked with me and usually some other artists, not always from the Gang of Five. Different artists each day and somebody would come to my hotel to pick me up. We would go everywhere. I mean, sometimes it would be 10 o'clock at night and we'd ride on motorbikes to a pagoda and watch the sunrise and just- Magical! I was so blessed by this magical journey. As I was saying, along with this journey of exploration at that time, it was very difficult to travel in Vietnam. Most people were on bicycles, the very fortunate ones had motorbikes. As a foreigner, if you want to go to the countryside, number one, you have to have permission. Also, there was no way to get there.

26:06

So, one day when I was in Saigon, I saw this white Jeep, and I ended up about-

"Well, that's great. It would be great to have a car like that."

The owner, oddly, invited us in. He saw me and this young overseas Vietnamese, looking in the garden. He had all these cars. He was like an antique car collector. He had some Citroën, and it was beautiful inside. Then he had this Jeep, and I asked my friend who was a car mechanic. I said,

"Oh, wow, look at that Jeep. Wouldn't it be great to have something like that to travel? I think we could go everywhere."

At that moment, this man comes out of the house, and he's the owner. He was very gracious. He was probably about 65 at the time. He invited us in, and it turns out, he had been the Foreign Trade Minister to Japan. He spoke some Japanese and he found out that I'd lived in Japan, and I ended up with the Jeep. I bought the Jeep. We drove it to Hanoi, which was an incredible experience. Then we took some artists and we drove through the countryside up through Điện Biên Phủ, Sangla, and we ended up in a village, called Mai Chau and San Quan. It's beautiful!

Kerry Newsome: 27:50

A lot of textiles and yes.

Suzanne Lecht: 27:53

Beautiful textiles. The fine arts universities require all of their students, every summer, to live in a different province. Then in about 1978, Vinh, he was an artist, he elected to go to Mai Chau to live for the summer. He lived with this white Thai family, and he hadn't seen them for about 15 years. So, he said,

"Oh, let's stop by and see this family."

We did, and it was magical. I mean, it was like a huge event. The whole village came and sang and made wonderful food. It was just a really beautiful experience. That ended up in Vinh buying a house. He told me about a week later,

"Oh, Suzanne, I bought my house and I'm going to bring it to Hanoi,"

And he put it on this piece of land that he owns.

"And use it as my studio."

And I thought to myself,

"Oh, wow, I would love to live in a house like that."

I'm thinking about it, thinking about it. I said to Vinh,

"You know Vinh, instead of paying rent to somebody I don't know for a house in Hanoi. Why don't I pay rent to you? Let's make this house bigger."

We could have a gallery on the first floor, and you could have a studio and... I didn't say this, but the idea was that I could live in that house on stilts! [laughter] So that's what happened. We ended up creating this beautiful house.

Kerry Newsome: 29:41

Oh, it's divine. I've seen the pictures. We have to make sure that we include some of the pictures of that house. I'll put that on the website for everyone because it is just exquisite. It's just delightful. I don't know how much involvement you had in the design or the architecture or design of it, but it certainly came up magically from the photos that I saw. This place became your first real gallery where you started. Was that a public gallery or just for private viewings? That's more your specialty, isn't it?

Suzanne Lecht: 30:24

Well, it was very private, because at that time, as a foreigner, I wasn't allowed to have that kind of business or anything. It was really simply my home. I would hang art from all the Gang of Five and also other artists that I met. We finished the house, and we designed the house together. We created it a bit like children would, like,
"Oh, that would look nice there."

It was just a creation of joy, really collaborative joy. People would hear about foreigners or businesspeople that would come to Hanoi, would hear about this American lady who had friends with the artists, and they would contact me.

31:17

So initially, they would come here, and then I would take them to different artists' studios. Not only did I work with Gang of Five, but I worked with a lot of other artists, as I kind of collected them along my path. Then I had my very first exhibition of five Vietnamese artists. Phạm Quang Vinh was the only one from the Gang of Five. I tried to pick different generations and different styles to really represent Vietnamese art at the time. This was in Hong Kong, and it was supported by [Hongkong Land](#) which is a company that was one of the biggest land developers in Asia. They had just started to build the first office tower in Hanoi. The CEO loved art. And I had taken him around to see all this art. And he said,

"Suzanne," It was just before the handover, in 1997, Hong Kong back to China. And he said,

"Let's do an exhibition of Vietnamese art."

32:24

I chose these five artists, and I called the exhibition "**The Changing Face of Hanoi.**" It was really wonderful. Four of the artists had never been on a plane, and had never left Vietnam. Of course, coming to Hong Kong, it's a big, sophisticated city. It was so wonderful. I stayed for three weeks to work on the exhibition. I had a lot of support from wonderful friends in Hong Kong, and it was a very successful show. We sold nearly three fourths of the work; we had 57 works. Art and gouache on paper. I think that the audience was like me. They were so surprised that this really sophisticated, beautiful art was coming out of Vietnam.

33:18

I would continue to do exhibitions overseas, because as I said before, I'm not allowed to do things in the country. I mean, you have to have permission. I finally did an exhibition with the Vietnam Fine Arts Association. And a wonderful Vietnamese woman who was the director of that association, who became my sponsor, in 2000, was called in praise of the paper. That was 10 artists from Vietnam who did works on handmade paper, and 10 artists from this center in America called [Pyramid Atlantic](#). Its artists from all over the world who do works on handmade paper. Four of those foreign artists came for the opening, and it was quite wonderful. Those are just a couple of my first exhibitions. I did art fairs in Paris and New York and different things. Then in 2002, I had very little money left, and I thought, if I'm ever going to have a public gallery, I have to do it now. So, I did! I opened my first public gallery in our old Vietnamese traditional tube house in the Old Quarter in 2002.

Kerry Newsome: 34:43

Yes, I've seen photos of that too, and that's a stunning room and areas and space. It's just- I mean, I don't know about you, but I do get affected by some of the ways in which Vietnamese can create a feeling within a space, within a building, with very small things. There's just energy, isn't there? That you feel when you walk in. Sometimes it's quite overwhelming, sometimes it can bring emotions to you. Maybe it comes from their religion, being Buddhist, I think they just have a knack of being able to create wonderful and beautiful spaces.

35:34

Can I take you or ask you to take us, better still, into some aspects of just how Vietnam was viewing you doing this? The more I've got into art and learning about it myself, I hear coming up every now and then about the culture police. Maybe you can talk to us just briefly and touch on that, so that we understand how Vietnam wants to be seen by the world. They had some fairly strict attitudes to what they wanted to present. Maybe you could speak to that a little bit.

Suzanne Lecht: 36:15

Yeah, that continues to be a condition, I would say, of living and working here. Being American and being of the Vietnam War generation, I think from the very beginning, I've always been aware that I'm a guest in this country. I've tried to always remember that. I can read this as just a funny story. The [Culinary Institute of America](#) wanted to come here, I think it was about 2000. They wanted me to take them to some art studios and such. They sent an email, which was the only way to communicate at that time. In the subject matter, it reads,

"CIA wants to meet you."

[laughter] Culinary Institute of America, right? And I was like, *"Oh, no!"*

Kerry Newsome: 37:21

[laughter] No, that's not gonna work.

Suzanne Lecht: 37:24

Not a good acronym to use in Vietnam, with me, especially.

Kerry Newsome: 37:28

Exactly.

Suzanne Lecht: 37:30

Everything always happens in such subtle ways. This was right before I was going to do that exhibition of works on handmade paper with all these artists from America. I was back in America and my visa, which was always kind of automatic that I would get when I went back for the summer. It just wasn't coming. The approval wasn't coming through and I wasn't getting any answers. Finally, I just got a tourist visa, although by that time, I'd lived here already for about eight years. I had built a house. [laughter] Anyway, I came through immigration, and they said,

"Oh, okay, you can come in, but you have to go see immigration, immediately. Nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

38:26

So, my secretary, said,

"Oh, everybody's been asking about you. What are you doing here in Vietnam? Who are you?"

I went prepared to meet the Immigration Department. By that time, I'd done exhibitions in Paris, and I'd done that big show in Hong Kong. I published some books on artists in Vietnam, and I brought everything with me. They were very lovely and so polite. They sat me down, and they just said, "

We don't understand who you are and what are you doing here?"

[laughter] I think I have learned that. I really think at that time I was 50 years old and widowed, no children, no family. Of course, you can see where the -

Kerry Newsome: 39:25

Curiosity came from.

Suzanne Lecht: 39:26

Yeah! Especially after that email, with the CIA wanting to meet me.

Kerry Newsome: 39:30

Yes. *Who is this strange lady really representing?*

Suzanne Lecht: 39:34

Yeah, and it was really wonderful because it gave me this whole story. Just like I'm telling you. And I said,

"This is why I came here, because of these artists and this is my life."

And I said, *"I love this country. And people have been so kind to me. And I would love to stay here and continue my work, but I realized, I'm a guest in your country. So, if you would, please let me stay, I would really appreciate it."*

They were lovely. After that, there's been ups and downs, of course. But I think all joking aside, as an American, because I have friends here that are Vietnam War generation, or Vietnam veterans. And I think rightly so, we all feel that we have a lot of work to do here, to help if we can, if we have the ability, and resources to build these bridges of reconciliation, and to help heal the wounds of war, there's no better thing you can do with your life.

Kerry Newsome: 40:54

My listeners are probably going to be keen to hear from you about the kind of work they can expect to see. Now, here we are in 2022 and we are coming out of COVID. That has had effects on all of us. Vietnam is open and again, travelers are looking to come and explore Vietnam. I know they will be coming to Hanoi, I hope they're coming to Hanoi, because it'd be crazy not to, because it's a beautiful city. Maybe you could speak to us a little bit about the art that they should look at if they're art collectors, or admirers. What should they be looking for in contemporary art in Vietnam?

Suzanne Lecht: 41:45

Well, I think I'm really happy to be able to say this. Because of COVID, nobody could travel. The wealthy Vietnamese, well educated and art loving, had always collected their old masters and artists from the Indochina Era.

Kerry Newsome: 42:11

Yes.

Suzanne Lecht: 42:12

Which is really beautiful, but since they weren't really allowed to travel, I mean, nobody was traveling anywhere. A real interest in contemporary art has been seated and is just blossoming. So now that we're a little freer, it has been like a renaissance, an awakening, I guess, I should say. Now the artists are getting a lot of exposure. Vietnamese artists are now showing at the big art shows all over the world. I mean, not many, but some, that's the beginning, of course! A lot of the younger artists, the generation that know nothing about the war, they're doing multimedia, conceptual work, lots of video, lots of photography, very innovative uses of lacquer art, which is a traditional medium, but they're doing it in really new unheard of ways. We just did an exhibition last month of Contemporary Calligraphy, that's based on 'Nôm', which is the ancient original language of the Vietnamese.

43:33

It's interesting to see the reaction of the Vietnamese to this kind of work. The art lovers love it, because it's taking art beyond the confines of their culture, and it's mixing it with the outside world. Traditional scholars, maybe not so much. They don't like it so much. I think that's just the way an art flourishes, you have to have some kind of pushback, then you have to really verify and be proactive about providing the reasons you're doing work the way you are. I think it's a wonderful time for all kinds of people who are interested in art to come to Vietnam. There are good galleries all over the country, Saigon, Hanoi, Hồ Chí Minh City. There are many artists that have artist cooperatives that show work. There's a lot of performance. There's a lot of Vietnamese music, I think people in the world know this, where they're doing, combining traditional instruments with classical Western instruments, creating

new sounds. The drivers of this new movement, these artists are young, they're in their 20s, 30s, 40s. So, it's like a new Vietnam integrated with the world.

Kerry Newsome: 45:12

Fascinating. Isn't it?

Suzanne Lecht: 45:13

This is so fascinating, it's a wonderful, wonderful time to be here and to come here.

Kerry Newsome: 45:20

I totally agree with you. I'm just so impressed with the talent that is springing forth, and as you say, they're not bound by any myths or stories that hold them back. They feel an entitlement to expand and push the boundaries, explore and develop, and it really is- The country is growing exponentially. I think that's one of the reasons why there is a lot of youth in the country, as you say. It is a great time to be involved with Vietnam and to visit and I think there's a lot more to explore. I just want to touch on briefly. I think, for a long time Vietnam was kind of in that era of arts, probably more around the 80s, or the 90s, where there were a lot of copies made. A lot of copy art, a lot of fake art, and it was hard to really know what you were looking at, because they were so good. There are people that say, they could do the Mona Lisa, it would be that good.

46:41

I wanted to just touch on that, so that people can appreciate that they're not going to get this work of art, this real work of art, as from a true artist, they're not going to get it for copy prices. There are some times, I think, misconceptions that everything in Vietnam is cheap, or everything in Vietnam- they're going to be able to get these bargain door prices. I was talking to Bridget March, [I had her on the program](#), and she was singing your praises. She was saying you'll probably be able to tell the real from the not real by the price.

Suzanne Lecht: 47:27

Well, yes. I mean, a lot of people come here, and they've been told or whatever,

"Oh, you've got a bargain for this and that."

That time is over.

Kerry Newsome: 47:43

There's not everybody that has got that through their head. One of the things I wanted to do on this show is kind of change perceptions or get the perceptions right.

Suzanne Lecht: 47:54

Yeah, of course, it's hard to know. You have to do your research and see what the prices are. I think that for really good, innovative original art, you're going to be paying international prices in Vietnam. Gone are the days when you could buy a fantastic oil painting for \$500 that today would be worth \$10,000. Those days are over. The issue of copying. Every country of the world has that. I mean, this is how artists learn here, by copying masters, and that's very common in Asia. I think there is a variety of really good art here in Vietnam that has nothing to do with the old masters' works. These are creative new works, and quality. If

you go to quality galleries and artists' studios, you will be able to tell. I'm very sensitive to the bargaining issue, because for me, there's some things about artists. Number one, they have such a hard life and it's a gift to be an artist. It is some kind of blessing gift and I think people should respect that. Obviously if they think it's way too expensive, okay, well, find another artist or maybe it is too much. You have to let your commonsense kind of tell you. Now that Vietnam is on more of an international level. They're showing all over the world so they can't have crazy different prices everywhere. The prices will be the same.

Kerry Newsome: 49:52

Okay, Suzanne, is there anything you'd like to finish off with in the program today for my listeners? It's been so good to talk to you, and just to get some history and get some background to the work you've been doing in Vietnam.

Suzanne Lecht: 50:09

Well, thank you for asking Kerry! I would like to encourage all of you listeners to come to Vietnam. From my experience of traveling all over the world, the Vietnamese are the most open, generous, loving people I have ever met. It is a peaceful country. It's gentle, it's safe, it's peaceful. It's a joy to interact with people. It's a country that's just endlessly fascinating. It's a country from the art standpoint, where finally after Indonesia, Thailand, China, and Philippines. Vietnam is in the attention of major collectors and museums, and we're getting a lot of interest. If you're an art lover and would like to have Vietnamese art, the time is now!

Kerry Newsome: 51:07

I think that's a great way to finish up the show. Thanks again, Suzanne, and we'll be talking again soon.

Suzanne Lecht: 51:12

Thank you, Kerry

Time Stamps -

- 00:00** Today's Topic: Contemporary Art in Vietnam.
- 05:59** How Suzanne's interest in art found her in Vietnam.
- 10:19** Article: Art from the Heart - Gang of Five Holds Their Third Joint Art Exhibition.
- 15:41** "What in God's name am I doing here in Vietnam?"
- 21:32** How the Gang of Five became Suzanne's window to the outside world.
- 27:52** Suzanne's first gallery was in a house in Hanoi.
- 34:43** Vietnam's culture and art.
- 40:13** What should the travelers be looking for, in contemporary art in Vietnam?
- 47:55** How can art lovers tell real art from fake art?