Associate Professor Vatthana Pholsena, Guest of Honour.

Opening of the *Lines of Inquiry* exhibition, NUS Museum, 21 October 2026.

Speech notes

I am very pleased to have been invited to say a few words for the opening of the *Lines of Inquiry* exhibition.

This exhibition of the NUS Museum collection of Vietnamese art features different bodies of material, including wartime drawings and posters of the late Dato' N. Parameswaran's collection, works of Vietnamese contemporary art, and ceramics. It is precisely this heterogeneity that makes the collection so interesting: these works, each in their own way, both represent aspects of Vietnamese art *and* also tell stories of multiple "Vietnam(s)." The ceramics are part of a history of production, trade and circulation that precedes the history of Vietnam as a nation-state, while the presence of works by artists from southern Vietnam reflects the long history of regional division prior to unification.

As noted in the exhibition's excellent catalogue, the museum's Vietnamese holdings were not assembled as a representative survey of Vietnamese art. Indeed, this exhibition posits that absences – of various types – in the collection provide pointers to stimulating new lines of inquiry for researchers across a wide range of disciplines.

Amongst the pictures in the exhibition that first caught my eye are the wartime posters showing the critical role played by minority peoples of Vietnam's Central Highlands, participating in the national struggle for independence. However, the "official" nationalist narrative conveyed by such posters may well be very different from the perspectives of the women themselves, which are not portrayed – another example of absence. I know this from my own research, in which I have explored the narratives of female revolutionary veterans of ethnic minority backgrounds on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southeastern Laos, the cross-border comrades of the women from the Central Highlands. I have focused on their complex motivations, wartime experiences, and post-war lives, as well as on how they remember the war through their own subjective interpretations of events.

Moving beyond "traditional" historical sources to include others such as oral histories and works of art – particularly among groups whose experiences are underrepresented in national histories – can contribute to a more democratic and diverse understanding of the past. As scholars, we should allow individuals to articulate their own perspectives, even when these are ambiguous, contradictory, or at odds with established historical narratives.

Another benefit of approaching the past from the perspectives of ordinary people is that it helps us recognise that "history," as anthropologist Sherry Ortner writes (1984, 159), "is not simply something that happens to people, but something they make."[1] Although it had a huge impact on their minds and bodies, the Vietnam War did not reduce these populations solely to victims of violence. The story of the twentieth century wars in Southeast Asia does not end with the agendas of the global powers and the struggles of national governments. Far from being swept away by the forces of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, nationalism, and

[1] Sherry Ortner. 1984. "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1): 126–166.

state-building, local populations were very much actors in the multilayered history of the region.

This multilayered history is reflected in the exhibition's heterogeneity, particularly across the divides of North and South, centre and periphery, and majority and minority. Each offers a distinct lens through which to examine what comes to be understood as Vietnamese art and history. Rather than seeking a coherent "Vietnamese style," the exhibition traces how particular artworks, artistic practices, and artists have come to be recognised as "Vietnamese" in the first place. For instance, although the collection is dominated by works from northern Vietnam, the presence of southern Vietnamese works also invites consideration of the regional histories that have shaped the broader narrative of Vietnamese art.

University collections are important sites for new scholarship, teaching, and public understanding of Southeast Asia. By bringing artworks into conversation with history, politics, anthropology, and other disciplines, collections such as this invite us to ask new questions of objects, beyond the contexts in which they were originally created and collected.

Keeping these materials accessible to students, researchers, and wider publics is equally important, allowing successive generations to revisit and engage with them through different questions and perspectives. For example, at least 37 NUS courses across a range of disciplines – Vietnam and SEA History; Art History and Museology; Literature, Poetry and Media – have worked with the Parameswaran collection over the past decade. My colleagues in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies have also long collaborated with the Museum, bringing students to engage with its collections, curating exhibitions, and drawing on its rich and extensive holdings for their research and teaching.

Lines of Inquiry exemplifies how a university museum can bring together collections, research, teaching, and public engagement, creating opportunities for new interpretations and a deeper understanding of Southeast Asia's histories and cultures.

I would like to warmly congratulate the Museum staff and the director, **Mr Ahmad Mashadi**, as well as **Ms. Chang Yueh Siang**, the curator of the exhibition, for their remarkable work. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the donors, **Ms Sharmin Parameswaran, Mr Mok Wei Wei, artist Mr Đặng Xuân Hòa and Mr Anthony Teo**, whose generosity makes such scholarship possible.

It is now my great pleasure to declare the exhibition open!

Thank you.