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Danh Vo

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Art | Basel



Danh Vo on destroying art, designer playgrounds, and why he won't be pigeonholed

Dr Jeni Fulton

Art Basel's Jeni Fulton meets the artist in Berlin to discuss 'collaborating' with polymath legend Isamu Noguchi

A crisp, sunny February morning on Berlin Schöneberg's busy main road, a few doors from where David Bowie spent his Berlin years. The artist **Danh Vo**, cigarette and cup of coffee in hand, stands outside his 'storage space,' a ground-floor former shop in an early-20th-century building that abuts a kebab takeaway. 'Come on in,' he says, opening the door to an airy, stuccoed room. Dozens of abstract paintings in primary colors – oil on mirror foil – are leaning against the walls, while more are stacked up, covered with bubble wrap, on archival shelves. 'Your new work?' I ask, somewhat surprised, given Vo's well-documented suspicion of the medium. It transpires that they are by Peter Bonde, a former professor of his, and will be part of a piece Vo is working on for the upcoming Venice Biennale. The artist cuts a slight figure in oatmeal wool trousers and jumper, and Ugg boots. He speaks in measured sentences with a lilting Danish accent, preferring to speak English despite his long association with Berlin – he moved to the city in 2005.

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Art Basel March 2019

<https://www.artbasel.com/news/danh-vo-noguchi-art-sculpture-art-basel>

Vo's biography is well documented: born in Vietnam in 1975, he fled on a makeshift boat four years later and grew up in Denmark. After graduating from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (KADK), where he was taught by Bonde – 'I thought he was macho and I couldn't relate to him at the time,' Vo recalls – he attended the Städelschule in Frankfurt and quickly made a name for himself in early-2000s Berlin, then a hotbed of experimentation. A series of exhibitions at major museums, the 2012 Hugo Boss prize, the Danish pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, and a retrospective at the Guggenheim last year have all marked his rise to artworld fame.



Installation view of 'Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away' at SMK Copenhagen, 2018. Photo by Nick Ash.

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'Noguchi for Danh Vo: Counterpoint', a 'collaboration' with the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), currently on show at the M+ Pavilion in Hong Kong, is his first venture on Hong Kong soil. Initially commissioned to create an artwork for the public terrace at M+ museum (due to open next year), Vo decided to use a delay in construction of the building to stage an introduction to Noguchi's oeuvre, and in particular his iconic Akari lamps. The exhibition unites Noguchi's sparse, Modernist sculptures – his apprenticeship with Constantin Brancusi was one of the many stations in a globe-spanning career – with his design objects and Vo's own assemblages and conceptual sculptures.

Noguchi's boundary-breaking, protean practice, which not only combined sculpture and design but also set design (he worked with the choreographer Martha Graham), landscape architecture, and, surprisingly, playground design, was highly unusual for the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, when artists were very much expected to stick to their métier. The famed critic Clement Greenberg went as far as deriding Noguchi's work as 'feminine Eastern aesthetics.' As a consequence, 'I was attracted to it immediately!' laughs Vo. 'What intrigued me was the affiliation I had with him not being a Modernist – he was totally versatile. We think that he comes from a Modernist tradition due to his association with Brancusi, but we forget that his other mentor, and lifelong friend, was [architect and inventor] Buckminster Fuller,' Vo notes. 'The Akaris are the fusion of Brancusi and Fuller – isn't that great?'

Despite the similarities, both in style and in attitude, between Noguchi's and Vo's practices, Vo first encountered Noguchi's work at a recent exhibition at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City. 'I saw the models of his playgrounds [Playscapes], and seeing all these unrealized proposals triggered me. This artist was casting his failures in bronze,' he says, clearly bemused. For the Herzog & de Meuron-designed M+ museum, he will construct, he says, one of 'Noguchi's playground proposals, which I think is so relevant for our time.'

A public environment poses an entirely new set of challenges for the artist. Working through another artist's work is typical for Vo, who has long favored collaborations of all kinds. But in every case, the context of an art institution has been crucial to his ongoing questioning of the nature of art. Reviewing his retrospective at the Guggenheim, the critic Roberta Smith noted that 'not much of Vo's art looks like art, even by today's standards,' and that it was the art museum that gave meaning to his undertaking. A public project, therefore, lacking this context, is taking him into the unfamiliar.

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Installation view of 'Noguchi for Danh Vo: Counterpoint' at M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong, 2019. Courtesy of M+, Hong Kong, and The Noguchi Museum, New York City. Photo by South Ho.

'Making public art at, for example, a train station, which people use because they have to, is very different [from making art for a white cube]. You don't want to have some crazy artist's life, vision, or ideas imposed on you.' A Noguchian playground, then, is an elegant approach: a piece that straddles the boundary between art and design, a collaboration with an artist of mixed Asian heritage, who worked everywhere and truly belonged nowhere. All these elements are echoed in Vo's practice.

Asked to define what art, in the end, is for him, Vo fixes me with a piercing stare. 'I really love to work with questions, and to broaden possibilities. So, it could be an agenda that destroys what we think art is. But isn't that good? That was what I learnt from Felix Gonzalez-Torres – you have to work in oppositions,' he says. 'There's a certain force in the artworld that wants to define things, especially when you have a so-called different background or history. I really believe in a multiplicity of identities. That's probably also one of the reasons I'm attracted to Noguchi's work.'

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Vo's work often serves as a Trojan horse for other artists, whose works prominently feature in exhibitions where he is nominally the invited artist. His earlier Guggenheim exhibition, in 2013, focused on the mundane items of Sino-American life that the Chinese-American artist Martin Wong had assembled with his mother. This results in an expanded concept of the readymade, where an artist's oeuvre is used as a 'conceptual readymade' – as something to appropriate, to recontextualize.

Questioned about this hybrid artist-curator approach, Vo refers to one of his mentors, Julie Ault, a founding member of Group Material. 'It was always natural for me to have to involve people, to curate things. I believe that, as an artist, you have formed a certain way of thinking. And that can be broken, of course. If I'm choosing two objects, it's because I think they create a tension together. I don't think it's that different when I take two artists, or an artist's work and my own work, and choose a particular constellation. The only difference is that I have to be a bit more responsible.'



Installation view of 'Noguchi for Danh Vo: Counterpoint' at M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong, 2019. Courtesy of M+, Hong Kong, and The Noguchi Museum, New York City. Photo by South Ho.

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Installation view of 'Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away' at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, 2018. Photo by Cathy Carver.

Challenging assumptions to highlight issues of memory, culture, loss, violence, both personal and public, and bringing forgotten practices to the fore lie at the core of what Vo does. He plays with the status of the artist – both his own and that of his peers. By treating an oeuvre as a readymade, he points to the boundaries of art, the limitations that we set in the cultural reception and treatment of artists – and that often still involves Modernist and pre-Modernist ideals of the totemic, auratic art object and the artist as genius, no matter how much Postmodernist thought attempted to shift this. This approach has attracted controversy. ‘I got so much criticism working with Martin Wong at the Guggenheim, when I did the Punta della Dogana, and when I did a show with Peter Hujar. People were really criticizing me for “abusing” intellectual artists in my work. Afterwards, I told myself I didn’t need that shit. But then, I can’t help it, you know? Because when I saw Noguchi’s work, I was like, “I’m going to show a lot of Akari lamps.”’

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The reaction doesn't appear to have dampened his enthusiasm: asked about the Bonde paintings stacked in the storage space, Vo explains that it's about creating a constellation of craftsmanship, gathering works by his father (Phung Vo, a skilled calligrapher and frequent collaborator) and photos by his boyfriend Heinz Peter Knes. The result will be shown at the next Venice Biennale. 'Just put a bunch of things together and see what comes out of it,' says Vo. Including Bonde, whose practice he had a tense relationship with while at university, is a sign of maturity – 'It's my age [Vo is 44] and my situation now, and I want to embrace these contradictions,' he explains. In the end, the pieces are a 'little army of crazy people to attack the Venice Biennale with beauty,' he says, impishly.



Installation view of 'Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away' at SMK Copenhagen, 2018. Photo by Nick Ash.

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Danh Vo will feature in Art Basel's Conversations program at Art Basel Hong Kong 2019. Learn more about the program [here](#).

'Noguchi for Danh Vo: Counterpoint' runs until April 22 at the M+ Pavilion, West Kowloon, Hong Kong.

Danh Vo will take part in the 58th Venice Biennale curated by Ralph Rugoff, 'May You Live in Interesting Times,' which takes place from May 11th, 2019.

Top image: Danh Vo. Photo by Nick Ash.

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DANH VÔ'S WORKS,
SUCH AS *UNTITLED*, 2018,
FASHIONED FROM TWO
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ROMAN SCULPTURES,
WILL BE DISPLAYED AS
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PIECES BY ISAMU NOGUCHI



Two of a kind

In a new Hong Kong show, artist Danh Vô pairs and shares to pay homage to Isamu Noguchi

The Danish-Vietnamese artist Danh Vô has been described as a 'hunter gatherer', awing widely on disparate historical events and artefacts, and infusing them with an element of autobiography. He has found inspiration in Greek and Roman sculpture, medieval weaponry, the ordeals of Christian missionaries in Indochina, the Statue of Liberty, and the personal letters of Henry Singer, each time finding themes that endure across cultures and epochs. So it's fitting that Hong Kong's M+ Pavilion has invited him to pay homage to the late Isamu Noguchi in an upcoming show, 'Counterpoint'. The Japanese-American sculptor and landscape architect's work has come a major influence on Vô; Noguchi's playful spaces for children were the blueprint for Vô's 'playscape' at Korea's Anyang Art Park in 2017, and his 'Akari' light sculptures have been installed at the National Gallery

of Denmark for a Vô retrospective (until 2 December). This, however, is the first time Vô has done an entire show on Noguchi.

The installation at M+ Pavilion will be inspired by the scholar's pavilion and garden, a leitmotif in Chinese ink painting. There are efforts to draw a common thread between historic and modern design – the centrepiece is Vô's Dong pavilion, an amalgamation of wooden structures traditionally created by China's eponymous ethnic minority. Adorned with Noguchi's 'Akari PL2' lamps, it is surrounded by a selection of the architect's works from the 1920s to 1980s, interspersed with Vô's own pieces. Meanwhile, Vô's *We the People*, a full-scale reproduction of a copper fragment from the Statue of Liberty, holds court in the museum's backyard.

There are echoes in material and form: Noguchi's distinctive bamboo basket chair (a collaboration with interior designer Isamu

Kenmochi) goes hand in hand with Vô's *Bamboo*, a readymade bamboo birdcage from Guangzhou meant to symbolise the resilience of craft in modern China; while the inclusion of Noguchi's 1945 sculpture *Strange Bird*, with its hybrid silhouette, seems a nod to a recent, untitled work by Vô, a hermaphrodite fashioned from two 1st to 2nd century Roman sculptures (a Venus Anadyomene and a dancing satyr). Given the parallels between the two artists – both immigrants working across geographical boundaries and visual disciplines – a biographical reading of the show is inevitable. More importantly, the juxtaposition of Noguchi and Vô reminds us that identities are at once overdetermined and fluid, and art, today as in Noguchi's time, is ours to define and reinvent. *

'Noguchi for Danh Vô: Counterpoint' is at the M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong, 16 November 2018-22 April 2019, westkowloon.hk

MOUSSE

Danh Vo: Garden with Pigeons in Flight

Text by Francesco Scasciamacchia

Estancia Femsa - Casa Luis Barragán
Gral. Francisco Ramírez 12-14
Mexico City
casaluisbarragan.org
Through January 13

Danh Vo's site-specific and environmental project for the house of the modernist Mexican architect Luis Barragán is primarily a subtle reflection on and a gentle reaction to the standardized museographic mechanisms of historical preservation through cultural artifacts. Vo's understated intervention is a thoughtful and insightful commentary on the conventional ways in which history is treated as a frozen entity in an untouchable and auratic vitrine, as epitomized in the Casa Luis Barragán press release, according to which the house "has been preserved just like it was back when he lived in it, until his death in 1988."

Vo's project, *Garden with Pigeons in Flight*, points to the necessary instability of historical narration through almost imperceptible displacements and gentle new touches. For instance Vo removed the original carpets to reveal the light traces on the floor formed by the sun throughout the years, moved pieces of furniture to give breath to architectural forms and ambiances, and opened up areas previously inaccessible to the public. Also he commissioned new floral decorative elements from one of Barragán's employees who still lives in the house and who, when the architect was his employer, collected tree branches and leaves from the outdoor garden to create new compositions.

Inspired by vintage photographs of the house, Vo uses the floral compositions not merely as added decorative elements that echo the past life of the house before it became an international celebratory monument, but more as a metaphor for the impermanent, living nature of what we consider solid, fixed categories like architecture and history. Leaves and tree

branches are perishable—they cannot stay the same, but need to be changed out, necessarily mutating the style and atmosphere of the rooms. History and architecture likewise become organisms that continue living: furniture moves; historical pieces are restored; excessive elements are amassed visibly in the last room of the guided tour; visitor safety barriers are removed.

Vo's light displacements do not alter the historical essence or the architectural style, but rather give them vitality, destabilizing the usual preservation dictates; museographic approaches to historical buildings; impressions of second-time visitors and the house's employees. Such disorientation works also on a larger, symbolic level, namely by disrupting the usual narration of history through the meticulous preservation of cultural artifacts and personal anecdotes conveyed by souvenirs and memorabilia.

In this sense Vo questions how systems of knowledge and thought—history and architecture, in this case—are governed by rules that are not only linguistic and grammatical, but also discursive and institutional. In a manner that to me recalls Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the artist points out that we are inclined to project already-existing rules governed by inherited knowledge onto any period we encounter, thereby for instance transforming historical data into a coherent narration that influences the reading of history. Thus history, like any other knowledge, is a discourse, a way of speaking and interpreting that includes not only the object but also the rules around it.

Vo's gestures of subtraction and addition, then, are an attempt to reveal not just a more vital and organic Casa Luis Barragán, but the "object"—that is, the *episteme* (the knowledge) of it, free of the rules that govern it. This becomes even clearer when the artist shows visibly such gestures of reduction, for instance amassing the objects and fur-

niture that he decided to remove from the rooms as an installation made simply by this accumulation. Such elements then become not historical gems but "irrelevant" archaeological finds, at least for Vo, who points out through their visible display as an installation the subjective nature of knowledge, and therefore its non-totality. History is made by interruptions, not through a total linear narration, and Casa Luis Barragán becomes the "stage-metaphor" of a historical and cultural artifact that is part of the discourse of knowledge—that is to say, turned into a narration.

Among Vo's interventions of addition is an installation made from numerous beeswax candles handcrafted by master artisans in Oaxaca. Partly accumulated in an installation and partly distributed all over the house, the carmine candles are another perishable element, consumed day and by day. Their ephemeral nature, together with the different densities of the carmine, are visual metaphors for the fragility of material history and the many layers that constitute it, like the history of Mexico that is behind the material process of making those candles. The candles refer to the history of carmine dye, made in pre-Hispanic times by extracting color from the cochineal insect, which was a fundamental part of the economy of New Spain. Those layers of history, symbolized by the different consistencies of the carmine color, are usually excluded from historical narration because they are an obstacle to the universalizing way in which history is usually constructed—that is, as a logic that connects partial and disconnected data into a totality.

The candles and the floral composition, together with the action of adding and reducing, tell a story that is both particular to Barragán's house, but also relevant to any cultural object. It is a story that reveals rather than hides its different layers, the interruption and the non-totality of systems of knowledge and thoughts. Vo attempts to disclose this mechanism not by foregrounding it, but simply through displacing it temporarily.

Exposition Danh Vo à Bordeaux : l'éternité du marbre et la fugacité de l'Homme

Par Jean-François Lixon 

Mis à jour le 05/09/2018 à 10H12, publié le 05/09/2018 à 09H56



Les blocs de marbre de Danh Vo au CAPC de Bordeaux © France 3 Culturebox Capture d'écran

Le CAPC, le Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, accueille jusqu'au 28 octobre 2018 une exposition du plasticien danois d'origine vietnamienne Danh Vo. Il a jonché la nef d'énormes bruts blocs de marbre de Carrare et y a parsemé des photographies de mains de statues sculptées par Michel-Ange. Une réflexion sur le temps et l'espace, la pérennité et la vacuité.

Danh Vo est un artiste danois né vietnamien en 1975. Son exposition bordelaise succède à un passage remarqué au musée Guggenheim de New York. Le plasticien a exposé dans les lieux les plus prestigieux, comme justement le MoMa. Au musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, CAPC, il a rempli la nef du bâtiment d'énormes blocs de marbre de Carrare; des blocs bruts, imposants, impossibles à bouger. Et dans cet espace habité par l'image de l'immuable, il a disposé des photographies... de mains sculptées par Michel-Ange. Qui peut savoir ce qui se cache dans un bloc de marbre ? Cette exposition "in situ" est une commande du CAPC.

Reportage : France 3 Aquitaine O. Prax / D. Bonnet / B. Chague



Jean-François Lixon

« Exposition Danh Vo à Bordeaux : l'éternité du marbre et la fugacité de l'Homme »

Culture Box, September 5, 2018

<https://culturebox.francetvinfo.fr/arts/evenements/expo-danh-vo-au-capc-de-bordeaux-l-eternite-du-marbre-et-la-fugacite-de-l-homme-278705>

Danh Vo : après le Guggenheim de New York , le Capc de Bordeaux

JUDITH BENHAMOU

| Le 21/05/2018 à 16:50



occupé pendant 3 mois et jusqu'au 9 mai dernier le colimaçon de toutes les gloires, celui du Guggenheim de New York. Ainsi c'est Alberto Giacometti qui lui succédera en juin. C'est dire...

Cependant pour moi l'exposition était un rendez-vous manqué avec ce musée. Le lieu n'arrivait pas à être comblé au sens de rempli, les œuvres étaient tantôt trop répétitives, tantôt trop narratives au sujet d'une biographie intime quelquefois trop anecdotique. Pourtant en 2015 il était l'auteur avec la commissaire Caroline Bourgeois d'une exceptionnelle exposition à Venise, à la fondation Pinault qui comprenait un mix de ses propres œuvres et de celles qui ont servi à créer son univers mental.

Danh Vo fait aujourd'hui partie de ces vedettes de la création mondialisée qu'on voit de la Biennale du Whitney à New York jusqu'à une rétrospective au musée Jumex de Mexico City en passant par le musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris en 2013 et surtout maintenant un petit bijou d'exposition qui vient d'être inauguré à Bordeaux au musée CAPC.

Dans la nef de cet ancien entrepôt maritime du XIXe siècle, d'une beauté confondante, il propose quatre installations dont la plus importante, inédite et impressionnante est constituée d'un ensemble de blocs de marbre de Carrare (jusqu'à 21 tonnes chacun) qui ressemble à une installation minimale si ce n'est qu'il y a accroché ponctuellement des photos de détails de sculptures de Michel Ange. L'installation me fait aussi penser au « terrain de jeu » de Paul Cézanne,

Judith Benamou-Huet

« *Danh Vo: après le Guggenheim de New York, le CAPC de Bordeaux* »

Les Echos, June 21, 2018.

<http://blogs.lesechos.fr/judith-benhamou-huet/danh-vo-apres-le-guggenheim-de-new-york-le-capc-de-bordeaux-a16361.html>

la carrière Bibemus, là où le peintre aixois avait installé son atelier et où les roches prenaient des formes anguleuses du fait de l'ancienne destination du lieu.

C'est certainement là qu'est née une préfiguration du cubisme.

« Traitez la nature par la sphère le cylindre et le cône » disait Cézanne.

Mais pour revenir à Bordeaux, les sculptures fragmentées, disloquées et superposées sont partout dans le récit de Danh Vo. Et ses histoires sont souvent, au détour d'un détail, autobiographiques. Il en va ainsi pour toutes ces mains souvent présentes dans les photos qu'il s'approprie ou qu'il prend lui même. Il en va ainsi pour cette pièce qu'on appellera « Carnation milk » une marque de lait concentré américain qu'il a bu toute son enfance. Il a récupéré une vieille caisse en bois de ce breuvage affectueux dans laquelle il a placé un fragment de sculpture romaine découpé à la mesure du contenant. Carnation et incarnation...Enfance et christianisme...Une autre fois il m'avait confié « Je suis allée à l'église chaque dimanche jusqu'à 18 ans. Je pense que je suis traumatisé par le catholicisme. Mais lorsque vous êtes catholique vous êtes particulièrement sensible aux objets ».

Comme l'artiste Felix Gonzalez-Torres auquel il porte une immense admiration il crée des objets qui sont des reliques d'un culte privé hérité de celui que l'on voue à Jésus.

L'exposition Danh Vo organisée à Bordeaux aux CAPC par la commissaire du lieu, Maria-Ines Rodriguez est exceptionnelle.

On pourra d'ailleurs déplorer que cette dernière ait été débarquée récemment par la ville de Bordeaux.

Judith Benamou-Huet

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Les Echos, June 21, 2018.

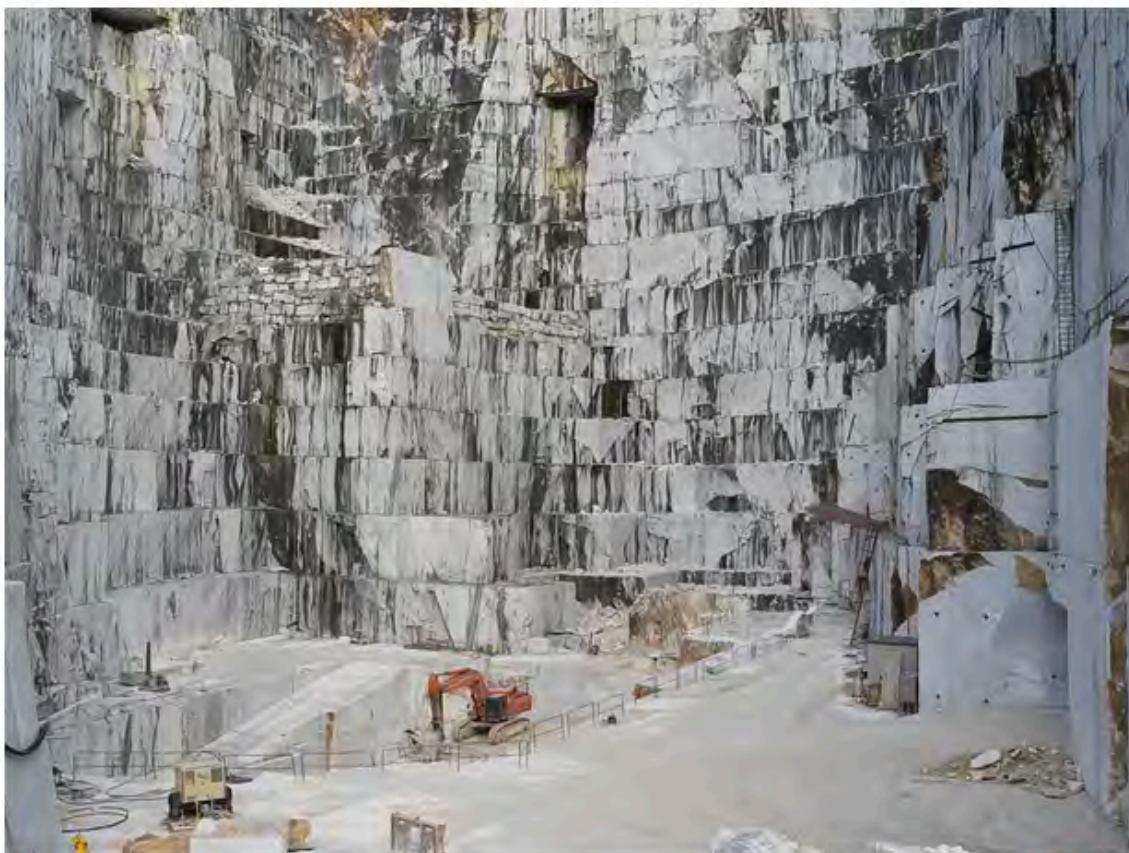
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CRITIQUE

A BORDEAUX, LES JEUX DE MAINS ET DE MARBRE DE DANH VO

Par Judicaël Lavrador
— 19 août 2018 à 17:36

L'artiste a investi la nef du CAPC avec une installation de blocs de pierre, en forme d'hommage et de critique de l'histoire.



Les blocs de Danh Vo viennent de Carrare, Mecque du marbre des artistes de la Renaissance italienne. Photo Nick Ash

↗ f t

Judicaël Lavrador

« *A Bordeaux, les jeux de mains et de marbre de Danh Vo* »

Libération, August 19, 2018

http://next.libération.fr/arts/2018/08/19/a-bordeaux-les-jeux-de-mains-et-de-marbre-de-danh-vo_1673412

Au cœur de l'immense entrepôt Lainé, dans cette nef du Centre d'arts plastiques contemporains, chapelle Sixtine éphémère d'une longue liste d'artistes contemporains qui y sont intervenus, Danh Vo livre à son tour une de ses plus belles expos. L'ancien stock de denrées coloniales offre une majestueuse caisse de résonance à son art de faire bruire les résidus de l'histoire, les reliquats minéraux et les reliques religieuses de toutes sortes de récits personnels et collectifs. Danh Vo fait parler les choses mortes, sans les ramener pour autant à la vie. Il fait plus figure de spirite communiquant avec les esprits en mettant la main sur des vieilleries et faisant bouger les pierres. En l'occurrence, des blocs de marbre. Lourds et imposants, ceux-ci se serrent dans un des coins de la nef. Mais pas trop, de manière à ce qu'on puisse se faufiler entre eux, voire grimper dessus. Y mettre la main, explique Maria Inés Rodriguez, directrice du CAPC (ex-directrice, en fait, son licenciement ayant pris effet le 1^{er} août), pour sentir la texture de leur surface, lisse ou rugueuse, selon que les pierres ont été polies ou non, est une recommandation de l'artiste. Qui a en quelque sorte fléché le geste : des photographies de mains sculptées s'accrochent à la paroi des blocs. Fragments d'œuvres taillés dans le marbre par Michel-Ange. Mains droite ou gauche de David, Moïse, du Christ ou de Giuliano de Medici, sont rendues à leur matériau d'origine par la grâce de ces allers-retours qu'affectionne Danh Vo.

Ces blocs viennent, on l'aura deviné, de Carrare, Mecque du marbre des artistes de la Renaissance italienne. Leur transport, leur manipulation, leur installation par d'adroits manutentionnaires, toute cette prise en charge, en main, pèse son poids dans la portée de cette pièce. Un, parce qu'il remet les ouvriers au rang des artistes. Deux, parce qu'il concrétise un frottement entre les âges, géologique et humain, classique et contemporain. Enfin, ce déplacement renvoie à la circulation des œuvres de par le monde et à une géopolitique artistique. Un sujet au cœur du travail de Danh Vo qui y décèle des rapports de pouvoir, d'influence, de domination, de *soft power* dirait-on aujourd'hui.

Courbure

lascive

Sur ce marbre de Carrare pas ouvrillé, brut de décoffrage, c'est tout le rayonnement du classicisme italien et ce qui s'y incarnait (la religion, la perfection, la conversion) qui vient ainsi se fracasser. Sans faire de bruit : l'œuvre de Danh Vo laisse sourdre sans fracas une pensée critique qui remonte le fil de l'histoire et détricote ainsi ses mythes, notamment celui de l'authenticité ou de la pureté. Dans la diagonale opposée à cette installation, il a ainsi posé au sol une vieille caisse en bois de la marque «Carnation Milk» contenant un bloc de marbre poli provenant de Grèce. Tout blanc, courbure lascive qu'on veut toucher là encore, et le titre, *Lick Me, Lick Me*, qui fait baver. C'est un petit fragment d'un torse d'Apollon, datant approximativement du I^{er} et du II^e siècle, éventré, scié par Danh Vo.

Judicaël Lavrador

« *A Bordeaux, les jeux de mains et de marbre de Danh Vo* »

Libération, August 19, 2018

http://next.libération.fr/arts/2018/08/19/a-bordeaux-les-jeux-de-mains-et-de-marbre-de-danh-vo_1673412

Puristes

Qu'est-ce qui est ainsi mis en boîte et fracturé ? Les Romains qui s'approvisionnent en matière première chez les Grecs copient leur art et en font des caisses pour se l'approprier tout en revendiquant l'originalité de leur propre art, de leur propre civilisation. Au-delà des Romains, ce sont les puristes de tous acabit qui sont visés. L'impureté de la pièce se niche par ailleurs dans son titre emprunté à l'une des répliques du démon qui dans le film *l'Exorciste* habite le corps d'une fillette et lance ce genre d'insanités à la face du prêtre qui tente de l'en déloger. Ce serait, selon Maria Inés Rodriguez, un souvenir de l'artiste, que la mère, tandis qu'il était enfant, avait l'habitude de prendre sur ses genoux tout en matant des films gore. L'amour maternel et l'horreur d'un même tenant comique et effrayant.

Dans l'expo, les paroles du démon résonnent à nouveau (sans aucune portée blasphématoire) dans le titre d'une autre pièce : *Do You Know What She Did, Your Cunting Daughter ?* - un Christ en bois portugais produit vers le XV^e siècle, dans un style flamand. La pièce gît démembrée mais soigneusement rangée sur une longue et haute étagère métallique au milieu d'autres antiquités religieuses, achetées par l'artiste. Exposer ainsi des pièces remises (ou mises en boîte), c'est la trouvaille de Danh Vo pour dire comme son art oscille entre le visible et le caché, l'oubli et la réminiscence, ou, de manière moins banale, plus concrète, et selon ses propres termes, entre «*la cathédrale et le "storage"*». Ce qui est une des manières finalement de dire que de cette nef du CAPC (ancien stock), il fait aussi une crypte. ♦

Judicaël Lavrador

[Danh Vo dans la nef du CAPC, Bordeaux \(92\). Jusqu'au 28 octobre. Rens. : \[www.capc-bordeaux.fr\]\(http://www.capc-bordeaux.fr\)](#)

Judicaël Lavrador

« *A Bordeaux, les jeux de mains et de marbre de Danh Vo* »

Liberation, August 19, 2018

http://next.liberation.fr/arts/2018/08/19/a-bordeaux-les-jeux-de-mains-et-de-marbre-de-danh-vo_1673412

Aurelle, Cédric. « Danh Vo, la renaissance du génie à Bordeaux », *The Art Newspaper Daily*, Numéro 76,
Monday, June 25, 2018, pp.4-5.



THE ART NEWSPAPER DAILY

LUNDI 25 JUIN 2018 / NUMÉRO 76 / 1€



DANH VO, LA RENAISSANCE DU GÉNIE À BORDEAUX P.4

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DANH VO, LA RENAISSANCE DU GÉNIE À BORDEAUX

Danh Vo présente dans la nef du CAPC à Bordeaux un ensemble d'œuvres dans lesquels se croisent histoire individuelle et collective, temps humain et géologique.

Par Cédric Aurelle



Vue de l'exposition « Danh Vo » au CAPC de Bordeaux. © CAPC Bordeaux, photo : Nick Ash

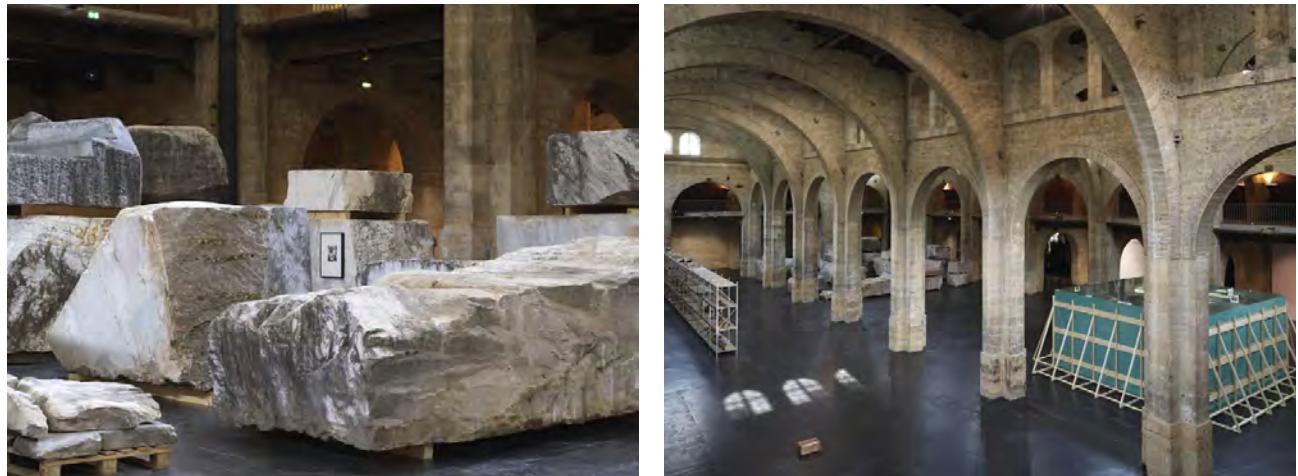
**ÉVANGÉLISATION
MISSIONNAIRE
ET
COLONIALISME
SE FONT ÉCHO
ICI DANS
LE DISPOSITIF
D'EXPOSITION**

quelques photographies de mains sculptées par Michel-Ange dans ce même marbre de Carrare accrochées de-ci de-là sur les blocs en attestent autant qu'ils rappellent l'inexorable redevenir poussière des acteurs de l'histoire.

Danh Vo poursuit là un travail dans lequel se rencontrent histoire individuelle et grande Histoire. « *Cathédrale et lieu de stockage* », selon les termes de l'artiste, l'entrepôt Lainé qui héberge le CAPC, basilique de pierre construite pour accueillir les denrées exotiques, avant d'avoir été reconvertis en sanctuaire de l'art contemporain, renvoie au commerce colonial dont l'artiste danois d'origine vietnamienne assume une part d'histoire collatérale. Dans ces allers-retours ressort cette lettre datée de 1861 d'un moine missionnaire au Vietnam accrochée à l'un des pilastres de la nef. Dernière missive du moine à son père auquel il annonce sa décapitation prochaine, le courrier manuscrit a en fait été reproduit comme par ventriloquie par le père même de l'artiste qui ne lit pas le français mais maîtrise la calligraphie latine traditionnelle. Un Christ de bois polychrome est accroché non loin, un ensemble de sculptures baroques en bois ainsi que des branches collectionnées par l'artiste sont présentées sur des rayonnages qui constituent un deuxième pôle d'œuvres. Évangélisation missionnaire et colonialisme se font écho ici dans le dispositif d'exposition.

Diamétralement opposée aux blocs de marbre, une petite caisse en bois est posée seule au sol. Sur ses côtés est imprimée la marque de lait dont elle constitue

C'est un chaos de marbre qui accueille dans sa grande nef le visiteur du CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, qui, dans un fracas aussi titanique que silencieux, vient réagencer dans l'ordre du musée l'abîme des temps géologiques et les notes de bas de page de l'histoire humaine. Ces blocs de marbre de Carrare sont les vestiges inutilisés et abandonnés de découpes effectuées à l'époque fasciste. L'ensemble d'environ une trentaine de blocs de plusieurs tonnes chacun forme un labyrinthe de pierre dans lequel on se promène à la croisée des temps minéral et humain. Dans leurs entrelacs se manifeste la volonté de puissance créatrice de l'homme par la mise en forme de l'éternité du geste dans les matériaux susceptibles de la conserver. Les



Vues de l'exposition « Danh Vo » au CAPC de Bordeaux. © CAPC Bordeaux, photo : Nick Ash

l'emballage, « Carnation milk ». Le produit de consommation issu de l'exploitation animalière rejoint l'entrepôt de denrées coloniales précisément à l'endroit où, comme l'objet d'un culte marchand, le soleil viendra l'éclairer chaque jour à une heure précise. La caisse contient un fragment de torse d'Apollon dont la « carnation laiteuse » n'est autre qu'une projection fantasmée de l'Europe occidentale sur une Grèce blanche qui n'a jamais existé.

Le quatrième pôle de l'exposition est un espace clos à l'intérieur duquel les cimaises sont plaquées de miroirs. Sur ces dernières sont accrochées des photos du Vietnam datant des années 1960. On y voit des Vietnamiens visitant des lieux d'exposition ou observant le paysage. Pris en photo par un Américain dont on apprend qu'il a été espion pour le compte de la CIA, l'ensemble constitue une mise en abyme de jeux de regards emboîtés les uns dans les autres, que la boîte miroir reproduit à l'infini.

La manière dont l'artiste narre sa propre histoire à travers les grands récits n'est pas le produit d'une expérience collective mais la chronique individuelle de quelqu'un qui se déclare « *born under a lucky star* », né sous une bonne étoile. Choisi au berceau, l'artiste tutoie le mythe en se confrontant aux géants dont Michel-Ange, qu'il convoque ici, occupe la place zénithale. Comme l'artiste de la Renaissance auquel il se réfère, Danh Vo allie sa virtuosité (conceptuelle en l'occurrence) à la question de la bonne fortune qui veut qu'en fouillant le marbre le sculpteur ne tombera pas sur une mauvaise veine. L'organisation de ce chaos de marbre dans le musée peut aussi apparaître comme la marque de la tentation mégalomaniaque d'un artiste qui a par ailleurs reproduit la statue de la Liberté en autant de *disjecta membra* (fragments dispersés) nécessaires pour l'éparpiller dans toutes les collections du monde. Et le commentaire sur la ruine de la masculinité qu'ambitionne être cette œuvre qui a nécessité pas moins de dix camions semi-remorques depuis Carrare pour être réalisée, ne fait qu'en reproduire toute l'*hybris*.

**« Danh Vo », jusqu'au 28 octobre, CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux,
7, rue Ferrère, 33000 Bordeaux, www.capc-bordeaux.fr**

**CHOISI AU BERCEAU,
L'ARTISTE TUTOIE LE MYTHE EN
SE CONFRONTANT AUX GÉANTS**

PUBLIÉ LE LUNDI, 28 MAI 2018

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Les rendez-vous à ne pas manquer cette semaine

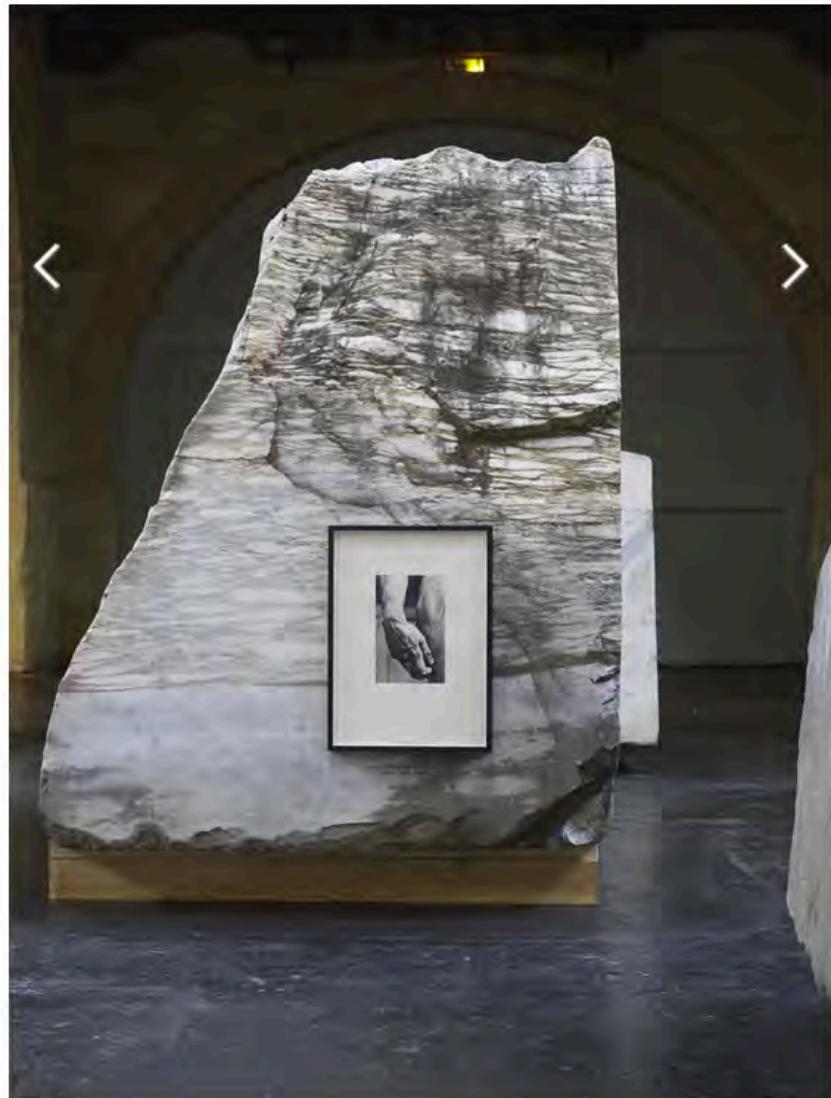
Cette semaine, on célèbre Danh Vo au CAPC – on retrouve Konstantin Grcic à la Galerie Kreo – et on fait monter les enchères du design italien chez Pierre Bergé & Associés. 7 jours pour :

PAR OSCAR DUBOY

Évoquer le passé

Maria Inés Rodriguez termine en beauté. Pour sa dernière exposition, la directrice du CAPC, le Centre d'arts plastiques contemporains de Bordeaux, a invité Danh Vo à investir les très beaux volumes de la nef de l'Entrepôt Lainé. De la Punta della Dogana de Venise au Guggenheim de New York, le jeune artiste est acclamé de tous les côtés et ses énormes blocs en marbre de Carrare entassés ici à Bordeaux viennent confirmer une fois de plus son talent. Précision : ces monolithes datent des années 1930, quand la découpe n'était pas encore aussi précise qu'aujourd'hui. En se baladant parmi eux, on saisit la texture de cette pierre brute, franche, fatiguée par le temps qui passe, telle une évocation presque mélancolique d'un passé dont les traces survivent malgré tout. Ça et là, les détails de sculptures de Michel-Ange soulignent le contraste d'une matière première domptée par la main de l'homme, tout comme une série de bouts de décor en bois dorés du XVII^e, étalés le long d'une étagère avec une minutie d'archiviste, composent le répertoire des prouesses artisanales d'autan. Autant d'éléments narratifs qui jalonnent désormais depuis quelques années le récit de l'artiste, fait de références autobiographiques, « mais pas que », à une histoire révolue mais toujours palpable... et saisissante.

Danh Vo, jusqu'au 28 octobre 2018 au CAPC, 7, rue Ferrère, 33000 Bordeaux ; www.capec-bordeaux.fr



© Nick Ash

Vue de l'exposition au CAPC musée d'art contemporain

Oscar Duboy

« Les rendez-vous à ne pas manquer cette semaine »

AD Magazine, May 2018

https://www.admagazine.fr/art/sorties/diaporama/les-rendez-vous-a-ne-pas-manquer-cette-semaine/50997#les-rendez-vous-a-ne-pas-manquer-cette-semaine_image2

Arnaudet, Didier. « DANH VO – CAPC BORDEAUX », *Art Press*, May 29, 2018.

<https://www.artpress.com/2018/05/29/danh-vo-capc-bordeaux/>



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DANH VO – CAPC BORDEAUX

CAPC MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN, BORDEAUX, DU 19 MAI AU 28 OCTOBRE 2018

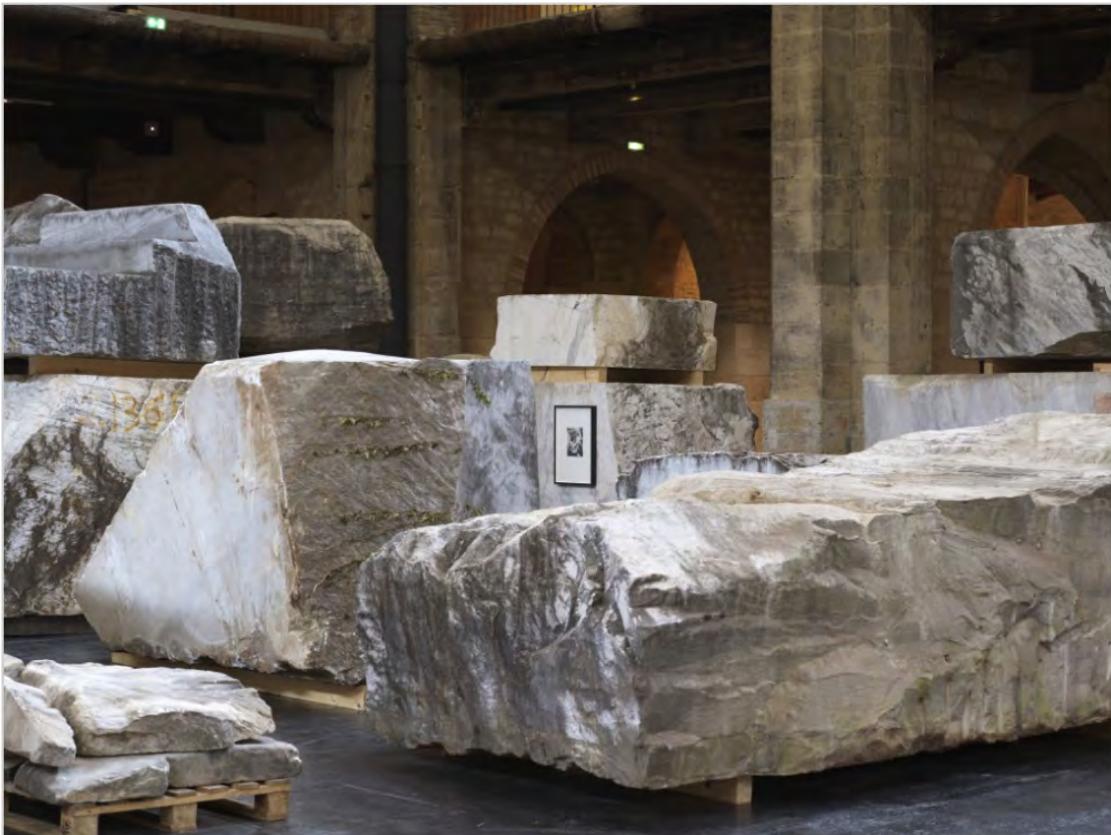
Chez Danh Vo, l'association n'est pas simplement le rapprochement actif de différents éléments où des énergies se rejoignent et produisent un partage des expériences et des enseignements. C'est aussi un point de fragilité et d'étonnement qui devient révélateur de tout ce qui, venu d'ailleurs, le cerne, l'interroge, parfois le malmène, et indique partout autour de lui les ressources de cet au-delà et de ses possibilités d'éveil. Ainsi, passé et présent, espace et temps, destins collectifs et individuels, matériaux naturels et industriels, références culturelles et formes dominantes s'entrecroisent sans se confondre, participent à d'étranges déplacements qui apportent d'autres éclairages et renouvellent les perspectives, les significations et les émotions.

Invité par María Inés Rodríguez, qui signe là sa dernière exposition au CAPC, cet artiste danois d'origine vietnamienne (1975) a réalisé une installation in situ, organisée en quatre « moments », dans le vaste et envoûtant espace de la Nef du musée. Ce qui frappe d'emblée, c'est cette « forêt » de blocs de marbre de Carrare découpés dans les années 1930 selon une technique artisanale s'appuyant sur les propriétés intrinsèques de la roche et donc tenant compte des veines et des parties plus fragiles et propices à craquer. L'irrégularité des découpages renvoie puissamment à l'ampleur du travail manuel lié à l'extraction et à l'aridité de cette durabilité minérale. Les photographies de mains du Christ, de David et de Moïse, sculptées par Michel-Ange, accrochées sur le flanc des pierres, évoquent cette logique de domestication imposée par le choix de la voie esthétique. Sur des étagères en métal, s'agence un inventaire de branches, de fragments d'ornements du 16e siècle et d'un Christ en bois de châtaignier polychrome dans un style flamand, produit au Portugal des du 15e et 16e siècle. Cette longue ligne de rangement semble autant rendre hommage aux vertus de la rigueur qu'à celles de l'égarement. Elle est à la fois l'aiguillon d'un vertigineux émerveillement et la solution apaisante d'un équilibre d'une singulière justesse. Dans une caisse en bois d'une marque de lait concentré américain que l'artiste a bu toute son enfance, repose un torse d'Apollon en marbre, période romaine, 1er et 2e siècle après Jésus-Christ. Derrière des palissades de chantier se déplie un environnement de miroirs. À la surface de plusieurs miroirs, le père de l'artiste a gravé les paroles de la chanson *Fabulous Muscles* de Xiu Xiu, groupe californien invité par Danh Vo à l'occasion de plusieurs performances. Le titre de cette œuvre fait écho à *Take my Breath Away*, chanson produite pour le film *Top Gun* qui donne une vision héroïque de la Guerre du Vietnam durant les années Reagan. À ces références, s'ajoute l'inscription des photographies du Dr. Joseph M. Carrier, appartenant à une série documentaire illustrant le quotidien du Vietnam des années 1960 et 1970 (1).

Pour Danh Vo, ce qui compte, c'est d'être à l'écoute d'une large gamme de désirs : « Je sais les choses qui m'intéressent et je suis ouvert à toutes les possibilités de les combiner. Je ne cherche pas à trouver un point commun à tous mes centres d'intérêt. Je ne me pose pas la question de savoir si je peux les associer. Le seul lien qui existe entre eux est celui que je crée, volontairement ou non, par rapport aux choses que j'ai traversées et aux choses qui m'ont traversé. Le lien n'est peut-être pas visible mais il existe. Et la seule chose que je peux faire est de tout assembler, de tout mettre ensemble, et je dois faire confiance à ce processus car c'est aussi celui qui compose ma vie » (2).

(1) Cf. sova.si.edu/record/NAA.PhotoLot.2014-02

(2) Notes prises lors d'une conversation entre Maria Inés Rodriguez et Danh Vo.



Arnaudet, Didier. « DANH VO – CAPC BORDEAUX », *Art Press*, May 29, 2018.

<https://www.artpress.com/2018/05/29/danh-vo-capc-bordeaux/>

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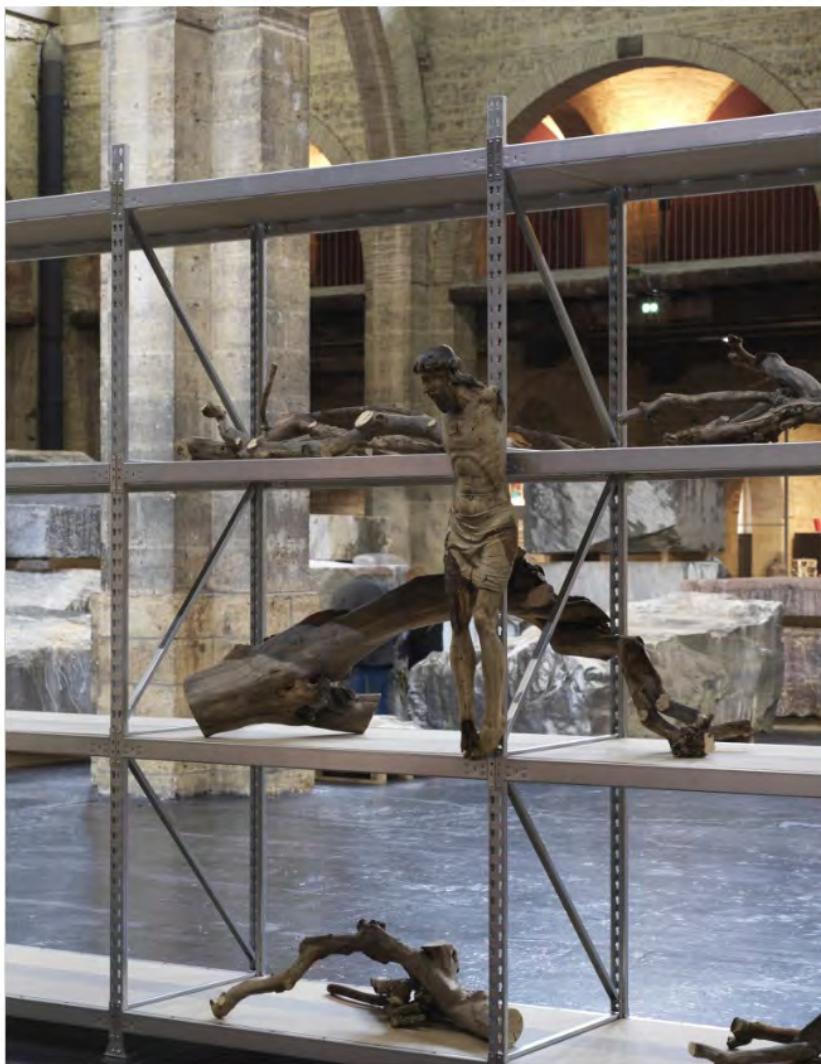


Photo de couverture et pour toutes les photographies : © Nick Ash (17 mai 2018)

AVRIL

L'INVITÉ DU MOIS

DANH VO
AU GUGGENHEIM
ÉCLATS
D'HISTOIRE

À NEW YORK,
DANH VO CONFIRME SON STATUT DE
CRÉATEUR AUX MULTIPLES VISAGES :
D'HISTORIEN ENGAGÉ À POÈTE POLITIQUE.
UNLUSTREPROVENANTDEL'HÔTELMAJESTIC
OÙ FURENT RATIFIÉS LES ACCORDS DE PARIS
EN 1973, LE MENU SERVI À LA MAISON-
BLANCHE LE JOUR DE L'ASSASSINAT DE JFK,
LA LETTRE D'UN JEUNE MISSIONNAIRE
D'INDOCHINE... PAR MORCEAUX, L'ARTISTE
D'ORIGINE VIETNAMIENNE CONVOQUE LA
GRANDE HISTOIRE POUR MIEUX LA REVISITER
À LA LUMIÈRE DE SON PARCOURS
PERSONNEL... ET TOUCHER À L'UNIVERSEL.

PAR CAROLINE BOUJEDOU. PORTRAIT ET PHOTOS PAR NICK ASH

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



J'AI EU LA CHANCE de collaborer avec Danh Vo pour l'exposition *Slip of the Tongue*, à la Punta della Dogana à Venise en 2015, ce qui a rendu notre rencontre encore plus marquante. Travailler ensemble pousse en effet chacun à aller plus loin dans l'intimité de l'autre. Dans son travail, Danh Vo joue justement avec sa propre intimité, son histoire singulière, ses interrogations et ses recherches sur son origine de réfugié vietnamien, aujourd'hui ressortissant danois. Mais si son parcours personnel est assez inhabituel, ses questionnements nous concernent tous, quelles que soient nos origines et notre histoire.

Depuis ses premières œuvres, Danh Vo intègre ce quelque chose de "particulier", son histoire personnelle, qui fait aussi appel à la grande histoire. C'est le cas avec l'image *17.1.1980* (2010) le représentant, tout juste parti du Vietnam, à son arrivée à Singapour, qu'il quittera bientôt pour le Danemark. Là, il était proposé à chacun des réfugiés de choisir un vêtement. Pour Danh Vo, ce fut une robe.

Autre exemple : quelques années plus tard, alors qu'il réside à Francfort après avoir suivi ses études à l'Académie royale des beaux-arts du Danemark, il demande à ses parents d'aller à sa place à la cérémonie de remise du diplôme de l'institution, laquelle lui fait d'ailleurs savoir qu'elle ne le considère pas comme un peintre (un artiste ?). Bien d'autres de ses œuvres jouent avec cet intime qui questionne les structures de pouvoir, de décision, et celles qui définissent qui l'on est. Il dit lui-même qu'il élabore son travail autour des "minuscules diasporas de la vie d'une personne".

Nous nous sommes rencontrés peu avant que je lui propose de présenter l'œuvre de la Collection Pinault *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* (2010), dans l'exposition *L'Illusion des lumières* au Palazzo Grassi, en 2014. *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* illustre la façon dont Danh Vo travaille. Lors d'une résidence à San Francisco, il avait rencontré l'anthropologue américain Joseph M. Carrier, auteur de nombreuses photographies au Vietnam pendant la guerre. Carrier a confié à Danh Vo une série d'images de jeunes garçons vietnamiens. Pour l'artiste, dont la famille a quitté le pays en abandonnant tout, ces photos deviennent comme son passé. Il les installe derrière un voile tissé de fleurs importées du Vietnam aux États-Unis. Puis il ajoute la pièce *2.2.1861* (2009), qui est une reproduction manuscrite d'une lettre adressée à son père par un jeune missionnaire en Indochine, Théophane Vénard, avant son exécution par les autorités vietnamiennes, le 2 février 1861. Jusqu'à la fin de sa vie, le père de Danh Vo, Phung Vo, a reproduit cette lettre à la main toutes les fois que la demande lui en a été faite. L'autre pièce que Danh Vo installe

New York

DANH VO AT THE GUGGENHEIM

IN HIS CURRENT SOLO SHOW, THE DANO-VIETNAMESE ARTIST CONFIRMS HIS MULTIVALENT STATUS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN POLITICAL POET AND ACTIVIST HISTORIAN, REVISITING HISTORY WITH A CAPITAL H IN THE LIGHT OF HIS OWN PERSONAL TALE, AND TOUCHING ON THE UNIVERSAL ALONG THE WAY.

I was lucky enough to work with Danh Vo on the exhibition *Slip of the Tongue* at Venice's Punta della Dogana in 2015. Our encounter was remarkable – working together pushes you to go further into each other's intimacy. And it's precisely with his own intimacy that Danh Vo plays in his work – his particular unique story, his inquiry into his origins as a Vietnamese refugee who is now a Danish national. But while his personal journey is unusual, his self-questioning concerns us all.

Right from the start Vo integrated this "special" something into his art, a personal story that also englobes history with a capital H. In *17.1.1980* (2010) we see him just after his departure from Vietnam, in Singapore, which he would soon leave for Denmark. Each refugee was invited to choose a piece of clothing. Vo picked a dress. A few years later, when he was living in Frankfurt after studying at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, he asked his parents to take his place at the graduation ceremony – in any case the Academy had made it clear they didn't think of him as a painter (an artist?). Many of his works play with this intimate questioning of structures of power and decisions, which often define who we are. He says himself that he builds his work around the "tiny diasporas of a person's life."

We met each other shortly after I invited him to show *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* (2010) in the exhibition *L'Illusion des lumières* at the Palazzo Grassi in 2014. *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, which is part of the Pinault Collection, perfectly illustrates the way that Vo works. During a residency in San Francisco, he met American anthropologist Joseph M.



WERE I TO ATTEMPT TO SUM UP VO'S WORK IN KEYWORDS, AMONG THOSE THAT COME TO MIND ARE: COLONY, BODY, RELIGION, DISSECTING, DISPLACING, DESIRING, EXILE, WITNESS...

LE TRAVAIL DE DANH VO PAR UNE SÉRIE DE MOTS-CLES, CEUX QUI ME VIENNENT À L'ESPRIT SERAIENT : POSSESSION, CORPS, RELIGION, DISSEQUER, DEPLACER, COLONIE, QUESTIONNER, DÉSIRER, EXIL, TEMOIN, INTIME, PLURIEL, RECONTEXTUALISER, FAMILLE, COMMUNAUTE, PRISON, POLITIQUE, RISQUER, APPRENDRE, CHERCHER, TROUVER, POÉSIE, BEAUTÉ, HISTOIRES...

pour composer cette œuvre est un extrait du manuel d'exécution par pendaison du département des services correctionnels de l'État du Delaware, produit par Fred A. Leuchter Associates, Inc., en 1990. À travers la façon qu'a Danh Vo de récolter des sources, de les utiliser et de les montrer, les temps sont déplacés, décontextualisés et recontextualisés dans un glissement qui permet de repenser l'Histoire, de mettre en question nos savoirs et d'en faire une autre lecture.

L'idée de faire une exposition ensemble à partir de la Collection Pinault est également née de la pratique "curatoriale" de Danh Vo (travail qui consiste à "prendre soin" des choses, comme l'a dit Élisabeth Lebovici à l'occasion de l'exposition *Slip of the Tongue*). Il a en effet conçu et réalisé plusieurs expositions, notamment une autour de l'œuvre de Felix Gonzalez-Torres, au Wiels, à Bruxelles, grâce à Elena Filipovic (2010), et une autre de la collection de Julie Ault à Artists Space, en 2013-2014. Le travail de Danh Vo combine toujours éléments de l'Histoire avec aventures personnelles. C'est pourquoi il m'a semblé que travailler à partir d'une collection serait aussi une façon pour lui de se confronter à d'autres récits. De même, j'imaginais qu'il pourrait également s'inspirer de l'histoire (des histoires) de la ville de Venise.

Dans l'élaboration du projet, il est également devenu clair que nous devions construire un groupe composé d'artistes et de théoriciens, je pourrais presque dire une communauté, qui a inspiré notre façon de travailler. Pour les artistes vivants, il s'agissait de David Hammons, Leonor Antunes, Nairy Baghramian, Hubert Duprat, Elmgreen & Dragset, Petrit Halilaj, Bertrand Lavier, Jean-Luc Moulène, Henrik Olesen, Cameron Rowland, Jos de Gruyter et Harald Thys ; et pour ceux qui comptent dans l'histoire de Danh Vo, il y avait Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Peter Hujar, Nancy Spero, Paul Thek, David Wojnarowicz et Martin Wong. Un groupe s'est ainsi formé, qui incluait également Julie Ault, bien sûr, mais aussi Patricia Falguières, Élisabeth Lebovici et les artistes. Vivre des expériences ensemble, échanger, discuter et déplacer faisait partie de la préparation de l'exposition. Le langage de Danh Vo naît de sa curiosité et de cette manière d'avancer en apprenant sans cesse. Il travaille en rassemblant des proches, des artistes, des amis, des rencontres. Ses œuvres sont l'expression de l'histoire d'un individu en même temps que celle d'un groupe.

Carrier, who had taken numerous photographs during the Vietnamese War. Carrier gave Vo a series of images of young Vietnamese boys. For the artist, who with his family had fled the country and left everything behind, these photos began to embody his own past. He displayed them behind a veil woven from imported Vietnamese flowers, and then added the work *2.2.1861* (2009), a manuscript reproduction of a letter written by a young missionary in Indochina, Théophane Vénard, to his father just before his execution by the Vietnamese authorities on 2 February 1861. Right up to the end of his life, Vo's own father, Phung Vo, would reproduce this letter by hand whenever anyone asked him. The final piece Vo added to *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* was an excerpt from the Delaware State Department of Correction's *Execution by Hanging Manual*, produced by Fred A. Leuchter Associates, Inc., in 1990. Vo's method of collecting, using and showing sources has the effect of displacing, decontextualizing and recontextualizing different historical times in a way that allows us to reconsider our knowledge of history and come up with alternative interpretations.

The idea of doing an exhibition together from the holdings of the Pinault Collection also came out of Vo's "curatorial" practice (in the sense of "taking care" of things, as Élisabeth Lebovici said of the *Slip of the Tongue* exhibition). He has put on several shows, including one on the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, at Wiels, in Brussels (2010), and another featuring the collection of Julie Ault at Artists Space in 2013/14. Vo's work always combines elements of history with his own personal stories. That's why it struck me that working from a collection would be a good way for him to confront other stories. Likewise, I imagined he would draw inspiration from the history and stories of Venice itself. While developing the project, it became clear we had to build a group composed of artists and theorists – I could almost say a community – that inspired our way of working. The living

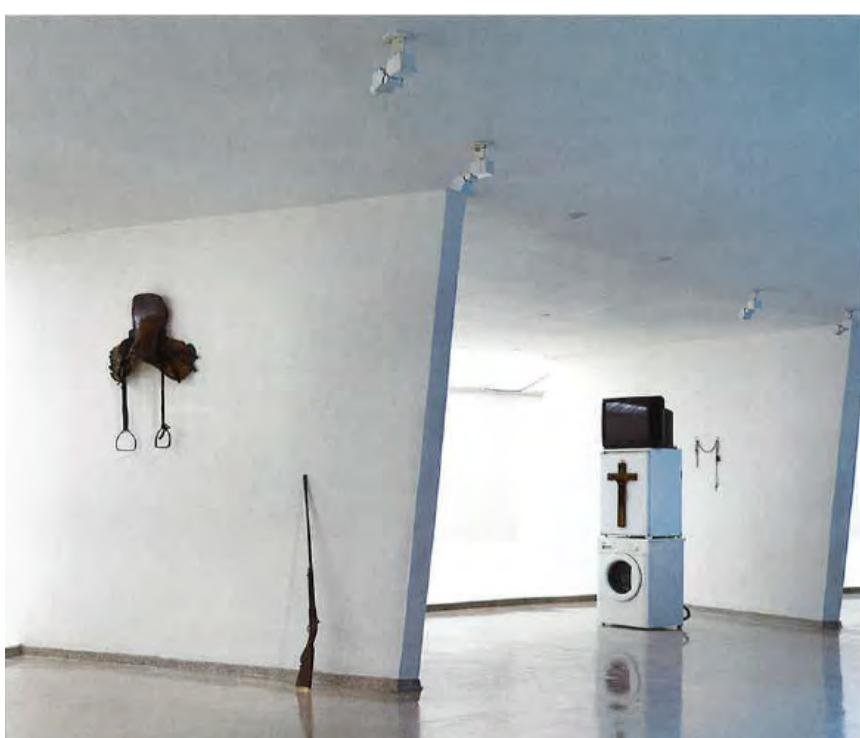
« Danh Vo au Guggenheim, éclats d'histoire », *Numéro Art* 2, March-August, 2018. pp. 96-105

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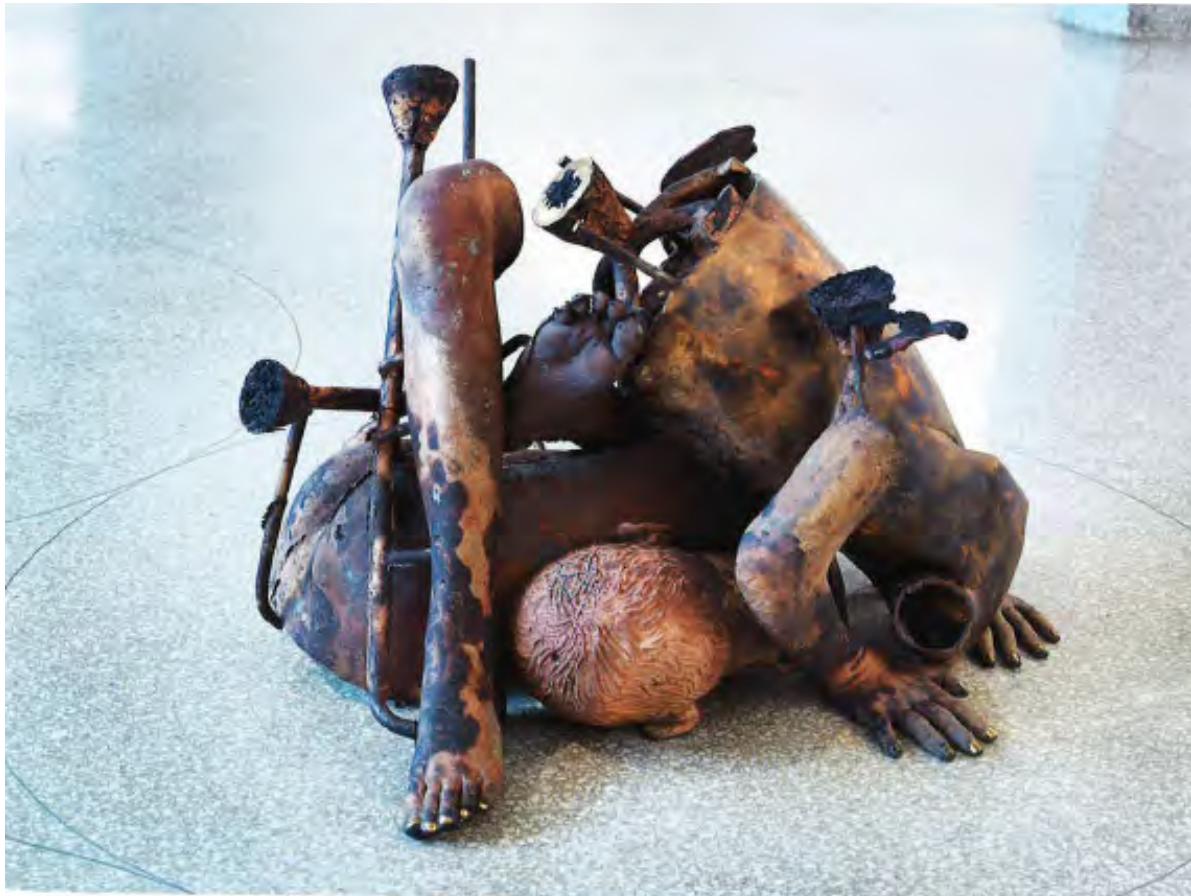
CI-CONTRE 16:32, 26.05 (2009). LUSTRE DU XIX^E SIÈCLE, 240 X 320 X 120 CM.



CI-CONTRE DE GAUCHE À DROITE : GALOPPA! (2009), SELLE, 101,6 X 88,6 X 43,8 CM. COLLECTION OF JOHN MORACE AND TOM KENNEDY. UNTITLED (FUSIL) (2007), OMA TOTEM (2009). TELEVISON PHILIPS, MACHINE À LAVER GORENJE, RÉFRIGÉRATEUR BOMANN, CRUCIFX EN BOIS, CARTE D'ENTRÉE PERSONNELLE POUR UN CASINO, 220 X 60 X 60 CM. COLLECTION PRIVÉE, TURN.



CI-CONTRE Ο Θεός μαύρο (2015). SARCOPHAGE GREC EN MARBRE (FIN DU II^e SIÈCLE) ET VIERGE DE L'ANNONCIATION EN PEUPLIER (ITALIE, VERS 1350). 177,5 X 57 X 52 CM. COLLECTION PINAULT.



CI-DESSOUS DÉTAIL DE L'EXPOSITION TAKE MY BREATH AWAY (2018), AU SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM À NEW YORK.

Danh Vo a un sens de l'accrochage hors du commun, et, de ce point de vue, l'exposition fut aussi une expérience singulière et collective. Il a ainsiposé la photographie *Draped Male Nude (I)* [1979], de Peter Hujar, sur un chevalet de chez Pietro Scarpa, puis disposé à côté un "tableau" en feuilles de plastique transparent de David Hammons, *Untitled* [2007]. L'ensemble donne l'impression que l'on se trouve devant une pietà. Parfois, Danh Vo installe également les œuvres à l'envers pour inciter le public à circuler autour d'elles.

Si on jouait à tenter de définir le travail de Danh Vo par une série de mots-clés, ceux qui me viennent à l'esprit seraient : possession, corps, religion, disséquer, déplacer, colonie, questionner, désirer, exil, témoin, intime, pluriel, recontextualiser, famille, communauté, prison, politique, risquer, apprendre, chercher, trouver, poésie, beauté, histoires...

J'ai eu la chance de voir son exposition rétrospective *Take My Breath Away* au Guggenheim de New York, un lieu qu'il est très difficile de s'approprier. Toute la magie de son travail s'y déploie; l'accrochage est remarquable. Rien n'est jamais posé de façon frontale, au contraire, tout est fait pour qu'on se déplace autour des œuvres et dans le temps. Rien n'est directement évoqué, tout est suggéré. Le parcours n'est pas chronologique, il met en avant – et d'une manière exemplaire –, la pratique de l'artiste, qui se caractérise par la collecte d'objets que le contexte permet d'appréhender sous de multiples sens, comme par exemple *Christmas, Rome 2012* (2013) [présenté la première fois à la Biennale de Venise en 2013], qui consiste en une antique charpente d'église transportée depuis le Vietnam, voisinant avec un ensemble de tentures en velours récupérées au Vatican et sur lesquelles étaient jadis posées des reliques dont on ne distingue plus que les empreintes, tels des fantômes d'un temps révolu. Tout le poids du catholicisme est énoncé ici, tout comme celui du colonialisme, que d'autres œuvres faisant directement référence aux missionnaires rappellent également durant tout le parcours.

À mon sens, cette exposition à une dimension très politique, notamment à travers les éléments portant sur l'histoire américaine, qui se matérialisent grâce à des œuvres "trouvées" et "déplacées", comme ce menu proposé par la Maison-Blanche le jour où Kennedy fut assassiné, ou encore les lettres de Henry Kissinger remerciant Leonard Lyons pour des places de théâtre, sachant, bien sûr, que Kissinger était au même moment secrétaire d'État du gouvernement américain et aussi le signataire des accords de paix qui mirent fin à la guerre du Vietnam en 1973 (*Untitled*, 2008). Ce même accord historique est également évoqué à travers les trois lustres provenant de l'hôtel Majestic de Paris où il fut ratifié. L'aspect politique se retrouve aussi dans d'autres œuvres "construites", comme les 150 morceaux composant la statue de la Liberté diffusés dans le monde (*We the People*, 2010), ou encore les boîtes de produits de consommation américains, évoquant l'impérialisme, recouvertes d'or par des ouvriers de Bangkok (*Untitled*, 2018).

Les œuvres de Danh Vo nous engagent à voir et à appréhender autrement l'Histoire, qu'elle soit proche de nous ou un peu plus lointaine, à en reprendre les éléments et à les remettre à plat, de façon à envisager une autre lecture, une autre philosophie de la vie.

Exposition *Take My Breath Away* jusqu'au 9 mai, au musée Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York.

artists were David Hammons, Leonor Antunes, Nairy Baghramian, Hubert Duprat, Elmgreen&Dragset, Petrit Halilaj, Bertrand Lavier, Jean-Luc Moulène, Henrik Olesen, Cameron Rowland, Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys; while those that count in Vo's history were Gonzalez-Torres, Peter Hujar, Nancy Spero, Paul Thek, David Wojnarowicz and Martin Wong. A group thus formed which also included Julia Ault, of course, as well as Patricia Falguières, Élisabeth Lebovici and the artists. Our exchanges were all part of the preparation for the exhibition. Vo's language is born from his curiosity and this way of moving forward through constant learning. He works by bringing together close friends, artists and others encountered along the way. His works express the story of an individual and of a group at the same time. Were I to attempt to sum up Vo's work in a series of keywords, those that come to mind, in no particular order, are: possession, body, religion, dissecting, displacing, colony, questioning, desiring, exile, witness, intimate, plural, recontextualize, family, community, prison, politics, risking, learning, seeking, finding, poetry, beauty, stories...

I was lucky enough to see Vo's current retrospective, *Take My Breath Away*, at New York's Guggenheim, a space that has always been notoriously hard to appropriate. All the magic of his work can be seen there in a hang that is nothing short of remarkable. No work is shown frontally; rather everything is done so that one moves around each work in space and over time. Nothing is stated, but everything is suggested. The show is not chronological and as such perfectly highlights Vo's practice, which is characterized by the collecting of objects whose context inspires multiple understandings – for example *Christmas, Rome 2012* (2013), which sets an antique church roof frame imported from Vietnam next to a collection of velvet hangings from the Vatican, on which relics once lay, leaving marks like ghostly footprints from another time. The full weight of Catholicism is evoked here, just like that of colonialism, themes that are also present in other works that make direct reference to missionaries. In my opinion, this retrospective has a very political side to it, particularly in the "found" and "displaced" pieces that relate to American history, such as the menu at the White House the day Kennedy was assassinated, or Henry Kissinger's letters thanking Leonard Lyons for theatre tickets – Kissinger of course having been Nixon's National Security Adviser and a signatory to the Paris Peace Accords that ended the Vietnam War in 1973 (*Untitled*, 2008). These same accords are evoked once more through the three chandeliers from Paris's Hôtel Majestic, where they were signed.

Danh Vo's work invites us to see and understand history from a different perspective, whether it concerns us directly or seems to be at rather a remove. It encourages us to pick up the pieces and lay them out differently in such a way as to envisage another interpretation, a different philosophy of life.



CI-CONTRE MASSIVE BLACK HOLE IN THE DARK HEART OF OUR MILKY WAY
(2018), OR SUR CARTON, Outils en fer et corde.

WIDEWALLS

Galerie
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Immigration, Colonialism, Capitalism and Authorship - Dahn Vo at the Guggenheim

Art Exhibitions

January 2, 2018

Andrey V.

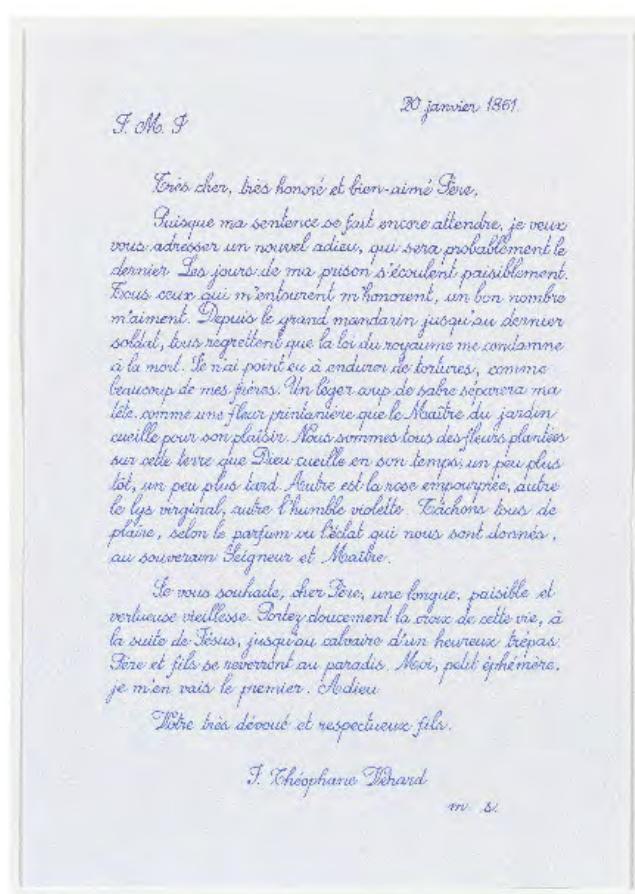
Andreja Velimirović is a passionate content writer with a knack for art and old movies. Majoring in art history, he is an expert on avant-garde modern movements and medieval church fresco decorations. Feel free to contact him via this email:
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WIDEWALLS

At **Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum**, we will soon be able to visit a comprehensive exhibition of works by **Danh Vo**, a Vietnamese-born Danish artist whose art resides **somewhere between performance and conceptual art**.

The show will feature **numerous installations, sculptures and photographs** that he created or re-appropriated, in order to share his opinions on the matters of **immigration and colonialism**.

The New York museum will prepare an illuminating overview of Vo's production by mainly focusing on the last 15 years of his craftsmanship, including recent projects that were created specifically for the occasion.



Danh Vo – 2.2.1861, 2009. Ink on paper, writing by Phung Vo, 29.6 x 21 cm, open edition, Photo: Kristopher McKay

WIDEWALLS

Views On Immigration, Colonialism, Capitalism and Authorship

The upcoming exhibition is organized by Katherine Brinson, Daskalopoulos Curator, and Susan Thompson, Assistant Curator. These two made the decision to fill the ramps of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed rotunda with **more than 100 Vo's art objects**, allowing the viewers to immerse themselves within the artist's singular creative vision.

The show will have a wide spectrum, presenting the artist's early conceptual works such as *Vo Rosasco Rasmussen* (2003) as well as his recent sculptural hybrids of classical and Christian statuary.

The exhibition will forgo a chronological presentation. Instead, it will be interweaving installations, photographs and works on paper from various points in the artist's career, hoping that such an organization of artworks will lead to an amplification of thematic resonances.

The main installations will concentrate on the legacy of colonialism and the fraught status of the refugee. Vo made it clear that he will be predominately focusing on European and U.S. influences in Southeast Asia and Latin America – he'll do so by putting the relationship between military incursions and current states of several nation under the microscope.

Visionary Installations

For years now, Dahn Vo's installations have been dissecting the power structures. By taking into account cultural forces and private desires, his artworks manage to detect the fundamental causes and events that shape the world we live in.



Danh Vo – Bye bye, 2010, Photogravure, sheet: 65 x 52 cm, edition of 24, Courtesy the artist, Photo: Nick Ash

His work addresses such challenging themes like religion, colonialism, capitalism and artistic authorship. However, although these topics have a very wide scope, Vo analyzes them through intimate personal narratives he calls "*the tiny diasporas of a person's life*".

Historical studies, coincidental encounters and personal relationships are all resources Vo uses in his artistic practice. Once all the materials and information is gathered, Vo applies his process of deconstruction and recombination. As a result, found objects, documents and images are turned into registers of latent histories and sociopolitical fissures.

WIDEWALLS

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



Danh Vo – Installation view: Danh Vo ، الـلـحـجـجـاـرـةـ وـالـدـيـيـيـ، Museo Jumex, Mexico City, November 13, 2014 – February 25, 2015, Photo: Abigail Enzaldo and Emilio Bernabé García, courtesy Museo Jumex, Mexico City

Danh Vo Art Exhibition at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

The upcoming show will be a strong indicator of how Dahn Vo managed to probe the myths and symbols that frame entrenched cultural ideals and aspirations – and he did so by subtly excavating the internal contradictions and veiled tensions embedded in his materials.

The comprehensive exhibition of the Danish artist Danh Vo's works will be hosted **between the 9th of February and the 9th of May 2018** at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

Featured images: Danh Vo – She was more like a beauty queen from a movie scene, 2009. Mixed media, 96.5 x 54.5 cm, Collection Chantal Crousel, Photo: Jean-Daniel Pellen, Paris; Das Beste oder Nichts, 2010. Engine of Phung Vo's Mercedes-Benz 190, 66 x 101.6 x 205.7 cm, Purchased with funds contributed by the International Director's Council 2011.56, Photo: Kristófer McKay. All images © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York / © Danh Vo.

ARTFORUM

“DANH VO: TAKE MY BREATH AWAY”

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

February 9–May 9

Curated by Katherine Brinson with Susan Thompson

In the Christian tradition, the “laying on of hands” is a way of transporting a spirit from one body to another. Danh Vo made a similar technique integral to his art. Starting with an array of scavenged objects, ranging from grand chandeliers to presidential pens, Vo alters them—in ways that are undetectable to the human eye—by imbuing them with an affective charge. At times, he cuts these items into pieces, as he did with Roman sculptures and, more metaphorically, the Statue of Liberty. And then there are the cardboard boxes that he emblazons with corporate logos. All of this has made Vo central to contemporary art and a mystical figure in a de-skilled world. If Vo’s practice often focuses on the displacement and migration caused by colonial regimes, this survey of the forty-two-year-old’s career promises to address America’s present state of decay.

—Alex Kitnick



At the Guggenheim, a memoir about America, colonialism and desire



Danh Vo's "She was more like a beauty queen from a movie scene," 2009, mixed media. (Jean-Daniel Pellen/© Danh Vo)

NEW YORK — The Danish artist Danh Vo left Vietnam in 1979, when he was 4 years old. His family fled the war-torn and repressive country in a handmade boat with 117 people on board and were rescued at sea by a Danish freighter. They resettled in Copenhagen, where they built a life suspended between cultures and marked by the whims of historical forces.

Vo's work, which now fills the rotunda galleries of the Guggenheim Museum, is a memoir in objects, a memoir that is indecipherable without extensive footnotes. He begins with an axiomatic assumption: that the self isn't just "a parcel of vain strivings," as Thoreau once wrote, but essentially a fiction. To the extent that Danh Vo exists, he is a product of where he came from, the governments that have shaped his life, the social and cultural forces that have left their impress, the desires he has felt, the things that he has collected. None of this is "bond together," as Thoreau thought or hoped; rather, it is spread out, piece by piece, in seemingly random objects spread along the ascending spiral ramp of the museum's atrium space.

Look through the footnotes, however, and the apparent randomness disappears. What emerges is a picture of how a great, corrupted empire, projecting its force and its hollow idealism around the world, can shape the lives of people even on its farthest peripheries. "Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away" is a powerfully sad show about power, America, colonialism and desire.

Kennicott, Philip. « At the Guggenheim, a memoir about America, colonialism and desire », *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2018.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/at-the-guggenheim-a-memoir-about-america-colonialism-and-desire/2018/02/09/59177f82-0ddc-11e8-8b0d-891602206fb7_story.html?utm_term=.d3129107502f



It includes a collection of photographs of young Vietnamese men holding hands that the artist acquired from an American anthropologist who worked on counterinsurgency programs in South Vietnam during the war; chandeliers that hung in the Parisian hotel where the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973; White House Cabinet room chairs gifted to Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara by Jacqueline Kennedy after her husband's assassination; and 14 letters written to a prominent theater critic by Henry Kissinger, who led a secret bombing campaign in Cambodia that was one of the most shameful acts of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.



Danh Vo's "Das Beste oder Nichts." (Kristopher McKay/Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/© Danh Vo)

Not everything Vo collects is so intimately tied to the Vietnam War. He also deals with sexuality and religion, especially Catholicism, which played a key role in the colonization of Vietnam, the oppression of LGBT people and the spread of HIV during the 1980s and '90s. His family is a recurring subject, especially his father, Phung Vo, who hand-draws elaborate calligraphy messages that are a theme of his son's installations. Desire and death are seen in multiple ways, residing in such things as a medieval statue of Saint Joseph, cut into pieces and tucked into regulation size airline carry-on bags; a cast of his partner's feet; tombstone markers he has fashioned for his family; and images of grisly executions of Christian missionaries in Vietnam. Sometimes, multiple skeins of his collecting come together, as in an elegant, seemingly commercial window display of his father's watch, cigarette lighter and an honorary American military ring — eliciting thoughts about the desire for luxury objects, the connection to family, the way possessions might define us and the American military adventure, extended through time and prosecuted with fire.



This kind of art can be excruciatingly hermetic and solipsistic, and as visually interesting as sorting through someone else's attic. There is an annoying tendency among artists and curators to pretend that merely juxtaposing objects is somehow an argument, or worse, a way of "interrogating" or "questioning" power structures.

Vo's work transcends the usual limitations of memoir art, perhaps because he has uncanny power when it comes to the choice of what to collect and display. Faded velvet hangings from the Vatican Museums retain the shadowy outline of the objects that were displayed in front on them, like ghostly photographs that recall the artist's metaphysical sense of the self as merely a collection of impressions. The Kissinger letters — light, short, friendly notes written during the height of the war — are full of small revelations about one of the most controversial personalities of the century. "Many thanks for the tickets to 'Hello Dolly,'" he writes, and then says in reference to an offer of a ballet performance, "I warn you, I'm insatiable."

Vo also seems to have transferred whatever he has suffered, and whatever anger he might feel, into the objects themselves, which are tempered by a distinctly bittersweet and humane acknowledgment of both human love and cruelty. A recurring icon in many of his installations, and at the Guggenheim, as well, is a letter (hand-copied by his father) written by a French Catholic missionary before he was executed in Hanoi in 1861. The letter reveals a sensitive young man, deeply devout, with an endearing poetic gift. It was his last letter to his father, before "a slight sabre-cut will separate my head from my body, like the spring flower the Master of the Garden gathers for His pleasure."



Danh Vo's "Bye bye" uses a historical photo of missionaries. (Nick Ash/© Danh Vo)

Kennicott, Philip. « At the Guggenheim, a memoir about America, colonialism and desire », *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2018.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/at-the-guggenheim-a-memoir-about-america-colonialism-and-desire/2018/02/09/59177f82-0ddc-11e8-8b0d-891602206fb7_story.html?utm_term=.d3129107502f



Vo seems to have fallen in love with the missionary, who also appears in a photograph in which two other missionaries join hands tenderly. With his fixation on the young man, the artist gives his own slight sabre-cut to our expectations, to the complexity of how colonial relations were lived and to the complicated inheritance of that oppression. Missionaries laid the groundwork for colonialism, which led inexorably to the social divisions, resentment and finally civil war and authoritarian government that forced his family from its home. But Vo's desire pierces all of that in a grand refusal of ideology.

For this exhibition, the Guggenheim has removed the screening that ordinarily covers the skylight at the top of its inverted ziggurat gallery space. So light floods in and grows ever brighter as you near the top of the ascending ramp. At that moment, in a touching gesture, the artist introduces a curtain between the viewer and the objects on display, as if to decline the metaphorical enlightenment that comes from the brightness and the ascent. The exhibition ends inconclusively, but all the more powerfully.

Why should one care about Danh Vo's life? This kind of artistic endeavor can become insufferable if done badly, without the small quirks and pervasive generosity that make memoir interesting and meaningful. The material must have connections, and those connections must be more substantial than the first stirrings of a narcissistic mind. As with the best memoirs, Vo's work isn't about Vo. It is about what made Vo, and even people who have lived a life antipodal to his may find that they, too, have been shaped by the same forces.

ARTFORUM

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—Alex Kitnick

Miguel Ángel García Vega. «Entrevista al mejor artista de 2015, Danh Võ. 'No hay nada malo en fracasar'», *El País*, December 30, 2015.

<http://blogs.elpais.com/con-arte-y-sonante/2015/12/danh-v%C3%8D-no-hay-nada-malo-en-fracasar.html>

EL PAÍS

Entrevista al mejor artista de 2015, Danh Võ. "No hay nada malo en fracasar"

Miguel Ángel García Vega
30 de diciembre de 2015

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



Destierra a los sin rostro/Premia tu gracia es una de las mejores exposiciones de este año en España. A partir de una canción de los años 70 de Nico, Danh Võ (Bà Ria, Vietnam, 1975) propone (hasta el 28 de marzo) en el Palacio de Cristal del parque de El Retiro (Madrid) uno de los viajes más intensos que ha visto este espacio construido para la Exposición de las Islas Filipinas de 1887. Un lugar difícil donde defraudaron en su día artistas tan protegidos por el statu quo artístico internacional como Gabriel Orozco u Olafur Eliasson.

Nacido en Vietnam del Sur, crecido en Dinamarca, a donde llegó de milagro tras huir con su familia en un paquebote de la represión comunista del Vietcong, Danh Võ tiene el talento de un alquimista para mezclar significados y la obsesión kantiana de un coleccionista. Solo de esta forma 600 fragmentos fósiles de mamut, un Cristo de marfil del siglo XVII, una Madona policromada del gótico temprano francés y la primera fotografía del paseo espacial estadounidense dibujan una historia única y, al mismo tiempo, mil narraciones distintas a la vez.

Miguel Ángel García Vega. «Entrevista al mejor artista de 2015, Danh Võ. 'No hay nada malo en fracasar'», *El País*, December 30, 2015.

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Võ destruye las obras y las vuelve a dar sentido. Caos y orden. Entropía y linealidad. Nos habla de colonialismo, economía, del papel de los museos de ciencias naturales del siglo XIX, del paso del tiempo a través de fósiles de miles de años, de sexualidad. Pero sobre todo nos encara a la vida. Y el dolor de su tránsito. Como en la fantástica carta escrita en Vietnam en 1861 por el misionero católico galo, San Jean Théophane Vénard, que remite a su padre en Francia días antes de ser decapitado por proselitismo. Phung Võ, el progenitor del artista, la copia con una caligrafía bella, aunque no entienda sus palabras. Pues no habla ninguna lengua occidental. Para él es una composición abstracta. La soledad del lenguaje contenida en un Palacio en el que los rostros se desvanecen y surge la gracia.

Pregunta. Muchas de sus obras están rotas, fragmentadas o incluso seccionadas con una sierra o un láser. ¿Tiene alguna relación con su interés por la diáspora cultural?

Respuesta. En cierta forma. En esta instalación no hay cortes, desde luego sí fragmentos. Pero es una forma de unir cosas; establecer relaciones. Puede funcionar en ambos sentidos. Algunas veces empleo piezas cortadas o serradas, sin embargo lo importante en la obra es poder trabajar en diferentes pulsos, tamaños y escalas. Es una manera de aprender.

P. Su trabajo es bastante hermético. ¿Resulta un problema para el espectador a la hora de conectar con su propuesta?

R. Cuando utiliza la palabra hermético lo hace empleando otro tipo de referentes. Si pinto un cuadro abstracto o una tela en blanco, o lo que sea, la historia ya está definida porque ese es el canon. Encaja dentro de la historia ya existente. En cierta manera es verdad que mi trabajo puede ser hermético pero es algo estructural.

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P. ¿Cómo ha influido su compleja historia personal en su trabajo?

R. Creo que todos los artistas utilizan su historia personal. Un artista cuya propuesta esté referida al minimalismo o al arte conceptual también es autobiografía. Historia personal. Cuando un creador emplea otro tipo de referencias entonces se convierte en más visible y la gente piensa que esto es historia personal. Es una percepción equivocada.

P. Es cierto, pero también que su vida es un punto de partida para su trabajo.

R. ¿Puede citarme a un solo artista cuyo trabajo no sea personal? Simplemente hay unas historias que son más visibles que otras. En mi propuesta hay parte que es mi biografía. Pero si trabajo con la bandera estadounidense, el primer hombre en el espacio o con la Estatua de la Libertad son imágenes comunes. Los escritos que hace mi padre se refieren a cómo viaja el alfabeto y al dominio y la imposición de la historia occidental. En mi trabajo trato de cuestionarme qué cosas definen otras. Cuando la gente habla de referencias en mi propuesta artística como, por ejemplo, Vietnam, no hay que olvidar que el país asiático es una construcción geopolítica.

P. ¿Cómo descubre las piezas que forman parte de sus instalaciones?

R. En parte las busco, pero suelo decir que he nacido bajo la estrella de la suerte. Las cosas vienen a mí. Es una cuestión de mantener abiertos los ojos y la mente. Son oportunidades y tienes que atraparlas cuando las ves. Viajo mucho y me fijo mucho. Y pienso: “Esto es interesante, debería profundizar más en ello”.

P. Sostiene João Fernandes, subdirector del Museo Reina Sofía y comisario de la muestra que, al igual que Picasso, usted “no busca, sino que encuentra”.

R. Diría que casi ni encuentro, las cosas interesantes suceden delante de mí.

Miguel Ángel García Vega. «Entrevista al mejor artista de 2015, Danh Võ. 'No hay nada malo en fracasar'», *El País*, December 30, 2015.

<http://blogs.elpais.com/con-arte-y-sonante/2015/12/danh-v%C3%A9o-no-hay-nada-malo-en-fracasar.html>

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

EL PAÍS



P. Si tuviera que elegir, ¿cuál sería su trabajo más importante?

R. Sin duda la carta de mi padre. La posibilidad de usar los textos y la caligrafía de mi padre significa mucho, y no lo digo por ser su hijo. Si no por lo que representa. Una de las virtudes más bellas de la cultura es que utilizas cosas que la sociedad puede percibir sin interés o sin calidad. Cuando mi padre llegó a Dinamarca su escritura era inútil porque no habla ninguna lengua occidental. Así que nunca más ha vuelto a utilizarla. Este es uno de los muchos ejemplos que le puedo dar. Porque en una sociedad siempre hay instituciones poderosas que definen qué es calidad y qué no.

P. En su obra *We The People* trocea una reproducción en cobre de la Estatua de la Libertad. La pieza está creada con un material caro y ha empleado a trabajadores chinos en su fabricación. ¿Tiene miedo a fracasar?

R. Desde luego. Es algo a lo que te enfrentas todo el tiempo. Cuanto más éxito tienes más seguro te sientes. Espero realmente no perder el deseo de arriesgar. Porque si trabajas en el mundo del arte es básico emprender caminos nuevos. En todos los proyectos el riesgo tiene que estar incluido. Ya que no hay nada malo en fracasar, si lo haces aprendes. De hecho, desearía fracasar más (risas).



Miguel Ángel García Vega. «Entrevista al mejor artista de 2015, Danh Võ. 'No hay nada malo en fracasar'», *El País*, December 30, 2015.

<http://blogs.elpais.com/con-arte-y-sonante/2015/12/danh-v%C3%A9-no-hay-nada-malo-en-fracasar.html>

EL PAÍS

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

P. Tiene un enorme éxito dentro de la crítica especializada y también en el mercado del arte y con los coleccionistas. ¿Cómo gestiona la presión que esto representa?

R. No lo sé. Es algo difícil. Lo importante es tener las ideas claras. Porque en la realidad el éxito no significa nada. Es muchos casos resulta más destructivo que constructivo. De verdad espero que no afecte a mi trabajo.



P. Pero gracias al éxito económico puede comprar, por ejemplo, estos fósiles de Mamut que no deben de ser muy baratos...

R. Desde luego ayuda. Sin embargo no es una garantía de calidad del trabajo. Puedes producir obras caras que no signifiquen nada. La clave está en hallar el equilibrio. Los fósiles, u otros materiales, son caros pero, por ejemplo, la carta de mi padre es muy asequible [300 euros].

P. Este año ha tenido una gran presencia internacional: el pabellón danés dentro de la Bienal de Venecia, una exposición en la Punta della Dogana de la Fundación Pinault, muestras individuales en varias de las galerías que le representan (Marian Goodman, Chantal Crousel). ¿Será capaz de mantener la tensión de este nivel de exigencia? ¿Va a parar?

R. Ahora mismo creo que para mí es muy importante adquirir mucha experiencia. He trabajado durante bastantes años a baja escala. Resulta fundamental también poder hacerlo en una dimensión grande. Todas esas exposiciones son una manera de sumar experiencia. Y esto es lo trascendente. Además soy más o menos joven y tengo todo el futuro por delante para fracasar.

Fotografías: Samuel Sánchez (El País) y Museo Reina Sofía. Imagen de apertura: Danh Võ fotografiado en su exposición Destierra a los sin rostro/Premia tu gracia (Palacio de Cristal, Parque de El Retiro, Madrid). La entrevista ha sido condensada y editada.

EXPOSITION

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À la Pointe de la Douane, un lapsus révélateur

En marge de la Biennale de Venise, dont le vernissage se déroule cette semaine, du 6 au 8 mai, le Pointe de la Douane propose l'exposition « Slip of the Tongue » conçue par la commissaire Caroline Bourgeois et l'artiste Danh Vo. Une histoire d'obsessions. *Par Roxana Azimi*



Robert Manson,
*Travaux des champs et
animaux de la ferme,*
vers 1950, groupe de
37 photographies.
© Pinault Collection.

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

APRÈS AVOIR
DÉPLOYÉ DU
MUSCLE,
PARFOIS DE
LA GRÂCE, IL
FALLAIT OFFRIR
À LA PLANÈTE
ARTY UNE
EXPOSITION
ULTRA-POINTUE

— À la Pointe de la Douane, à Venise, les expositions se suivent et ne se ressemblent pas. La première, en 2009, sous la houlette de Francesco Bonami et Alison Gingers, avait offert des trésors de guerre, une démonstration de force plus que de pensée, avec des grands charniers des Frères Chapman, en veux-tu en voilà, Jeff Koons et Richard Prince, un parfait catalogue de Christie's. Deux ans plus tard, « l'Éloge du doute », sous le commissariat de Caroline Bourgeois, avait tenté d'explorer la fragilité existentielle. Mais voilà, par-delà les fulgurances dont est coutumière la curatrice, les œuvres étaient parfois trop pétries de certitudes, trop ancrées dans l'histoire ou le marché pour sonner entièrement juste. À l'occasion de la dernière Biennale de Venise, la conversation entre Caroline Bourgeois et Michael Govan, directeur du Lacma (Los Angeles), sous le libellé « Prima Materia », s'était réduite à une juxtaposition inégale d'œuvres plutôt qu'à un vrai récit.

Cette année, l'équipe de François Pinault a corrigé les maladresses des précédentes éditions : la Biennale de Venise est un enjeu trop symbolique. Après avoir déployé du muscle, parfois de la grâce, il fallait offrir à la planète arty une exposition ultra-pointue, tendue, perverse juste ce qu'il faut. Pari réussi avec « Slip of the Tongue », qu'on pourrait traduire par « lapsus ». Caroline Bourgeois s'est associée à l'artiste Danh Vo, invité à fourrager dans l'inventaire de François Pinault - 60 pièces en sont issues - et à y adjoindre une centaine issue d'autres collections. Pour renforcer le sentiment de cohésion avec la ville, le duo a emprunté des œuvres au musée Correr et à la Fondation Cini. Il est des surprises : une *Iris messagère des Dieux* de Rodin qu'on ne soupçonnait pas dans la collection de François Pinault. À l'inverse,

/...

EXPOSITION

À LA POINTE DE
LA DOUANE
UN LAPSUM
RÉVÉLATEUR

ON NE PARLE
PAS ICI DE CHEF-
D'OEUVRE. IL
NE S'AGIT PAS
DE FAIRE DES
MONUMENTS.
(CAROLINE
BOURGEOIS)

SUITE DE LA PAGE 05 on s'étonne que Nancy Spero, artiste ô combien cardinale, en majesté dans le parcours, ne figure pas encore dans le fonds du milliardaire breton... La proposition explore plus les obsessions de Danh Vo que celles du collectionneur. La photo d'une paume tenant un criquet, par un photographe français méconnu, Robert Manson (1907-2001), témoigne du changement de focale. Finies les installations viriles prêtes à sortir de leurs gongs. Place à la fragilité, à l'infiniment petit des trichoptères qui, sous la délégation d'Hubert Duprat, créent fourreaux d'or et de gemmes, aussi subtils que ténus. « *On ne parle pas ici de chef-d'œuvre. Il ne s'agit pas de faire des monuments* », insiste Caroline Bourgeois.

La majorité des pièces convoquées traitent de notre part maudite, du corps blessé ou tronqué, des frottements et frictions de l'âme, des cris tus et des plaies non refermées.

« *Les gens ont cette idée bizarre que l'art vous cicatrice. Je n'ai pas la moindre envie d'imposer une telle idée* », confie Danh Vo. *J'ai toujours détesté cette idée que l'art, c'est la réconciliation qui vous sauve de la noirceur du monde, bla-bla-bla. Il faut regarder la vie avec honnêteté*. Avec férocité aussi. C'est un cri strident qui émane du *Codex Artaud* de Nancy Spero, ode bouleversante au poète suicidé de la société. Il faut prendre le temps de lire les textes de cet être torturé, ravagé, dont l'artiste a reproduit des passages : « *Et surtout qu'on ne me passe plus à l'électrochoc pour des défaillances dont on sait fort bien qu'elles ne sont pas hors du contrôle de ma volonté* ». Par un effet miroir, la rage d'Antonin Artaud alors enfermé en hôpital psychiatrique résonne dans la colère et la frustration d'une femme artiste qui, dans les années 1960, ne parvenait pas à trouver sa place dans le monde de l'art. « *J'avais beaucoup de choses à dire, mais je me sentais réduite au silence, ignorée* », dira-t-elle. Avec ses dessins minuscules, elle tournait en ridicule la grandiloquence macho de l'art américain d'après-guerre. Le cri, c'est aussi celui de son cœur meurtri au décès de son mari, l'artiste Leon Golub. Nancy Spero réalisera à sa mémoire une frise de dessins d'amour et de pleurs, Taj Mahal sans emphase. Thanatos et Eros embrassent l'exposition, entre Peter Hujar et Felix Gonzalez-Torres, tous deux morts du sida, mais aussi avec les fragments de chair encagés de Tetsumi Kudo. Chez Elmgreen et Dragset, la mort n'est pas dénuée d'humour, avec ce plongeoir, invitation à un suicide dans la lagune. « *Le suicide, ce n'est pas la pire des choses*, estime Danh Vo. *On vit dans un monde maniaque qui essaye de vous garder en vie coûte que coûte. C'est bien plus absurde que la mort* ».

SLIP OF THE TONGUE, jusqu'au 31 décembre, Punta della dogana, 2 Dorsoduro, Venise,
www.palazzograssi.it



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Larve de Trichoptère dans son fourreau précieux, par Hubert Duprat. Courtesy Galerie Art Concept, Paris. Photo : Roxana Azimi.



Danh Võ, prismes sensuels

Judicaël Lavrador
15 novembre 2015

Le jeune Danois d'origine vietnamienne propose à Paris un jeu de miroirs sur l'imaginaire amoureux à partir de photos noir et blanc récupérées par hasard.

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



«Fabulous Muscles», détail, 2015.
Photo F. Kleinefenn.
courtesy de l'artiste et de la galerie
Ch. Crousel

A l'origine de cette installation à la galerie Chantal Crousel, à Paris (IIIe), il y a une espèce de conte, si merveilleux que même l'artiste peine encore à y croire - et nous avec. C'est souvent ainsi avec Danh Võ. Montré il y a deux ans au musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, il était le curateur, cet été à la Pointe de la Douane, à Venise, d'une remarquable exposition affichant notamment des artistes rares et un peu oubliés.

Plantant un paysage esthétique décharné, rugueux et sensuel à la fois, le jeune Danois d'origine vietnamienne, installé à Mexico, s'appuie sur les histoires des uns et des autres. Mais il les fragmente, les découpe et les greffe sur d'autres bribes de récit, à la manière de ses propres œuvres, à la manière aussi dont certains pans des événements et des objets du passé peuvent nous parvenir : lacunaires, isolés de leur contexte ou enfouis sous des représentations dominantes.



Affection.

«En 2007, nous a raconté l’artiste, alors que je me trouve à Los Angeles, un homme me contacte, parce que, me dit-il, il sait que je suis gay et vietnamien. Il ignore cependant que je suis artiste. Il tient à me remettre des photographies qu’il a prises quand il était en poste au Vietnam, entre 1962 et 1967. Il n’a pas participé aux combats, il était dans l’administration américaine.» Sur ces clichés, noir et blanc, des hommes ou des adolescents, des soldats en permission ou des civils vaquent dans une exposition de peintures, se baignent dans une rivière ou se promènent dans la rue. Mais, dans certaines images, les corps se frôlent discrètement, les épaules s’effleurent et les mains se cherchent. Pris sur le vif, ces signes d’affection ténus se chargent aux yeux de Danh Võ «d’une sensualité gay impossible à afficher à l’époque où Joseph Carrier les a capturées».

Autant dès lors révéler ces photos, mais sans cramer la belle intimité qui s’y niche. L’artiste a donc construit, dans la galerie, une espèce de chambre de miroirs. A l’intérieur, le vif éclat blanc des néons fait rayonner les parois miroitantes. Votre reflet vous suit partout tandis que les photos, certes exposées en pleine lumière, semblent cependant se fondre au milieu des spectateurs.

Frottement.

Dans ce dispositif à tiroirs et à miroirs, on finit aussi par distinguer des mots gravés sur les parois. Tirés d’un morceau de 2004, *Fabulous Muscles*, ode homoérotique volontiers crue et explicite chantée avec des accents poignants par Jamie Stewart, leader du groupe Xiu Xiu, les couplets gravés ménagent, à l’imaginaire érotique discret des images, un arrière-plan écrit, fier et sexué. Pas une contradiction mais un frottement entre des époques, des attitudes, des désirs à la fois semblables et distincts dans leur forme d’expression. L’œuvre procède par strates, couchant un imaginaire amoureux sur un autre, et se conclut par la présentation d’un fossile de mammouth, façon déroutante pour l’artiste d’inscrire l’exposition dans le temps long et incertain de l’histoire du monde.

Danh Võ Take My Breath Away Galerie Chantal Crousel, 10, rue Charlot, 75003. Jusqu’au 19 décembre. Rens. : www.crousel.com

VENISE

Palazzo Grassi

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**Punta
della Dogana**

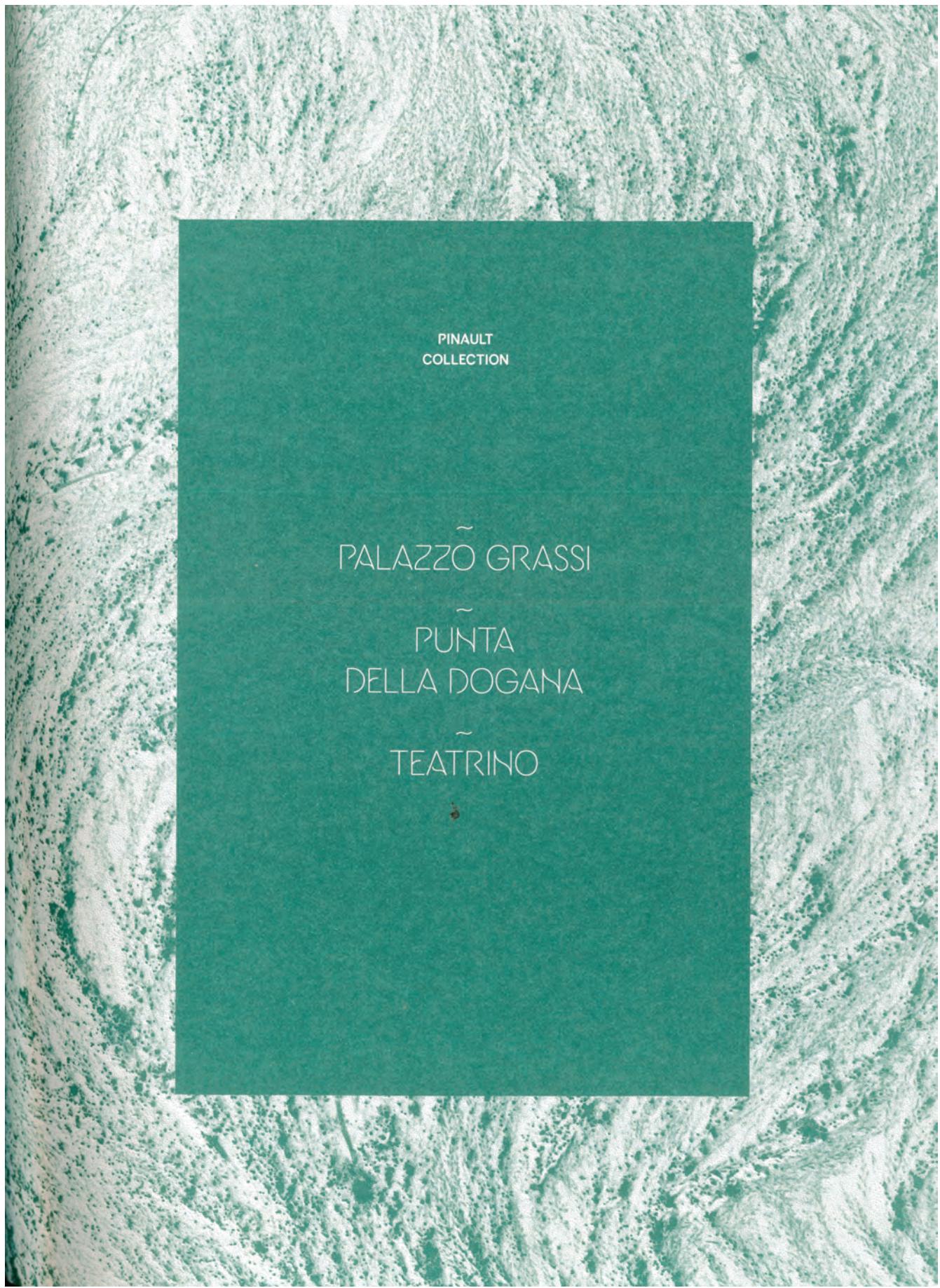
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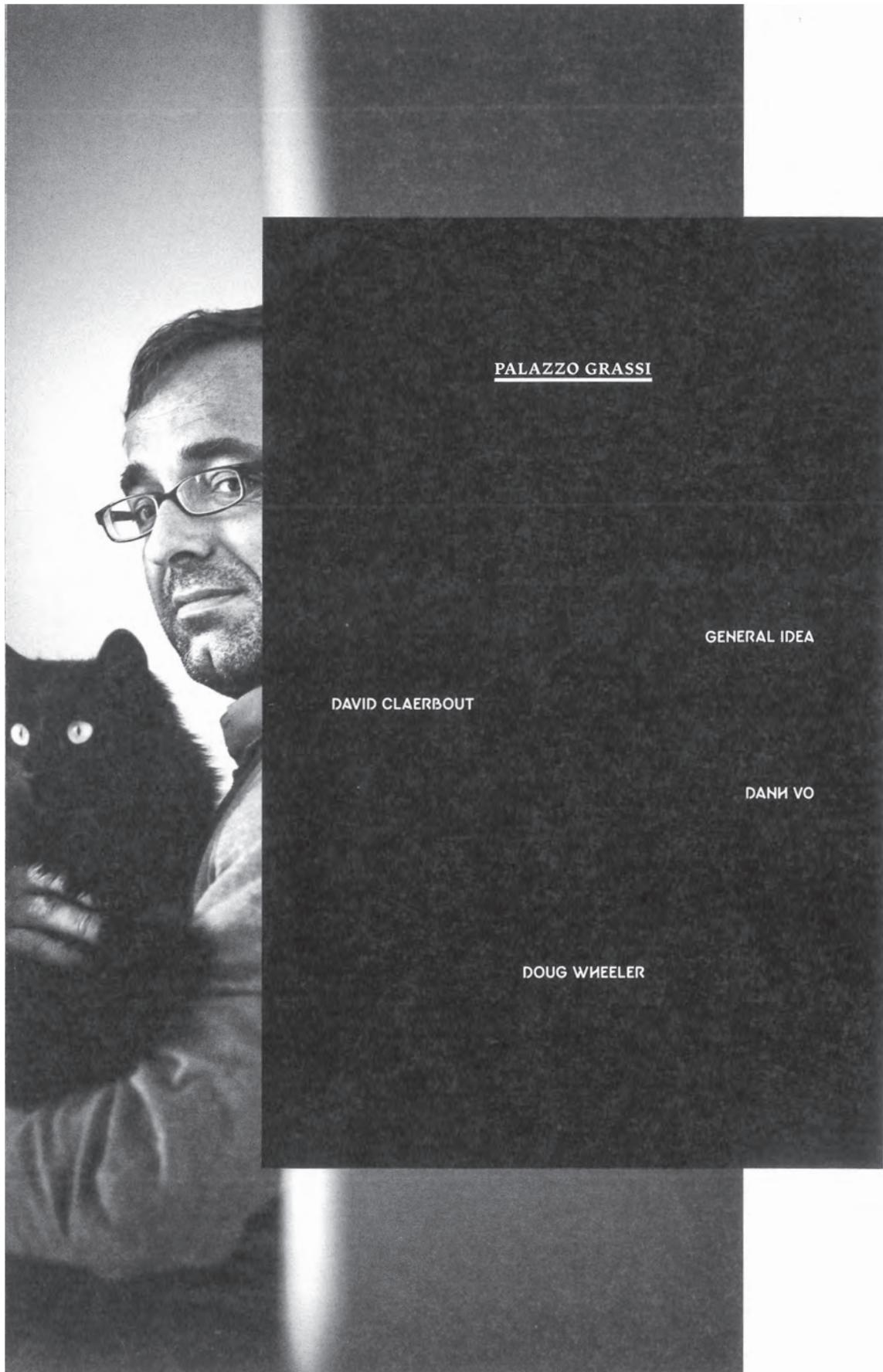
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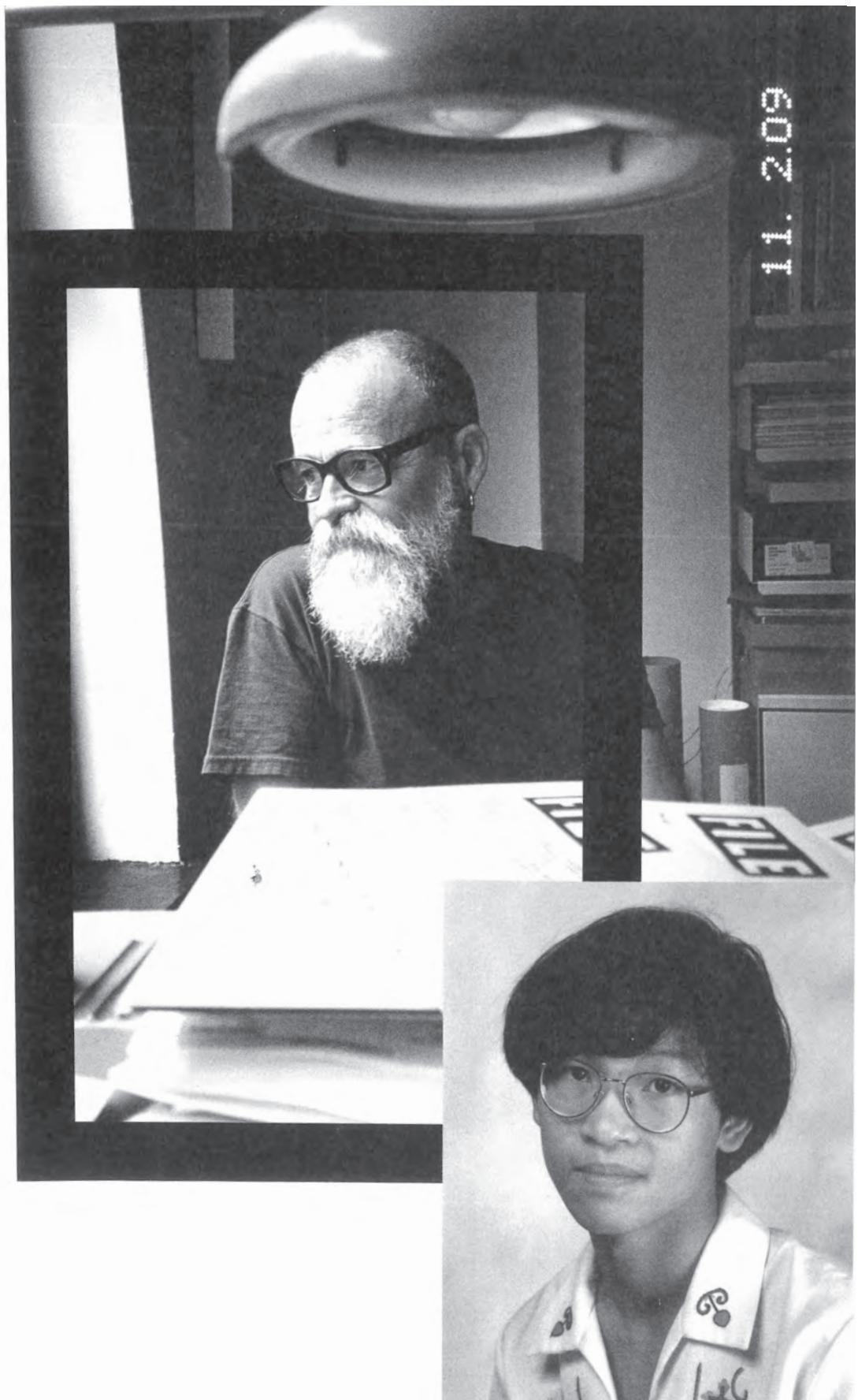
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Anael Pigeat. «Palazzo Grassi, Danh Vo», *Pinault Collection*, October 2014, March 2015, pp. 60 - 73.



À L'OCCASION DE L'EXPOSITION «L'ILLUSION DES LUMIÈRES», DANH VO INÉ EN 1975 À SAÏGON A DÉSOSSET LES MURS DE LA PLUS GRANDE SALLE DU PIANO NOBILE DE PALAZZO GRASSI POUR Y PROPOSER UNE INSTALLATION COMPLÈTEMENT RENOUVELÉE DE SON ŒUVRE AUTOEROTIC ASPHYXIATION.

FOR THE EXHIBITION "THE ILLUSION OF LIGHT." DANH VO IN 1975 IN SAIGON MADE THE WALLS OF THE LARGEST ROOM OF PALAZZO GRASSI'S PIANO NOBILE DISAPPEAR TO PROPOSE A ENTIRELY RENEWED INSTALLATION OF HIS AUTOEROTIC ASPHYXIATION.

DANH
VO

Texte
Anaël Pigeat
Critique d'art,
rédactrice en chef d'*arpres*
Art critic, Editor-in-chief
of *arpres* magazine

Fr *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, comme souvent les œuvres de Danh Vo, présente au premier regard un caractère lumineux qui se noircit au fur et à mesure que l'on s'en approche. Présentée à New York en 2010 à l'Artists Space, cette installation constituait la première exposition de Danh Vo aux États-Unis. Elle est peuplée, ou plutôt hantée, par une série d'œuvres qui dessinent son univers, entre le Vietnam, où il est né et qu'il a quitté à l'âge de quatre ans sur un bateau construit par son père, et le monde occidental postcolonial où il vit depuis. Pour Danh Vo, l'histoire est une fiction et c'est là que réside sa beauté, car elle permet la liberté. Grande histoire et histoire personnelle, mêlées dans ses œuvres, donnent lieu à des récits dont la subversion va de pair avec des réflexions formelles d'une redoutable efficacité.

À Palazzo Grassi, la salle est vide. Les murs sont recouverts de rideaux blancs brodés de fleurs derrière lesquels dansent des ombres — celle de Felix Gonzalez-Torres n'est pas loin, il a grandement marqué Danh Vo. Les formes de ces fleurs, cueillies dans le sud de la Chine, ont été relevées dans les dessins d'un missionnaire botaniste du XIX^e siècle, Jean-André Soulié, décapité au Tibet en 1905. Danh Vo a fait retirer les cimaises de la salle. À travers l'écartement des rideaux, on distingue les fenêtres ouvertes sur la ville et les murs mis à nu, qui révèlent un voyage dans l'histoire du palais, mais aussi

En *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, like many of Vo's works, appears light and breezy at first glance—but becomes darker as we come a little closer. Shown for the first time in 2010 at Artists Space in New York, this installation constituted the entirety of Vo's first American exhibition. It is inhabited—haunted, rather—by a specific universe: a universe that bridges Vietnam, where the artist was born and which he left at the age of four in a boat built by his father, and the western world in which he has lived ever since. For Vo, history is fiction, and that's where lies its beauty: it's what gives us complete freedom. History with a capital H and personal history are combined in his work, creating subversive tales that compel us to engage in a dauntingly effective formal reflection.

At Palazzo Grassi, the room seems empty. White curtains, embroidered with flowers, disguise the walls. Shadows dance behind these curtains—perhaps Felix Gonzales-Torres, whose work strongly influenced Vo's, is not far. The shape of these flowers, found in southern China, was borrowed from drawings by a nineteenth-century missionary with a passion for botany, Jean-André Soulié, who was decapitated in Tibet in 1905. Vo had the wall's outer panels removed. Through the curtains, we glimpse their original structure, open windows and the city beyond, electrical equipment,



6 l'appareillage électrique et, sur le châssis métallique qui soutenait les cimaises, des estampes gravées en noir et blanc à partir de photographies : *The Good Life*. Ces images ont été données à Danh Vo par un homme, Joseph Carrier, qui travaillait pour le ministère de la Défense américain et qui a fait de nombreux voyages au Vietnam entre 1962 et 1973. Il fut contraint de quitter son poste en raison de son homosexualité. De jeunes Vietnamiens apparaissent dans ses photographies, souvent dans des poses sensuelles. Ces images auraient pu être les archives que Danh Vo n'a jamais eues de sa famille. C'est aussi le témoignage de sa rencontre avec cet homme.

D'autres documents surgissent de ce voyage dans le temps, notamment une photographie de famille de Danh Vo enfant, ou encore le destin du missionnaire, Théophane Vénard, dont la dernière lettre à son père, avant sa décapitation, a été recopiée à la main par le père de l'artiste, Phung Vo, qui ne parle pas le français : *02.02.1861* (2009--). Phung Vo reproduit ce geste chaque fois que l'œuvre est achetée, et le fera jusqu'à la mort. Régulièrement disséminée dans des expositions, cette œuvre est « une métaphore de la lutte par l'intérieur du système et non contre lui ». La photographie de cinq missionnaires, dont deux se tiennent la main, a été glissée dans cet ensemble.

Écho glaçant au titre de l'exposition, est aussi accrochée une plaque métallique qui reproduit une page d'un manuel d'instructions pour mener des exécutions par pendaison dans l'État du Delaware. Des mondes coexistent ici, qui se rencontrent en hors champ de l'exposition.

and finally, on the metal framework that supported the panels, black-and-white engravings based on photographs: the series *The Good Life*. These images were given to Danh Vo by an employee of the US Department of Defense named Joseph Carrier. Carrier traveled to Vietnam on multiple occasions from 1962 to 1973. He was eventually pressured into resigning from his post because of his homosexuality. His photographs are of young Vietnamese men, often in seductive poses. These images might have been the archives that Danh Vo never received from his own family; they are also the trace of his encounter with Carrier.

Other documents appear in this journey through time, including a family snapshot of Vo as a child and a letter written by the missionary Théophane Vénard to his father, his final letter before his decapitation. Vo asked his own father, Phung Vo, who doesn't speak French, to copy the letter by hand: *02.02.1861* (2009--). Phung Vo recreates this letter each time the work is acquired, and will continue to do so until his death. Regularly included in exhibitions, this work is "a metaphor of a struggle from within the system, rather than against the system." A photograph of five missionaries, two of whom hold each others' hands, has also been included in this group.

Finally, in a chilling echo to the exhibition's title, a metal plaque hangs on the wall: an excerpt from an instruction manual explaining how to carry out a death by hanging in the state of Delaware: several worlds coexist alongside each other here.





Danh VO,
Autoerotic Asphyxiation,
2010

—
24 héliogravures en noir et blanc sur papier du Dr. Joseph M. Carrier 1962-1973, 2 gravures 7.01.1980, 2010, et *Bye Bye*, 2010 ; 02.02.1861 (2009-), encres sur papier, 1 plaque en métal avec des extraits du manuel des prisons du Delaware ; rideaux en soie et coton brodés avec des détails de plantes découvertes par le missionnaire et botaniste français Jean-André Soulié dans

la Chine du Sud et au Tibet, fin du XIX^e siècle, provenant des archives du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris.

Dimensions variables
Vues d'installation,
«L'Illusion des lumières»
(Palazzo Grassi, avril-décembre 2014)

—
24 framed black and white heliogravures on paper of photographs by Dr. Joseph M. Carrier 1962-1973 ; 2 framed gravures 7.01.1980, 2010, and *Bye Bye*, 2010 ; 02.02.1861 (2009-), ink on paper, framed;

1 metal plate depicting excerpts from Department of Correction, Delaware; cotton and silk curtains embroidered with plant details discovered by French missionary and botanist Jean-André Soulié in Southern China and Tibet, late 19th century, from

archives of Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris.
Installation views,
“The Illusion of Light”
(Palazzo Grassi, April- December 2014)







Qu'il dépèce la Statue de la liberté pour en reproduire, à l'échelle, chaque morceau comme des pièces de boucher ou qu'il fasse recopier par son père, qui ne comprend ni n'écrit le français, la lettre d'un missionnaire condamné à mort au Vietnam au XIX^e siècle, Danh Vo prête l'oreille à la mauvaise conscience de l'histoire. Sauvé des eaux à l'âge de 4 ans par un cargo tandis qu'il fuyait le Vietnam sur un radeau de fortune avec sa famille, il est, à 40 ans, l'un des artistes contemporains les plus réverés de sa génération. élevé au Danemark, formé à la prestigieuse Städelschule – l'École supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Francfort –, il a su faire de son destin tragique un art conceptuel et néanmoins fort généreux, par lequel il s'immisce dans les intervalles imperceptibles de la marche du pouvoir et des peuples. Car Vo, c'est « l'inframince » fait homme ou, comme l'aurait écrit Duchamp, « la chaleur d'un siège qui vient d'être quitté », un courant d'air qui donne aussi quelques frissons aux puissants de ce monde. L'artiste est à Venise à l'heure de tirer ce chapeau, quelque part entre le Pavillon danois qu'il investit pour la Biennale d'art contemporain, et la Punta della Dogana, où la Fondation François-Pinault l'invite pour un commissariat. À la fameuse Douane, où il signe avec Caroline Bourgeois l'exposition « Slip of the Tongue », Danh Vo s'entoure d'artistes venus, comme lui, des quatre coins du monde et de l'histoire pour un « lapsus à 1.000 langues ». Ce trébuchement, si l'on en croit sa virtuosité, est forcément révélateur. — ALEXIS JAKUBOWICZ

Exposition « Slip of the Tongue », en collaboration avec Caroline Bourgeois,
Punta della Dogana, jusqu'au 31 décembre.
56^e biennale de Venise, du 9 mai au 22 novembre.

Adrian Searle. «Art among the ruins: Danh Vo's perverse empires»,

The guardian, January 21, 2015.

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/21/danh-vo-marian-goodman-gallery-review-encounter>



Art among the ruins: Danh Vo's perverse empires

Danh Vo was rescued at sea aged four as his family fled Vietnam. Now, he's an expert arranger of flotsam and jetsam ... from crates of Carnation milk to a Madonna possessed by the devil and a picture of Queen Victoria's puppy Looty



Whisky, or ambrosia? Untitled (2015) by Danh Vo.

A beheading and a wedding; some lines from a song by Nico; a satyr, a cherub and Queen Victoria's pet Pekingese. The more I look (and there doesn't seem all that much to see at first), the more Danh Vo's art troubles me. Amid the exhibition's reaches of elegant emptiness at the Marian Goodman gallery in London are little islands of delicacy and violence, histories, blasphemies.

Given away by her father, the bride wore a gown of ivory satin, made with a fitted bodice embroidered with seed pearls. Her veil of rosepoint lace belonged to the bridegroom's mother. The greyed, half-tone New York Times portrait shows Miss Barbara Pierce looking like a movie star (it is December 1945), as she marries George Herbert Walter Bush of the Naval Air Arm, the future president of the United States. The framed newspaper cutting goes otherwise unexplained.

Talking in the gallery before the show's opening, Vo remarked that he found the newspaper notice in Bush's presidential archive. He likes such places, Vo said, and the bride looks beautiful.

A collector, a rummager and a bricoleur, Vo is an arranger of ruins and fragments. There are stories and connections here, but Vo prefers to let the fragments speak for themselves. This is frustrating, as everything in his work has a story at least as complicated as his own. His family escaped from Vietnam in 1979, in a boat built by the artist's father, Phung Vo, when Danh was four. Rescued at sea by a Danish merchant ship, the family ended up in Copenhagen. Vo will represent Denmark at the next Venice Biennale.

Near the gallery entrance hangs a hand-drawn copy of an 1861 letter that an imprisoned French catholic missionary, St Jean Théophane Vénard, wrote to his father from Tonkin, in Vietnam, days before his execution.

Adrian Searle. «Art among the ruins: Danh Vo's perverse empires»,

The guardian, January 21, 2015.

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/21/danh-vo-marian-goodman-gallery-review-encounter>



J. M. J.

20 janvier 1861.

Très cher, très honoré et bien-aimé Père,
puisque ma sentence se fait encore attendre, je veux
vous adresser un nouvel adieu, qui sera probablement le
dernier. Les jours de ma prison s'écoulent paisiblement.
Tous ceux qui m'enlacent m'honorent, un bon nombré
m'aiment. Depuis le grand mandarin jusqu'au dernier
soldat, tous regrettent que la loi du royaume me condamne
à la mort. Je n'ai point eu à endurer de tortures, comme
beaucoup de mes frères. Un léger coup de sabre séparera ma
tête, comme une fleur printanière que le Maître du jardin
uelle pour son plaisir. Nous sommes tous des fleurs plantées
sur cette terre que Dieu cueille en son temps, un peu plus
tôt, un peu plus tard. Aube est la rose émouprise, aube
le lys virginal, aube l'humble violette. Cachons tous de
plaire, selon le parfum ou l'éclat qui nous sont donnés,
au souverain Seigneur et Maître.

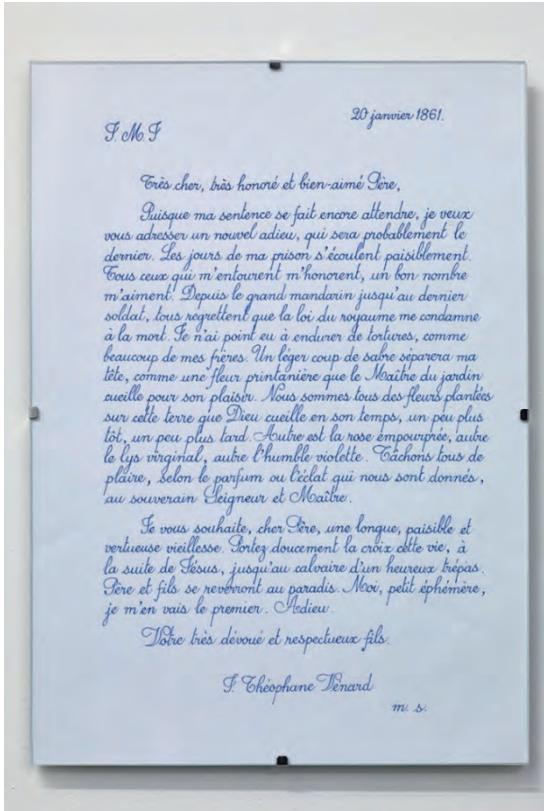
Je vous souhaite, cher Père, une longue, paisible et
verteuse vieillesse. Portez doucement la croix cette vie, à
la suite de Jésus, jusqu'au calvaire d'un heureux triomphe.
Père et fils se reverront au paradis. Moi, petit éphémère,
je m'en vais le premier. Adieu.

Votre très dévoué et respectueux fils.

J. Théophane Vénard

m. s.

Galerie
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Untitled (2015) Last letter by St. Jean Théophane Vénard to his father before he was decapitated, copied by Danh Vo's father, Phung Vo.

diamond saw, and wedged into an old wooden crate whose sides bear the logo of Carnation milk. The smooth, cut surface of the torso has that same glistening, creamy whiteness as evaporated milk. This may be happenstance. Tins of the milk were crated up and shipped around the world from the US at the beginning of the 20th century. It came, Carnation said, from contented cows. Vo loved it as a child. In a similar crate, this time for Johnny Walker whisky, sits part of a wooden, 17th-century cherub's head.

Empires drank the whisky and supped the sickly milk. Neither are the ambrosia their manufacturers would have us believe. Both have colonised the world. Colonisation and migration are themes throughout Vo's work. This includes Catholicism (Vo's parents and grandparents are Catholics), hence the gothic, ruined carved Madonna, whose crowned bust sits on a little shelf of discarded plywood, balanced upon a pair of legs from a 2,000-year-old Roman marble sculpture of a child. Alarmingly, this little confection is called Your Mother Sucks Cocks in Hell, perhaps the most offensive line from William Friedkin's 1973 movie *The Exorcist*, spoken by a demonically possessed Catholic child. The Virgin's face looks deathly, staring out on to the street from the window ledge where she sits.

Another line from Friedkin's movie, "Dimmy, why you do this to me?", is the title of an amalgam of the hips and buttocks of a Roman satyr and the lower part of the same Madonna's worm-eaten oak torso. The last flakes of the blue and red paint that once adorned her nestle here and there in the fissured wood, an ungainly dark mass on smooth marble legs. The satyr has at some point been castrated. Only the testicles remain. This perverse, sacred and profane object stands on a polished steel plinth. The material disjunctions are as startling as their amalgamation.

At the time, Vénard was being kept in a cage. His handwritten letter, in beautiful script, has been copied out by the artist's father, who does not read French and who scrupulously reproduced it in blue ink, by hand, as though he were copying a drawing. He has copied it many times and, for the sum of €300, mails it to anyone who purchases this unlimited Danh Vo edition.

"A slight sabre-cut will separate my head from my body," Vénard writes, "like the spring flower which the Master of the garden gathers for His pleasure. We are all flowers planted on this earth, which God plucks in His own good time: some a little sooner, some a little later ... I, poor little moth, go first. Adieu". By all accounts, Vénard was brave to the last.

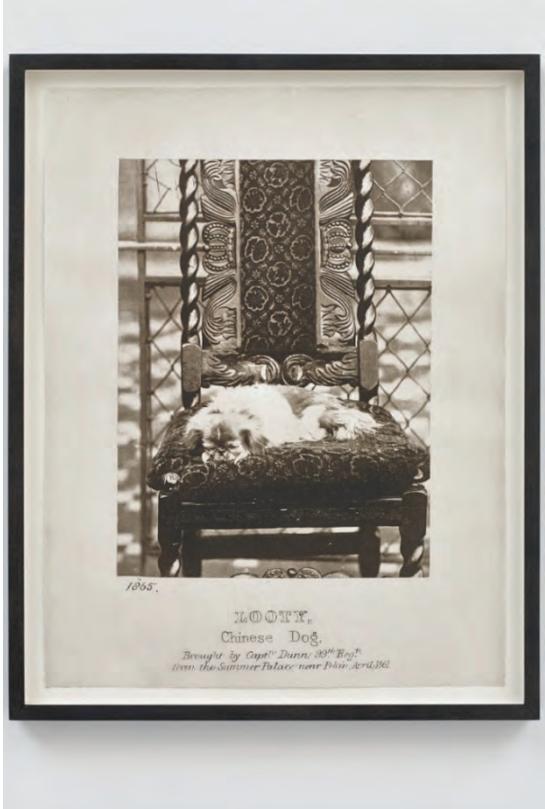
Phung Vo accompanied his son to London, and has also drawn, in large gothic script, a few lines from the late German singer Nico's 1970 song Afraid (from the album Desertshore) on the gallery floor. As the show goes on, the thin pencil lines will become scuffed and erased as people walk over them. I hardly noticed them at first: "Cease to know or to tell or to see or to be your own/ Have someone else's will as your own". Nico's song has been covered by Antony Hegarty and Throbbing Gristle. In Vo's work too, what goes around comes around, in unlikely ways.

There are cuts everywhere – dismemberments, separations, reconciliations, marriages of objects and images. They form unlikely conjunctions. There's more than one kind of wedding. Here is a 2nd-century marble torso of Apollo, sliced lengthways using a

Adrian Searle. «Art among the ruins: Danh Vo's perverse empires»,

The guardian, January 21, 2015.

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/21/danh-vo-marian-goodman-gallery-review-encounter>



Queen Victoria's Pekingese, Loopty

Across the gallery is a copy of a 19th-century photograph of a Pekingese dog, one of several rescued (if that is quite the word) by British and French soldiers who looted the Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860, during the second opium war, after the emperor fled. The emperor's aunt, who looked after the dogs, killed herself when the soldiers came.

One of five dogs, the first to be seen in the west, was given to Queen Victoria, who named it, with a certain wit, Loopty. In the photograph the dog sprawls on a chair, looking dumbfounded, or just plain dumb. Victoria received the dog around the time of the French missionary's execution.

A constellation hangs suspended from the skylights and over the stairs: pitchforks, stirrups and horseshoes, a two-handed saw, a hoe that looks like a stooping falcon, iron traps, pincers from the forge, hinges. All these implements – one imagines their use in building a nation – hang between opened-up industrial cardboard boxes, emblazoned on one side with an earlier version of the American flag (with only 13 stars), and on the other with the corporate logos of Coca-Cola, Sony, Colgate and Coffee Mate. The flags and logos have all been picked out in gold. The cardboard flags turn lazily in the draught. You have to be careful not to clunk yourself in the face with the lower-hanging bits of ironware. As well as colonising the world with corporate brands, America colonised itself, building a nation and wreaking havoc on its natives and its ecology.

Back downstairs, a fragment of a fluted Roman column lies crosswise on its original base, the parts bundled together with the straps of the industrial sling that carted it in here, as if an attempt to hoist it erect had been abandoned. Thinking of Shelley's sonnet Ozymandias, I look on and despair, standing on Nico's desert shore.



Curated by Eungie Joo, Sharjah Biennial 12, “The Past, the Present, the Possible,” featured a compact lineup of 50-plus artists and groups from 25 countries, with many newly commissioned projects and the use of several new sites around the Gulf emirate. Eschewing the grab-bag presentation and heavy polemical themes commonly deployed in biennials, Joo instead showcased artists’ practices in depth or created opportunities for ambitious, site-specific solo projects. The result was more of an exhibition than a festival, as Joo nudged the biennial format away from wide-angled superficiality that make them akin to displays at today’s art fairs. Here’s a look at a handful of the memorable projects from “The Past, the Present, the Possible,” before a full review is published in the May/June issue of ArtAsiaPacific

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An assembled portion of DANH VO's We the People (2010–), a 250 piece-by-piece reproduction of the Statue of Liberty in copper repoussé—made in a Chinese factory. Here, 13 pieces form Lady Liberty's left armpit, rising to the level of the structure around it. Photo by HG Masters for ArtAsiaPacific.

Sharjah Biennial 12: “The Past, the Present, the Possible” can be seen from now until June 5, 2015, at various venues in Sharjah.

EXORCISMS

OF

Connections across time
and place in the work of **Danh Vo**
by Jörg Heiser

THE SELF

Jorg Heiser. «Exorcisms of the self», *Frieze*, n°171, May 2015, p. 192 - 197.

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In a recent acceptance speech for a prestigious literary award, the German writer Navid Kermani, whose parents are Iranian, described the importance to him of five of his colleagues, friends and relatives, all of whom had died in the years since the publication of his autobiographical novel *Dein Name* (Your Name) in 2011. Kermani stated that 'even though they didn't know each other, didn't even live in the same part of the world, didn't speak the same language, [they] were connected to one another in my life, and thus formed the incredible web of relationships that we call "me". This is, I believe, what is meant when in the Talmud and in the Qur'an it says, almost word for word, that if you kill a human being it's as if you kill humankind.'¹

The web of relations that the Vietnamese-born, Danish artist Danh Vo might describe as 'me' is integral to the 'we' of the many works he has realized over the course of the last decade. But, compared to Kermani's understanding of the word, Vo's web feels

more like a thicket of entanglement, formed not just by friends, colleagues and relatives, but also by a cast of characters including a Copenhagen policeman, a 19th-century French missionary in Vietnam, and a politician in 1960s Washington D.C.

'Trung Ky-Danh Vo has been in my class for one year, and I might or might not understand his agenda, but I strongly recommend he quit painting,' stated Peter Bonde, professor of painting at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts on 27 May 2004. Vo reprinted the letter in his 2007 artist book and titled it *Self Portrait (Peter)* (2004). There is also *Self Portrait (Leif)* (2004), a reprint of a Copenhagen Police notification signed by one Leif Enemark Sørensen, who fined Vo 400 Danish Krone for exposing his *derrière* to a group of policemen. In the same book, there is an untitled, undated snapshot of Vo as a child receiving his first communion. The 'incredible web of relationships we call "me"' has been Vo's artistic material from the outset.

Previous page
Your mother sucks cocks in hell, 2015,
fragment of a marble sculpture
of a child from a Roman workshop,
1st–2nd century CE; oak and
polychrome Madonna and child, French
early gothic; plywood, 53 × 40 × 35 cm

1
Oma Totem, 2009,
objects given to the artist's grandmother
Nguyen Thi Ty, by the Immigrant
Relief Program upon her arrival in Germany
in the 1970s: 26-inch Phillips television set,
Gorenje washing machine, Bomann
refrigerator; personalized casino entry pass
and wooden crucifix
received from the Catholic church,
220 × 60 × 60 cm

2
'JULY, IV, MDCCCLXXVI'
2011, installation view at Fridericianum,
Kassel

Courtesy
previous page the artist and
Marian Goodman, London and New York;
photograph: Stephen White •
1 Galleria Zero, Milan; photograph: Jacopo
Menzani • 2 the artist and Galerie
Buchholz, Berlin



Vo's work opens up the complex histories of colonialism, Catholicism and the Vietnam war, and the ways in which they influenced, in often painful ways, the lives of his family and many others.

Take, for example, the letter from Henry Kissinger – who, at the time of writing, was National Security Advisor under President Nixon – which Vo bought at auction. (Along with 13 other letters, it comprises ‘Untitled’, 2008.) In the missive, dated 20 May 1970, Kissinger thanks a *New York Post* theatre critic for inviting him to attend a ballet while regrettably declining, as he has to ‘contemplate Cambodia’ – a euphemism for his key role in supervising a covert US carpet-bombing campaign against North-Vietnamese sanctuaries. Vo exhibits the Kissinger letters in carefully lit wall vitrines, which look like the kind of high-security units used to display jewels.

Since 2009, another letter has been central to Vo’s work: French missionary Jean-Théophane Vénard’s farewell to his father in 1861, as he calmly awaits his execution in the wake of anti-Christian violence in Vietnam. (‘A slight strike of the sword will behead me, like a spring flower picked by the garden master for pleasure.’) The letter is an ongoing edition: upon his son’s request, Danh’s father, Phung Vo, who learned

calligraphy but speaks neither French or English, faithfully reproduces it in his beautiful handwriting and will continue to do so until his death (2.2.1861, 2009–ongoing).

But Vo’s father is not the only person to whom the artist delegates the production of his work. On numerous occasions he has also, for example, asked installation crews – at museums including Kassel’s Fridericianum in 2011 and Copenhagen’s National Gallery of Denmark in 2013 – to decide where and how to install the fragments of his life-size, copper reproduction of the Statue of Liberty (*We The People*, 2010–13), in an attempt to prevent his own decisions from becoming a further layer of meaning imposed on an already fraught allegory. ‘It had to be about economy, logistics, anything but *more* claims being made in the name of liberty,’ Vo told me.

In 2009, Vo piled a TV set onto a refrigerator onto a washing machine, and attached a large crucifix to the fridge’s door. *Oma Totem* (2009) is accompanied by a caption stating that the three objects were ‘objects given to the artist’s grandmother, Nguyen Thi

Ty, by the Immigrant Relief Program upon her arrival in Germany in the 1970s [...] personalized casino entry pass and wooden crucifix received from the Catholic church.’ Produced soon after *Oma Totem*, the work *Tombstone for Nguyen Thi Ty* (2009) consists of meticulous marble-and-wood renderings of the aforementioned objects, arranged as a flat relief or ledger on the floor. Does the piece reduce Vo’s grandmother (whose name is Nguyen Thi Ty) to a consumer, refugee and gambling Catholic? The piece was shown as part of Vo’s exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel in 2009 alongside other elements, including Vénard’s letter and a chandelier the artist had acquired from the former Hotel Majestic in Paris, under which, on 27 January 1973, delegations from North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the Vietcong and the US signed the Paris Peace Accords. In other words, if Vo’s tombstone initially appears to be a deadpan, reductive portrait of his grandma, the letter and the chandelier open it up again to the full complexity of history: colonialism, Catholicism and the Vietnam War, and the ways in which they influenced – in painful

and surprising ways – her life and that of many others, including her grandson.

Two films have been especially important to Vo: *Rosetta* (1999) by the Belgian Dardenne brothers and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), arguably one of the scariest films in movie history, which Vo first saw at the age of seven. After the family had relocated to Copenhagen as refugees when the artist was four, his Catholic mother developed a predilection for horror movies that she readily shared not only with her husband but also with their young children – the family united in front of the television. ('She was too scared to watch alone,' claims Vo.) Given that the film is terrifying to adults, it's not hard to imagine what impact watching *The Exorcist* must have had on a seven year old.

In his exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in London earlier this year, Vo included a number of sculptural collages, one of which was placed on a windowsill. It comprises a weathered oak fragment of an early gothic French statue of a crowned Madonna balanced on a plywood sheet that, in turn, rests on the legs of a 1st–2nd century CE Roman marble statue of a child. Myriad writers throughout history have described damaged ancient figures as being beautiful because of their fragmented nature, and you could consider the montage of two such artefacts here as a contemporary reflection of this. But once you see them as severed body parts rather than as the fragments of a sculpture, the work also evokes something of the obscenity of a Viking drinking skull – the cruel 'misuse' of mortal remains. And, in case you're wondering whether Vo is aware of this element of obscenity, you might be interested to learn that he titled the work *Your mother sucks cocks in hell* (2015). One of the reasons Vo quotes the most famous line in *The Exorcist* is, he readily admits, the mischievous pleasure he derives from gallery professionals having to recite it. It's a pleasure he intends to carry on into his upcoming solo project for the Danish pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, where officials may have to recite the title in opening speeches. But it also reflects Vo's interest in the idea that being possessed by a demon involves becoming the literal conduit for words that you can't control. It's like being exonerated from guilt for the sin committed – or from the task of representing Denmark in a statesman-like manner. (Vo left the country ten years ago, when he moved to Berlin; he now lives in Mexico City, although he has kept a studio in the German capital.)

Apart from Vo's unabashedly juvenile delight in profanity, there are two things that make the figure of Regan – the 12-year-old protagonist of *The Exorcist* (played by Linda Blair), who is possessed by the ancient demon Pazuzu – so striking for the artist. One is that, while her body remains that of a young girl,

her head turns into an evil thing capable of rotating 360°. This is reflected in the way Vo puts the 'wrong' head onto the 'wrong' limbs in his sculptures, twisting anatomy as much as the idea of a unified self, or work of art. The second aspect is that, through Regan, Pazuzu speaks the truth – in different languages and the voices of the dead as well as the living – to those who are present, mirroring their own feelings of lust and guilt.

Another sculpture included in the London show was *Dimmy, why you do this to me?* (2015), titled after a line in *The Exorcist* hissed by the demon in the broken English of the priest's late Greek mother. The demon reflects the priest's deep-seated feelings of guilt for not having cared for her properly. So, does Vo's piece also speak truth to us? The torso of the same worn-worn Madonna that forms the head of *Your mother sucks cocks in hell* rests on the lower part of the body of a satyr missing his phallus but still in possession of his peachy marble buttocks. You could interpret Vo's sculpture as an allegory for the strange mix of pleasure and guilt that pervades the art world, from its cloisters of scholastic discourse to the various blue-chip bazaars. But that's probably reading too much into it: the piece also resonates with Vo's experiences of a Catholic upbringing, of living with his sexual identity and, more generally, of the way subjectivity is a life-long battle between conflicting impulses; the work is yet another self portrait, of the web of relationships that forms 'me'.

'I cut them up so they would fit within Easyjet's hand-luggage requirements,' said Vo in 2007, explaining the rationale behind the size of the church artefacts he was using in his work. He squeezed parts of a medieval sculpture of St. Joseph into six pieces of luggage (*Untitled*, 2008). The saint's half face and severed fingers fit neatly into the zip-up compartment of a leather bag. What initially may have been a hilarious take on economic pragmatism, as well as a cheeky echo of the colonial seizure of 'foreign' artefacts, has since evolved into an aesthetic register and elaborate fetish in its own right. Included in his recent London show was *Lick me, lick me* (2015), a marble Apollo torso – another 1st–2nd century CE artefact from a Roman workshop – stuck in a vintage wooden Carnation Milk box. The box becomes a tool that guides the gaze erotically and cruelly, given that what we see is a mutilated ancient artwork. Yet the torso is put in 'the wrong way round'. A vertical cut that would have made Apollo's beautifully chiselled back and buttocks sit neatly inside the box, exposed to the viewer, is instead turned the other way round: we see the clean milky plane of the incision. Vo recently sent me an email, the subject line of which read 'fwrd: lick me lick me', that contained a group of images from the workshop where the marble statue was cut, including numerous shots of the huge saw wheel cutting through the Apollo – a strangely necrophilic sight – as if through butter, while milky water from the machine pours across it.

So it is with *We The People*. Here, too, the 'body' of the Statue of Liberty has been

dissected: one that is universally recognized as the allegory of freedom, albeit compromised by too many tourist reproductions and too many failures of the promise of freedom it embodies. The social reality of these failures brings us to *Rosetta*. Like *The Exorcist* – albeit in an entirely different, *cinéma-vérité* style – the film features a driven central character: Rosetta, a 17-year-old girl who lives with her alcoholic mother in a Belgian trailer park, is desperately, determinedly, trying to get a job in order to survive. She is driven by basic human needs: the need for food, a roof over her head, a safe place to sleep and – if things go well (but they usually don't) – some sense of intimacy and trust. As Vo put it in a 2012 catalogue statement for his show at Kunsthaus Bregenz, in a characteristic mix of humility and exaggeration: 'I confess my brain was gang-raped by the films of Jean-Pierre Dardenne and his brother, Luc. Rosetta and her phallic drive to secure a job (and therefore a place in society) is burned into my mind.' It's a quip that explains Vo's prolific output and his willingness to implicate others with a sense of commitment, whether it's institutions and galleries having to deal with the logistics of creating a life-size replica of Lady Liberty, or his dad copying letters until he dies.

It is in this spirit that Vo is approaching his 'job' of representing Denmark in Venice. With no-nonsense conceptual pragmatism, he has insisted that all superfluous expenses associated with the pavilion, which have accrued in recent years, should be eliminated: there will be no party to celebrate the opening, and the involvement of a PR company that had previously been in charge of handling press (which had apparently eaten up a good part of the budget) was cancelled without replacement. The information currently on the Danish pavilion's website is a transcription of every single line uttered by the demon in *The Exorcist*, including: 'What an excellent day for an exorcism.' ♦

1 Navid Kermani, 'Dein Name. Dankrede zum Joseph Breitbach Preis' (Your Name. Acceptance Speech for the Joseph Breitbach Prize), in *Merkur* no. 798, February 2015, pp. 6–19.

Jörg Heiser is co-editor of *frieze* and co-publisher of *frieze d/e*. He lives in Berlin, Germany.

Danh Vo lives in Mexico City, Mexico. In 2014, he had solo exhibitions at Museo Jumex, Mexico City, and Nottingham Contemporary, UK, and his sculpture *We The People* (2010–13) was displayed in City Hall Park and Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, USA. In 2015, he had a solo exhibition, 'Homosapiens', at Marian Goodman Gallery, London, UK; Vo is representing Denmark at this year's Venice Biennale, Italy.

1
Dimmy, why you do this to me?
2015, oak and polychrome
Madonna and child, French early
gothic; marble torso of a satyr from a
Roman workshop, 1st–2nd
century CE; steel, 146 × 50 × 50 cm

2
Lick me, lick me, 2015,
Marble torso of Apollo from a Roman
workshop, 1st–2nd century CE;
wood; nails, 21 × 32 × 48 cm

Courtesy
the artist and Marian Goodman,
London and New York; photographs:
Stephen White



*You could read Vo's
sculpture as an allegory
about the strange mix
of pleasure and guilt
that pervades the art world.*

Karen Rosenberg. "Two Parks, One Statue, Lots of Pieces Lying Around. Danh Vo's 'We the People,' Divided", *The New York Times*, August 7, 2014.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/arts/design/danh-vos-we-the-people-divided.html?_r=1

The New York Times



A detail — folds on the statue's robe — from Danh Vo's "We the People," on display in Brooklyn Bridge Park. Damon Winter/The New York Times

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If you can get past the glaring obviousness of its central metaphors, Danh Vo's "We the People" — a fragmentary replica of the Statue of Liberty, made in China — looks pretty compelling in its latest incarnation as a Public Art Fund project. After popping up in various American, European and Asian museums, the work — or a portion of it, at least — is now ideally situated in two city parks at opposite ends of the Brooklyn Bridge.

In 2010, Mr. Vo enlisted a Shanghai fabricator to make him a copy of Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi's Liberty. Mr. Vo's version was made piece by piece from thin sheets of hammered copper, like the original. But at the artist's insistence, it remains unassembled: The 250 or so parts, now dispersed through various public and private collections, are never to be united as a single sculpture. You might think of it as a giant, scattered Erector set, awaiting assembly by some unknown hand.

Mr. Vo has shown small groups of fragments at museums (including the New Museum in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago). Now, working with the Public Art Fund and Andria Hickey, its associate curator, he has split his latest exhibition of "We the People" between City Hall Park and Brooklyn Bridge Park.

Karen Rosenberg. "Two Parks, One Statue, Lots of Pieces Lying Around. Danh Vo's 'We the People,' Divided", *The New York Times*, August 7, 2014.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/arts/design/danh-vos-we-the-people-divided.html?_r=1

The New York Times



Two untitled details from Danh Vo's "We the People," an actual-size copy of the Statue of Liberty in fragments, at City Hall Park in Manhattan. Damon Winter/The New York Times

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

It's hard to think of a better setting, or settings, for Mr. Vo's project; the original statue is either in sight or a quick ferry ride away. And at both of these well-trafficked locations, the civic and political aspects of the work emerge forcefully. (In white-box galleries, by contrast, "We the People" looks like so much other post-Minimalist installation art.)

At City Hall, more than 30 pieces are strewn about the lawn (with a few others inside the rotunda, viewable by signing up for a City Hall tour). The haphazard-looking arrangement of oddly shaped and twisted sheets of metal on grass feels deeply unsettling, especially to a people traumatized by memories of Sept. 11.

Most of the coppery curves represent segments of Liberty's draped gown — small diagrams have been provided, to show you how the components would fit together — but ringlets of hair are also visible on the lawn, and inside the rotunda is a giant ear.

Visitors may also make more soothing connections between the sculptures and the park surroundings: In particular, the curls of fallen tree bark that surround many of the fragments, which might make you think of "We the People" as a kind of second skin. The piece is also accompanied by a horticultural intervention, albeit one that's likely to be missed by passers-by who don't read the placards. At the park's southern entrance, Mr. Vo has planted a garden of flowers cataloged by 19th-century French missionaries to Southern Asia and subsequently introduced to Europe and North America.

Karen Rosenberg. "Two Parks, One Statue, Lots of Pieces Lying Around. Danh Vo's 'We the People,' Divided", *The New York Times*, August 7, 2014.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/08/arts/design/danh-vos-we-the-people-divided.html?_r=1

The New York Times

The link between the garden and "We the People" becomes more apparent when you think about both projects, and, of course, the Statue of Liberty itself, as embodiments of international exchange. As the Public Art Fund's texts note, Mr. Vo's sculptural fragments were "conceived in Germany, fabricated in Shanghai, supported by his French gallery, collections and art institutions worldwide, and dispersed to exhibition venues in more than 15 countries." The garden is also a subtle reminder of the double standards of 19th-century colonialism, the idea that France could maintain a presence in Asia and Africa even as it presented us with a monument to independence.

At Brooklyn Bridge Park, that monument can be seen in the distance. And here, Mr. Vo teases us with the idea that his diffuse replica might one day come together; he has joined 13 of the fragments to form sizable portions of Liberty's right sleeve, the one that clothes her torch-bearing arm.

Set on Pier 3 Greenway Terrace, this part of the show is smaller but allows for more interaction with the works than the exhibition does at City Hall Park (where lunching office workers and ground zero tourists sit on benches that ring the fountain, turning their backs to the art). Here it's possible to peer into the scaffolding that supports the copper drapery, imagining the innards of that familiar body across the harbor.

"We the People" also gives you an occasion to survey Brooklyn Bridge Park, still under construction, and to meditate on its unusual private-public partnership (which has become a subject of intense debate). It seems significant that "We the People" has a similarly complex status, as a sculpture apportioned among various public and private collections. This is probably the most interesting, if least remarked-on, part of Mr. Vo's project: the idea of a public sculpture — a national monument, even — as a fractional, proprietary thing.

Danh Vo

Intimate Bonds: The Art of Danh Vo

MICHAEL NEWMAN

At first glance, two of the most obvious themes through which one could examine Danh Vo's practice are biography and lineage. This is in part a result of the subjects the artist chooses as well as how his family members and their personal story—now recounted in almost every discussion of his work—have become intertwined with objects. Vo left Vietnam with his family when he was four years old, in a boat built by his father. Rescued by a Danish cargo ship, they ended up in Copenhagen, rather than the United States, their intended destination. These days, Vo prefers to live a somewhat nomadic life, reflecting the diaspora that results in what Paul Gilroy has described as "ordinary cosmopolitanism."¹⁾ Yet many of Vo's works focus on his family, often through objects connected with death. One such work is TOMBSTONE FOR NGUYEN THI TY (2009), a permanent memorial for Vo's grandmother in marble, granite, bronze, and wood, representing a refrigerator (with a crucifix on its door), a washing machine, and a television set—all objects she was given upon her arrival in Germany by the Immigrant Relief Program. Another is TOMBSTONE FOR PHUNG VO (2010), a plaque for Vo's father. Now in the collection of the

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DANH VO, 16:32, 26.05, 2009,
08:03, 28.05, 2009, 8:43, 26.05,
2009, late 19th century chan-
delier, dimensions variable, in
progress, Hotel Majestic Ballroom,
Paris, 2009 / Kronleuchter,
spätes 19. Jahrhundert, in Arbeit.
(PHOTOS: SANDRA TERDJMAN)

Danh

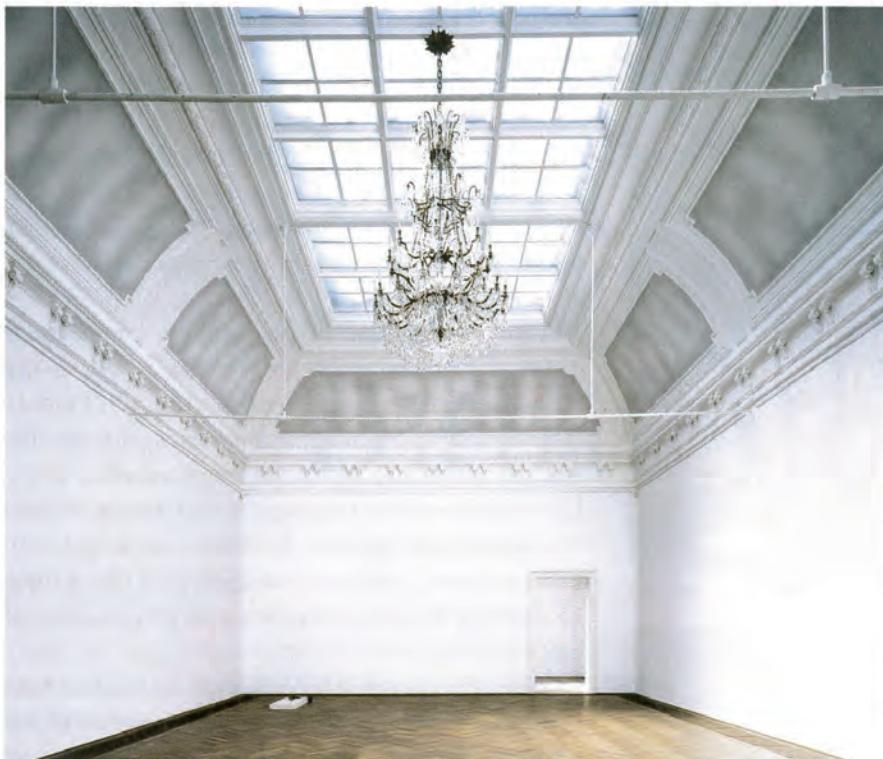
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, it will be exchanged upon the death of Phung Vo for a selection of his personal effects, including a Dupont lighter, a Rolex watch, and an American military class ring. These are more recent versions of the three objects that together comprise Vo's IF YOU WERE TO CLIMB THE HIMALAYAS TOMORROW (2005): things Vo's father had desired in Vietnam but only obtained after his arrival in Denmark.

These works have to do with the complexities of being Vietnamese not in Vietnam as well as the Western-ness already in Vietnam. After all, Catholicism arrived via French missionaries, agents of colonialism, which also led to the transformation of the Vietnamese written language from Chinese characters to the Latin alphabet. So there is no simple Vietnamese "other," and acknowledgment of that is a way of avoiding the internalization and perpetuation of colonial projections.

When Vo turns his focus away from his Vietnamese family in the West and toward his country of origin, his interest lies most often in the involvement of Western figures. He finds objects that are connected with French and American intervention in Vietnam and even the people who directed it: chandeliers from the Hotel Majestic where the Vietnam peace accords were signed in 1973; letters from Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's National Security Advisor during the Vietnam War; chairs, pens, and photo album belonging to Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under presidents Kennedy and Johnson; photographs by RAND counter-insurgency agent Joseph Carrier of young Vietnamese men, taken between 1962 and 1973, when he was withdrawn on the grounds of homosexuality.

In one way or another, all of these objects have been touched by their owners and the places through which they've circulated; or, using a photograph as a model, they have been touched through their exposure (to an event). The analog photograph has been recognized as a kind of relic, and, in a sense, all these objects are relics.²⁾ It is through touch that the relic both gains and imparts its efficacy; this is also how familial culture is acquired. Phung Vo's personal objects share a history with powerful agents whose actions affected the fate of his family; through his

Danh Vo



DANH VO, 08:03, 28.05, 2009,
late 19th century chandelier from
the Hotel Majestic ballroom, Paris /
Kronleuchter, spätes 19. Jahrhundert,
aus dem Ballsaal des Hotel Majestic.

DANH VO, TOMBSTONE FOR
NGUYEN THI TY, 2009, marble,
granite, bronze and wood relief,
 $86 \frac{5}{8} \times 23 \frac{5}{8} \times 7 \frac{7}{8}$ /
GRABSTEIN FÜR NGUYEN THI TY,
Marmor, Granit, Bronze- und
Holzrelief, $220 \times 60 \times 20$ cm.

Installation views /
Installationsansichten:
“Where the Lions Are,”
Kunsthalle Basel, 2009.
(PHOTOS: SERGE HASENBÖHLER)

touch, he turns the otherwise mediated connection into something intimate.

To be clear, these objects and documents are not representations or copies. They have been given to Vo by their owners or purchased by him at auction. In other words, they have a provenance. Vo's work thus differs from the Duchampian readymade, in the importance of ownership; from the Surrealist objet trouvé, in that the acquisition is usually researched and deliberate; and from the appropriation art of the 1970s and '80s, as authorship and authenticity are not questioned, but rather their role is extended beyond questions of aesthetic value.³⁾

It is important to Vo that the objects are indeed authentic, but not necessarily for the sake of the experience of their aura in a Benjaminian sense—as nearness-within-distance and connection to place.⁴⁾ The authenticity of the objects Vo obtains has more to do with the “real presence” of the host in the Catholic mass, a change in substance without a change in its “accidental” qualities. The pen is merely a pen, but what orders it must have signed! These chairs



were sat on by McNamara—and perhaps Kennedy and Johnson! The connection with the great is quite stupid, obtuse. This reduction can provide a degree of control over powerful people who wrote off the lives of many. However, this also means that the object is more than it appears. As an ordinary object, it could be substituted by similar objects, but the way it



Danh Vo

DANH VO, TOMBSTONE FOR NGUYEN THI TY, 2009, marble, granite, bronze and wood relief, $86 \frac{7}{8} \times 23 \frac{3}{8} \times 7 \frac{7}{8}$;
installation view, "Strange Comfort (Afforded by the Profession)," Church Sant'Isidoro, Rome / GRABSTEIN FÜR NGUYEN THI TY,
Marmor, Granit, Bronze- und Holzrelief, $220 \times 60 \times 20$ cm, Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: ELA BIAŁKOWSKA)

is used in Vo's work draws on the dimension of the irreplaceable: It has to be that one object that was in contact with that person, or in the place of that event. While the object may be imitated, the singularity of its provenance cannot be repeated.

This serves not only to amplify the object in a way that connects history with the particular circumstances of Vo and his family, as mentioned above, but it also draws upon and brings to light the Christian source of some of the fundamental assumptions that underlie Western art to this day: that an object might "incarnate" something in excess of its appearance; that it is both singular and is connected in a direct, unmediated way with an agency that has shaped history.

However, the objects of political movers incarnate ideas related to power and control; the family objects incarnate something closer to love; and the Carrier photographs show how love and power relations are involved with each other. *Love*, a loaded term, here refers to intimate bonds, which take different forms, frequently overflowing into each other: Agape or love of God combines with familial love in a letter written by a nineteenth-century missionary, Jean-Théophane Vénard, to his father on the eve of his execution in Vietnam; homosocial love may be projected into a group photograph of missionary priests as well as onto Carrier's subjects; and extreme masochistic enjoyment is illustrated in postcards of missionary priests being tortured, dismembered, and

Danh Vo

killed, included in the catalogue to “Where the Lions Are,” Vo’s 2009 exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel.

A missionary in one of the postcards appears to be suffering lingchi, the so-called “death by a hundred cuts,” photographs of which were published in Georges Bataille’s *The Tears of Eros* (1961); in another projection onto the Chinese other, the philosopher found here sex and dying united in an ecstasy that transgresses limits. The postcards are followed in Vo’s catalogue by illustrations of plants discovered by a missionary in southern China and Tibet; these were embroidered onto gauze curtains—between Carrier’s snapshots of Vietnamese men (photographed from behind as they lean over a balcony wearing only shorts; pairs holding hands or asleep together)—in “Autoerotic Asphyxiation,” Vo’s 2011 exhibition at Artists Space, New York.⁵⁾ The title suggests the combination of pleasure and pain beyond limits for which psychoanalysis invented the word *jouissance*.⁶⁾

Jouissance meets filial and spiritual love in Vénard’s letter to his father, where he writes that “a light blow of the sword will separate my head, like a spring flower that the Master of the garden picks for his pleasure”: The martyr suffers and dies to please God the Father. Vo has his father copy this letter on commission, in an edition limited only by Phung Vo’s life span. The father becomes a scrivener who copies the writing without being able to read it, so that the exercise becomes something like drawing—a perverse relationship to a Western language as it is reduced to the meaningless materiality of its letters. Through this commission—the repeated enactment of a memento mori—the son supports his father, the Vietnamese boatman to whom he owes the unrequitable debt of his life. Vo inserts his relationship with his father into a larger historical, Christian narrative and insists that it be understood within an art context, in which it is often forced into intimate relations (by virtue of their proximity in the exhibition space) with objects plucked from grand narratives of colonial control. As the tribute that his father’s tombstone will bear, in gothic lettering, Vo adopted the poet Keats’s epitaph: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.”



1) Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London and New York, Routledge, 2004), p. 80. Gilroy’s idea is reflected in Vo’s WE THE PEOPLE (2010–13): The Statue of Liberty, which once greeted immigrants to the New World, is rendered in fragments of thin copper that are then dispersed to different exhibitions around the world.

2) See Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Amsterdam and New York: Van Gogh Museum and Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

3) See Nora Taylor, “Is Danh Vo a Vietnamese Artist?,” talk presented at the Renaissance Society, Chicago, November 4, 2012: <http://vimeo.com/53014678> (accessed November 8, 2013).

4) Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version,” *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996–2003), vol. 4, pp. 251–83, and “Little History of Photography,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 507–30.

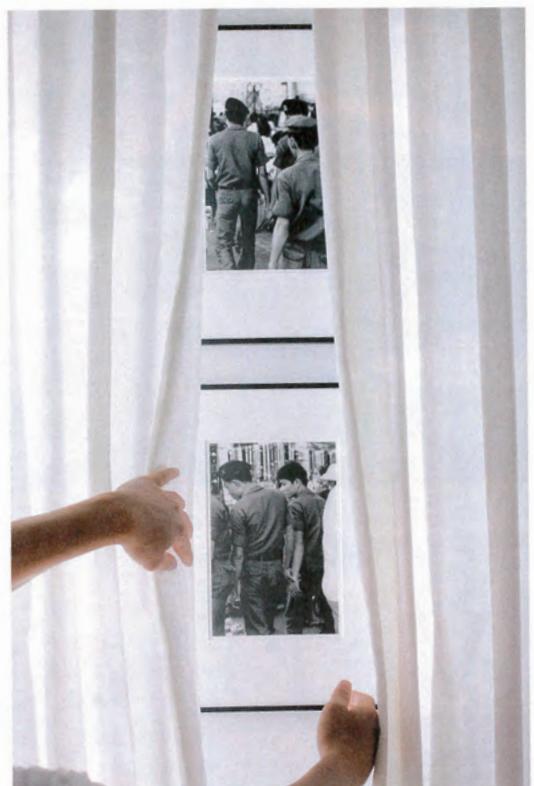
5) For a superb discussion of this exhibition, see Amy Zion, “Aesthetic Desire,” in *Fillip*, no. 14 (Summer 2011), pp. 76–83. The exhibition pamphlet contained an excerpt from the manual “Execution by Hanging, Operation and Instruction Manual of the Department of Correction, State of Delaware,” with instructions in numbered steps. Vo often incorporates such so-called ephemera, including pamphlets and gallery plans, into his exhibitions. Carrier’s will bequeathing the photographs to Vo also hung in the Artists Space exhibition, establishing the images’ provenance.

6) See the entry for *jouissance* in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 93–94.

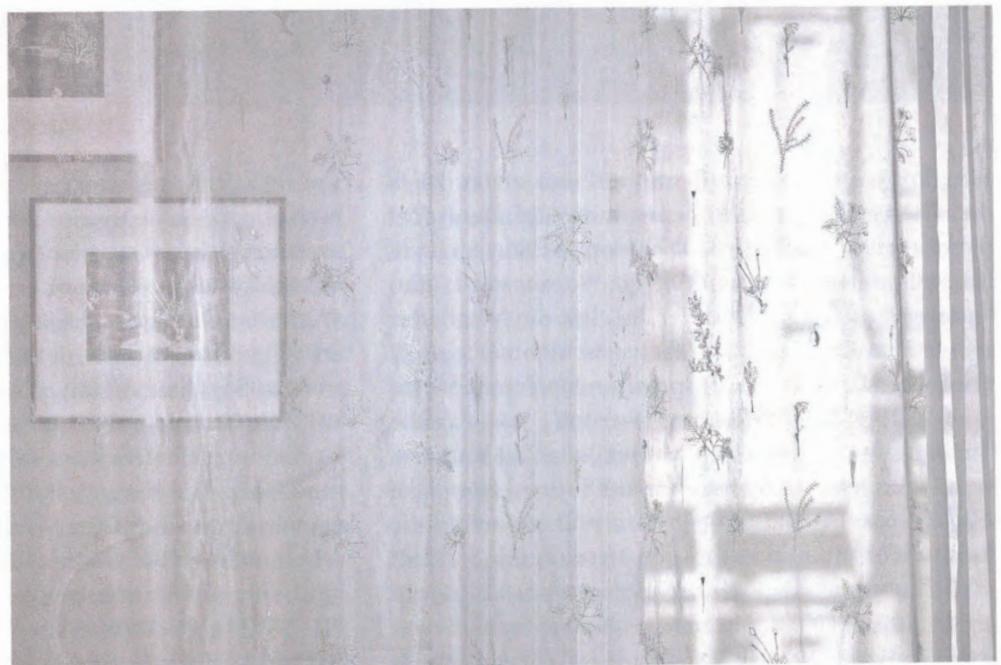
Michael Newman. «Intimate Bonds: The Art of Danh Vo», *Parkett*, n°93, 2013.



Danh Vo

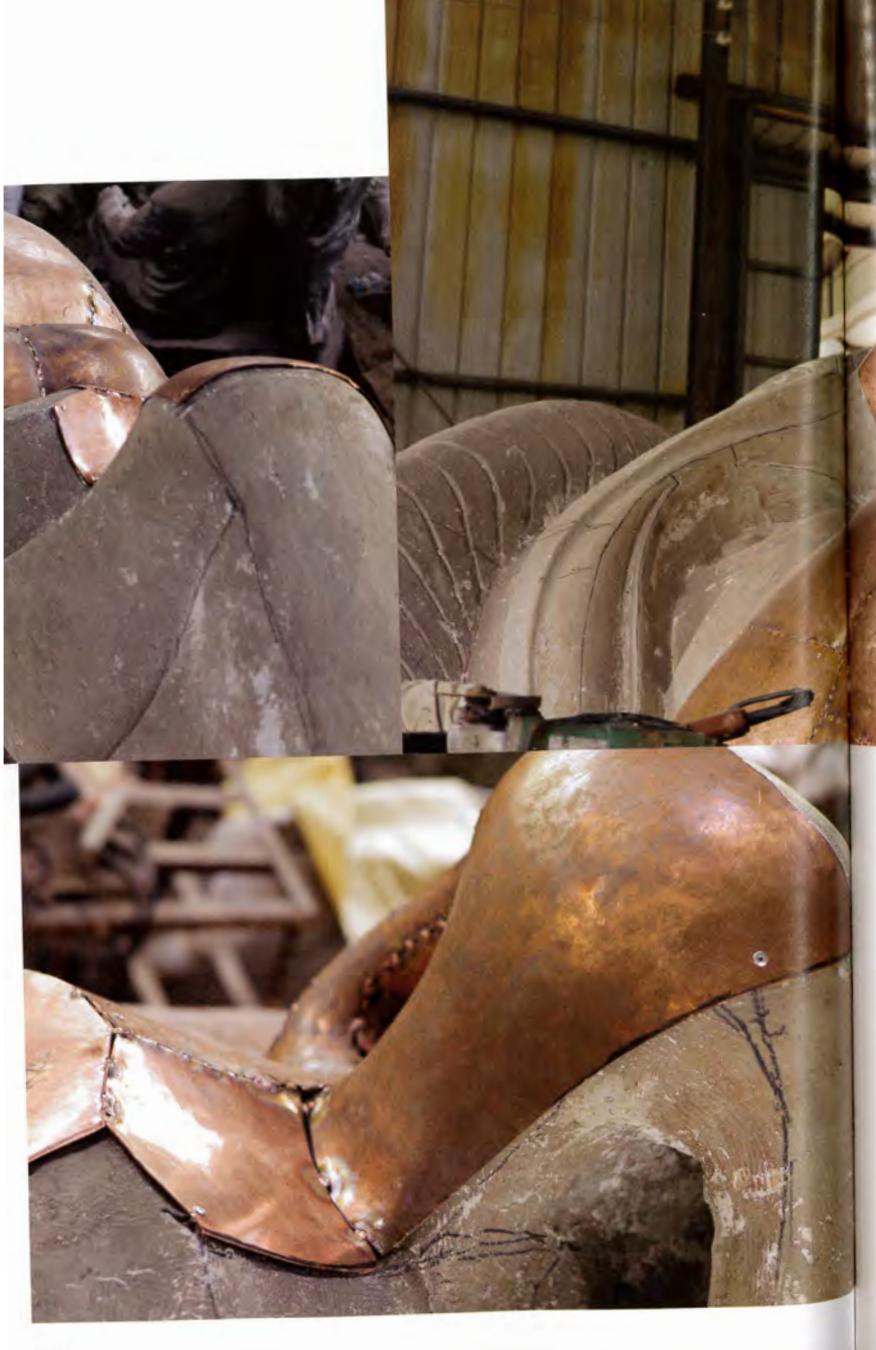


DANH VO, "Autoerotic Asphyxiation," Artists Space, New York, installation view, 2010 / Installationsansicht. (PHOTOS: DANIEL PÉREZ)



Laura McLean-Ferris. "DANH VO", *Art Review*, N°168, May 2013, p66 - 71.





Danh Vō

The award-winning artist makes history and culture personal in work that is split, fragmented and scattered around the world. Some might say that's the perfect mirror of our times...

By Laura McLean-Ferris

Danh Vō's *We The People* (2011-) is a full-scale replica of the Statue of Liberty. Made in China, it was beaten out in copper, piece by piece, but never assembled into a whole, and now lies scattered around the globe in the galleries of collectors and institutions: a toe here, an eye there, the torch somewhere else. It functions as a splintered counterobject to the original, which was designed by Frédéric Bartholdi, and finally finished in 1886 after years of planning, fundraising and fabrication. Whereas that statue came to symbolise American ideals about freedom, self-creation and immigration, Vō's sculpture-in-pieces speaks to ideas about the contemporary immigrant subject, while simultaneously operating as a symbol of the exported culture of modern America – particularly when one appraises what that country might stand for from afar. Indeed, the meaning of 'American' freedom, and the symbolism used to express it have been altered and reconstructed many times since the facture of the original statue and the founding adoption of the US Constitution (in 1787), the first line of which gives Vō's work its title.

Vō's Statue of Liberty project is now drawing to a close – the fabrication team worked on Liberty top down and bottom up, creating the

middle pieces last: "They're doing the armpit now, which is definitely the best part of it," says Vō from New Orleans when I talk to him over Skype in February. The artist himself, a refugee from Vietnam who was raised in Denmark, does not have a fixed address, and tends to view nationhood, identity, profession and practice as inevitable traps best avoided for as long as possible. He is en route to New York when we speak, in the midst of an intense schedule of solo exhibitions: first at Marian Goodman Gallery and in April at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum – where he is presenting an exhibition as the 2012 winner of the prestigious Hugo Boss Prize, awarded biennially. These quickly follow two solo exhibitions earlier this year: *Chung Ga Opla* at Villa Medici in Rome and *Gustav's Wing* at Culturgest Porto. Then, in May, several components of *We The People* will be brought together as part of a major solo exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and Vō will participate in this summer's Venice Biennale.

When developing the initial idea for *We The People*, Vō had not seen the Statue of Liberty, and he remembers the moment at which he finally went inside the statue and discovered how fragile it was – only 2mm thick – as one in which the idea to create the body as a series of fragments seemed "obvious" to him. "One can only create a project such as this if you see the fragility of it," he says. And yet he describes the long process of creating this massive broken colossus as "overwhelming and exhausting", and seems excited to involve himself in a new body of work. "I was not created to make these great monuments of things, I think," he concludes. The project did arise, he acknowledges, from his propensity to swing from one extreme to another; *We The People* came into being after a curator suggested that Vō was very adept at filling exhibition spaces using a small amount of material.

For his first show at Goodman, with whom he started working last year, Vō has acquired some objects from a recent Sotheby's auction of the possessions of Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (crucially, during the outbreak and escalation of the war in Vietnam). Among these items were a 1944 Ansel Adams photograph of a clearing storm in Yosemite National Park and McNamara's ceremonially engraved pen, used to sign the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which paved the way for America's military intervention in Vietnam. "It was Marian who went to the auction," explains Vō. "I thought that it was very important that she be a part of negotiating what would be part of it. After all, it's more her history than mine. Because she has lived it."

The pen acts both a silent agent-object and a historically drenched ready-made, of which Vō has employed several in his work over the years. He bought the typewriter on which Ted Kaczynski (otherwise known as the Unabomber) wrote his manifesto 'Industrial Society and Its

Laura McLean-Ferris. "DANH VO", *Art Review*, N°168, May 2013, p66 - 71.



Oma Totem (installation view, Kunsthalle Bremen, 2009), objects from the artist's grandmother Nguen Thi Ty: 2x Philips television set, German washing machine, wooden crucifix and personal entrance card for a coffee appliance received from the Immigrant Relief Programme and crucifix from the Catholic church upon her arrival in Germany in 1990, 220 x 60 x 60 cm. Photo: Markus Tröster

Laura McLean-Ferris. "DANH VO", *Art Review*, N°168, May 2013, p66 - 71.

'Future', as well as the three chandeliers that hung in the ballroom of the Hotel Majestic in Paris, where the signing of the Paris Peace Accords ended official military intervention by the US in Vietnam in 1973. These he subsequently incorporated into exhibitions, dismantling one of the chandeliers before methodically placing each component on the floor as a contribution to a drawing show at MoMA in 2009, and hanging another from the grand ceiling of the Kunsthalle

Basel for his solo exhibition *Where the Lions Are* in the same year. However, all three will be reunited – for the first time since the hotel was demolished, and 40 years after the signing of the agreement – in Vo's Paris show. In discussing the pen, he zooms in on the minute point at which the ink flows from its vessel and becomes transformed into a history of war and bloodshed: "I'm more interested in just the tip of it, where you still can see the ink."

In Vo's art, historical objects are commonly displayed as part of a constellation of fragments, often involving the work of another artist or the cooperation of a friend or, more recently, family member. The artist tends to pair a long, telescopic view of the world and of its historical events with an extreme personal closeup. In *Oma Totem* (2009) he stacked five items – a washing machine, a television, a fridge, a crucifix and an entrance card to a local casino – that his grandmother was given by the Immigrant Relief Programme and the Catholic church following her arrival in Germany from Vietnam

VO PAIRS A LONG, TELESCOPIC VIEW OF THE WORLD AND OF ITS HISTORICAL EVENTS WITH AN EXTREME PERSONAL CLOSEUP

in 1980 into a kind of fetish totem to objects of Western worship. He has since made a tombstone for his grandmother depicting the same five items in marble (*Tombstone for Nguen Thi Ty*, 2009). Eight of Vo's nieces and nephews were given the freedom to draw all over the walls at the recent Villa Medici exhibition, on the proviso that they include certain quotes from David Bowie, Emile Cioran and Antonin Artaud.

It is the artist's father, Phung Vo, however, who is the most regular presence in his work, and it is his American dream that remains a regular grace note, discernible in *We The People* as an object of inspiration and aspiration. As it is customarily reported when discussing the artist's work, Phung Vo decided to leave Vietnam in 1979, following the fall of Saigon in 1975, which had seen the Vos evacuated to the island of Phu Quoc, where Danh was born, and where they lived in extremely poor conditions. Vo's father built a wooden boat and attempted to use it to get to America, taking with him 100 refugees and the young Danh (who was then four), before the vessel was rescued by a Danish commercial tanker. The refugees were taken to Denmark and were granted citizenship of that state.



Though America and Vietnam were in conflict, Vo's father idealised US culture from afar, and Vo has appropriated for his installations several of the possessions that Phung strove to acquire after leaving Vietnam. The objects are revealing in terms of the elder Vo's ideas about American masculinity and success: a Mercedes-Benz car engine in *Das Beste oder Nichts* (2010); or a Dupont lighter, an American military class signet ring and a Rolex watch, which are collected in a vitrine in *If You Were to Climb the Himalayas Tomorrow* (2009). The items in this last work have been acquired by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, contractually promised to the institution once Phung Vo has died, as per his last will and testament. In the interim the Walker has a black tombstone laid in its grounds for Phung Vo, which reads, in gold, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water" (the epitaph of the Romantic poet John Keats), and which will be shipped to his resting place in Copenhagen following his death – the life, ambitions, death and body of a man here put into the play of the art system by his son.

Vo has also been employing Phung Vo's talents as a skilled calligrapher to handwrite copies of letters for several years (he is contractually obliged to write certain letters on demand until his death). The letters are chosen by the artist and are always written in languages that his father cannot understand. Among these are the last letter written by the missionary Saint Théophane Vénard to his father, in 1861, before he was beheaded in Vietnam. Vénard might be seen as representing another form of export: as a

nominated body of the church sent out to spread the word of God, and to preach a specific form of ideology, which resulted in a literal split of his body. More fragments of bodies and ideologies left around the world.

Vo's father has even lately been executing larger wall-based writing commissions for his son that require him to travel around the world to institutions and galleries. I quiz Vo on the



This page, from top:
The Hugo Boss Prize 2012: Danh
Vo, I M U R 2 (installation view),
photo: David Heald, © 2013
Solomon R. Guggenheim
Foundation, New York; objects
from the collection of Martin
Wong, photo: Heinz Peter Kries

Facing page: The Hugo Boss
Prize 2012: Danh Vo, I M U U R 2
(installation view), photo:
David Heald, © 2013 Solomon
R. Guggenheim Foundation,
New York

understanding his elderly father has of the tasks that the artist employs him to undertake: "But that's the beauty of the whole project, I think: there is no understanding," he exclaims. "The problem comes in anytime that we think art is 'bridging' something, I don't believe in 'bridges' in general. I think that maybe the beauty of things is that we can accept to do things together, to be together, whether that's me and my father, or a stranger or my gallerist, or friends. That we stay together through all these differences. And that is what I think makes this work with my father so beautiful, because there is no understanding – just pure economy and practicality."

Vo's work is very graceful in execution, remixing the bureaucratic aesthetics of

conceptual art – letters, legal contracts and systems – with ornate material such as chandeliers, calligraphy and drawings of flowers. However, this is politically driven work, a form of post-romantic Conceptualism, which takes up a lineage carved out by the likes of Felix Gonzalez-Torres – Vo was one of the three guest curators (along with Tino Sehgal and Carol Bove) during the 2010 touring retrospective of Gonzalez-Torres's work. He also mentions in conversation that his teacher Julie Ault, who like Gonzalez-Torres was a member of Group Material, was the one who "raped my brain".

It's important to emphasise the uneasy balancing act the artist makes between

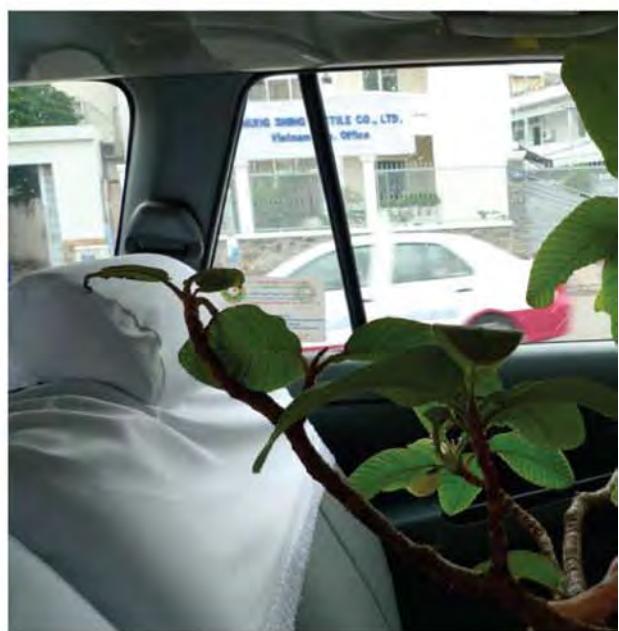
objective coolness and personal heat, and the way in which a controlled form of intimacy functions as a tool to communicate the way that individuals are formed within the vicissitudes of history. The mortality of the artist's family members turned into art objects, a description of a work that replaces the relationship between father and son as "pure economy and practicality" – these artworks have a distinct chill to them, and yet, in many ways it's this bureaucratic approach to a filial bond that allows something "beautiful", as Vo puts it. Within this positioning of fragments – a missionary, a son, a death, a movement between countries, an object from history, say – one is made aware of the multitude of decisions informing individuals on a micro and macro scale. Fragments and traces of laws, wars, religions, political and economic systems all have their part to play in one of Vo's installations, and they are presented in a way that allows us to respond with some emotion, and yet it's not of the blinding sort, but rather allows a simultaneous engagement with the formation of human subjects – a process that is affected by other humans. Questions of "economy and practicality" are often some of the most difficult to answer, and yet they are the most humane ones to ask.♦

Danh Vo: Go Mo Ni Ma Da is on view at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 24 May – 18 August; the exhibition The Hugo Boss Prize 2012: Danh Vo, I M U R 2 can be seen at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, through 27 May

Fassi, Luigi. «Terra Cognita», *Artforum*, February 2010.

Galerie
Chantal Crousel





Fassi, Luigi. «Terra Cognita», *Artforum*, February 2010.

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Terra Incognita

LUIGI FASSI on the art of [Danh Vo](#)

Spread: Photographs from Danh Vo's artist's book *HIC SUNT LEONES* (in collaboration with Julie Ault; Kunsthalle Basel, 2009).

OFFICIALLY SPEAKING, the Vietnam War concluded in Paris on January 27, 1973, at the Centre de Conférences Internationales—an imposing belle époque edifice that had begun its stately life as the Hôtel Majestic. There, in a grand ballroom furnished with baize-covered tables, the Paris Peace Accords were signed by representatives of the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Vietcong. These dark-suited dignitaries went through the motions in silence—indeed, according to a reporter for the *New York Times*, “the scene was as glum as the drizzly, gray Paris sky outside.” The mood stemmed from widespread doubts as to whether the peace would hold. And, of course, it didn’t.

The conference center has remained largely unchanged in the more than three decades since this ill-fated ceremony. Last year, however, the space was finally closed for renovations, and during this time the artist Danh Vo managed to borrow three of its chandeliers for his own work—calling them “mute witnesses” to an event that was in fact not the end but “the beginning of a tragedy that affected millions of lives all over Southeast Asia.” The first he placed on view at Paris’s Kadist Art Foundation in May. (The statement above—alluding to the fact that, in 1973, the collapse of the South Vietnamese government and the rise of the Khmer Rouge and Pathet Lao lurked in the future—comes from the show’s catalogue.) Another appeared at Berlin’s Hamburger Bahnhof in the fall. Most intriguing, however, was the chandelier on view as part of Vo’s larger exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel last summer, hanging from the vaulted ceiling of a vast, nearly empty room, and more provocatively ambiguous than any historical summation would suggest. Unlit in the pale sunlight filtering into the gallery, the object had a melancholy presence, presiding over a stripped-down show composed mainly of curios—nineteenth-century photographs, looped strands of hair, a few panels of botanical wallpaper. With such objects, spread thinly across three galleries, Vo created enigmatically evocative tableaux that both solicited and thwarted the narrative impulse.

The key to unraveling the intricate interconnections among these works was the show’s checklist—as terse and telegraphic as any checklist, but nevertheless far from conventional. For example, the entry for 16.06.1974, 2009—an assemblage of trinkets in

View of Danh Vo, “Where the Lions Are,” 2009, Kunsthalle Basel. Foreground (wallpaper): Danh Vo, Flowering branch, fruiting branch and fruit of *Rosa soulieana*; fruiting branchlet of *Sallis souliei*; fruiting branches of *Prunus tomentosa* var. *souliei*; distal portion of flowering plant of *Lilium souliei*; basal leaves, fruit, carpel and flowering plant of *Anemone coerulea* var. *souliei*; caudex leaves of *Acronitum souliei*; fruiting branch of *Berberis soulieana*, 2009. Background (chandelier): Danh Vo, 08.03.51, 28.05.2009. Photo: Serge Hasenböhler.



a glass cabinet, with a gnarled tree branch propped nearby—read as follows:

Vitrine; photo of the missionaries Th. Vénard, G. Goulon, J. Perrier, J. Lavigne and J. Theurel leaving Paris on September 19, 1852; branches from the tree in An Thoi, Vietnam that was used as a marker for the now lost grave of Võ Trung Thành . . . ; a hair relic of the Saint Théophane Vénard decapitated in Tonkin on February 2, 1861—his body is in the Missions-Etrangères in Paris, his head remains in Vietnam.

Nowhere was the fact that Võ Trung Thành was the artist’s brother mentioned. Instead, the viewer, like a historian, was left to sift through a welter of uninflected information, to discern—or not—the

significances buried in the archival surfeit of the past. Among the materialist certainties that characterize the typical exhibition checklist—this object was created on this date and is made of these substances—Vo had interjected the contingency of history.

A clue to the significance of this thematic of effacement and estrangement was given by the title of the exhibition, “Where the Lions Are,” which placed Vo’s work within a specific frame of reference: the long, long *durée* of Western colonial expansion. The famous notation *Hic sunt leones* (Here there are lions) was used by the Romans in antiquity to identify the blank places on their maps, and the Romans in turn handed the phrase down to the cartographers of medieval Europe. Thus the civilized West for centuries divided itself from the



Clockwise from left: View of Danh Vo, "Les Fleurs d'intérieur" (Interior Flowers), 2009, Kadist Art Foundation, Paris. Background: Danh Vo, Oma Totem, 2009. Danh Vo, untitled, 2009, marble, granite, bronze, wood relief. Installation view, Kunsthalle Basel, 2009. Photo: Serge Hasenöhrl. Danh Vo, If You Were to Climb the Himalayas Tomorrow, 2005, vitrine with Rolex, Dupont lighter, and American military class ring (property of the artist's father), 20 1/4 x 24 1/2 x 17 1/4".

savage Rest. The only catch was that, in order to internalize this soothing representation of itself as central and, indeed, as existentially primal, the West had to internalize the empty places and their phantom beasts as well. It could then be said that Vo's practice, employing an intricate combination of appropriation and reconfiguration, inscribes itself in this ambiguous void that is at once outside and within Western modernity. (In fact, the artist, who was born in Vietnam in 1975 and raised in Denmark, plots a course around the shoals of oblivion and conquest, exoticism and the everyday.) As his treatment of the checklist's evacuated institutional rhetoric suggests, Vo's empty spaces are the blanknesses and blind spots, the tacit elisions, the gaps in meaning, that percolate through institutions of all sorts—those that govern the relations of state and individual, state and state, artist and spectator, public and private.

BASED IN BERLIN, Vo has no studio and is much less a maker of things than an arranger and stager of them. In many cases, the artifacts he uses have a highly personal significance—even a talismanic quality, as the title of one work, *Oma Totem*, 2009, admits. This towering collection of stacked merchandise—a TV set, a washing machine, a refrigerator, a wooden crucifix, and a card granting admission to a casino—represents the gifts Vo's maternal grandmother received from the immigrant relief program and the Catholic Church on her arrival in Germany as a refugee. Aestheticizing this array of goods by turning it into a teetering monolith, Vo highlights the almost comical blatancy with which the gift

givers sought to socialize his Vietnamese grandmother in the image of modern capitalist standardization—and this new, normalized identity would, Vo implies in other works, persist unto death and beyond. Consider a related untitled sculpture from 2009, installed in Basel in the same gallery as the Centre de Conférences chandelier: Manufactured to the artist's specifications, the work is a horizontal bronze and granite representation of *Oma Totem's* stacked objects—worldly possessions as permanent memorial. (The slab is, in fact, an actual tombstone; it will eventually be placed on Vo's grandmother's grave.) And in a similar vein, for *If You Were to Climb the Himalayas Tomorrow*, 2005, the artist uses an array of his father's possessions—a glass display case contains a Rolex, a Dupont lighter, and an American military-academy signet ring—to explore the ways in which objects or commodities function in soft-power strategies of control and indoctrination. The items, all coveted status symbols in '70s Vietnam, posit a suave, prosperous, and explicitly Western vision of masculinity, unmasking a colonialism of desire that directly undermines the allegedly intimate logic of taste. Here Pictures-generation appropriations acquire new sociopolitical weight and nuance.

Indeed, *pace* autobiographical readings—which would see these explorations of his family's past as a search for an authentic, rooted self—Vo's almost clinical dissections of his closest relatives' lives in fact work to expose the inescapable negotiations between public authority and private subject. They posit identity as a conjunctural collage, a matter of inevitable inauthenticity. The artist's own discussion



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This page: Grave marker on the artist's balcony, Berlin, 2007. Opposite page, clockwise from left: Danh Vo's father copying a letter from Jean-Théophane Vénard for Vo's *Untitled*, 2009, Paris, 2009. Danh Vo, *Untitled*, 2008, wheeled carry-on bag, wooden statue, 21 1/2 x 17 1/4 x 9 1/4".

of one such work, *Ngo Thi Ha*, 2008, illuminates the role such investigations of personal history play in his practice very well. A sort of counterpart of the untitled tombstone, this piece, which was shown in Vo's 2008 exhibition "Package Tour" at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, consists of a simple white-washed cross propped against a wall; the words MARIA NGO THI HA are emblazoned across it. The artist's father made the cross for the grave of Vo's paternal grandmother; as Vo explains in a videotaped interview produced by the Stedelijk, his bereaved parent could not bear to wait the requisite year for the soil to settle enough to support a tombstone. In fact, Vo continues, laughing in the rueful manner people often adopt when talking about their families' foibles, his "totally bourgeois" relatives were mortified by the homespun cross; yet when the earth was finally ready for the permanent stone, they couldn't bring themselves to throw the cross away. So they gave it to Vo, who, he says, kept it on his balcony for "seven or eight months": It was only then that he was able to "depersonalify" the object enough to see it as an imperialistic trace. And yet as a work of art, the cross still holds these two poles—intimate and affective, political and collective—in an oscillating relation, an ambivalence that cannot be resolved but must be perpetually renegotiated. After all, while it is true that the Catholicism represented by the cross and the Roman alphabet used to spell the name of the deceased were crucial tools in the colonization of Vietnam, the very fact that the artist tells the story shows that the cross is far from depersonalized; it remains charged with poignant and personal significance.

Further, and more reflexively than most of Vo's work, *Ngo Thi Ha* evinces ambivalence toward its own status as a readymade. The cross, with its bottom carved into a point, is also a stake—similar to those that marked imperial claims in the age of expansion. Vo's gesture of propping it against a gallery wall, embedding it within the genealogy of the Western avant-garde, is staking a kind of claim, too, perhaps—at once a reappropriation of a tradition whose encounter with the exotic other was decidedly one-sided and a rather mordant questioning of that tradition's viability. Naturally, such an interrogation has implications for the contexts in which Vo's work is shown and into which the artist never relaxes uncritically. Rather, he acknowledges and engages the fact that art institutions do not merely frame but are also enfolded within the historical narratives he traces. In so examining the colonial structure of power that lies behind cultural phenomena, he could be said to question the politics of what anthropologist Walter D. Mignolo calls the "locus of enunciation"—the place from which power

exerts its rule, imposes its narrative, and asserts the ownership of meanings.

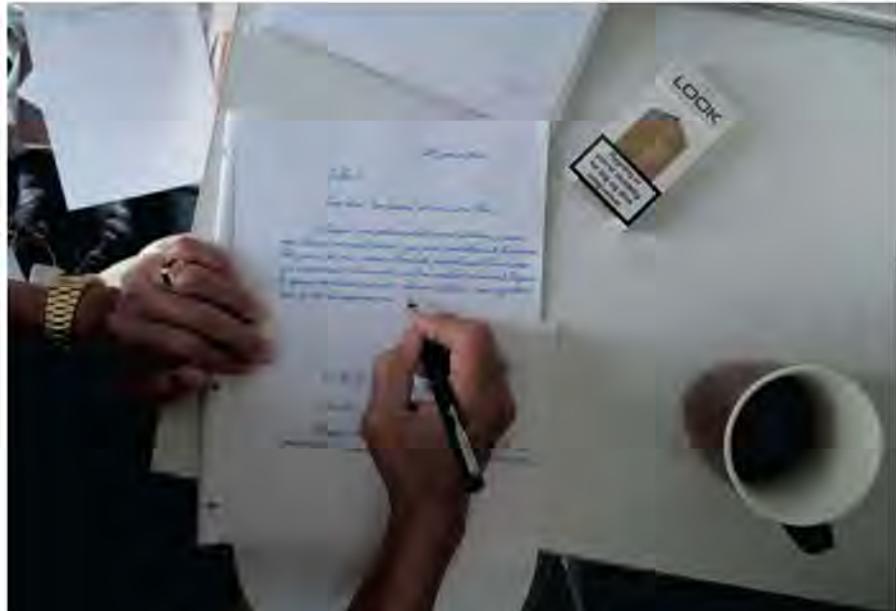
While in Amsterdam for his Stedelijk show, for instance, Vo purchased a wooden sculpture, allegedly dating to the sixteenth century and depicting Saint Joseph—the type of devotional object that was once widely exported, an icon of Christian virtue. Here, too, a profound ambivalence comes into play: In an interview, the artist says that as soon as he saw the handsome oaken statue, he “fell in love with it,” yet for him, the sculpture epitomized the instrumentalization of culture in the service of the spread of Western values. He sliced the statue into six parts, so that he could fit it into his suitcase and display it in art venues around the globe—a gesture that registers less as critique than as revenge. Dismembered and disintegrated, the statue is robbed of its status, exposed to a symbolic death. “I think of the slicing up as a response to world history, to the dominance of Western cultures,” Vo says in the interview; he has thus far shown the disarticulated statue at the Busan Biennale in South Korea. “We have always brought these items around the world,” he concludes, before drawing an analogy to the circulation and distribution of contemporary art, of which his own efforts inevitably partake: “The exportation of religious relics is similar to the transport of art for today’s international biennials and art fairs.”

WHETHER AN ICON in a suitcase or a chandelier hung on a garment rack like a disused ball gown, objects in Vo’s work are never static: They move, transmute,

perform, and are performed; they insist on their own status as both matter and energy. Analogously, Vo’s practice holds itself in a kind of suspension between the object-based and the performative, in large part via the medium of the document, which, for him—per his cryptic statement “I always saw the passport as the ultimate performance piece”—seems to occupy a kind of liminal space: an unreliable mediator between thing and action, subjects and systems.

Perhaps such a quality is to be expected. After the fall of Saigon, Vo’s family fled Vietnam in a boat fashioned by his father. And so in the artist’s work the strange vitality that “papers” acquire in the lives of refugees—their power to dictate whether an individual will be included among those with the “right to have rights” or excluded and relegated to the status of bare life—is often examined via a kind of bureaucratic absurdism. For one ongoing, untitled piece, Vo’s father, who has exquisite handwriting but cannot read French, periodically copies and recopies an 1861 letter from the sainted, executed missionary Jean-Théophane Vénard; the ever-growing corpus of letters is a beautiful but ineffectual interface between epochs and languages. More provocatively, Vo has elsewhere created a series of “self-portraits” that each consist of a single bit of ephemera certifying some kind of encounter with authority: a letter from a professor advising him to stop painting, a DNA test. His work *Vo Rosasco Rasmussen*, 2002–, meanwhile, is essentially an archive relating to the artist’s marriages to people to whom he feels personally, though not necessarily

Whether an icon in a suitcase or a chandelier hung on a garment rack like a disused ball gown, objects in Vo’s work are never static: They move, transmute, perform, and are performed; they insist on their own status as both matter and energy.



Galerie
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Vo's serial-marriage piece suggests the upside to the frighteningly arbitrary nature of identity: Just as identity is subject to random fate and bureaucratic caprice, it is also subject to individual will and can be a site of resistance.



romantically attached. After each marriage (so far, there have been two), Vo immediately gets divorced but retains the surname of his ex-spouse. The legal documents generated by the various nuptial and divorce proceedings constitute the work. Thus the actions are reduced to their juridical essence, emphasizing bureaucracy's role in regulating the most intimate aspects of life by bestowing or withholding privilege. (Often this happens capriciously, as in the case of Denmark's granting gay couples the right to marry but denying them the right to jointly adopt children.) *Vo Rosasco Rasmussen* attacks this system at the level of semantic logic; the artist will keep generating surnames ad infinitum, until, theoretically, his name grows too long for any single document to contain it. His own name will then become a source of disorder, small but persistent, propagating itself across the state's information infrastructure, and Vo himself will become more and more difficult to keep track of, as the set of legal documents confirming each new name, each new identity, grows and grows.

The name Danh Vo by itself attests the highly mutable quality of nominal identity. When Vo was initially registered as a citizen, Danish officials recorded his first name as last and vice versa, and the order stuck. This was just the last in a series of aleatory events that had shaped the artist's life up to that point; it was only because his family had been rescued from the ocean by a Danish tanker that they wound up as Danish citizens in the first place. Yet here again, it becomes very clear how *Vo Rosasco*

Rasmussen suggests the upside to the frighteningly arbitrary nature of identity: Just as identity is subject to random fate and bureaucratic caprice, it is also subject to individual will and can be a site of resistance. Vo uses the Danish marriage system for his own purposes—in taking the names of loved ones, he gains a permanent, intimate connection to them, using the state's exclusionary civil laws, which divide the citizenry into those who are fit to adopt children and those who are not, to construct his own community.

This suggestion that intimate connection may be a means by which to resist effacement, exclusion from the social and moral order, is echoed in Vo's 2007 project *Good Life*, presented at Isabella Bortolozzi gallery in Berlin that year. During a residency in Los Angeles, the artist by chance met a man named Joe Carrier, who had lived in Vietnam in the 1960s and early '70s, working first for the RAND Corporation and then, after accusations of homosexuality cost him his job, for a foundation researching the effects of Agent Orange. Vo and Carrier became friends, and the artist was granted access to the extensive personal archive Carrier had compiled—love letters, diaries, and erotically charged photos of young Vietnamese men. Since Vo's family had left all of their mementos behind when they fled Vietnam, he had never seen photographs of himself or his relatives in their native country, so he constructed a proxy "self-portrait" from a selection of Carrier's material. Beyond the act of appropriation,



Good Life testifies to the encounter between Vo and Carrier (who also authored the press release for the show) as an emotional coincidence, a fluid moment in which the biographies of two individuals overlap. Identity and authorship, critically questioned and dismantled by Vo throughout his practice, are in this work mutually diluted, pointing toward what Paul Gilroy termed in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) a space of conviviality, “a radical openness that brings conviviality alive [and] makes a nonsense of closed, fixed, and reified identity.” Here and in *Vo Rosasco Rasmussen*, the artist seems, as well, to be suggesting a redefinition of the very notion of citizenship, one grounded in the rejection of any form of exclusion; one that, perhaps, does not even require its citizens to maintain stable, verifiable identities. Indeed, opening up his own identity to endless multiplication and expansion, Vo dramatically manifests what political theorist Chantal Mouffe would call a “break with individualism”—a literal instance of a radical pluralism that Mouffe argues requires “the existence of multiplicity, of plurality and of conflict and sees in them the *raison d'être* of politics.” And yet, as she says, this is a political sphere that must be continually constructed; it is always still to come.

TURNING AWAY FROM VO'S WORK in performance in all its guises, how might we find a means of reading this contestatory impulse back onto the artist's mysterious decors, such as those he constructed in Basel using a “mute witness” to tragedy? Significantly, the term *décor* was Marcel Brodthaer's designation for his own museal stage sets, which, as Rachel Haidu argued in this magazine in 2007, themselves expose the linkages between the conventions of museum display and the detached and lordly mode of spectatorship developed under imperialism. As informative in this vein would be a reading of Vo's works through the influential arguments of James Clifford. According to the anthropologist, the Western avant-garde evolved in cross-pollinating tandem with ethnography; both disciplines are defined by a “modernist orientation” that takes “as its problem—and opportunity—the fragmentation and juxtaposition of cultural values.” This orientation, he says, was rooted in the depravities of World War I, which had thrown the foundations of society (and even of reality) into doubt and given rise to the impulse to question and, indeed, attack any appearance of stability or convention. Avant-garde strategies of collage were answered by ethnography's own semiotic de- and recompositions; in both instances, “culture and its norms—beauty, truth, reality—[were approached] as artificial arrangements susceptible to detached analysis and comparison.” The

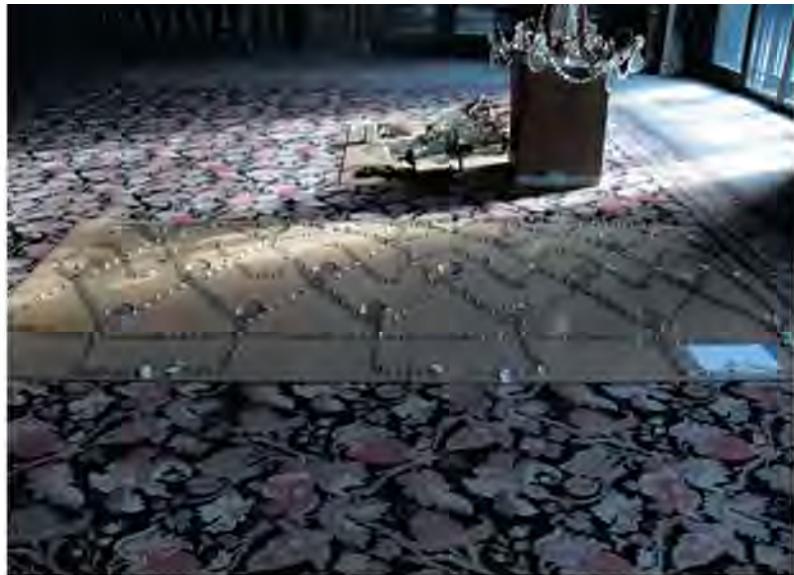
encounter with “the exotic” thus became a model for the provocation of eruptions of otherness, a means by which to question traditional cultural codes and institutional definitions. If this did not result in a rethinking of the injustices being committed against the other, it nevertheless, per Clifford, instituted the potential for “more troubling, less stable encounters” with the foreign and the unknown.

If the ethnographic turn to which Clifford's arguments contributed now hovers in the recent past—its problems more clearly remembered than the suppressions and inequalities it addressed—Vo's practice nonetheless allows us to imagine another half rotation. He provides a recuperation of the ethnographic impulse in art not as style or subject but as a commitment to the perpetually estranging encounter, the continual reconstitution of identity. His decors, in other words, stage these encounters, insisting that cultures are not undifferentiated and equal but are always engaged in complex struggles of resistance and opposition. Fundamentally agonistic for all their elliptical beauty, his works strive to break open what Mignolo defines as the “logical matrix of modernity/coloniality” and its monotonous perspective. Bringing to the fore the artificiality of cultural artifacts and ostensibly organic structures alike, he enacts a process of decoding that points to the ideolog-

ical construction of all homogenous discourse, the power imbalances that influence all self-other relations. This fundamental strategy allows his practice to operate as critique across a range of registers.

Or better, following another formulation of Clifford's, one could say that Vo's is a “poetics of displacement,” a perpetual making-strange that aims, indeed, at the decolonization of knowledge and culture. But whereas Clifford saw the encounter with *le divers*—the heterotopic, the unaccountable, the other—as transpiring in the “outside” or the “beyond” of colonial adventure, Vo's *divers* constitutes itself in and for a world that is no longer organized around an inside and an outside. Rather, it is structured more like a foam or a gel: The tiny pockets of emptiness, like the gaps between the words on a checklist, exist as a kind of dispersed phase within the viscous continuity of “the global.” Like a tracer dye, Vo's art makes these pockets visible. If we consider this poetics of displacement as the *pars destruens* of his work, it is his location of spaces for the reconfiguration of identity and the envisioning of collective citizenship that is his *pars construens*. It is in these spaces that he locates the possibility of new modes of personal and collective identification, a reinvention beyond the logic of coloniality and modernity. □

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Opposite page, from top: Danh Vo, *Vo Rosasco Rasmussen* (detail), 2002—documents. Danh Vo, *Good Life* (details), 2007, black-and-white photographs in vitrines. From left: “Army Boys,” Quy Nhon, 1966; “Hunter,” Mekong Delta, 1972; “Eating Boy,” Selangor Central Market, 1972. This page: Dismantled chandelier at the Centre de Conférences Internationales, Paris, 2007.