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The Modular Visual Language of Sculptor Diem Phung Thi and Art in Vietnamese Spatial Installation

Abstract: This article examines the modular visual language developed by the Vietnamese sculptor Diem Phung Thi (1920–2002) as a self-sufficient system of plastic signs, and analyses its extended influence on Vietnamese spatial installation art. Drawing on the case study of the exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* (The Outpost Art Organization, Hanoi, 2024), the article argues that Diem Phung Thi's seven elementary forms constitute a visual grammar a structured set of minimal units capable of generating infinite spatial configurations. Through a theoretical framework combining Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's social semiotic approach with the concept of materiality inherited from international Concrete Art, the article demonstrates that the modular system operates simultaneously as formal language, cultural inscription, and spatial practice. Rather than positioning Vietnamese installation art as derivative of Western movements, the article foregrounds the ways in which Diem Phung Thi transformed international influences into a distinctly local aesthetic logic rooted in the Vietnamese architectural form, material culture, and spatial thinking. The analysis contributes to current debates on non-Western trajectories in contemporary installation art and to the broader historiography of the Concrete Art's global legacies.

Keywords: Diem Phung Thi; modular visual language; spatial installation; Vietnamese art; Concrete Art; visual grammar; plastic semiotics.

Introduction

In the history of the twentieth-century art, few practices so precisely embody the intersection of form and system as the modular sculpture created by the Vietnamese artist Diem Phung Thi. Having spent most of her career in France before returning to Vietnam, she developed a system of seven elementary curved forms, which she termed *modules*. These could be assembled, rotated, and stacked to produce sculptures of vastly different scales, materials, and spatial effects. Critics responded with a vocabulary that sat uneasily between art criticism and linguistics: the French art critic Raymond Cogniat described her modules as an *alphabet* of forms,¹ while the musicologist Tran Van Khe compared them to the seven notes of a musical scale, observing

¹ Aware Women Artists, "Diem Phung Thi," accessed January 15, 2025, <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/diem-phung-thi/>.

that “the seven modules she created are like seven musical notes for a musician to compose a melody.”² These analogies, drawn independently by two observers from different disciplines, point to something structural: the modules function as a system, not merely as shapes.

The central question this article addresses is whether this system constitutes a genuine visual grammar, a coherent plastic language that generates meaning through combination, repetition, and spatial disposition, and how that language has been received, reinterpreted, and extended by subsequent generations of Vietnamese installation artists. To answer this question, the article focuses on the exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules: A Visual Essay on Diem Phung Thi's System of Signs* (The Outpost Art Organization, Hanoi, 2024), in which five Vietnamese artists Le Thuan Uyen, Hachul Le Do, Ngo Dinh Bao Chau, Do Thanh Lang, and Nguyen Huu Hai Duy engaged directly with her modular inheritance over five years of archival research.³

The article proceeds in four stages. Section #2 establishes a theoretical framework for analyzing modular visual language, drawing on social semiotics and the material aesthetics of international Concrete Art. Section #3 examines the formation and logic of Diem Phung Thi's seven modules, arguing that their significance lies not in individual forms but in the relational possibilities they generate within space. Section #4 analyses the 2024 exhibition as a case study in the transmission and transformation of visual grammar across generations and media. Section #5 draws conclusions about the role of modular language in Vietnamese spatial installation, and its contribution to a non-Western genealogy of Concrete Art's legacies.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative case study approach. This choice is deliberate: case study is the appropriate instrument when the object of analysis is a historically situated practice whose significance cannot be abstracted from its specific institutional, cultural, and material context. The exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* was selected as the central analytical example on the basis of three criteria: its explicit and documented engagement with Diem Phung Thi's modular grammar as a subject of collective investigation; its situation within an independent curatorial space operating outside state institutional frameworks, making it a particularly revealing site for examining how a canonical Vietnamese practice is reactivated in contemporary critical conditions; and the representativeness of its curatorial format the collective visual essay as a model for the transmission of a shared visual logic across generational and media boundaries. The analytical procedure combines close formal analysis of the modular system with contextual reading of the exhibition's spatial and institutional conditions, drawing on published criticism, artist statements, and the author's direct observation of the exhibition in October 2024.

² Kieu Nga, “Doc dao nghe thuat dieu khac Diem Phung Thi” [English translation: The Distinctive Sculptural Art of Diem Phung Thi], *Song Lam Magazine*, June 18, 2023, <https://www.tapchisonglam.vn/doc-dao-nghe-thuat-dieu-khac-diem-phung-thi/>.

³ Vietnam News, “Artists Celebrate Late Sculptor Diem Phung Thi with Exhibit,” *Vietnam News*, October 2024, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://vietnamnews.vn/life-style/1663977>.

Visual grammar, plastic signs, and spatial dimension of form

The theoretical framework for this analysis rests on two bodies of scholarship that, taken together, provide the tools necessary to describe what is specifically grammatical about a visual material system. The first is the social semiotic approach to visual communication developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen; the second is the aesthetic theory underlying international Concrete Art, particularly as it articulates the relationship between form, space, and meaning.

In their foundational study *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that visual composition is not a neutral arrangement of elements but a structured system in which spatial relations proximity, salience, framing, directionality generate distinct meanings.⁴ Their model proposes that visual texts can be analyzed according to representational, interpersonal, and compositional metafunctions. For our purposes, the compositional metafunction is most directly relevant: it concerns the way elements are organized within a given space to form a coherent whole. Applied to sculpture and installation, this framework allows us to ask how the arrangement of modules within a gallery or public space produces meaning beyond what any single module could generate in isolation. This approach connects productively with emerging scholarship on the Southeast Asian installation art and postcolonial spatial practices. Patrick Flores's work on curatorial epistemologies in Southeast Asia, T. K. Sabapathy's studies of regional modernisms, and recent contributions to exhibition studies in postcolonial contexts, including the critical framework developed around the Asia Pacific Triennial, collectively provide a comparative horizon against which the specificity of Vietnamese spatial practice can be situated. The present analysis does not engage these traditions exhaustively, but the argument is informed by their shared premise: that spatial and installation practices in Southeast Asia articulate local aesthetic and political logics that cannot be reduced to derivative responses to Western movements.

The second strand of the framework concerns the aesthetic theory of Concrete Art, and specifically the concept central to both the Brazilian Noigandres group and the European Concrete movement that the material form of an artwork is itself its content. In the 1958 Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry, Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos declared that form and content are unified in the material sign: the work is an object in and of itself, not the depiction of another object.

Although the Pilot Plan was addressed to poetry, its underlying logic that the elementary unit of a work should be stripped to its material essence and organized according to spatial rather than sequential logic applies with equal force to the plastic arts.⁵ Sérgio Martins has shown, in his analysis of Ferreira Gullar's Neo-Concrete writings, that the movement's key contribution was to extend this spatial logic into

⁴ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2006), 1–19.

⁵ Augusto de Campos et al., *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry* (1958), in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Indiana University Press, 1970), 71–72.

three-dimensional environments, dissolving the boundary between art object and inhabited space.⁶ It is in this expanded sense material sign organized spatially that we can speak of a modular visual language in the work of Diem Phung Thi.

What distinguishes Diem Phung Thi's practice from both these traditions is not a theoretical declaration but a practical invention: the creation of a finite set of elementary forms whose power lies entirely in their combinatorial potential. This combinatorial principle distinguishes the modules from conventional sculptural forms and explains their capacity to generate diverse spatial configurations. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge the limits of such linguistic analogies when applied to visual and spatial systems. Unlike verbal language, in which syntactic rules are largely formalized and shared across speakers, the "grammar" of a visual-material practice is inherently contextual: its rules are implicit, its meanings are not fixed by convention, and its reception depends on embodied, sensory, and culturally situated responses that resist the systematicity of a linguistic description. The concept of visual grammar should therefore be understood as a productive heuristic rather than a strict structural claim a way of foregrounding the relational and combinatorial logic of the modular system without reducing the openness and ambiguity that constitute its aesthetic force.

Diem Phung Thi's seven modules: formation and visual logic

Diem Phung Thi was born in Hue city, Vietnam in 1920 and trained at the University of Hanoi before moving to France, where she completed her doctorate in dentistry in Paris while simultaneously pursuing a career as a sculptor.⁷ Her development of the modular system began in the 1960s, when as she later recounted she was working with scraps of leftover wood, selecting ten basic signs from the fragments before refining them, through a long process of formal elimination, into the definitive seven modules.

The seven forms are all derived from a single geometric principle: the convex-concave curve. They differ from one another in the degree of curvature, the ratio of concave to convex surface area, and the implied directionality of their silhouettes. Individually, they are semantically neutral. As *Fine Arts Magazine* observed, these modules have "the ability to transform in space, lending uniqueness to her works across diverse materials"⁸. The artist articulated the logic precisely: "After making the modules, I only need to structure them in the sculptural space, whatever that space may be. Each work created in this way is a new whole with its own soul, its own life, and its own dimension"⁹. (Figure 1)

⁶ Sérgio B. Martins, "The Pulp of Color: Toward a Notion of Expenditure in Ferreira Gullar's Neo-Concrete Writings," *October* 152 (2015): 108.

⁷ Aware Women Artists, "Diem Phung Thi."

⁸ Le Quang, "Diem Phung Thi va nhung dau an tren ban do nghe thuat dieu khac quoc te" [English translation: Diem Phung Thi and Her Imprint on the International Sculpture Map], *My thuat* magazine, July 17, 2024, <https://tapchimythuat.vn/diem-phung-thi-va-nhung-dau-an-tren-ban-do-nghe-thuat-dieu-khac-quoc-te/>.

⁹ Kieu Nga. "Doc dao nghe thuat dieu khac Diem Phung Thi."

The critical vocabulary that emerged around her work consistently reached for linguistic analogies. Cogniat's description of the modules as an alphabet has already been noted; Tran Van Khe's musical analogy adds a combinatorial dimension that the alphabetic metaphor leaves implicit. Most significantly, the critic Luu Huynh Lam observed that in Diem Phung Thi's installation works, natural space becomes "the eighth letter"—the module she did not carve but always incorporated.¹⁰ This formulation is theoretically precise: it recognizes that the spatial environment is not a neutral backdrop but a structural element of the work's visual grammar.

The materials Diem Phung Thi employed—including wood, stone, ceramic, fabric, metal—were not interchangeable. Each material inflects the module's visual and tactile qualities, modulating its weight, surface texture, light absorption, and perceived temperature. This sensitivity to material as signifier is consistent with the Concrete Art tradition. It also resonates with a specifically Vietnamese architectural tradition: several commentators have noted the formal parallels between the modular logic and the "*chống rường*". (the main load-bearing structure of the roof consists of short wooden beams (called purlins) stacked on top of each other in a tower shape.) The system of interlocking bracketed beams characteristic of Vietnamese communal halls and pagodas is a system in which elementary curved forms are combined to support and distribute structural load across space.¹¹ (Figure 2)

Recognizing the national significance of her artistic contribution, in 1994 Diem Phung Thi donated her entire artistic estate of 367 works to the city of Hue, thereby establishing the Diem Phung Thi Art Center at 1 Phan Boi Chau Street. The gesture encapsulated the dual character of her practice: formed in dialogue with the European modernism and rooted in the particularity of the Vietnamese culture and space.

"The Curious Adventure of the Modules" (2024): case study in transmission of visual grammar

The exhibition "The Curious Adventure of the Modules: A Visual Essay on Diem Phung Thi's System of Signs", held at The Outpost Art Organization in Hanoi in October 2024, provides an exceptionally rich case study for the analysis of how a visual grammar is transmitted, transformed, and recontextualized across generations and media. The exhibition brought together five artists: Le Thuan Uyen, Hachul Le Do, Ngo Dinh Bao Chau, Do Thanh Lang, and Nguyen Huu Hai Duy, whose work emerged from five years of collaborative archival research into Diem Phung Thi's practice.¹²

The Outpost, established in 2017, is one of the small numbers of independent contemporary art spaces in Hanoi operating outside the institutional framework of

¹⁰ Luu Huynh Lam, "Nhà điêu khắc Diem Phung Thi: Cuộc hóa thân của đất đá" [English translation: Sculptor Diem Phung Thi: The Metamorphosis of Earth and Stone], *Song Huong* magazine, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p11/c34/n20649/Nha-dieu-khac-Diem-Phung-Thi-CUOC-HOA-THAN-CUA-DAT-DA.html>.

¹¹ Nora A. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (NUS Press, 2009), 45–62.

¹² Vietnam News, "Artists Celebrate Late Sculptor Diem Phung Thi with Exhibit."

state-sponsored cultural organizations. Labbe, Zuberec, and Turner have documented how such spaces occupy a structurally ambiguous position in the Vietnam's cultural landscape, simultaneously tolerated and marginalized by a system that has no established category for independent curatorial practice.¹³ The choice to stage a re-examination of Diem Phung Thi in this particular context is significant: it positions her modular grammar not within the official narrative of the Vietnamese art history but within a living critical conversation about the contemporary spatial practice.

The exhibition's most significant formal decision was to present the five artists' responses not as independent works but as a collective visual essay, a term that positions the installation as a form of argumentation, a spatial equivalent of discursive reflection. Each artist was engaged with the modular vocabulary in a distinct manner, yet all remained faithful to its core structural principle: the primacy of relation over form, and of combinatorial logic over individual image.

Le Thuan Uyen's contribution focused on the materiality of the modules themselves. By employing textiles—a medium absent from Diem Phung Thi's repertoire—she introduced a vocabulary of softness and surface variation, thereby reactivating the tactile dimension of the modular system. Hachul Le Do extended the modular language into a three-dimensional installation that engaged directly with the architecture of The Outpost, incorporating the walls, floor, and ceiling as integral components of the spatial composition. Ngo Dinh Bao Chau introduced a temporal dimension by presenting the modules as objects in a process that was incomplete, partially assembled, and suspended between configurations.¹⁴

A dimension that the preceding account does not fully address is the role of the spectator within this spatial grammar. Installation art is, by definition, a practice that activates the viewer's body: it cannot be experienced from a single fixed point but requires movement through space, and its meaning is partly constituted by that movement. At *The Curious Adventure of the Modules*, the spatial disposition of the five artists' contributions created itineraries of navigation that were meaningful: the sequence in which a visitor encountered different responses to the modular grammar shaped the interpretive possibilities available to them. Le Thuan Uyen's textile works, encountered at tactile proximity, invited a haptic engagement that Hachul Le Do's architecturally scaled arrangement extended into full-body spatial orientation. This embodied dimension of reception, which phenomenological accounts of installation describe as the work's dependence on the perceiving body in space, is not incidental to the modular grammar but intrinsic to it. In the artist's own formulation, the modules are structures that require the spatial environment as a constitutive element. A fuller account of how audiences navigate, and bodily encounter the exhibition space would require dedicated ethnographic or reception-based research and is identified here as a productive direction for future exploration

¹³ Danielle Labbe et al., "Creative Hubs in Hanoi, Vietnam: Transgressive Spaces in a Socialist State?" *Urban Studies* 60, no. 1 (2023): 5.

¹⁴ Vietnam News, "Artists Celebrate Late Sculptor Diem Phung Thi with Exhibit."

What the exhibition collectively demonstrates is the openness of Diem Phung Thi's modular system, whose continued vitality depends on reinterpretation and adaptation. Taylor has argued that one of the structural difficulties facing contemporary Vietnamese art is the absence of a sustained critical discourse capable of linking individual practices into a shared conversation.¹⁵ *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* represents a significant exception: a curatorial project in which the modular language of a single artist becomes the occasion for a collective investigation into the possibilities of spatial form.

Conclusion

The argument of this article has been that Diem Phung Thi's seven modules constitute not a personal style but a visual grammar, a relational system whose meaning is generated by combination and spatial disposition rather than by individual form. This system shares certain formal properties with the visual logic of international Concrete Art, particularly in its insistence on the material sign as self-sufficient content and on space as a structural agent. But it transforms these shared principles through a sustained engagement with the Vietnamese material culture, architectural tradition, and spatial practice, most visibly in the resonances between the modular logic and the “*chống rường*” system of the Vietnamese traditional architecture.

The 2024 exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* demonstrates that this grammar is capable of generative transmission: the visual logic Diem Phung Thi created can be reinterpreted, extended, and challenged by later artists without losing its structural coherence. The five artists' responses collectively map possibilities latent within the modular system tactile, temporal, architectural, conceptual that the original work had opened but not exhausted.

As the writer Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong observed, Diem Phung Thi's art demonstrates “a capacity for super-language to convey the artist's messages to all people everywhere.”¹⁶ That observation points toward what is perhaps the most important conclusion of this study: the modules are not a closed artistic vocabulary but an open system capable of generating new interpretations across generations.

The article necessarily leaves several questions open. The most pressing concern is the transmission mechanisms by which Diem Phung Thi's modular grammar reached the five artists in the 2024 exhibition. This question requires sustained archival and interview-based research into the pedagogical and curatorial networks through which her work has circulated within Vietnam. A second concern is the gender dimensions of her reception: as a female sculptor working outside the institutional frameworks of both the French and Vietnamese art worlds, her relative neglect by academic scholarship is not merely an oversight but a structural condition that warrants specific investigation.

¹⁵ Nora A. Taylor, “Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and their Communities in the Face of Geography,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 2 (2011): 10.

¹⁶ Hoang Kim Dang, “Nho xuan xua gap nha dieu khac Diem Phung Thi.”



Figure 1. Diem Phung Thi, seven modules, various materials. Permanent collection, Diem Phung Thi Art Center, 1 Phan Boi Chau Street, Hue city, Vietnam. Photo: Tram Thi Trach Oanh, 2025.



Figure 2. Diem Phung Thi, two sculptures in bronze and wood, post-1970. Permanent collection, Diem Phung Thi Art Center, 1 Phan Boi Chau Street, Hue city, Vietnam. Photo: Tram Thi Trach Oanh, 2025.



Figure 3. General view, Diem Phung Thi Art Center, 1 Phan Boi Chau Street, Hue city, Vietnam. Photo: Tram Thi Trach Oanh, 2025.

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