



## Understanding Vietnam Art & Cultural Scene: A Perspective from Hanoi Grapevine

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### Abstract

This paper explores the transformative role of the Hanoi Grapevine, a leading non-profit independent platform, in shaping Vietnam's contemporary art and cultural landscape since its inception in 2007, with a particular focus on its strategic evolution and impact from 2019 onwards. Beyond its initial function as a news aggregator, the Hanoi Grapevine has cultivated a support system for artistic endeavors by facilitating connections among artists, spaces, and organisers, and by hosting vital educational and knowledge-sharing programs. Key initiatives such as the Proactive Audience Network (PAN) are examined for their success in building a highly engaged and discerning community of cultural enthusiasts. Drawing upon an insider's perspective, this study illuminates the critical contributions of independent organisations to cultural development in Vietnam, while also addressing existing challenges and the imperative of future collaborations, particularly with international partners, to foster a thriving and sustainable artistic environment.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Art, Culture, Hanoi Grapevine, Cultural Ecosystem

### Introduction

In recent years, Vietnam's contemporary art and cultural landscape has undergone a period of dynamic transformation. From the emergence of independent creative hubs to the growing engagement of younger audiences and the expansion of regional collaborations, the country's art ecosystem is increasingly operating beyond traditional institutional frameworks. This shift has been accelerated by a combination of social, political, and economic factors—including the COVID-19 pandemic—which have disrupted conventional modes of cultural production, challenged state-led narratives, and prompted a fundamental reimagining of artistic labor, access, and infrastructure.

At the center of this evolving cultural terrain is *Hanoi Grapevine*, a hybrid platform for arts and culture founded in 2007 and operated independently since 2019. Initially conceived as a digital bulletin for contemporary art events in Hanoi, Hanoi Grapevine has



since developed into a multifaceted initiative that supports information dissemination, audience development, capacity-building, and curatorial experimentation. As both a media platform and an art organisation, it plays a distinctive role in cultivating informal networks among artists, organisers, and audiences. Its recent initiatives—such as the *Proactive Audience Network*, *Hanoi Grapevine's Finest* awards, and *The Grapevine Selection* exhibition series—reflect a wider trend across Southeast Asia toward bottom-up cultural infrastructures and community-rooted practices.

This paper presents a longitudinal case study of Hanoi Grapevine from 2019 to 2024, grounded in the author's position as the platform's director during this period. Adopting an autoethnographic lens, the study explores how Hanoi Grapevine has contributed to Vietnam's art and cultural landscape by nurturing participatory audiences, enabling cross-sector collaboration, and developing alternative models of recognition, archiving, and support. The analysis situates these efforts within a broader inquiry into how independent cultural actors address gaps in policy, funding, and institutional infrastructure—particularly in transitional contexts where cultural ecosystems are still emerging.

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to document the development of the Hanoi Grapevine initiatives as a case of situated cultural practice; and second, to contextualise these initiatives within wider debates around creative industries, participatory culture, and cultural infrastructure in Vietnam and the broader Southeast Asian region. The study also reflects the epistemic and structural constraints that self-organised cultural actors face, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate challenges related to sustainability, recognition, and resource scarcity. In doing so, the paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of the role of independent platforms in shaping the cultural futures of postcolonial and post-pandemic societies.

## Methods and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative, practice-based research methodology that draws on a combination of autoethnography and longitudinal case study. As the author has served in leadership roles at Hanoi Grapevine from 2019 to 2024—first as Managing Partner and later as Director—the research is embedded in an insider perspective that offers direct insight into the platform's development, operations, and cultural impact. This dual position—as both practitioner and critical observer—enables a layered, reflexive analysis of the evolving forms of cultural infrastructure in Vietnam.

Autoethnography, as a method, foregrounds the experiences of the researcher as a source of knowledge. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), autoethnography connects the personal to the cultural by situating the self within wider systems, histories, and practices. In contexts such as Vietnam—where formal documentation is partial, institutional transparency is limited, and much of the creative field operates informally—autoethnographic inquiry provides access to insights often omitted from official narratives. Rather than minimising subjectivity, this method embraces positionality as a critical asset.



In this study, the author's direct involvement in the programming, design, and partnerships of the Hanoi Grapevine serves as both object and vehicle of analysis. The interpretation is grounded in reflective field notes, project evaluations, participant feedback, and internal communications, which are read alongside theoretical perspectives from cultural infrastructure and curatorial studies.

This study focuses on Hanoi Grapevine as a longitudinal case study over a five-year period, encompassing key moments in its institutional and programmatic evolution. These include the launch of audience development initiatives such as the *Proactive Audience Network* (PAN), the creation of cultural recognition frameworks like *Hanoi Grapevine's Finest*, the rapid digital transformation of the platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recent educational initiatives such as *Đỡ Đàn*—a peer-support program offering professional guidance for artists and cultural workers. This five-year timeframe enables an in-depth, situated analysis of the ways in which independent platforms can operate as sites of both cultural production and infrastructural experimentation. While the Hanoi Grapevine is not representative of all Vietnamese arts organisations, its trajectory offers a compelling lens through which to examine broader patterns of self-organisation, adaptation, and innovation within the region.

The empirical basis of this study draws from multiple sources, including internal reports, event archives, public communications, and platform analytics. Documentation reviewed includes workshop materials, exhibition catalogues, nomination records, and correspondence related to program planning and evaluation. Quantitative data—such as audience numbers, participation rates, and voting outcomes—were analysed to assess the scope and impact of key initiatives. These materials were complemented by the author's fieldnotes and analytical writing generated during the implementation of projects.

### **The case of Hanoi Grapevine (2019-2024)**

Hanoi Grapevine was founded in 2007 by Canadian artist Brian Ring as a digital bulletin designed to disseminate information about contemporary art events in Hanoi. Informal in spirit and community-driven in scope, the platform initially functioned as a grassroots media outlet in a cultural landscape where mainstream visibility for the arts remained limited. Upon Ring's departure from Vietnam in 2017, leadership transitioned to Vietnamese journalist Truong Uyen Ly. In 2019, the author joined as Managing Partner and later assumed the role of Director in 2024. This leadership transition marked a significant shift in the platform's trajectory, as it began to evolve from a listings site into a multifaceted initiative for arts communication and education, experimental networking, and capacity-building within Vietnam's independent cultural sector.

From 2019 onward, Hanoi Grapevine expanded both its digital reach and its programmatic ambition, shaped by a growing awareness of the structural challenges facing artists, audiences, and cultural practitioners in Vietnam. At the heart of this evolution was the recognition that access to information alone was insufficient to sustain a thriving cultural



ecosystem. The platform thus began to move beyond documentation and event promotion, towards forms of active mediation—connecting artists, organisers, and art spaces in collaborative formats, while also encouraging audiences to engage not merely as recipients of content but as a critical and participatory public. This shift culminated in the development of several long-term initiatives aimed at building cultural infrastructure from the ground up, particularly in areas where institutional support remained limited or inconsistent.

Among the most consequential of these initiatives was the Proactive Audience Network (PAN), launched in 2019 with support from the British Council, the European Union, and the Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (VICAS), as part of the Cultural and Creative Hubs Vietnam project. Designed in response to the prevailing passivity of cultural spectatorship in Vietnam, PAN sought to cultivate a more engaged, informed, and critically responsive audience base. Initially comprising approximately 40 members, the network provided structured opportunities for participants to observe the creative process, interact directly with artists, and offer evaluative feedback through various modes of expression—including writing, video, and digital archiving. By 2024, the network had expanded to nearly 3,000 active members, indicating both a latent demand for participatory cultural engagement and the viability of peer-led audience development in the Vietnamese context.

The emphasis on participatory spectatorship and horizontal recognition was extended through the launch of Hanoi Grapevine's *Finest*, an annual initiative celebrating outstanding cultural contributions across three primary categories: *Finest Artists*, *Finest Projects*, and *Finest Organisers*, later expanded in 2023 to include *Active Curators/Producers*. Although the inaugural award ceremony planned for 2020 was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform adapted by producing its first printed publication of nominees, which was distributed to artists and cultural spaces across the country. Between 2019 and 2024, Hanoi Grapevine reviewed nearly 5,000 cultural events, issued close to 300 nominations, and facilitated public voting by thousands of audience members. What began as an experimental and decentralised model of recognition has since become one of the most anticipated cultural initiatives in Vietnam, offering symbolic affirmation and increased visibility for practitioners operating outside dominant institutional circuits.

In this way, Hanoi Grapevine has gradually assumed the role of a cultural intermediary—a platform positioned at the intersection of audiences and institutions, artists and funders, information and practice. No longer merely a media outlet, the platform now functions as a dynamic node of cultural infrastructure. The next section explores how this role was further shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, through the platform's embrace of hybrid programming, digital pedagogy, and professional development.



## Hybrid practices and resilience during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical turning point for cultural production worldwide, and Vietnam was no exception. As national lockdowns and social distancing measures took hold in early 2020, the country's already fragile cultural infrastructure faced severe disruptions. Physical venues closed, public gatherings were suspended, and funding pipelines stalled. For a platform like Hanoi Grapevine—whose operations had traditionally been tied to physical events and in-person exchange—these conditions posed an existential challenge: how could it remain relevant when cultural activity, at least in its conventional form, had effectively come to a halt?

The response was swift, adaptive, and ultimately transformative. Beginning in March 2020, Hanoi Grapevine pivoted its operations to focus on digital content creation, curating resources specifically tailored to audiences now confined to their homes. Drawing on international sources, the platform localised and contextualised a wide range of materials—ranging from online art courses and virtual museum tours to archives on Southeast Asian contemporary art and cultural research. Initially published as informal blog posts, these curated compilations attracted unexpected popularity, with thousands of shares across social media. Their success prompted a strategic reorganisation of platform content structure, signaling a broader shift toward integrated digital programming.

This momentum led to a major collaboration with the British Council under the initiative #CultureConnects, a series of online training programs developed to support cultural and creative professionals during the crisis. Hanoi Grapevine contributed three foundational courses—*Writing in the Arts*, *Communications in Arts*, and *Copyrights: Arts and Multimedia*—each designed with accessibility and practical relevance in mind. Open to the public and free of charge, the courses reached over 15,000 visitors during the height of the lockdowns and issued nearly 3,000 completion certificates. Far from being a stopgap solution, these programs revealed a growing appetite for professional knowledge and peer exchange, especially among younger practitioners who lacked access to formal institutional training.

Rather than a temporary pivot, the pandemic became a catalyst for Hanoi Grapevine's long-term transformation. Its capacity to adapt to digital formats, new learning environments, and uncertain economic conditions, highlighted the potential of informal cultural infrastructures to remain responsive and generative in times of crisis. By broadening its scope from information dissemination to include training, knowledge exchange, and professional support, the platform effectively redefined what a cultural media outlet could be in the shifting Vietnamese landscape.

This expansion of mission also brought renewed attention to the structural precarity of the Vietnamese independent arts ecology. Prior to the pandemic, many of the Hanoi Grapevine programs, like those of other regional initiatives, were sustained through support from foreign cultural institutions, including the British Council, Goethe-Institut, the Japan Foundation, and EU-funded cultural networks. These institutions played a crucial role in



seeding innovative projects and subsidising risk. However, the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of this dependency. As global priorities shifted and mobility was restricted, the need for locally grounded, self-sustaining models became increasingly urgent.

In response, the Hanoi Grapevine began to reposition itself not only as a cultural connector but also as a capacity-building hub for practitioners navigating a post-COVID landscape. In 2021, the platform launched *Đỡ Đần*, a practical support initiative offering guidance in writing artist bios, organising portfolios, managing documentation, and navigating copyright issues. The title *Đỡ Đần* is an evocative Vietnamese phrase meaning both “to assist” and “to become less ignorant,” captured the project’s ethos of solidarity and informal learning. Designed to meet the practical needs of artists, particularly those working without institutional backing, *Đỡ Đần* represented a new mode of engagement, one grounded in infrastructural care and peer-to-peer mentoring.

By 2023, this approach was formalised into a series of paid workshops and public talks focused on essential skills for artistic survival and development. Topics included grant writing, communication strategies, exhibition design, legal frameworks, and international mobility programs. The workshops reached more than 600 participants annually, with 16 sessions and five public talks held in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2023, followed by nine workshops and six public talks in Hanoi and Da Lat between 2024 and early 2025. Notably, these programs introduced modest participation fees, marking a critical shift toward financial self-reliance. While such fees might previously have been considered a barrier to access, their successful implementation suggested a growing recognition among cultural practitioners of the value of professional development, and a willingness to invest in their own sustainability.

In this way, the pandemic did not simply disrupt Hanoi Grapevine’s trajectory, it accelerated its maturation. What emerged was a more agile, multidimensional platform capable of integrating media production, education, recognition, and support into a coherent strategy for cultural sustainability. These hybrid practices, born of crisis, now form the foundation of Hanoi Grapevine’s post-pandemic vision and signal a broader paradigm shift in how cultural infrastructure might be reimaged in Southeast Asia.

### **Archiving and curatorial experimentation**

The scarcity of formal art archival infrastructure in Vietnam has long been recognised as a critical impediment to both historical research and the development of contemporary cultural policy. Unlike other Southeast Asian nations that have invested in national art museums, art institutions, and state-backed digital archiving projects, the Vietnamese contemporary art archive remains highly fragmented—distributed across private collections, sporadic institutional efforts, and ephemeral grassroots initiatives. In response to this lack, recent years have seen the emergence of a number of independent archiving projects, including the *Vietnam Contemporary Art Database* hosted by Heritage Space, Veronika Radulovic’s *Don’t Call It Art*, the APD (Center for Art Patronage and Development) *Open Archive*, the *Đỡ Đần Library*, and the UK-based *An Viet Archives*.





These initiatives often arise from a mix of necessity, advocacy, and personal dedication, and aim to generate knowledge from the periphery while challenging centralised models of documentation and authority.

As the most comprehensive database of art and cultural events in Vietnam since 2007, with more than 18,000 entries the Hanoi Grapevine has uniquely positioned itself to contribute to this independent archival landscape. In 2023, the platform launched *The Grapevine Selection*, an annual exhibition series designed to serve both as a public showcase and as a living archive. Unlike traditional exhibitions organised around curatorial themes or specific media, *The Grapevine Selection* is structured around a peer-recommendation model: each year artists are nominated by a rotating advisory board and by previous exhibiting artists. This cumulative, intergenerational process privileges artistic integrity, underrecognised labor, and representational depth over market visibility or institutional endorsement. Works included in the exhibition are treated not merely as discrete objects, but as markers of their time, anchoring the archive in the lived realities and urgencies of contemporary Vietnamese art.

This curatorial framework challenges conventional hierarchies and instead centers on relational authority, that is, the trust and tacit knowledge that circulates within artistic communities. It also resists the seriality and trend-driven logic of many curated exhibitions by establishing a "landmark" model: each artist may only participate once in their career, with the long-term goal of building an index of creative production across the 2020s. The first two editions were held in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, with plans to expand to other cities in coming years. Each exhibition is accompanied by bilingual documentation, professional photography, and critical essays, contributing to a growing body of archival material in both digital and printed formats.

### **Institutional vacuum and the emerging role of coordinators**

The rapid expansion of Vietnam's contemporary art and cultural scene in recent years has spelled out the deficiency of institutional infrastructure. While new galleries, private collections, and creative hubs have proliferated, the field continues to operate within what can be described as an institutional vacuum, characterised by the lack of formal curatorial education, minimal state investment in arts administration, and few public institutions capable of supporting long-term cultural development. Within this context, the work of coordinators, that is those who manage, translate, and sustain the complex processes behind artistic production, has become increasingly vital.

Often overlooked or misclassified, art coordinators occupy a pivotal, but structurally invisible role in Vietnam's cultural sector. Unlike curators, whose labor is typically foregrounded in the presentation of exhibitions and public programs, coordinators work across disciplines and hierarchies: liaising between artists and institutions, managing timelines and logistics, interpreting creative visions into actionable plans, and ensuring the continuity of projects in highly fragmented conditions. In the unavailability of institutional scaffolding, coordinators have emerged not only as facilitators but as infrastructure-



builders—the ones who “make things happen” in a field that frequently relies on improvisation, informal networks, and personal trust.

The fluidity of roles within the Vietnamese art scene has only highlighted the significance of coordinators. It is common for a single cultural worker to serve simultaneously as organiser, educator, project manager, and even co-curator. This adaptability is often celebrated as a marker of resourcefulness, but it also signals deeper systemic gaps in labor recognition and professional sustainability. While the field has become more dynamic and interdisciplinary, the work of coordination, despite being central to nearly every artistic or institutional endeavor, remains underacknowledged, undercompensated, and under-theorised.

Recognising this gap, Hanoi Grapevine has taken active steps to reposition coordinators as key agents of cultural production. In 2023, the platform co-founded *ddur.production*, a production collective designed to support independent artists by providing curatorial, administrative, and logistical expertise. Unlike traditional curatorial teams, *ddur.production* operates as a modular and collaborative entity, assembling coordinators, cultural workers, and technical specialists on a project-by-project basis. Founded by the author in collaboration with artist Trần Thảo Miên, curator Nguyễn Hải Nam, and coordinator Nguyễn Bích Đào, the collective balances artistic autonomy with the structured support needed to realise exhibitions and public programs in non-institutional settings.

Since its inception, *ddur.production* has supported over 20 artists through nine exhibitions across Hanoi, Hue, Quy Nhon, and Ho Chi Minh City. These projects, held in diverse spaces ranging from repurposed studios to research centers and white cube galleries, reflect the collective’s commitment to decentralisation, access, and care. In many cases, the exhibitions themselves would not have been possible without the embedded labor of coordinators working behind the scenes to translate ideas into actionable frameworks. In this light, *ddur.production* is a production unit, and a curatorial proposition—one that centers coordination as a generative, intellectual, and political practice.

This ethos culminated in Hanoi Grapevine’s launch of the Art Coordination Annual Meeting, the first national gathering in Vietnam dedicated exclusively to coordinators and behind-the-scenes cultural workers. The meeting recognises these practitioners as foundational to the sustainability and coherence of the arts ecosystem. More than an acknowledgement, it offers a platform for collective learning, advocacy, and visibility, helping to articulate a new professional identity that sits at the intersection of production, mediation, and care. It also challenges existing hierarchies that privilege curatorial authorship or artistic celebrity, foregrounding instead the relational and infrastructural work that enables creative processes to unfold.

In placing coordinators at the center of its institutional imagination, Hanoi Grapevine advances a critical reframing of curatorial labor in Vietnam. Here, curating is not limited to aesthetic judgment or conceptual design, but is embedded in the everyday labor of making





things possible—of building conditions for culture to survive, circulate, and resonate. In a field still inventing its own infrastructure, the coordinator is not simply a supportive role but a cultural protagonist: a mediator of complexity, a translator of vision, and a quiet architect of the future.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolution of Hanoi Grapevine between 2019 and 2024 as a case study in independent cultural infrastructure-building within Vietnam's rapidly transforming arts landscape. Through an autoethnographic and longitudinal lens, the study has traced how a platform originally conceived as a digital event listing has grown into a multifaceted cultural actor, simultaneously a media outlet, educator, curator, coordinator, and convener of networks. In navigating an institutional vacuum, shifting audience expectations, and the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hanoi Grapevine has expanded its scope and, at the same time, redefined its purpose: shifting from information-sharing to infrastructural support, from documentation to archiving, and from cultural commentary to field-building.

Central to this transformation is a practice grounded in participation, care, and contextual responsiveness. Initiatives such as the *Proactive Audience Network*, *Hanoi Grapevine's Finest*, *The Grapevine Selection*, *ddur.production* demonstrate that cultural labor in Vietnam is increasingly being carried by those working outside traditional institutions, by artists, educators, and especially coordinators whose work sustains and enables others. These initiatives propose an alternative model for what cultural institutions can be in postcolonial, post-pandemic contexts: flexible, relational, collaborative, and rooted in shared labor rather than hierarchical authority. In doing so, Hanoi Grapevine not only responds to gaps in Vietnam's cultural infrastructure, but helps reimagine what cultural work means, and who it is for.

At the same time, the case highlights persistent challenges: the absence of professional pathways for curatorial and coordination training, the instability of arts funding, and the structural marginalisation of the very labor that keeps the field alive. While Hanoi Grapevine's model has proven generative, it continues to rely on volunteerism, informal alliances, and personal networks that, while powerful, may not be sustainable without broader recognition and systemic support. The platform's evolution should not obscure the pressing need for policy reform and long-term investment in cultural infrastructure—from both state institutions and regional partners.

Looking ahead, Hanoi Grapevine's forthcoming initiatives, including the continued expansion of *The Grapevine Selection*, regional residency development through *AiRViNe* (*Artist-in-Residence Vietnam Network*), and the *Art Coordination Annual Meeting*, signal a deepening commitment to mobility, sustainability, and cultural stewardship. These projects also pose critical questions for the future: How can independent platforms scale without reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to resist? What ethical frameworks can support



peer-led forms of recognition, selection, and care? And how might the field better support the next generation of coordinators, producers, and infrastructural workers essential to cultural continuity?

As Vietnam's cultural ecosystem continues to evolve, Hanoi Grapevine offers not a blueprint, but a lived example of possibility. It demonstrates that cultural infrastructure need not be built from the top down, nor imported wholesale from external models. It can be assembled incrementally, from below—from relationships, shared labor, situated knowledge, and collective imagination. In doing so, it helps open space for more inclusive, resilient, and plural cultural futures—rooted not only in what is already visible, but in the invisible work that makes visibility possible.

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This paper is, in many ways, the result of a collective practice. While I have written from my own position and perspective, the work reflects the values and visions of a broader network of artists, writers, cultural workers, and coordinators whose presence and participation continue to reimagine what independent cultural infrastructure can be.

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