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CHANTAL CROUSEL

# Danh Vo

REVUE DE PRESSE | SELECTED PRESS

# Numéro



## Trees struck by lightning brought back to life by artist **Danh Vo** at the **Bourse de Commerce**

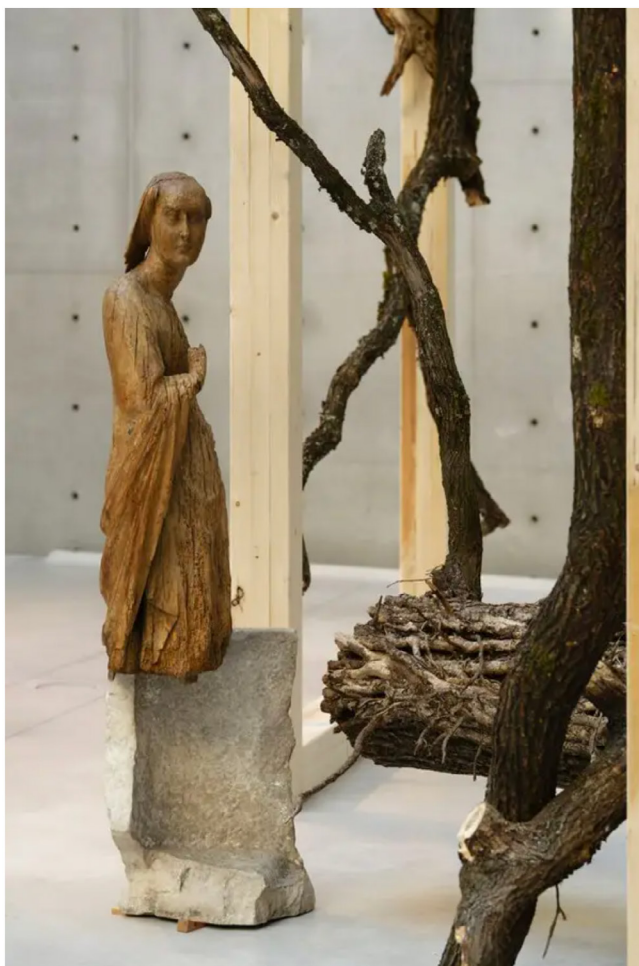
The Vietnamese-born Danish artist is taking over the monumental rotunda of the Bourse de Commerce until the end of April. Invited by the Pinault Collection, Danh Vo has installed impressive weatherworn tree trunks to open a conversation about our relationship with nature...



Danh Vo, Tropeolum, 2023.

In the middle of the rotunda located under the impressive glass roof at the Bourse de Commerce, weatherworn tree trunks are soaring into the sky in an ultimate and desperate move for survival. Installed by the **artist Danh Vo** as a monumental bouquet matching the dimensions of the space, these trees unfold through the most unexpected mutations in their death. They bloom, yet their flowers appearing in scattered, colorful, and seductive touches on the installation are photographs taken and arranged by the artist. Death being a great breeding ground, the blossoming of the corpse foreshadows other surprises, such as the presence of previous works by the artist – mostly wooden sculptures – that curl up or unite to the trunks like a myriad of grafted branches. This bouquet of trees forms a paradoxical artwork, both mortifying and fragile, with hope and resilience to support it – and more prosaically with timber structures to support the martyred trunks. *“An experience in which beauty and threat are intertwined in the same space”*, curator Caroline Bourgeois summarizes.

**"An experience in which beauty and threat are intertwined in the same space", curator Caroline Bourgeois summarizes.**



Danh Vo, Tropeolum, 2023.

## Danh Vo invited for the exhibition “Avant l'orage” at the Bourse de commerce

In a way, the artwork stands as a philosophical manifesto on the new direction taken by the artist in his work. For some years now, **Danh Vo** has been living in a farm-studio in Gldenhof, Germany. Amid an orchard, a greenhouse, meadows, and gardens, he is working on reuniting the meanings of the word “culture”. The care taken in nature’s development, symbolized by the garden and the orchard, echoes the care taken in the wounded nature represented by the trees exhibited at the Bourse. He also develops his knowledge of nature, in this case of the flowers in his garden, which he meticulously captures with his camera along with handwritten captions of their scientific names. The origin of the series of photographs of flowers at the **Bourse de Commerce** comes from that, but the pictures have been taken at a florist this time. Conversely to the traditional dichotomy in our Western culture, Danh Vo thwarts the opposition between nature and culture. As a perfect embodiment of the cultural object, art finds its cradle in nature. The artist first started to play with historical sculptures, often wooden church items, he installed in the space of his garden in Gldenhof. There, they would reconnect with their fundamental nature.

Nothing is completely natural, yet nothing is completely cultural as well at the **Bourse de Commerce**. The tree trunks have been treated to be put on display and have been installed according to the artist’s choices. The structures that support them, the artworks that seem to grow out of them like appendages, and even the frames of the photographs, are made of the same wood, even if the origin of this wood differs (I will come back to that later). Nature and culture thus shape each other in an infinite life and death cycle. The environment unfold by **Danh Vo** also reverses the horizontality of classical landscape painting seen from a human perspective. The cluster of trees looks disorganized and moves in all directions. People can walk through it without ever being able to encompass it solely from their viewpoint. Although a human structure may persist, that of the construction timber used to support the installation, it only seems to be here as a supporting and healing prop, intentionally devoid of any desire to impose its power. The decentering is complete. If nature is being domesticated, it is because we share the same home, the same *domus* with it.



Dtail d'une photo de fleur au sein de l'installation de Danh Vo. © Numro

*Dianthus*

Thibaut Wychowanok

*Trees struck by lightning brought back to life by artist Danh Vo at the Bourse de Commerce*

Numro, N237, February 15, 2023.

<https://urlr.me/7rXBx>

## Danh Vo when great history and intimacy intertwine

As a Danish artist of Vietnamese origin, **Danh Vo** fled his country by boat with his Catholic refugee parents in 1979. This landmark event will eventually nourish a body of works pervaded by the ideas of displacement and decentering, as well as a clear understanding of the complex strata of history, as his major exhibition at the **Guggenheim in New York** shows. Since then, Danh Vo has been developing his pieces from fragments that he moves and assembles to manifest relationships rather than to judge them. An approach that curator Caroline Bourgeois coins as “*make do*” – “*make do with what we carry with us and what we find, make do with all the contradictions surrounding us and within us.*” Danh Vo thus does make do with these tree trunks struck by lightning in the French forests, as well as with the hazards of life and of his personal story. The same idea applies to the wood that forms the foundation of the building structures and frames in the exhibition. A few years ago, Danh Vo discovered that the son of Robert McNamara, US Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and mastermind behind the Vietnam War that his family had fled from, owned a sustainable farm in California. He bought his black walnut wood. In 2012, he also bought some of Robert McNamara’s objects at an auction to include them in his exhibitions. Geopolitical and personal histories were therefore intertwined in a dual move of displacement from the political to the artistic, and reappropriation of objects. Objects reinvest their stories with Danh Vo. They are reactivated, dissected, and reassembled to reveal all their dimensions beyond their function and aesthetic, without dissociating family from politics, story from history.

***Tropeaolum, an installation by Danh Vo at the Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection, Paris, until April 24th.***



Danh Vo, Tropeaolum, 2023.

Thibaut Wychowanok

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## DANH VO À VENISE : « LE PRIVILÈGE D'INSTALLER LES ŒUVRES D'AUTRES ARTISTES, C'EST QU'ON APPREND VRAIMENT À LES CONNAÎTRE »

L'artiste danois d'origine vietnamienne organise à Venise une exposition qui associe son travail à celui de deux créateurs largement reconnus de générations précédentes, Park Seo-Bo et Isamu Noguchi.



Selon Danh Vo, l'exposition de Venise dont il est le co-commissaire présente « trois générations différentes, trois médiums distincts ».  
Photo : Theo Christelis. © White Cube

### LES DEUX MENTORS DE NOGUCHI QUE L'ON PEUT PERCEVOIR DANS LES LAMPES AKARI SONT BRANCUSI ET BUCKMINSTER FULLER

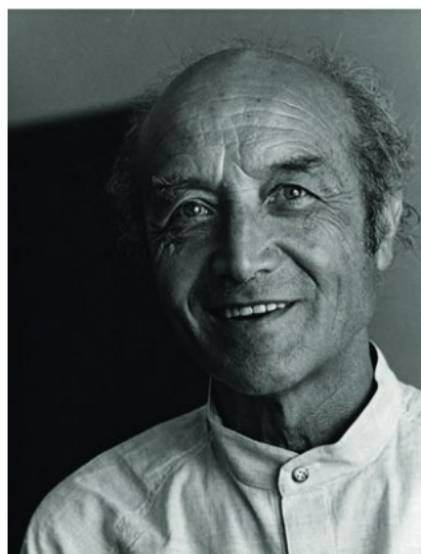
« J'ai tendance à travailler un peu comme un kamikaze, les choses se passent in situ », affirme l'artiste dano-vietnamien Danh Vo à propos de la manifestation qu'il a conçue et présentant ses œuvres aux côtés de celles de Park Seo-Bo, connu comme le père du mouvement coréen Dansaekhwa, et du défunt sculpteur, architecte et designer américain Isamu Noguchi. Il est en effet le co-commissaire de cette exposition se déroulant à la Fondazione Querini Stampalia, avec la conservatrice du musée, Chiara Bertola. Interviewé depuis sa ferme de Güldenhof, située à 50 kilomètres au nord de Berlin, Danh Vo explique à *The Art Newspaper* cette association d'œuvres d'artistes de trois générations différentes et comment le chaos, plutôt que l'ordre, les unit.

Anny Shaw

*Danh Vo À Venise : « Le Privilège D'Installer Les Œuvres D'Autres Artistes, C'est Qu'On Apprend Vraiment À Les Connaître »*  
The Art Newspaper, N°914, April 21, 2022, p.1-5.

**The Art Newspaper : Comment est né le projet de cette exposition ?**

**Danh Vo :** Le privilège d'installer le travail d'autres artistes, c'est qu'on apprend vraiment à les connaître. En tant que visiteur, vous vous contentez de regarder les choses, mais lorsque vous [êtes le commissaire d'une exposition], vous ressentez tout le poids des œuvres. C'est une façon empirique de connaître les pièces, ce qui est un désir latent chez moi. C'est un privilège et c'est amusant. Il s'agit de trois générations différentes, de trois médiums distincts. Pour ce qui est de mon travail, je m'en tiens à la photographie – je m'effacerais si je montrais mes sculptures avec celles de Noguchi. Il n'y a donc que ces trois médiums très classiques. Ce qui est également très intéressant, c'est que la Fondation Querini Stampalia offre un incroyable patchwork d'époques et de styles, de la Venise antique à la période moderniste. Tant d'architectes différents sont intervenus, ce qui ajoute une autre dimension. Nous ne montrons que les *Akari* [sculptures lumineuses] de Noguchi et les peintures de Park sont très linéaires. C'est donc une façon de tester toutes ces œuvres, y compris les miennes, de voir comment elles ont survécu à travers le temps, et de les répartir sur l'ensemble de la Fondation Querini Stampalia, qui est un collage temporel. C'est un projet intéressant.



Isamu Noguchi, en 1979. © Mimi Jacobs. INFGM/ARS

**Votre projet est donc de vous concentrer sur les Akari de Noguchi ?**

L'exposition se veut presque comme une rétrospective de cet ensemble d'œuvres. J'aime toujours travailler avec les pièces d'autres artistes qui ont été négligées. Et Noguchi lui-même pensait qu'elles étaient mal comprises. Il a vendu son âme à [l'entreprise suisse de meubles] Vitra. Et puis Ikea est arrivé [avec un dérivé]. Les *Akari* ont donc été distribuées comme des lampes, et ce sont des lampes, mais elles sont bien plus que cela – c'est l'angle sous lequel je vois ces œuvres. Noguchi avait d'autres mentors, mais les deux que l'on peut percevoir dans les *Akari* sont Brancusi et Buckminster Fuller. Noguchi a été le premier à mettre une ampoule électrique dans une forme ancienne – c'est tout à fait à l'image de Buckminster Fuller. On peut donc voir à travers ces œuvres ces deux sources d'inspiration qui ont été très importantes pour Noguchi. Il est intéressant pour moi de prendre les *Akari* et de les présenter vraiment comme des sculptures.

**LES AKARI SONT DES LAMPES, MAIS ELLES SONT BIEN PLUS QUE CELA**



Ensemble des sculptures lumineuses *Akari*, de Noguchi. Photo : Ollie Hammick. © White Cube. ©INFGM/ARS

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Park Seo-Bo au travail. Photo : Hangil Lee



Park Seo-Bo, *Écriture No. 080831*, 2008. Photo : Theo Christelis. © White Cube. © Park Seo-Bo

## JE PENSAIS ÊTRE UNE PERSONNE CULTIVÉE ET INSTRUITE, MAIS JE NE CONNAIS PAS LE NOM DES PLANTES ET DES OISEAUX QUE JE VOIS CHAQUE MATIN DEVANT MA FENÊTRE

*Et avec Park Seo-Bo, vous vous concentrerez sur ses peintures calligraphiques *Écriture*, une série débutée à la fin des années 1960.*

Oui. Pour moi, elles sont un point de référence pour l'ensemble de l'œuvre de mon père [Phung Vo], qui consistait simplement à rédiger des écritures. Je pense que les peintures auront de l'allure car je vais les exposer avec des œuvres dans lesquelles mon père a écrit des noms de fleurs encore et encore.

*En ce qui concerne votre travail, vous présentez de nouvelles photographies. Pouvez-vous nous en dire plus sur cet aspect de l'exposition ?*

Il s'agit d'un nouvel ensemble d'œuvres sur lesquelles j'ai travaillé et qui sont liées à mon intérêt pour cette rencontre fortuite avec le jardinage. Il s'agit de l'idée fondamentale de reconnaître ce que nous ignorons. Je pensais être une personne cultivée et instruite, mais je ne connais pas le nom des plantes et des oiseaux que je vois chaque matin devant ma fenêtre. Mes connaissances sont comparables à mon vietnamien de base. Je dois donc retourner sur les bancs de l'école.

*Quels sont, selon vous, les points communs qui vous unissent tous les trois en tant qu'artistes ?*

Je recherche le chaos plutôt que l'ordre. Je ne cherche pas du sens, je cherche des possibilités. Parfois, les choses n'ont pas forcément de sens. Il s'agit donc plutôt de se demander comment donner un sens à ce chaos.





## In the German Countryside, a Farmhouse Turned Lush Cultural Retreat

On the grounds of a former agricultural collective an hour north of Berlin, the artist Danh Vo has built a commune for like-minded talents.

In the artist Danh Vo's living room at his farmhouse in Brandenburg, Germany, potted and hanging plants, both living and dried; a leather-covered wire chair by Charles and Ray Eames; and a table Vo built according to the Italian designer Enzo Mari's "Autoprogettazione?" (1974), a manual of furniture designs that can be made using simple materials and tools. Angela Simi

AT THE HEART of [Danh Vo's](#) farmhouse in Brandenburg, Germany, is an oven. Not just any oven, though. This wood-burning clay furnace, the size of a Volkswagen minibus, painted a dark azure and bisecting the large living area, was one of the few things Vo knew he had to have in the house: a modern version of a traditional Russian stove, which was used for both cooking and heating. Once, these impressive pieces of masonry were the locus of the home and the inspiration for several Russian fairy tales. Many had large shelves or flat-roofed extensions, reached by small ladders and topped with mattresses. Vo's has a platform that juts out in the rear, radiating heat, with room to seat four.

Gisela Williams

*In the German Countryside, a Farmhouse Turned Lush Cultural Retreat*

The New York Times Style Magazine, March 14, 2022.

<https://urlr.me/YySW4>

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The monumental domesticity of such a piece no doubt appealed to Vo, 46, a conceptual artist who often makes new objects out of old ones, like the washer, refrigerator and TV his grandmother received from a Catholic charity upon arriving in the 1980s as a Vietnamese refugee in Germany, which Vo stacked atop one another and mounted with a wooden crucifix, refashioning them into art (“[Oma Totem](#),” 2009). “Duchamp did stoves,” notes Vo. But the clay oven also spoke to another desire he had for this house: that it be a place where people could gather. “I love when in the winter everyone is automatically drawn to its warmth,” he says. “This is what I prefer to buy instead of a fancy car.”



In front of the living room's clay oven is a heated seating platform and, in the foreground, two works by Vo: “[Small Daybed After Enzo Mari](#)” (left, 2018) and “[Untitled](#)” (2021). *Angela Simi*



A stairway from the office/lounge where firewood is collected. The entire farmhouse is heated with firewood sustainably sourced from a protected nature preserve nearby. *Angela Simi*

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A view of the field where sheep graze from the large kitchen window. Storage for everything, from the silverware to serving tools, was designed to be visible so that even a first-time guest will understand where things can be found. Angela Simi

Vo's property, called Güldenhof, is a little over an hour's drive north of Berlin, past vast rapeseed and rye fields and the tiny village from which it takes its name. It was once an East German agricultural collective, but most of its buildings had been abandoned for almost 30 years when Vo came upon it in 2016, and its uncultivated fields are now punctuated with art. In the middle of this 7.5-acre repurposed farm is a grassy football-field-size courtyard, framed on each side by a different structure, all originally built in the 1800s. Along with the gut-renovated, three-story, 7,000-square-foot farmhouse, where Vo lives, there are three long stone-and-brick buildings, formerly used to house cattle and store feed. Over the past few years, Vo has transformed the property into a cultural incubator. It's where he invites people to make things, be they art or sauerkraut, and where he himself is always experimenting with things, too.



A view of the main house from one of the 19th-century stone-and-brick barn buildings that has been renovated with a transparent polycarbonate roof and planted with vines that create living walls within the space. Angela Simi

Vo has never really had use for a traditional studio. His groundbreaking work “[We the People](#)” (2011-16) is a life-size recreation of the Statue of Liberty that exists not as a single object but as a series of shards of around 250 copper pieces, which Vo will never allow to be shown altogether in one place. His art often plumbs the intersections of collective history and personal history — or, as he’s called it, “the tiny diasporas of a person’s life.” Born in southern Vietnam, he and his family fled in 1979 when he was 4 aboard a hand-built wooden boat that was eventually picked up by a Danish freighter. After several months in a refugee camp in Singapore, they settled in a suburb of Copenhagen; he considers Danish his mother tongue. He has spent his adult life in many different places seemingly all at once — he has a house in Mexico City, an apartment in Berlin and a country house in Denmark. But “if people want to see Danh’s work,” the Thai conceptual artist [Rirkrit Tiravanija](#) says, “they should come to Gldenhof. In a way, what he is doing here is his practice.”

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Also in the living room, a blue clay stove and pizza oven by the local artisan Falko Martens; a photograph by the German photographer Heinz Peter Knes, Vo's partner; and a collection of Danish chairs and Chinese stools. Angela Simi



A German desk from the 1930s in one of the guest rooms. Angela Simi



Hanging on the wall of Vo's kitchen are artisanal domestic objects he's collected on his travels, including a broom from Thailand; dried flowers and chiles from Mexico, along with bones left over from cooking; and a pair of egg baskets from South Korea, a gift from his friend the artist Haegue Yang. Angela Simi



One of two "Play Sculpture" works designed by Isamu Noguchi for his utopian playscapes, planted on the farm's land. Angela Simi

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IT WAS TIRAVANIJA, Vo's friend and mentor, who first suggested that they buy some property in the countryside, a place for them and other artists to store work, and for Tiravanija, who's best known for interactive installations that center on communal rituals — like [cooking meals](#) or conducting tea ceremonies — to build a ceramics studio. (He spent weeks at Güldenhof last summer making pieces for the tearooms he's set up around the world.) But Tiravanija got caught up with other projects, says Vo, so he was left to renovate the compound himself.

Vo's longtime studio manager, Marta Lusena, enlisted the architect Pietro Balp of the Berlin-based [Heim Balp Architekten](#), who had previously helped renovate Vo's Berlin apartment, which he shares with his partner, the German photographer [Heinz Peter Knes](#). But unlike that grand, art-filled Art Nouveau space, Vo didn't want Güldenhof to feel precious or polished. Here, walls would be cement or plywood. Long metal LED grow lamps, often used to cultivate marijuana, would hang from the ceiling, because they "make such a strong, beautiful light," says Vo. There were two initial directives for the renovation: to transform one of the barns into a functioning archive that could store everything from photographs to sculptures, and to convert the farmhouse into a proper living space that could accommodate however many guests wanted to stay there.



The stairway leading from the second-floor office-lounge to the library and sleeping area on the third floor. Vo decided to use light plywood for the walls and ceiling of this room, as well as for the stairs. Angela Simi

Today, the farmhouse's footprint remains the same, but the exterior plaster walls have been painted matte black, the pitched roof is now corrugated metal and one accesses the space through a small greenhouse-like entrance, clad in polycarbonate. Once inside, visitors either climb the original pine staircase (to the upstairs semiprivate areas) or head toward the kitchen to the right through a small adjoining sitting room containing another clay fireplace, engineered to heat a bench at the kitchen table on the other side of the wall. The walls in the kitchen are decorated with mostly handmade tools that Vo has collected over time: a broom constructed of natural grasses and bamboo from Thailand; two straw egg baskets from South Korea given to Vo by his friend the artist [Haegue Yang](#). Beyond the kitchen is the large living area and the blue stove.



Vo in the library on the third floor of the main farmhouse. His sweater and knit pants are by the designer Claudia Skoda, who is based in Berlin and has also been a collaborator. Angela Simi



The Berlin-based chef Dalad Kambhu, a friend of Vo's and a regular visitor at Goldenhof, checks out the progress of a violet trumpet vine. She often uses edible flowers that she collects on the farm in the dishes at her restaurant, Kin Dee. Angela Simi

The top two floors are dedicated to reading, working and sleeping: At least a dozen beds (the number fluctuates along with the number of guests) are scattered among the house's small private rooms and larger lounge spaces. (Vo himself doesn't have a designated bedroom.) A plywood stairway — “a homage,” Vo says, to Tiravanija's farm in upstate New York, most of whose interiors are completely covered in plywood — leads through a triangular opening to the third floor, which serves as a library and sleeping area: yet another place to bed down for the night.





A view into one of the farm buildings — with a transparent roof and a packed earth floor — that contains an ever-evolving space where found religious sculptures are placed between walls of vines, which were planted by Güldenhof's gardener, Christine Schulte. In the summer months these "rooms" are sometimes used as studios by guests. [Anselm Groll](#)

VO'S TRANSFORMATIVE ENERGIES extended beyond the property lines, and as Balp and his team were working on the renovation, the artist was seeking out people from the surrounding area to help reimagine Güldenhof: like Falko Martens, an engineer and artisan who makes bespoke wood-burning clay ovens; or the cabinetmaker Fred Fischer, who now has a carpentry shop in one of the old barns and made much of the furniture in the farmhouse, including the beds fashioned out of plywood. Vo calls his knack for finding such collaborators "luck," but Tiravanija says that bringing people together is one of Vo's great skills. Indeed, Güldenhof is always buzzing with people Vo has brought into his world. On any given day, there might be between four and 12 visitors, like Claus Meyer, one of the creators of Denmark's [New Nordic Cuisine manifesto](#), and the Michelin-starred chef [Dalad Kambhu](#), discussing fish sauce and fermentation. Or Yang, who spent time at the farm learning how to make ceramics with Tiravanija. Or a group that includes Luise Faurschou, the founder of a Copenhagen-based nonprofit called [Art 2030](#), and the Berlin-based restaurateur Oliver Prestele, helping harvest cabbage from the neighboring farm of Vo's friends Lena Buss and Philipp Adler. "I don't grow many vegetables anymore, because I would rather support Lena and Philipp," says Vo. The biggest event takes place on the summer solstice, a two-day-long party that attracts more than a hundred people.

Gisela Williams

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But Vo's most important collaborator at Güldenhof might well be Christine Schulz, who moved from Berlin to Brandenburg to devote herself to gardening and beekeeping. ("She will move ladybugs from one side of the garden to the other by hand," says Vo.) She helped transform one of the barns, topped with a transparent polycarbonate roof, into a sort of artistic greenhouse, where cup-and-saucer vines with lilac-colored flowers grow up over wooden ceiling beams, creating organic interior walls. In the summer, these "rooms" are sometimes used by visiting artists as studios.

Vo's own work seems increasingly bound up in Güldenhof's landscape. For a [2020 solo show](#) at London's White Cube gallery, he installed grasses and sage growing out of tubs illuminated by grow lights, and he is currently planning another show in which he will create a garden and a flower shop. "Eventually, I might get to the point that when a collector asks to buy a work of mine, I'll say, 'Grow a garden instead,'" he says.

Güldenhof has also reminded Vo that sometimes the best inspiration can be found when everything seems fallow. "For the first time, I am making a point of returning here before the winter solstice," he says. "I have been drawn to learn how to adapt to the darkness and the coldness. I am suddenly loving being here on the darkest day of the year." Especially when it can be spent with a few friends by the stove.



Text  
Dominikus Müller  
Fotos  
Nick Ash

# Auf Wachstumskurs

2016 HAT DER KÜNSTLER DANH VO EINEN  
ALTEN GUTSHOF IN BRANDENBURG  
GEKAUFT. MIT LANDROMANTIK HAT DAS  
GANZE ABER WENIGER ZU TUN ALS  
MIT EINER NEUEN WERK- UND LEBENSPHASE.  
EIN BESUCH AUF DEM GÜLDENHOF





Hausbesuch, DANH VO

»DIE MENSCHEN, DIE  
HIER LEBEN  
UND ARBEITEN,  
TEILEN SICH  
DEN HOF NICHT  
NUR MIT DER  
KUNST, SONDERN  
AUCH MIT  
DER NATUR«

Auf dem GÜLDENHOF sollen Kunst  
und Natur, innen und außen  
ineinanderfließen, Räume nicht  
auf bestimmte Funktionen festgelegt  
werden. Alle Fotos auf den  
folgenden Seiten sind Teil von  
„DANH VO: Güldenhof, 2020–2021“

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Diesige Winterluft und klamme Kälte, dazu ein Himmel aus Beton. Vor dem Autofenster fliegen diese typischen Brandenburger Straßendörfer vorbei, deren einzeln stehende Häuser hinter hohen Lattenzäunen wenig einladende Gassen bilden. Unser Ziel: Güldenhof, ein einsamer Ortsteil der Gemeinde Stechlin, gut 80 Kilometer nordwestlich von Berlin. Laut offizieller Zählung leben hier 41 Menschen. Es gibt genau zwei Straßen mit sprechenden Namen: Farmweg, Betonstraße. An Letzterer liegt das Kieswerk. Ersterer führt mitten über das Gelände des eigentlichen „Güldenhofs“, eines alten Guts aus dem 19. Jahrhundert, hinaus auf die Felder. Danh Vo, der diesen Hof 2016 gekauft hat, sitzt vorne und fährt das Auto, auf dessen Rückbank ich aus dem Fenster hinaus nach Brandenburg starre.

Kurz darauf stapfen wir am späten Nachmittag durch die Dämmerung über den Hof, dessen zentrales Geviert mit den Dutzenden dort aufgestapelten und tonnenschweren Marmorblöcken wie eine fahlweiße Zyklopenlandschaft wirkt, die man eher in einem imaginären Arkadien als im realen Brandenburg vermuten würde. Eigentlich, so Vo, sei er nur auf der Suche nach einem Ort gewesen, um sein Archiv einzulagern. Er hat damals, mit 40, eine Retrospektive im New Yorker Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum vorbereitet, wobei ihm klar wurde, wie viele seine Werke über die ganze Welt verstreut in den Lagern diverser Museen schlummerten. Wäre es da nicht einfacher, sie künftig an einem Ort zu versammeln – und so auch wieder etwas mehr Kontext über das eigene Werk, die eigene Geschichte zu erlangen? befreundeten Künstlerkollegen Rirkrit Tiravanija machte auf die Suche. Und landete auf dem Güldenhof.

Die Tür fliegt auf, das Licht geht an, und schon stehen wir im ersten von insgesamt drei hintereinander angeordneten und unterschiedlich klimatisierten Lagerräumen im lang gestreckten Südflügel des Gehöfts. Links und rechts: Kartons, Transportkisten und Regale, in denen seepockenverkrustete Tongefäße liegen, kleine Putten oder jene antiken christlichen Holzschnitzereien, die Vo oft in seinen Installationen und skulpturalen Assemblagen verbaut. Dort lugen die Füße einer mannshohen Christusfigur hervor, hier die bizarr aussehenden selbst gebauten Instrumente des Künstlers Tarek Atoui, mit denen dieser im Sommer das alljährliche Mittsommerfest auf dem Güldenhof beschallt hat. Im Verlauf der Renovierung ist der Güldenhof für Vo mehr geworden als Archiv und Kunstlager. Spätestens seit er sich während der Coronakrise 2020 mit ein paar anderen hierhin zurückgezogen hat, dient der Hof als Studio, Werkstätte, Garten, Gasthaus, Wohnung, kurz: als Lebens- und Arbeitsmittelpunkt.

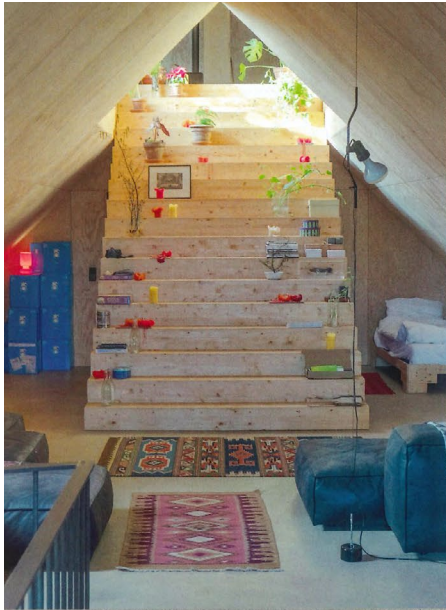
Vo – geboren in Vietnam, aufgewachsen in Dänemark, ausgebildet in Kopenhagen und an der Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main – hat eine durch und durch globale Künstlerkarriere vorzuweisen. Und das heißt eben auch: Er war die letzte Dekade ständig unterwegs. Auch wenn er zunächst Berlin und später Mexiko-Stadt als Wohnsitz angab, lebte er doch im Grunde immer dort, wo er gerade eine Ausstellung hatte oder vorbereitete. Ein „Studiokünstler“ im strengen Sinne war Vo, dessen Arbeiten meist erst vor Ort in den jeweiligen Ausstellungskontexten ihre finale Form annehmen, sowieso nie. Und auch den Güldenhof kann man als eine offene, prozessbasierte Sache begreifen, die sich ständig weiterentwickelt. So sehr Vos bisherige Karriere mit dem entgrenzten, entorteten Kunstbetrieb der letzten zwei Jahrzehnte verknüpft ist, so sehr scheint er mit seinem Umzug aufs Land nun eine neue Phase in Leben und Werk eingeläutet zu haben. Dabei aber vom Rückzug in die Selbstgenügsamkeit einer komfortablen Einsiedelei zu sprechen – aus der Kunst in die Natur, aus der Stadt aufs Land – geht an der Sache vorbei. Eher schon: Erweiterung, Verlagerung, ein strategischer Schritt zur Seite. Neue Verhältnisse.

Die Grenze zwischen Leben und Werk, privat und öffentlich ist im Fall Vos sowieso brüchig. Die Unschärfe zwischen den Sphären sowie die Ökonomien und Machtssysteme, die zwischen ihnen vermitteln und festlegen, was für wen geht und was eben nicht, bilden nicht selten die eigentliche Manövriermasse für seine Arbeiten. Die Grenzen zwischen offizieller Kollaboration, entlohnter Dienstleistung und dem informellen Netzwerk aus Freunden und Familie sind dabei ebenso fließend wie die zwischen der Autonomie der Kunst und deren biografischer Grundierung. Als bewusst „unrein“ hat der Kurator und Kunstkritiker Bartholomew Ryan in einem Interview mit Vo für die Zeitschrift „Mousse“ dessen Arbeitsweise jüngst bezeichnet.

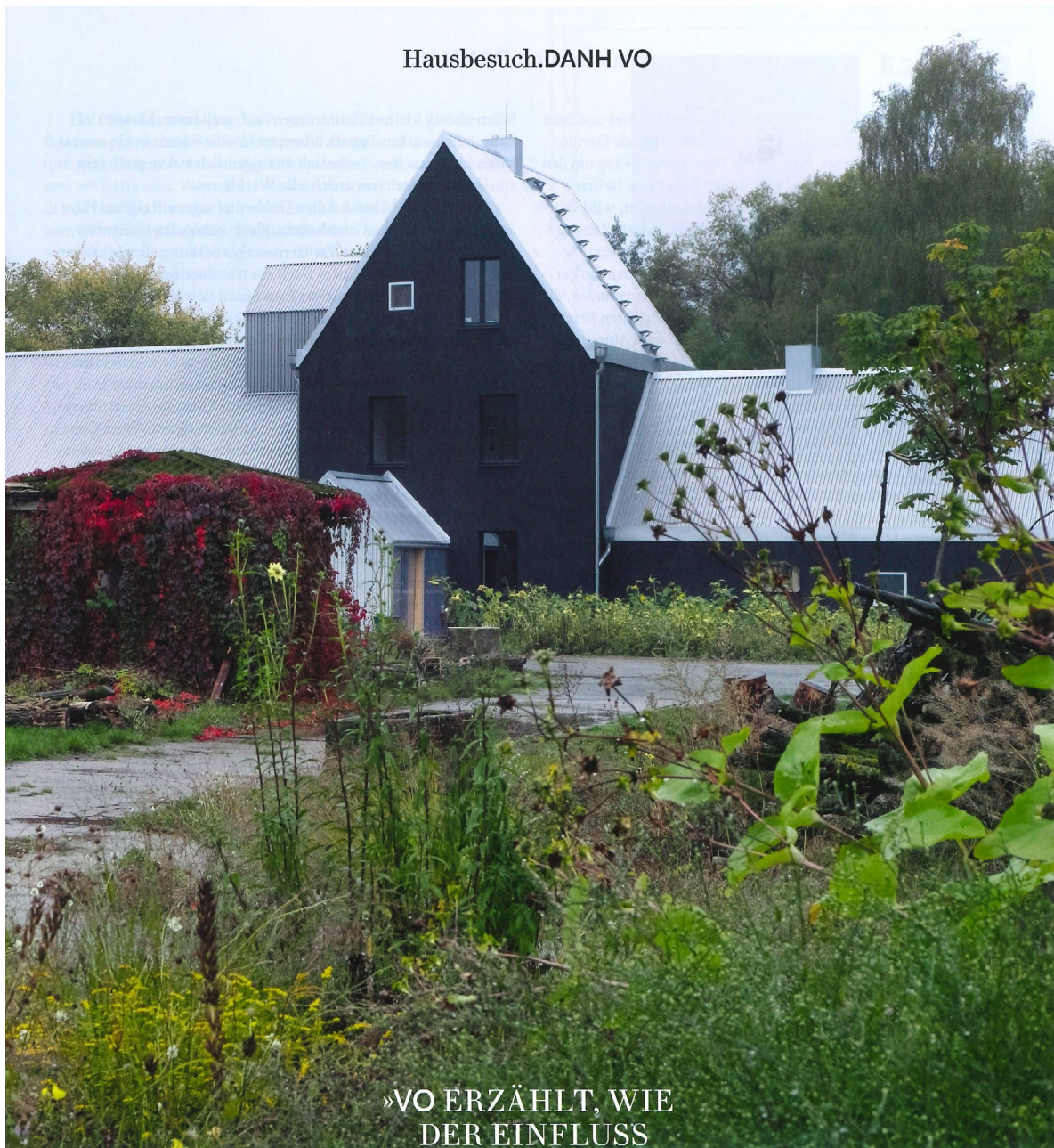
Wer möchte, kann im Güldenhof, diesem im Viereck angeordneten Gehöft, nun eine Art Matrix erkennen, anhand derer sich dieses komplexe Verhältnis von Kunst und Leben, von Arbeit und Sozialem sowie – und das ist der neue Partner im Spiel – der Natur gerade neu konfiguriert. So befinden sich gegenüber dem Kunstarchiv in einem weiteren lang gestreckten Wirtschaftsgebäude ein riesiges Holzlager sowie eine voll ausgestattete Tischlerwerkstatt. Vo hatte sie gleich zu Beginn hier einrichten lassen, um die Renovierung des Hofes über weite Strecken selbst stemmen zu kön-



GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL



Dominikus Müller  
*Auf Wachstumskurs*  
Monopol, February, 2022, p.76-85.



»VO ERZÄHLT, WIE  
DER EINFLUSS  
DER JAHRESZEITEN  
IHM DABEI HELFE,  
IN DISTANZ  
ZUM KÜNSTLICHEN  
KALENDER  
DES KUNSTBETRIEBS  
ZU GEHEN«

## Hausbesuch.DANH VO

nen. Seit 2019 arbeitet der Möbelbauer Fred Fischer hier und baut Elemente für Vos Ausstellung. Heute macht sich gerade Davide Berti, ein junger Italiener, der sich von Montag bis Freitag um den Hof kümmert, an einer neuen Tür für den Keller zu schaffen.

Wie zentral diese Werkstatt für den Güldenhof ist, wird deutlich, wenn man ins Haupthaus hinübergeht, das soziale Zentrum des Komplexes, dessen neu gemachte Außenwände schwarz gestrichen sind, um sie sichtbar vom Bestand abzuheben. So gut wie alle Aus- und Einbauten sind in der Werkstatt entstanden, die lange Küchenzeile ebenso wie die vielen selbst gemachten Betten, Tische und Stühle, manche davon nach Vorlage der „Autoprogettazione“-Entwürfe, mit denen der italienische Designer Enzo Mari in den 1970er-Jahren das Design im Gewand des Heimwerkens zu demokratisieren gedachte. Im dezent grau verputzten Gemeinschaftsraum steht ein gigantischer gemauerter Ofen, um den herum man im Winter zusammenrücken kann. Im Obergeschoss finden sich diverse Gästezimmer sowie ein mit einfachen Sperrholzplatten ausgekleideter Raum unter dem Dach: beeindruckend in den Ausmaßen, elegant in seinem Minimalismus, aber bescheiden in seinen Materialien. Hier oben arbeitet Marta Lusena, Vos langjährige Studiomanagerin, wenn sie auf dem Güldenhof ist.

Doch die Menschen, die hier leben und arbeiten, teilen sich den Hof eben nicht nur mit der Kunst, sondern auch mit den Pflanzen. Schon kurz nachdem Vo den Hof erworben hatte, holte er Christine Schulz an Bord, eine Gärtnerin, die den Güldenhof in ein wucherndes Paradies verwandelt hat. Schon im Haupthaus

fallen überall kleine Pflanzeninseln auf, grell bestrahlt von tief hängenden, starken Tageslichtlampen, die die Räume in ein surreal kaltes Licht tauchen. Technisch und eigentlich viel zu grell, geht von ihnen eine seltsam artifizielle Wärme aus.

Die Pflanzen haben auf dem Güldenhof sogar ein eigenes Haus am anderen Ende des Grundstücks, gleich neben den Gartenbau-räumen von Schulz: einen Zwitter aus alter Stallung, Gewächshaus und Wintergarten mit einem Dach aus transluzentem Wellacryl. Im Inneren sind Netze gespannt, an denen sich blühende Ranken nach oben strecken und grüne Wände formen. Dazwischen sind längst Räume entstanden, in denen hie und da klassizistische Steinskulpturen platziert sind, ihrerseits überwuchert – ein Haus nicht nur für die Pflanzen, sondern streckenweise aus ihnen.

Längst haben der Güldenhof und seine Gewächse ihren Weg in die Kunst Vos gefunden. In seiner Ausstellung bei White Cube in London stand im Herbst 2020 ein funktionierender Holzofen mitten in der Galerie, darum herum fanden sich kleine Pflanzeninseln unter tief hängenden Tageslichtlampen. Im Winter 2021 war bei Xavier Hufkens in Brüssel eine ganze Wand mit elegant-verträumten Blumenporträts zu sehen, die Vos Vater Phung in geschwungenen Lettern mit ihren lateinischen Namen versehen hat. Und auch für seine aktuelle Museumsausstellung in Luxemburg hat Vo einen konzeptuellen Garten geschaffen, in dem er eine aus Pflanzen und Steinen bestehende Installation in einen Dialog zu den berühmten Akari-Lampen des japanisch-amerikanischen Bildhauers Isamu Noguchi setzt.

## »LÄNGST HABEN DER GÜLDENHOF UND SEINE GEWÄCHSE IHREN WEG IN VOS KUNST GEFUNDEN«



Die Pflanzen versorgen das Projekt Güldenhof mit gleichermaßen metaphorischem wie konkretem Rüstzeug, sind Denkbild und praktisches Verfahren zugleich: pflegen, wachsen, wuchern und nie fertig sein. Vo erzählt, wie die Arbeit auf dem Land und der direkte Einfluss der Jahreszeiten ihm dabei helfe, in Distanz zum künstlichen Kalender des Kunstbetriebs mit seinen zyklisch wiederkehrenden Großereignissen zu gehen und sich im Denken unabhängig zu machen.

Dabei kommt Vos Version vom Landleben im Großen und Ganzen ohne die gängigen idyllischen Projektionen auf ein ganzheitliches Leben jenseits der Metropolen aus. Und wo sie bemüht werden, erscheinen sie in Beziehung gesetzt zu ihrem Kontext, eingespannt nicht zuletzt in die globalen Verwertungsmechanismen. Sowieso: Der Abschied von der Unbill des Kapitalismus, wie man ihn so gerne mit dem Rückzug in die vermeintliche Autarkie des Landes verbindet, ist letztlich integraler Teil jener eigentlich nur in der hypervernetzten Stadt gehegten Reinheits- und Ursprungsfantasien. Der Güldenhof ist kein losgelöster Solitär, keine abgeriegelte Trutzburg. So wie das Brandenburger Landleben seinen Weg in Vos weltweit gezeigte Ausstellungen findet, bringt der Güldenhof sich umgekehrt vor Ort ein, ist eingebunden in ein Netzwerk und steht im Austausch mit den Menschen, die diese Gegend bewohnen und bewirtschaften. Ökonomien sind das alles.

Schon nachmittags waren wir auf dem Hof von Philipp Adler und Lena Buss, wo Vo noch kurz die Fässer für das geplante gesellige Sauerkrauteinmachen am nächsten Wochenende inspizieren möchte. Längst hat er sich mit den beiden jungen Biobauern im benachbarten Altglobsow angefreundet. Über Vo kam für die beiden der Kontakt zu einigen Restaurants in Berlin zustande, die sie nun mit Gemüse beliefern. Auch der Güldenhof bekommt von hier Lebensmittel. Im Gegenzug beziehen Buss und Adler von Vos Hof Dinge, die auf ihren eigenen Feldern aus Gründen der Biozertifikation nicht angebaut werden können, essbare Blumen zum Beispiel.

Es dauert nicht lange, und wir stapfen mit dem Spaten über der Schulter übers Feld am Waldrand. Vo will ausgraben, was er „Mutanten“ nennt: Pflanzen, die aufgrund von Mutationen und Befall anders gedeihen als ihre Artgenossen. Kohlrabi etwa, die zwei oder drei Köpfe statt nur einem ausbilden, Knollen, die sich spalten und seltsam verwachsen – Früchte des Bodens auch sie, aber befreit von jeglichen Ursprungs- und Reinheitsfantasmen. Schon allein unter ästhetischen Gesichtspunkten sei er fasziniert von diesen Gewächsen, sagt Vo. Er überlege, ob man sie nicht als Zierblumen verkaufen könne. Und während er den Spaten in den Boden sticht und dieses Gemüse ausgräbt, das normalerweise aussortiert wird, weil es nicht der Norm entspricht, erzählt er vom kaputten System der Landwirtschaft, von den irrsinnigen Ausschüssen, von geringen Erträgen, miesen Löhnen, ausufernden Arbeitsstunden und den knallharten Zertifikationsregimen für Biogemüse. Da stehen wir nun auf dem Feld, den Spaten in der einen Hand, die Kohlrabi mit ihren zwei Köpfen in der anderen, und sprechen über Kategorisierungen, deren Abhängigkeit von globalen Ökonomien und wie man aus dem, was durchs Raster fällt, etwas Neues machen kann. Der Himmel über uns ist grau. Die Kälte zieht uns in die klammen Glieder. Die diesige Luft riecht nach frisch umgegrabener Erde. ●

„ISAMU NOGUCHI / DANH VO: A CLOUD  
AND FLOWERS“, Mudam Luxemburg, bis 19. September

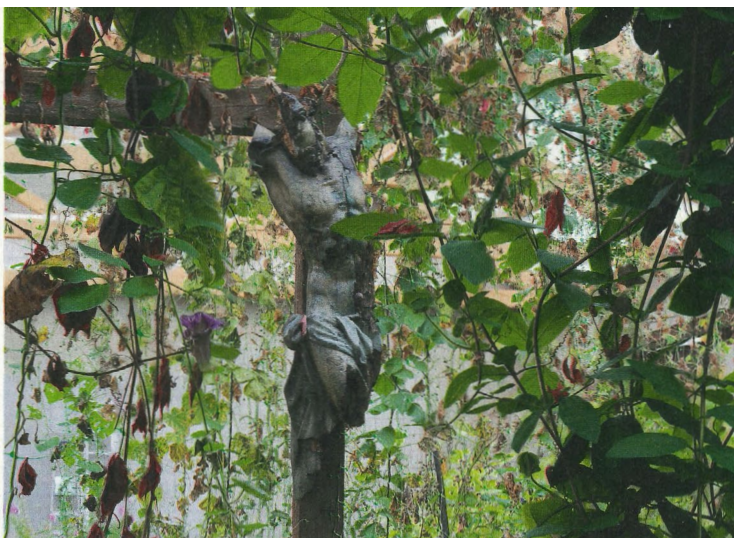


*Calliandra bodinieri*

**Danh VO.** JUSQU'AU PRINTEMPS, "M" INVITE L'ARTISTE DANOIS À PRÉSENTER DES IMAGES DES FLEURS QU'IL CULTIVE DANS LE JARDIN DE SON ATELIER PRÈS DE BERLIN. DEMANDANT À SON PROPRE PÈRE DE CALLIGRAPHIER LE NOM LATIN DES PLANTES, IL INVENTE UN HERBIER À LA FOIS CONCEPTUEL ET PERSONNEL.

CARTE BLANCHE À

Dans le jardin que cultive Danh Vo à Güldenhof, dans le Brandebourg, en 2021. Ci-dessous, Danh Vo au lycée.



DEPUIS VINGT-CINQ ANS, L'ARTISTE D'ORIGINE VIETNAMIENNE QUI A GRANDI AU DANEMARK POURSUIT UNE ŒUVRE SINGULIÈRE. INSTALLATIONS, SCULPTURES ET AUJOURD'HUI VÉGÉTAUX LUI PERMETTENT D'EXPLORER LA QUESTION DES ORIGINES, ENTRE HISTOIRES INTIME ET COLLECTIVE.

## Le jardin des arts de DANH VO.

À 46 ANS, DANH VO paraît revenir d'un long voyage qui a duré toute sa vie. L'artiste semble toujours à bord du bateau de fortune sur lequel il a fui le Vietnam, en 1979, avec ses parents, avant d'être recueilli par un navire danois. Depuis, il a fait escale à Berlin, puis à Mexico, et exposé partout dans le monde, où il est courtoisé par les plus grands collectionneurs. Aujourd'hui, Danh Vo habite littéralement cette maxime de Louis Aragon : « *Tout le bizarre de l'homme, et ce qu'il y a en lui de vagabond et d'égaré, sans doute pourrait-il tenir dans ces deux syllabes : jardin.* » Dans une ancienne ferme du Brandebourg (la région qui entoure Berlin), où il s'est installé depuis cinq ans, l'artiste a fait fleurir 3,5 hectares de terrain. Ici, à Güldenhof, pas d'allées géométriques, mais un joyeux tapis. Pas de fleurs industrielles et génétiquement modifiées, mais 120 espèces qu'il photographie depuis le mois d'août. « *Je me suis rendu compte que je connaissais le nom des directeurs de musée, des curateurs, des artistes et des collectionneurs, mais pas toujours celui des oiseaux qui chantent devant mes fenêtres ou des fleurs qui poussent à ma porte* », confie-t-il d'une voix douce. Après avoir accroché quelques photos à la galerie Chantal Crousel, en octobre, l'artiste en présente de nouvelles au Mudam, au Luxembourg, dans le cadre d'une exposition confrontant son travail aux sculptures d'Isamu Noguchi.

Dans ce nouvel exercice, l' impatient Danh Vo a d'abord voulu soumettre la nature à son rythme. « *Comme artiste à succès, j'avais l'habitude que les choses se passent selon mes désirs*, raconte-t-il. *J'étais rompu aux deadlines. Alors que le jardin est à l'opposé de ça.* » Lui qui mange local, au gré des saisons, a compris qu'il n'était pas moins absurde d'exiger des roses en hiver que de consommer des cerises à Noël. Comme de nombreux plasticiens, comme le cinéaste Derek Jarman, qui se sont mis au jardinage et l'ont vu comme un prolongement de leur création, l'artiste conceptuel qui assemble ou altère les objets existants, plutôt que d'en produire de nouveaux, travaille désormais la terre. « *Un boulot à plein temps* », s'amuse-t-il. Comme il l'a souvent fait dans sa carrière, Danh Vo a mis son père à contribution. Phung Vo a accepté de calligraphier le nom latin des fleurs. Auparavant, sans comprendre le français, l'ancien restaurateur avait déjà reproduit de sa graphie déliée à l'encre bleue la dernière lettre d'un missionnaire jésuite, Théophile Vénard, exécuté au Tonkin en 1861.

Quand on l'interroge sur la portée de ces photographies, Danh Vo se moque : « *J'ai mis tellement de sens dans tout le reste de mes œuvres que, là, il s'agit juste de regarder des fleurs!* » N'en croyez rien : avec lui, les objets les plus modestes recèlent toujours une

signification. Pour qui savait le décrypter, le lustre présenté dans sa fabuleuse exposition à la Pointe de la Douane, à Venise, en 2016, portait ainsi une histoire. Démonté et transporté loin de la salle de bal de l'Hôtel Majestic-Champs-Élysées, il était le témoin muet des accords de Paris qui y avaient été signés par les États-Unis, le Nord- et le Sud-Vietnam, le 27 janvier 1973. À l'intersection de l'art, de l'histoire collective et du journal intime, l'œuvre de Danh Vo entremêle ainsi, dans un mille-feuille de symboles, des récits d'amour, de pouvoir, de violence et de perte. Le démembrement, c'est sa grande affaire. Il a ainsi morcelé un Christ en bois portugais, découpé deux chaises de la Maison Blanche offertes par Jackie Kennedy au secrétaire de la défense Robert McNamara, artisan de la « sale guerre » au Vietnam. Il a su donner une forme aux fractures invisibles de l'Amérique, en tronçonnant une réplique en aluminium de la statue de la Liberté de Bartholdi. Ce projet, fait de 300 pièces dispersées dans le monde, a éveillé une curiosité internationale.

Derrière les pétales et pistils de ses photos de fleurs se tisse une histoire de la construction du goût – pourquoi préfère-t-on les roses aux pissenlits? –, de la colonisation – qui a fait migrer les espèces? – et du capitalisme – qui a transformé le commerce de fleurs en industrie peu écologique? Et tout simplement du pouvoir. « *Au Vietnam, on plante un bambou lorsqu'on conquiert une terre, au Japon, c'est un cerisier* », dit Danh Vo. Ces nouvelles photos occupent tant l'artiste qu'il confesse n'avoir « *jamais été aussi heureux qu'aujourd'hui* ». Pour garder cette énergie, il songe à ouvrir un jour un magasin de fleurs. Et invite les musées et les collectionneurs à en faire de même. « *Les musées ont des librairies, pourquoi ne vendraient-ils pas de fleurs? J'en ai parlé à François Pinault, confesse-t-il tout sourire. Il avait l'air intéressé!* » (M) Roxana AZIMI



Couv. : Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash.

## LES "À VENIR" DE DANH VO ET TAREK ATOUI

### CUEILLETTE PHOTOGRAPHIQUE

Il est vrai que l'un et l'autre se connaissent et s'apprécient depuis longtemps, et que Vo, dans la ferme où il vient de s'installer aux alentours de Berlin, possède et active régulièrement les œuvres d'Atoui qu'il lui a achetées, en particulier au solstice de la Saint-Jean, avec des amis musiciens. Mais ce qu'il y a de plus bouleversant dans ce projet, c'est la façon dont leurs œuvres, en s'infiltrant l'une dans l'autre, en s'hybridant l'une à l'autre, se soutiennent, s'étaient et s'épaulent. Et cela, qu'elles soient communes ou autonomes, réunies ou séparées.

Danh Vo nous présente presque pour la première fois l'herbier qu'il constitue jour après jour de toutes les plantes de ce nouveau territoire de la campagne allemande dans lequel il va faire (sa) demeure, manière inédite de se faire accueillir à travers une pratique de cueillette photographique. Car à travers cet herbier, il ne fait pas exister ces fragments poétiques de nature qui préexistaient bien avant lui, mais tente de (ré)exister à travers eux, de (re)trouver une voie/voix dans l'égrènement de leur nomination que son père, en moine copiste, inscrit sous chaque image.

GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

Tarek Atoui ne fait pas autre chose à travers son travail de collecte de vibrations, de timbres, de murmures et de chuchotements – son exposition s’intitule *The Whisperers* – qu’il nous restitue de façon tout aussi rigoureuse et précise qu’ouverte à l’imprévu et l’imprévisible de celui qui va s’en saisir. Ici, pour un ensemble d’œuvres, les visiteurs ; là, pour un autre, les élèves de la classe de maternelle de l’École alsacienne de Paris que fréquente son enfant et avec laquelle il a travaillé pendant le confinement au fil de cinq ateliers. Les sons de l’eau, du bois, de la pierre, du verre, du laiton, du bronze. Les sons des matériaux des œuvres de Vo. Les sons des territoires naturels ou urbains. Toutes ces sonorités, toutes ces fratries et sororités sonores que l’artiste restitue et amplifie selon une autre forme de paysage où chaque élément acoustique se retrouve relié, connecté, par de fines, ténues et fragiles lignes d’énergies, de tensions et de résonances, à l’instar de balises interactives d’émotions et de poésie temporaires, nomades et disséminées dans l’espace. *Not everywhere but anywhere...*



*Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash*

Marc Donnadieu  
*Les "à venir" de Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui*  
artpress, November 4, 2021.  
<https://cutt.ly/uR8RSBa>





Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash

## CONSTELLATIONS SONORES

Bien évidemment, Danh Vo repart une nouvelle fois de la séminale dernière lettre envoyée avant sa décapitation par le prêtre missionnaire catholique Théophane Vénard en 1861 à son père, et recopié par Phung Vo, père de l'artiste. Mais sa (re)lecture résonne autrement dans ce contexte de par les métaphores florales de l'existence humaine qui y sont inscrites : "Un léger coup de sabre séparera ma tête comme une fleur printanière que le Maître du jardin cueille pour son propre plaisir. Nous sommes tous des fleurs plantées sur cette terre que Dieu cueille en son temps, un peu plus tôt, un peu plus tard. [...] Tâchons tous de plaire, selon le parfum ou l'éclat qui nous est donnés, au souverain Seigneur et Maître." Ce qu'expriment tout à la fois l'herbier et les fragments de statues particulièrement précieuses contenues dans des caisses à claire-voie. Et celles-ci semblent bien plus soutenir comme des attelles ces corps en morceaux que les enfermer et les sanctuariser. Chez Tarek Atoui, ce sont nos voix qui pourraient se (re)formuler, voire renaître de façon presque épiphanique, à travers le parfum et les éclats des subtiles constellations sonores disposées dans l'espace de la galerie et à notre disposition. Saurons-nous être à leur écoute de leur grain comme à l'écoute de nous même ? Saurons-nous accepter leur dépassement, et leur faire confiance ?

GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

La vie, notre rapport aux choses, à notre passé, à notre culture ou à notre mémoire sont là comme en réparation. À nous de savoir saisir le potentiel et les devenirs de cette exposition en nous dessaisissant de nos a priori et de nos certitudes, en nous déchargeant de nos pierres que nous avons rendues muettes parce que refermées sur elles-mêmes et devenues sans signification, sinon sans usage. Car, comme l'annonçait Vladimir Jankélévitch : "Le devenir contrarie l'arrondissement plastique de l'objet, car il est la dimension selon laquelle l'objet se défait sans cesse, se forme, se déforme, se reforme et se transforme ; le changement que le devenir fait advenir n'est pas modelage, mais modification continuée." La communauté qui vient à laquelle nous invite leur projet, c'est très précisément ces modifications continues qu'il nous faudrait observer, recueillir puis accueillir, voire fertiliser et faire rejaillir, à partir de ces grains et ces voix que ces deux artistes simplement et humblement nous proposent, à l'instar d'une offrande faite au monde.



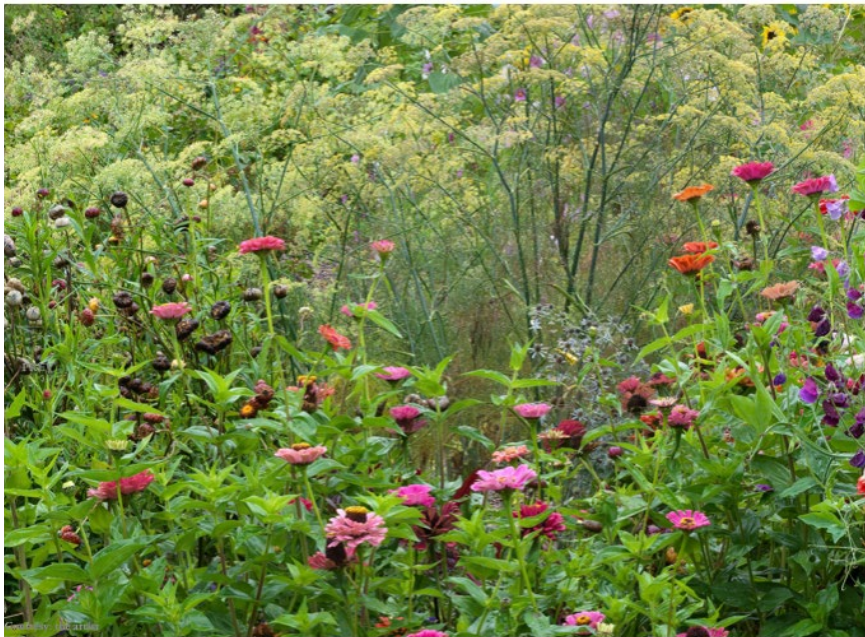
*Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui, vue de l'exposition, galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2021, Ph. Nick Ash*

Marc Donnadieu  
*Les "à venir" de Danh Vo et Tarek Atoui*  
artpress, November 4, 2021.  
<https://cutt.ly/uR8RSBa>

## MOUSSE

### Camouflage and Beauty: Danh Vo and Güldenhof Danh Vo in Conversation with Bartholomew Ryan

In the last few years, Danh Vo has moved his home and studio to Güldenhof, a former GDR communal farm one hour north of Berlin. It signaled a reset of sorts. In conversation with the artist, curator Bartholomew Ryan discusses the farm and Vo's current exhibitions at MASSIMODECARLO, Milan, and Secession, Vienna.



#### BARTHOLOMEW RYAN

Danh, in a sense, we each had our COVID-19 moments before the pandemic. I had my challenges with addiction, which prompted a five-year withdrawal. In 2017 you bought an old farm named Güldenhof near Berlin, and made it home. In a fascinating text published in *Mousse*, “Anywhere, Out of the World: Ruralism and Escape in the New Roaring Twenties,” Pablo Larios states, “In 2021, fantasies of escape are elsewhere. . . . Artists are leaving cities” to pursue what he calls a “technocratic pastoralism” (which I guess means rural life with internet access). Larios quotes artist Seth Price, who said that in withdrawing to a communal community in Connecticut he was attempting to decline the contemporary mandate “to know everyone and be known to all.” <sup>1</sup>

Bartholomew Ryan

*Camouflage and Beauty: Danh Vo and Güldenhof* Danh Vo in Conversation with Bartholomew Ryan

Mousse Magazine, October 22, 2021.

<https://cutt.ly/oRQXbxw>

This quote resonated with something I heard you say when you found Güldenhof: you realized you knew the names of all these art people, but none of birds or flowers. Güldenhof came along around the time of *Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away*, your 2018 retrospective at the Guggenheim, New York. I remember going to the opening, my first time in New York since getting clean. There were the usual pleasant and unpleasant art-world people. Toward the end, I found you and gave you a hug. I remember feeling distressed because your body seemed so frail. It was the culmination of years of travel and work for you. Is Güldenhof part of a fantasy of escape?

DANH VO

Maybe subconsciously. After the Guggenheim I felt I had reached so many ambitions in my life, and one of the things that I really wanted was a studio. Because I traveled so much, the studio was almost independent of me. I needed to create a space with a different relation to time that could benefit me but also others like Marta Lusena, my studio manager, who has dedicated so much intelligence. How to create a working space that benefits everybody? I would reformulate it from “escape” by saying that you find out what is important in your life, and that gives you direction.

BARTHOLOMEW

What has surprised you about Güldenhof?

DANH

I thought I would be looking at trees; I never knew I would be growing a flower or vegetable garden. A whole world opened up. How human beings perceive nature is the same discussion as how we perceive gender, or race, or whatever we have been delving into as a society. Identity opens up all these complex facets of what categorization means.

BARTHOLOMEW

Can you talk about your relationship to the garden, and specifically to the gardener Christine Schulz?

DANH

We were all city people coming out to the countryside, so it was important to hire a person who knew about gardens. But all gardens are different. I think it was a stroke of luck to find Christine, who has her own garden near the farm. Christine has a very particular quality for making gardens, which was not necessarily considered a quality when she was working in a nursery. A nursery has a different kind of economy, and therefore sensibility. If I was making the garden for economic reasons, I would work with someone else. Christine’s approach creates width.

Bartholomew Ryan

*Camouflage and Beauty: Danh Vo and Güldenhof* *Danh Vo in Conversation with Bartholomew Ryan*

Mousse Magazine, October 22, 2021.

<https://cutt.ly/oRQXbxw>

BARTHOLOMEW

So much of your work considers labor, and you personally put people to work. There can be a whisper of exploitation: Is there something twisted about these relationships? I was listening to a conversation on how you got your dad, Phùng Vo, to start (re)writing *2.2.1861* (2009–), the 1861 letter from St. Jean Théophane Vénard. The interviewer asked how you persuaded him to do it. You replied, “I gave him money.”<sup>2</sup> And people laughed and I think were surprised somehow by the answer. There’s a real integrity to that. It’s an exchange. And what the other does with the project, that is in their control.

DANH

When I started to work with my father, I looked at his beautiful handwriting, a deformed thing that embodied so much about colonial history and geopolitics. This handwritten Latin script by a Catholic Vietnamese refugee. A thing that had no value. I wanted to get *into* the work. I think with Christine it’s the same. Not that her labor becomes absorbed into the artwork. But when we look into the fields, it is those who have their hands in the soil who are so undervalued in our society. Christine confronts me with this problem.

BARTHOLOMEW

*2.2.1861* is an ongoing edition that lasts as long as Phùng is prepared to write out the last letter of this French missionary to his own father. Vénard is about to be beheaded by Buddhists for heresy, and the text is quite elegiac. I’ve often seen curators and critics assert that Phùng can’t understand the letter because he doesn’t speak French, and I’ve always thought, “Literally Phùng has been doing that project for *years*. I think the man is intelligent enough to figure out what the letter says!”

DANH

For me it doesn’t matter if he understands the letter or not. Maybe he knows or maybe he doesn’t care, but it’s secondary.

BARTHOLOMEW

This letter can exist for your dad *and* for you. I know that Phùng is aware that he is writing the last words of a famous Catholic saint. Today he’ll send the letter to grandchildren who graduate and such. So he has his logic with the piece and you have yours, and those two things can coexist. Let’s talk about your current exhibition at MASSIMODECARLO in Milan. It takes place in a 1930s apartment designed by Piero Portaluppi, Casa Corbellini-Wassermann, renowned for its art deco design and eclectic decorative qualities. The exhibition seems to consider the nature of supports. Simple two-by-four timbers prop up cut-marble slabs. If they are bases, they are empty except for an occasional broken fragment from an antique sculpture. How did this exhibition take shape?

Bartholomew Ryan

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GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

DANH

I created the works in the gallery. I got marble leftovers, basic construction wood, and antique stones, and balanced them without nails or glue. Some were functional: a pavement, a bench, a plinth. Most of the sculpture pieces come from a body of work that I've been doing for a while. But I've reached a level of confidence where I don't need to add political content.

BARTHOLOMEW

In the works you debuted for the exhibition *Homosapiens* at Marian Goodman Gallery, London, in 2015, you spliced together cut marble and wooden sculptures from antiquity and the Renaissance. At the time you used lines spoken by the demonically possessed Regan in *The Exorcist* as titles, for instance for *Your Mother Sucks Cocks in Hell* (2015). You've said of that work that these fragments of dead empires comfort you by reminding you that this thing we live in now will also end someday.

DANH

Yes, I was raised that we should be problem solvers. With this body of work, that changed. I did it for comfort. It doesn't matter that we are so stupid that we're going to eliminate ourselves through crazy presidents or flying too much. It all ends anyway.

BARTHOLOMEW

With the formal abstraction in the current exhibition, the body of work has moved away from citing specific empires. It feels existential in terms of human history.

DANH

At one point, marble or stone represented machismo in art. I tried to find a quality I could work with, and here that was the pure weight that holds the works together. I think that is enough for me.

BARTHOLOMEW

You also included C-prints of photos of flowers from Güldenhof with the Latin names written out by Phùng in pencil. They look like pages plucked from an encyclopedia.

DANH

I wanted to use Christine's flower photos that she takes as she works, because I have a tendency to use what's already there. I asked if she could take them a little faster, and all hell broke loose. She was like, "First of all, I don't like this idea that my photos are going to rich people. Secondly, when I take photos, they are the soul of the flowers that I'm catching." So I thought, "Okay, this is not going to work out." Then thank God I lost my iPhone, and I got a new one with a very advanced camera and thought, "Fuck it, I'm going to take the photos in her style." But very fast. Every time I saw a butterfly or a bee, I would take a pictures of it. It turns out of course that the iPhone is calculated for you to love the photos.

Bartholomew Ryan

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BARTHOLOMEW

For your Secession exhibition, the curator, Jeanette Pacher, wrote a text about her journey to Güldenhof with the technician Hans Weinberger to spend some time with you.<sup>3</sup> She was struck by how the imperatives of the farm allowed you both to sidestep the conventional curator-artist meeting. You all spent a day clearing out an area beneath some old silos. They brought some ideas from Güldenhof back to Secession, namely planting a nasturtium garden. Hans was attracted to your use of Enzo Mari's 1974 publication *Autoprogettazione*, a series of open-source designs that can be assembled by anyone with access to a hammer, timber, and nails. He used that approach to design structures that propped up a number of works in the show. There are similar strategies in Milan, but the overall aesthetic seems quite different. At Secession there is more of a horizontal quality. A number of works feature figuration, and even plant life. Can you talk about the relationship of Güldenhof to the making of this exhibition?

DANH

I think avoiding the conventions of how we do an exhibition is a strategy of escaping traps. Secession is the only institution I've worked with where a board of artists chooses the artist to exhibit. A curator is then delegated to that artist. I thought, how do we get to know each other better? When I do an installation, it's very improvised. And you need to have a team behind you. I invited Jeannette and Hans to come hang out in order to get to know one another.

BARTHOLOMEW

Güldenhof has a counter-institutional quality. It creates its own power center, its own internal logic of time and space. You have various people employed there. Güldenhof functions to insulate people from market forces and some of the worst excesses of exploited labor, particularly in relation to cultural production. It reminds me of the fundamental ethics of the way you work with your father. There's payment for services rendered, quite rare in so many behind-the-scenes arenas of the art field. People like Christine, or the cabinetmaker Fred Fischer, likely enjoy your work, but nothing about the structure of your involvement with them requires them to surrender to it.

DANH

The crew will put something on the wall, and I will say, "Yeah, somewhere around there." And some crews can deal with it. Those are the people I love to work with. You also have technicians who want you to say that it has to be 156 centimeters at eye level and centered on the wall.

Bartholomew Ryan

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GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

BARTHOLOMEW

Do you just work with that?

DANH

I just work with that, because otherwise it creates more work.

BARTHOLOMEW

You're not forcing people to be creative or to lend their creativity to your project.

DANH

Hans at Secession is gifted and likes puzzles. In terms of the timber structures and the works in the show, I said, "Whatever you build, it should make the object very easy to pack. Like, you just tip the work over and it will slide into the crate or what have you." These gestures create some intimacy and even humor.

BARTHOLOMEW

So the timber is a support and a protective structure in the packing. Perhaps the most engaging work for me, *Untitled* (2021), features a freestanding glass refrigerator on a marble slab with bronze feet cast from those of the photographer Heinz Peter Knes. They evoke Christ's feet on a crucifix, but the toenails are painted. On top is a first-century marble head of an elegant young Roman slave boy. That refrigerator used to be in your apartment, and when I see it I think, "God, I really want some *Apfelsaft* right now." Heinz is a Franconian ex-Catholic. I like that his feet are used to evoke this martyred queer quality...

DANH

That work is purely about beauty.

BARTHOLOMEW

Okay.

DANH

The work is about beauty. It sounds banal. That's why I never talk about these kinds of things. I think that the work should be encountered by pure *look*. That's why the works are untitled, and there is no real press release for either show. Historically, Secession was the first white-cube space. I wanted to invert the space. The wood is the same as that used to construct the walls of the white cube. I wanted to aestheticize everything that would be enclosed, to turn the inside out.

Bartholomew Ryan

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BARTHOLOMEW

The work is propped by some timber lengths that themselves rest on thin, wide marble slabs. Everything has an armature of support, an infrastructure that sustains the various historical, personal, and aesthetic effects produced by the exhibition. I read an article about Güldenhof by the English novelist Tom McCarthy, published in *frieze*.<sup>4</sup> He attended one of the midsummer parties at Güldenhof and used that as a springboard for various literary musings. He decided that while you showed an ethics of hospitality, you failed to show a fidelity to an ethics of deliberation. And by deliberation, I think he meant long-term thought. In his contention, the overall vibe of Güldenhof — the flowers you showed him — was not fake, but *camouflage* disguising the true infrastructure: the champagne pipeline between the commercial gallery system and your project. At one point he casts you as a Bond super-villain and himself as James Bond. He imagines you excising the super-spy like an unwanted weed in your garden.

I enjoyed the casting of you as a Bond super-villain, which I think was actually very appropriate. But this idea of you as excising the impure is so off the mark for me. Your whole project has been about the impurity of ideology, of history, of interpersonal relationships. Your objects contaminate each other. Your projects mutate along with the egos of the participants. McCarthy's article is inset into photographs from Güldenhof by Nick Ash, giving the prose a languid, pastoral (and mocking) air. At no point does the writer acknowledge the audacity of writing a piece that calls for such infrastructural awareness within the pages of *frieze*. What about the champagne pipeline between McCarthy's literary aplomb and this top brand in the international art market?

A few years earlier, another English critic, Claire Bishop made related demands. She looked at some of your found objects that had an aura attached by way of history or (*gasp*) personal relationships and declared that without these stories, your objects are just "arbitrary agglomerations of consumables."<sup>5</sup> Without the history of the Paris Accords having been signed in the ballroom at the Hotel Majestic, for example, the chandelier from that hotel is "just another nineteenth-century chandelier." Bishop called for you to take a greater role in interpreting your materials, a more transparent relation to history and meaning. Without irony, she suggested that you need to do the work of "distillation and synthesis" and accused you of favoring the decorative over meaning (an echo of the flowers as "camouflage"). You are no stranger to the complexity of beauty, of what it represents. Your whole artistic project has projected these seductive qualities back into the societies and cultures that produced or appropriated them as a salve and camouflage to colonialism, patriarchy, even just life.

Bartholomew Ryan

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GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

DANH

I think I would quote James Benning. He said something like, “Beauty conceals political content, and we shouldn’t be afraid of that.”

BARTHOLOMEW

Does that kind of criticism impact you?

DANH

Of course it does. Any kind of criticism does, because we don’t all think the same way or believe in the same thing. Most of the criticism comes from the queers and the left. I always thought I was on that side. It’s hurtful, but it’s very real. It reveals other structures. I have to remind myself that I didn’t do these kinds of things unconsciously.

BARTHOLOMEW

Probably the most obvious critique is one you could give so many successful artists of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the economic critique.

DANH

Nairy Baghramian talks about this idea of a burden on immigrant artists—that we have to be political. We are not allowed to go with beauty. It’s not expected from us.

BARTHOLOMEW

And what do you think of that?

DANH

I think it’s super interesting, and I don’t understand why Nairy mentioned it, because first of all her work looks MONSTROUS. *[laughter]*

BARTHOLOMEW

Have these kinds of criticisms been generative to your work?

DANH

No, but they have given me a better understanding of reality. I was serious when I said that I thought I belonged to a more queer and leftist part of society, and then I was thrown out, which is good.

BARTHOLOMEW

So where are you now?

DANH

Just—on no ground, but that’s the best. These things make me think back to the mantra of entering this world not aiming to be loved. I think that’s a good reminder.

Bartholomew Ryan

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GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

With an openness to personal relationships and fortuitous encounters, Danh Vo's projects emerge via objects and images that have accrued meaning in the world, whether through their proximity to specific people or events or their currency as universal icons. The artist's work embodies the shifting and precarious nature of contemporary life: power, history, eroticism, personal biography, imperial dissolution, and globalist expansion are all in play. The retrospective *Danh Vo: Take My Breath Away* was on view at the Guggenheim, New York (2018), and the National Gallery of Denmark (SMK), Copenhagen (2018).

Bartholomew Ryan is an independent curator from Dublin based in Minneapolis. With Argentine artist Eduardo Costa Ryan he is making an exhibition that will be a memoir and memorial to Costa's friends Ana Mendieta, Hélio Oiticica, Scott Burton, and Marjorie Strider. Ryan's recent text on the work of Heinz Peter Knes is published in *E.M.T. in MSP* (Edition Taube, 2021). At the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Ryan curated *9 Artists* (2013) and co-curated *International Pop* (2015), Ralph Lemon's *Scaffold Room* (2014), and *Goshka Macuga: It Broke from Within* (2011), among others.

Bartholomew Ryan

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# FRIEZE

1,500 Words  
by Tom McCarthy

## The Rainbow & the Pump



This summer, *frieze* sent novelist  
*Tom McCarthy* to DANH VÕ's studio to celebrate  
the solstice – and the undeniable  
seductions of the German countryside

All photographs courtesy: Nick Ash



**AS A NOVELIST**, I'm susceptible to the habit (syndrome? pathology? let's call it, more neutrally, *tendency*) of turning to literary templates in order to understand the various scenes and contexts into which chance drops me. This summer solstice, it had sent me on a car ride through the verdant countryside around Berlin to the farmhouse that, for the past few years, has served as studio-headquarters to artist Danh Võ, famous for his reconfigurations of eclectic, culturally loaded objects that set fridges, flags and flagellated Christs in dialogue with one another. So, unsurprisingly, as I idled around Guldenhof's luscious and expansive lawns, nurseries and pastures, I found myself thinking of the great park in Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914). Amidst that novel's bowers and arbours, madcap inventor Martial Canterel dazzles visitors by having various *tableaux vivants* play out: the guillotined head of French revolutionary Georges Danton re-speaks some of his old lines; resurrectine-infused corpses act out episodes of their past lives. Here, too, on this gloriously sunny day, a mode of replay seemed to hold sway; although I'd never visited before, the scene appeared *recognizable*. In tall grass beneath drooping apple trees and willows, two glamorous young women languidly played chess; nearby, a Japanese *coiffeur* tended to anyone who wanted their hair snipped; insouciant characters – collaborators, friends, collectors – drifted between willow chairs and benches chatting in French, Danish, English, German; a photographer snapped away. It was like a cross between a field trip to Andy Warhol's Factory and a *Vogue* shoot, running on a carefree loop.

From behind colossal sunglasses, Chantal Crousel, Võ's dealer, iPhone-tracked the crates of champagne she'd had sent. The sound artist Tarek Atoui, resident guest-of-honour, darted about indefatigably, tweaking elaborate instruments he'd constructed speculatively from drawings of extinct ones and installed – along with human operators, amplifiers, mixers and so on – amidst the plants, sculptures and buildings. They generated frequencies and dominants and tonics from which dance students from Salzburg took their cue, pirouetting and gyrating on the upper floors of barns, on paths, among giant piled-up slabs of marble. No less elaborate than the instruments' pipes and tubes was the system of sprinklers running about the property to irrigate the planting rows and flower beds.

'This is an East-German device,' Võ explained as we passed one whose spray was generating a remarkably clear rainbow, which a succession of entranced guests were Instagramming. 'It pumps at a perfectly consistent pressure. No one's bettered it.'

Less consistent but more welcome on this hot day was the overhead mist dispenser we passed beneath next, transforming a lettuce- and herb-patch courtyard into a haze-covered magic kingdom.

'A mistifier!' someone quipped.

'Gardens', Võ mused, stroking first one flower then another as he led me on towards the beehives, 'are like art. We make decisions all the time: what to include, what's beautiful and what's unwanted – don't you think?'

I didn't answer, since my thought-space was being hazily, yet persistently, co-opted by another, decidedly less highbrow literary template. In his James Bond novels, Ian Fleming has archvillain Ernst Stavro Blofeld set up, high in



the Swiss Alps, an allergy-research centre doubling as a cover for a fiendish bio-terrorism plot (for some reason, its residents are conspicuous British farmgirls); then, when 007 has rumbled this, a remote garden in Japan, amidst whose rare poisonous plants he stages his Lautréamontian power fantasies. Bond's relation to Blofeld, as to several other of his villains, follows a trajectory (as anyone who's seen the film versions will know) from meticulously greeted guest to iron-clapped prisoner to avenging saboteur. Listening heat-dazed to Vö's reflections, I found myself wondering if his sub-Aristotelian monologue was leading up to words along the lines of: 'And now, Mr Bond, you, too, have become unwanted; like an unlovely weed, you must be excised from my garden ...'

By this point, we'd looped back round to the mistified salad-row courtyard, about which helpers, who I was now convinced were SMERSH or SPECTRE agents, were gathering leaves. I recognized the erstwhile chess players among them, bearing their precious samples down into a concrete bunker-type building, from which they emerged a few minutes later carrying guns, or maybe a stolen missile-control console disguised as a sound-art theremin, or, in fact and more prosaically, summer rolls, inlaid with Guldenhof's own rucola and sorrel. Städtelschule students handed them around; they were delicious.

'I don't want', Vö told me after we'd eaten in silence for a while, 'to just perpetuate the gallery-collector money system. Screw that. This place is a platform for something else: encounter, speculation ...'

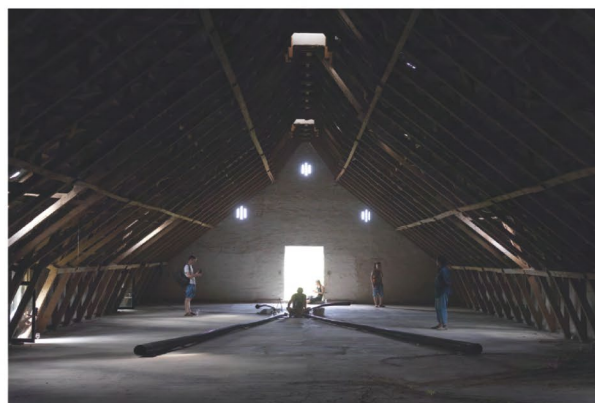
Later, I sat on a bench with Susan Philipsz, whose own wonderful sound-art installation I'd visited two days earlier at Konrad Fischer's former power-substation gallery. We talked about our various past projects on early radio; the next day, by post, we'd exchange novel and exhibition catalogue. I talked with Susan's partner, Eoghan McTigue, about our shared fascination with the relationship between James Joyce and his daughter, Lucia; he put me onto a reference I'd look up when I got home. Conversations of this nature seemed to be flowering all around us. This was, indeed, encounter; this was speculative platform, springboard.

Why, then, as I lay in bed back in Berlin that night, could I not drive another literary template from my mind? This one came from Marco Polo: his description of another garden retreat, that of Hassan-i Sabbah, legendary 'Old Man of the Mountain'. In 12th-century Syria, Sabbah rigged up an elaborate stage set in which wine and honey flowed from fountains, divine voices spilled from plants, and maidens tended to hashish-dosed young men who, led to believe they were being granted a glimpse of paradise, placed themselves henceforth in the service of the Old Man, who'd hire them out as *hashishin* or 'assassins' - contract killers to the courts of distant Europe. What's always intrigued me most about this set-up is that the fountain-pump operators and the divine-voice pipers must themselves have once been naive adepts who believed it was all real; yet still, rather than blowing the whole gaff when they discovered that it was fake, continued to expend great efforts to help maintain the illusion - maybe because they, too, at some level, still believed in *something*, in *some* value to whatever scene they saw playing out around them ...



I don't want to just perpetuate the  
gallery-collector money system. Screw that.

DANH VÔ



If we actually believe that there's *some*  
value to this whole art and culture thing,  
we should show a fidelity.







All of which leads me, in a roundabout manner, to report that the way I see it now, from the sobriety of my desk, is this: the flowers, the herbs, the rocket leaves and drooping fruit at Guldenhof aren't *fake* as such; rather, they're camouflage. A decoy. Our attention should be on the irrigation system that supports them – on the armature, if you like, of mystification. Võ is asking the right question – and, indeed, should be congratulated, celebrated even, for staging this question so baroque. It's the right question, but not, I feel, the right answer. How can it be, when the same pump is powering both market and garden, down a direct-feed champagne pipeline running from one locus to the other?

Võ was kind and generous; there's something undeniably seductive about the whole Guldenhof set-up; besides which, there is an ethics of hospitality of which I'm cognisant. But there's also an ethics of deliberation, to which, if we actually believe that there's *some* kind of – elusive, hard to pin down, but nonetheless still *there* – value to this whole art and culture thing, we should show a fidelity.

Allow me one final literary digression. Towards the end of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the floridly named Leopold Bloom draws from his kitchen tap a glass of water, which act sparks a long reflection on not only that liquid's dynamism and aesthetics as it erupts in waterspouts and cloudbursts, its mystery as it bubbles from springs and so on, but also an accounting of each mile that it has travelled from reservoir to tap – who owns or leases out which stretch of piping, for how much per yard and under whose jurisdiction. The two views are not incompatible; on the contrary, they complete, or require, one another. So it is here: the rainbow in the spray is not an illusion – it's composed of actual photons, the extraction of light's spectrum into strands each operating on its separate-but-related frequency, like the notes of Atouï's music. But understanding, or appreciating, it requires interrogation of the entire structure by which the separating-and-relating mechanism operates, the frameworks of its possibility, the networks of its substrates. We need to make a map – as it were, a Mark Lombardi diagram, minus the paranoia. There may not be a conspiracy, but there is an infrastructure. Only when we diligently parse this infrastructure in its joined-up, looped entirety might we begin to understand what culture is or could be, what role it plays, and our place, or places, in the sun **END**

**Tom McCarthy** is a novelist whose work has been translated into more than 20 languages and adapted for cinema, theatre and radio. His first novel, *Remainder*, won the 2008 Believer Book Award; his third, *C* (2010), was a Booker Prize finalist, as was his fourth, *Satin Island* (2015). In 2013, he was awarded the inaugural Windham-Campbell Prize for Fiction. His new novel, *The Making of Incarnation*, will be published in September.

**Danh Võ** is an artist. His solo exhibition at Secession, Vienna, Austria, is on view from 17 September to 7 November.

**T** The New York Times Style Magazine

## The 25 Works of Art That Define the Contemporary Age

Three artists and a pair of curators came together at The New York Times to attempt to make a list of the era's essential artworks. Here's their conversation.

On a recent afternoon in June, T Magazine assembled two curators and three artists — **David Breslin**, the director of the collection at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#); the American conceptual artist **Martha Rosler**; **Kelly Taxter**, a curator of contemporary art at the [Jewish Museum](#); the Thai conceptual artist **Rirkrit Tiravanija**; and the American artist **Torey Thornton** — at the New York Times building to discuss what they considered to be the 25 works of art made after 1970 that define the contemporary age, by anyone, anywhere. The assignment was intentionally wide in its range: What qualifies as “contemporary”? Was this an artwork that had a personal significance, or was its meaning widely understood? Was its influence broadly recognized by critics? Or museums? Or other artists? Originally, each of the participants was asked to nominate 10 artworks — the idea being that everyone would then rank each list to generate a master list that would be debated upon meeting.

Unsurprisingly, the system fell apart. It was impossible, some argued, to rank art. It was also impossible to select just 10. (Rosler, in fact, objected to the whole premise, though she brought her own list to the discussion in the end.) And yet, to everyone's surprise, there was a significant amount of overlap: works by [David Hammons](#), [Dara Birnbaum](#), [Felix Gonzalez-Torres](#), [Danh Vo](#), [Cady Noland](#), [Kara Walker](#), [Mike Kelley](#), [Barbara Kruger](#) and [Arthur Jafa](#) were cited multiple times. Had the group, perhaps, stumbled upon some form of agreement? Did their selections reflect our values, priorities and a unified idea of what matters today? Did focusing on artworks, rather than artists, allow for a different framework?

Naturally, when re-evaluating the canon of the last five decades, there were notable omissions. The group failed to name many artists who most certainly had an impact on how we view art today: Bigger names of recent Museum of Modern Art retrospectives, internationally acclaimed artists and high earners on the secondary market were largely excluded. Few paintings were singled out; [land art](#) was almost entirely absent, as were, to name just a few more categories, works on paper, sculpture, photography, fiber arts and [outsider art](#).

It's important to emphasize that no consensus emerged from the meeting. Rather, this list of works is merely what has been culled from the conversation, each chosen because it appeared on a panelist's original submission of 10 (in two instances, two different works by the same artist were nominated, which were considered jointly). The below is not definitive, nor is it comprehensive. Had this meeting happened on a different day, with a different group, the results would have been different. Some pieces were debated heavily; others were fleetingly passed over, as if the group intuitively understood why they had been brought up; a few were spoken of with appreciation and wonder. What came out of the conversation was more of a sensibility than a declaration. This list — which is ordered chronologically, from oldest work to most recent — is who we circled around, who we defended, who we questioned, and who we, perhaps most of all, wish might be remembered.

## Danh Vo, “We the People,” 2011-16



Danh Vo's "We the People" (detail) (2011-16). Photo by Nils Klinger, taken at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany

[Danh Vo](#) (b. Vietnam, 1975) immigrated to Denmark with his family after the fall of Saigon in 1979. “We the People,” a full-size copper replica of the Statue of Liberty, may be his most ambitious work. Fabricated in Shanghai, the colossal figure exists in roughly 250 pieces, dispersed throughout public and private collections around the world. It will never be assembled or exhibited as a whole. In its fragmented state, Vo’s statue alludes to the hypocrisy and contradictions of Western foreign policy. A gift from France to the United States, dedicated in 1886, the original monument was billed as a celebration of freedom and democracy — values both nations proved willing to overlook when dealing with other countries. At the time of the dedication, France possessed colonies in Africa and Asia, including Vietnam, where a miniature version of the statue was installed on the roof of the Tháp Rùa temple (or Turtle Tower) in Hanoi. Later, the United States financially supported the French military in Vo’s home country, waging war in the name of protecting democracy from Communism. By then, of course, the Statue of Liberty had welcomed millions of immigrants to the United States and had become a symbol of the American dream. In the wake of current violent crackdowns on immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border, Vo’s fragmented icon has never felt more darkly apropos.

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**DB:** I chose this because it totally takes away the masterpiece idea. It's the one statue, with many meanings embedded within it, but totally distributed. The sections are made in China, right?

**RT:** Yes.

**DB:** So it's also the idea that this object, which is synonymous with the United States, is now made in what will be the superpower of the future. It's signaling what other futures will be, and it gets back to this idea that "contemporary" is a total unknowingness. We don't know what the hell the "contemporary" is, and I think in some ways, these works affirm that that unknowingness is where we begin.

**KT:** That work had so much violence and anger in it. Anger is a big part of the work that's being made by artists now — everyone's feeling it — specifically the anger of a displaced person. This idea of what we've done as a country, all over the world.

# 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.

## Art | Basel



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

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.

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.

Dr. Jeni Fulton

*Danh Vo on destroying art, designer playgrounds, and his first ever show in Hong Kong*  
Art Basel, March, 2019.

<https://urlr.me/C8Rjv>



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

'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), Vō 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?'

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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.

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.

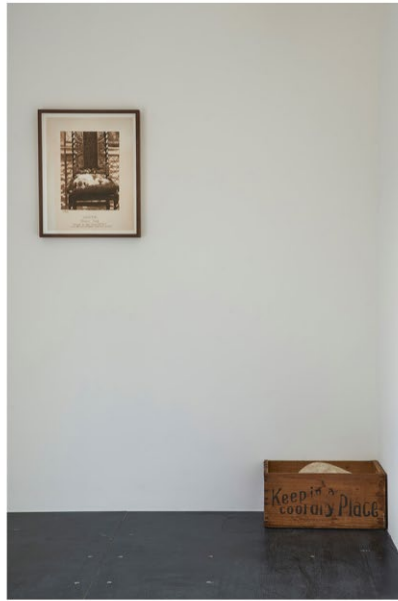
'Making public art at, for example, a train station, which people use because they have to, is very different [from making art for a white cube]. You don't want to have some crazy artist's life, vision, or ideas imposed on you.' A Noguchian playground, then, is an elegant approach: a piece that straddles 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.

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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.

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.'

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.'

Dr. Jeni Fulton

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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."'

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.

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<https://urlr.me/C8Rjv>

DANH VÕ'S WORKS, SUCH AS *UNTITLED*, 2018, FASHIONED FROM TWO 1ST TO 2ND CENTURY ROMAN SCULPTURES, WILL BE DISPLAYED AS COUNTERPOINTS TO PIECES BY ISAMU NOGUCHI



## Two of a kind

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

The Danish-Vietnamese artist Danh Võ has been described as a 'hunter gatherer', drawing 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 Kissinger, 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 become a major influence on Võ; Noguchi's public spaces for children were the blueprint for Võ'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 Võ retrospective (until 2 December). This, however, is the first time Võ 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 Võ'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 Võ's own pieces. Meanwhile, Võ'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 Võ'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 Võ, 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 Võ 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 Võ: Counterpoint' is at the M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong, 16 November 2018-22 April 2019, westkwoon.hk*

Photography: courtesy of the artist

WRITER: TF CHAN

Wallpaper\* | 091



## A Bordeaux, les jeux de mains et de marbre de Danh Vo

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)

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 bruir 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<sup>er</sup> 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 ouvragé, 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<sup>er</sup> et du II<sup>e</sup> siècle, éventré, scié par Danh Vo.

## 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 acabits 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<sup>e</sup> 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 remisées (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.

Numéro  
art

**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 BOURGEOIS. PORTRAIT ET PHOTOS PAR NICK ASH





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, Théophile 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

CI-CONTRE WE THE PEOPLE (DÉTAIL) (2011-2015), CUIVRE, 400 X 200 X 200 CM.

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.



Caroline Bourgeois  
*Danh Vo au Guggenheim, éclats d'histoire*  
Numéro art, N°2, March—August, 2018, p.96-105.

## 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...

SI L'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...

CI-CONTRE 16.32, 26.05 (2009), LUSTRE DU X<sup>e</sup> SIÈCLE, 240 X 320 X 120 CM.

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'imaginai 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 devons 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 Mouliène, 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. Théophraste 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

GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL



Caroline Bourgeois  
*Danh Vo au Guggenheim, éclats d'histoire*  
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DANH VO

AVRIL

NEW YORK

CI-CONTRE DE GAUCHE À DROITE : GALOPHYS (2004), SÉRIE F, 101,8 X 69,6 X 43,8 CM, COLLECTION OF JOHN VORACE AND TOM KENNEDY; LANTIERO FUSI (2002), OMA TOTEM (2008), TELEVISION PHILIPS, MACHINE À AVRIL GORFINIE, REFRIGÉRATORU BOVANN, ORJOURX EN BOIS, CARTE D'ENTRÉE PERSONNELLE POUR UN CASINO, 220 X 61 X 63 CM, COLLECTION PRIVÉE, TURIN.



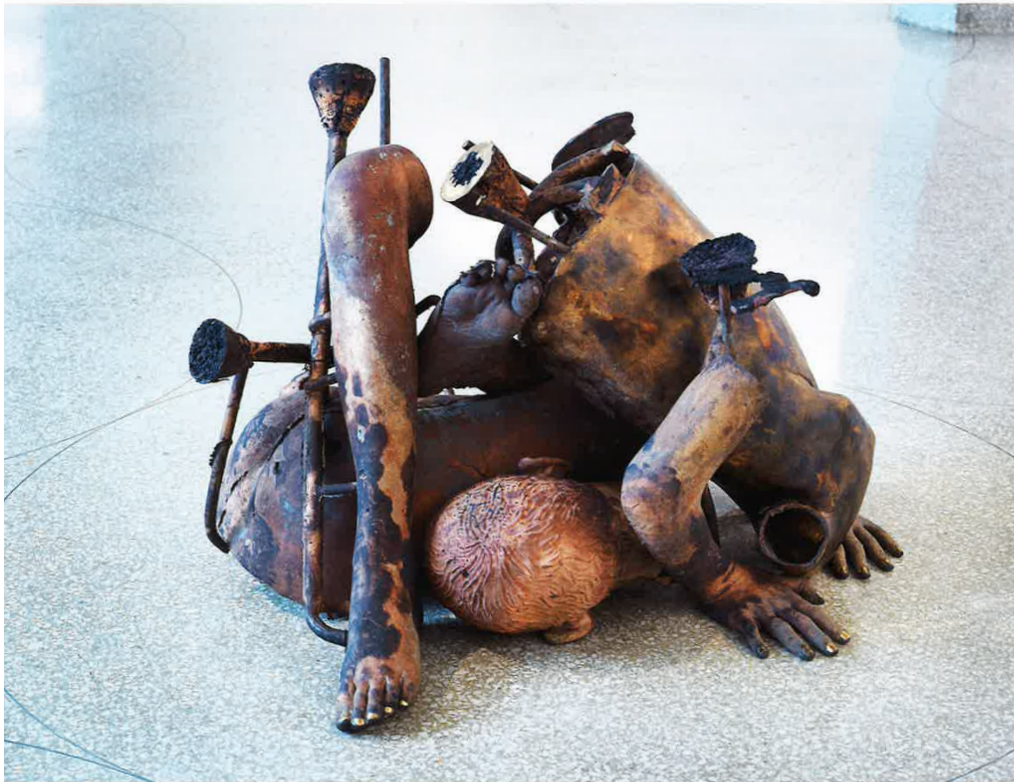
CI-CONTRE O *Orca puppe* (2015), SARCOPHAGE GREC EN MARBRE FIN DU II<sup>E</sup> SIÈCLE, ET VIERGE DE L'ANNONCIATION EN PEUPLIER ITALIE VERS 1350, 177,5 X 57 X 32 CM, COLLECTION PIVALTI.

DANH VO

AVRIL

NEW YORK

CI-DESSOUS DÉTAIL DE L'EXPOSITION TAKE MY  
BREATH AWAY (2018), AU SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM  
MUSEUM A 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 ainsi posé 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 piétà. 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 a 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.

CI-CONTRE MASSIVE BLACK HOLE IN THE DARK HEART OF OUR MILKY WAY (2018), OF SUR CARLTON, QUILLS UN FER ET CORDE

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 Julie 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.





## 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*

## EL PAÍS

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



*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 Rịa, 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.

<https://urlr.me/Qf4MF>



**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 Théophile 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.**

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.

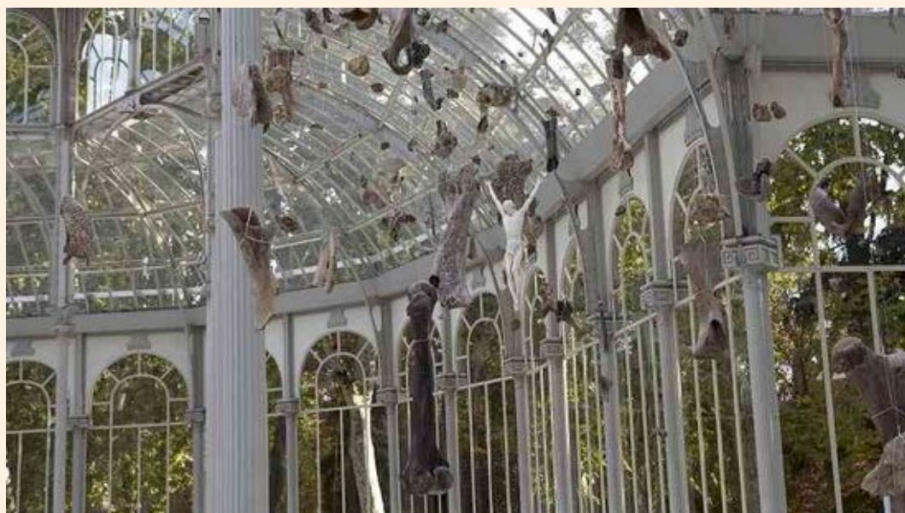
R. **¿Puede citarme a un solo artista cuyo trabajo no sea personal? Simplemente hay unas historias que son más visibles que otras.** En mi propuesta hay parte que es mi biografía. Pero si trabajo con la bandera estadounidense, el primer hombre en el espacio o con la Estatua de la Libertad son imágenes 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.**



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**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 que es calidad y que 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).**



**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.**



## Danh Võ, prismes sensuels

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.



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

A l'origine de cette installation à la galerie Chantal Crousel, à Paris (III<sup>e</sup>), 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.

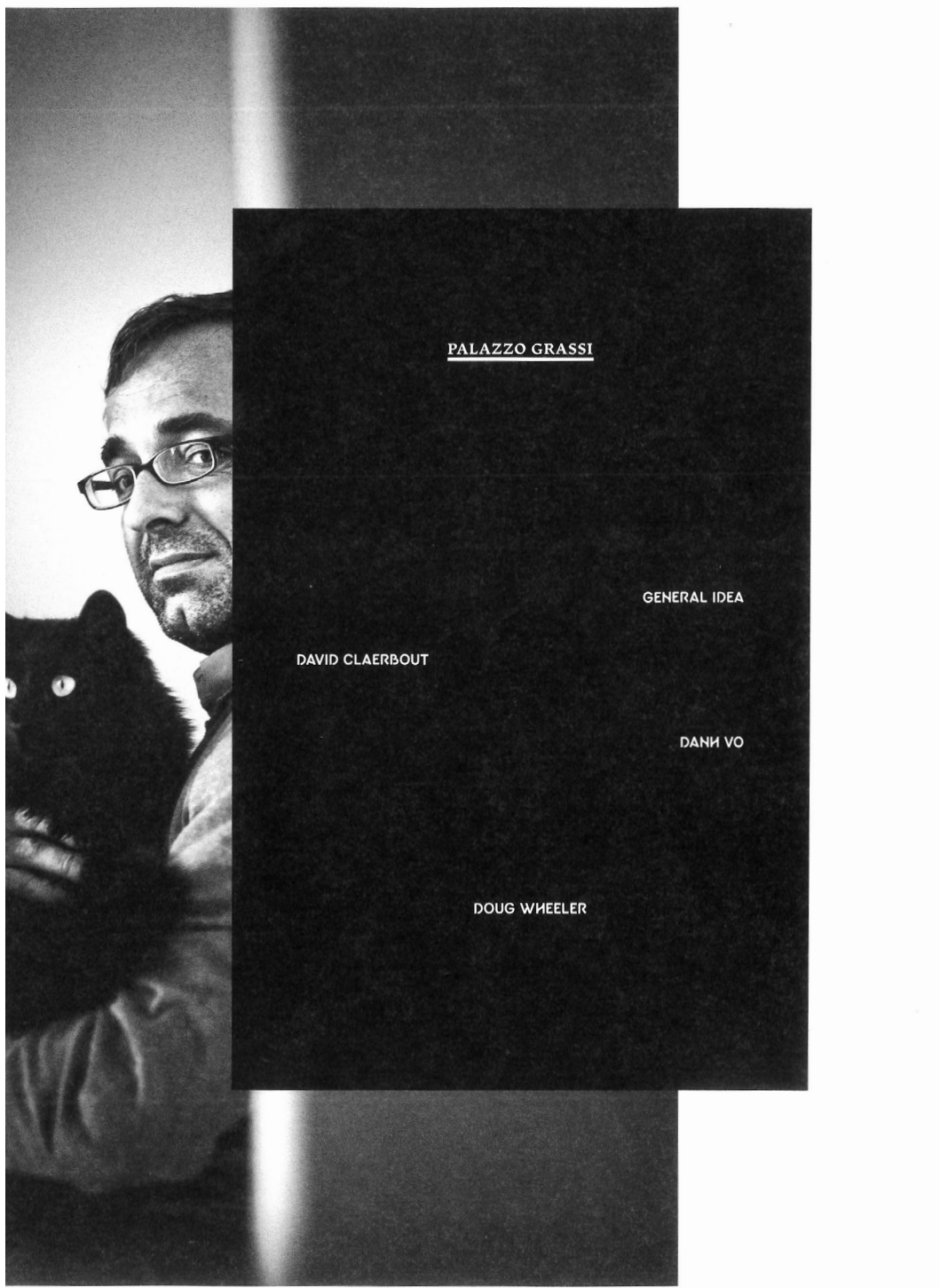
**Affection.** *«En 2007, nous a raconté l'artiste, alors que je me trouve à Los Angeles, un homme me contacte, parce que, me dit-il, il sait que je suis gay et vietnamien. Il ignore cependant que je suis artiste. Il tient à me remettre des photographies qu'il a prises quand il était en poste au Vietnam, entre 1962 et 1967. Il n'a pas participé aux combats, il était dans l'administration américaine.»*

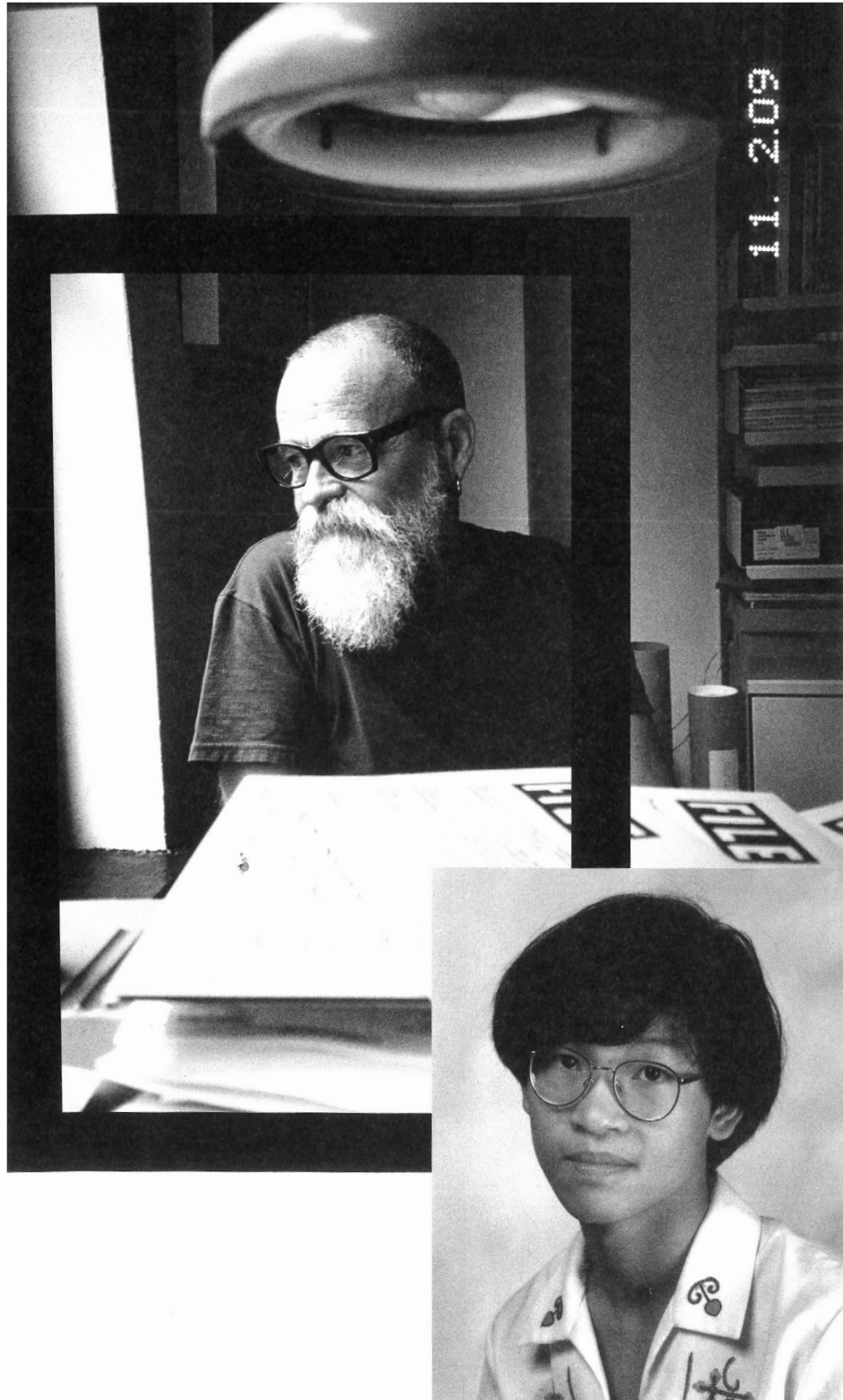
Sur ces clichés, noir et blanc, des hommes ou des adolescents, des soldats en permission ou des civils vaquent dans une exposition de peintures, se baignent dans une rivière ou se promènent dans la rue. Mais, dans certaines images, les corps se frôlent discrètement, les épaules s'effleurent et les mains 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.

## Pinault Collection





Anaël Pigeat  
*Palazzo Grassi, Danh Vo*  
Pinault Collection, October, 2014—March, 2015, p.60—73.

GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

À L'OCCASION DE L'EXPOSITION « L'ILLUSION DES LUMIÈRES », DANH VO INÉ EN 1975 À SAÏGON I A DÉSOSSÉ 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 I.B. 1975 IN SAIGON I 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'*artpress*  
Art critic, Editor-in-chief  
of *artpress* 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<sup>e</sup> 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

*Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, like many of Vo's works, **En** 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 Gonzalez-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,

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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, Théophile 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 Théophile 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.

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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- -), encre 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<sup>e</sup> 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  
Soulie in southern  
China and Tibet, late  
19<sup>th</sup> century, from  
archives of Muséum  
national d'Histoire  
naturelle, Paris.  
Installation views,  
"The Illusion of Light"  
(Palazzo Grassi,  
April- December 2014)

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## Field Trip: Sharjah Biennial 12



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.

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 *ArtAsiaPacifc*.

# FRIEZE

# 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.



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.'<sup>1</sup>

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.



1

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



2

*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 regretfully 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 exculpated 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 worm-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 'fwr: 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 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 x 50 x 50 cm

2  
*Lick me, lick me*, 2015,  
Marble torso of Apollo from a Roman  
workshop, 1st-2nd century CE;  
wood; nails, 21 x 32 x 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.*

## The New York Times

### Two Parks, One Statue, Lots of Pieces Lying Around



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

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.

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.

<https://urlr.me/KVLvP>

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.

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.



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

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.

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.



PARKETT

*Danh Vo*

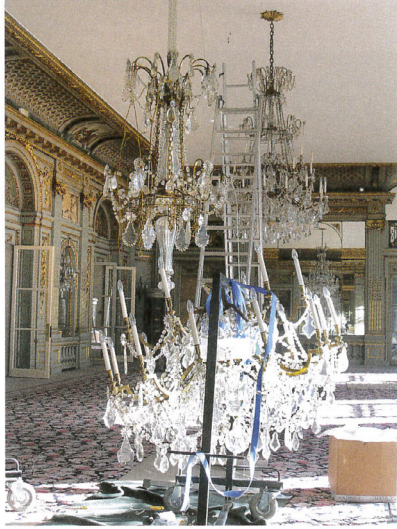
# Intimate Bonds: The Art of Danh Vo

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."<sup>13</sup> 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 Vo

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 a 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 photographic 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.<sup>2)</sup> 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 3/8 x 23 3/8 x 7 7/8" /  
GRABSTEIN FÜR NGUYEN THI TY,  
Marmor, Granit, Bronze- und  
Holzrelief, 220 x 60 x 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.<sup>3)</sup>

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.<sup>4)</sup> 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, *TOMBSTONE FOR NGUYEN THI TY*, 2009, marble, granite, bronze and wood relief, 86 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>",  
installation view, "Strange Comfort (Afforded by the Profession)," Church Sant'Isidoro, Rome / GRABSTEIN FÜR NGUYEN THI TY,  
Marmor, Granit, Bronze- und Holzrelief, 220 x 60 x 20 cm, Installationsansicht. (PHOTO: ELA BIALKOWSKA)

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

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CHANTAL CROUSEL

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.<sup>5)</sup> The title suggests the combination of pleasure and pain beyond limits for which psychoanalysis invented the word *jouissance*.<sup>6)</sup>

*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 pleasure 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.

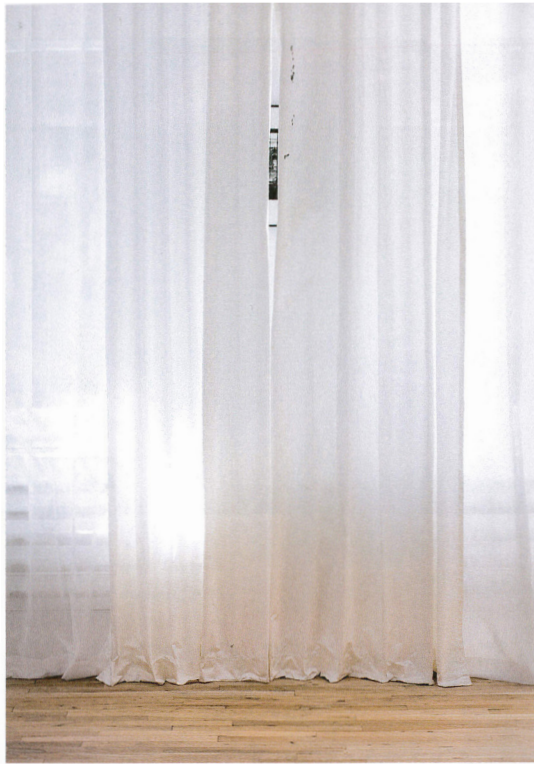
2) See Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Amsterdam and New York: Van Gogh Museum and Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

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).

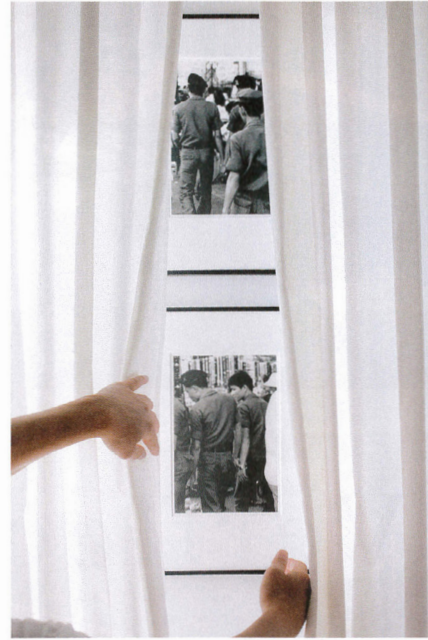
4) Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version,” *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Marcus Bullock et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996–2003), vol. 4, pp. 251–83, and “Little History of Photography,” *Selected Writings*, vol.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

5) For a superb discussion of this exhibition, see Amy Zion, “Ascetic 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.



*Danh Vo*



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



## ArtReview



Profile



## Danh Võ

*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 Võ'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, Võ'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 Võ's work its title.

Võ'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 Võ 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 Võ will participate in this summer's Venice Biennale.

When developing the initial idea for *We The People*, Võ 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 Võ 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, Võ 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 Võ. "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 as both a silent agent-object and a historically drenched readymade, of which Võ 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



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*Oma Totem* (installation view, Kunsthau Bregeuz, 2011), 2009, objects from the artist's grandmother Nguyen Thi Ty: 26" Philips television set, Gorenje washing machine, Bomann refrigerator, wooden crucifix

and personal entrance card for a casino; appliances received from the Immigrant Relief Programme and crucifix from the Catholic church upon her arrival in Germany in 1980, 220 x 60 x 60 cm. Photo: Markus Tretter



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

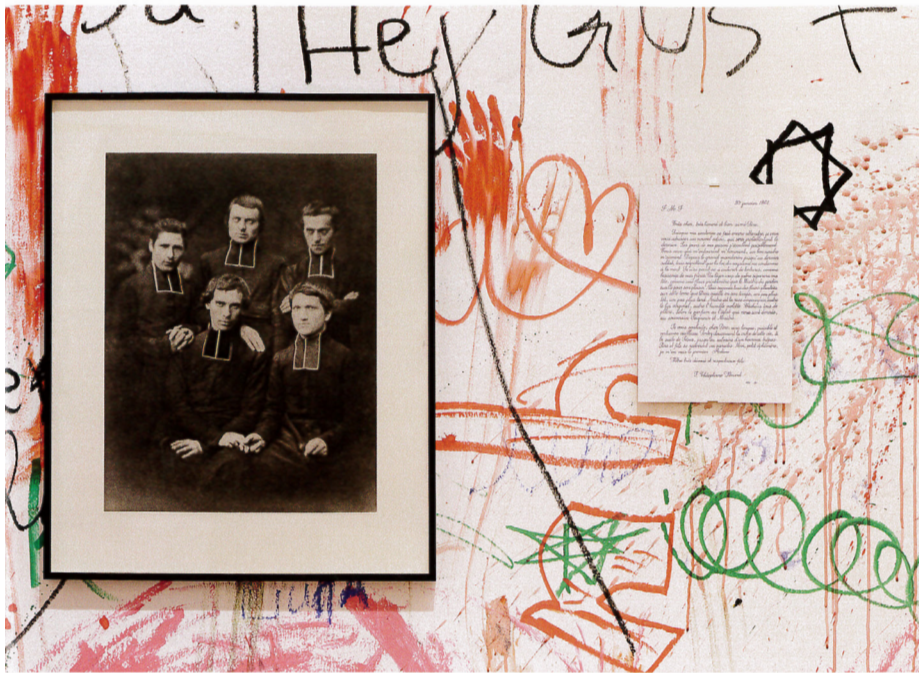
Basel for his solo exhibition *Where the Lions Are* in the same year. However, all three will be reunited – for the first time since the hotel was demolished, and 40 years after the signing of the agreement – in Vō's Paris show. In discussing the pen, he zooms in on the minute point at which the ink 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 Vō'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

VŌ 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 Nguyen Thi Ty*, 2009). Eight of Vō'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, Phùng Vō, 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, Phùng Vō decided to leave Vietnam in 1979, following the fall of Saigon in 1975, which had seen the Vōs evacuated to the island of Phu Quoc, where Danh was born, and where they lived in extremely poor conditions. Vō'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.



this page:  
Chung Go Opla (installation  
view, Villa Medici, Rome), 2013.  
Photo: Roberto Apa.

Though America and Vietnam were in conflict, V $\text{\u00f4}$ 's father idealised US culture from afar, and V $\text{\u00f4}$  has appropriated for his installations several of the possessions that Ph $\text{\u00f9ng}$  strove to acquire after leaving Vietnam. The objects are revealing in terms of the elder V $\text{\u00f4}$ '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* (2005). The items in this last work have been acquired by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, contractually promised to the institution once Ph $\text{\u00f9ng}$  V $\text{\u00f4}$  has died, as per his last will and testament. In the interim the Walker has a black tombstone laid in its grounds for Ph $\text{\u00f9ng}$  V $\text{\u00f4}$ , 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.

V $\text{\u00f4}$  has also been employing Ph $\text{\u00f9ng}$  V $\text{\u00f4}$ '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 Th $\text{\eacute}ophane V $\text{\eacute}nard$$  to his father, in 1861, before he was beheaded in Vietnam. V $\text{\eacute}nard$  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, he came into conflict with another ideology, which resulted in a literal split of his body. More fragments of bodies and ideologies left around the world.

V $\text{\u00f4}$ '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 V $\text{\u00f4}$  on the

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this page, from top:  
*The Hugo Boss Prize 2012: Danh  
Võ, 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 Knes

facing page: *The Hugo Boss  
Prize 2012: Danh Võ, I M 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."

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

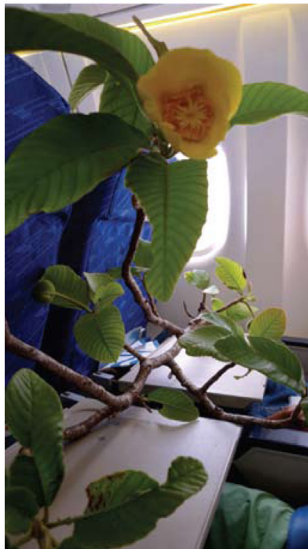
conceptual art – letters, legal contracts and systems – with ornate material such as chandeliers, calligraphy and drawings of flowers. However, this is politically driven work, a form of post-romantic Conceptualism, which takes up a lineage carved out by the likes of Felix Gonzalez-Torres – Võ was one 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 emphasize 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 Võ 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 Võ'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 Võ: *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 Võ, I M U R 2* can be seen at the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York*, through 27 May

# ARTFORUM





# 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 *Salix 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 coelestina* var. *souliei*; cauline leaves of *Aconitum 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 Théophile 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



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



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 Hasenböhler. 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 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 17 1/2".



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.





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-Théphane Vénard for Vo's *Untitled*, 2009, Paris, 2009. Danh Vo, *Untitled*, 2008, wheeled carry-on bag, wooden statue, 21 1/4 x 17 3/4 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.





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 testatory 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 Broodthaers'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

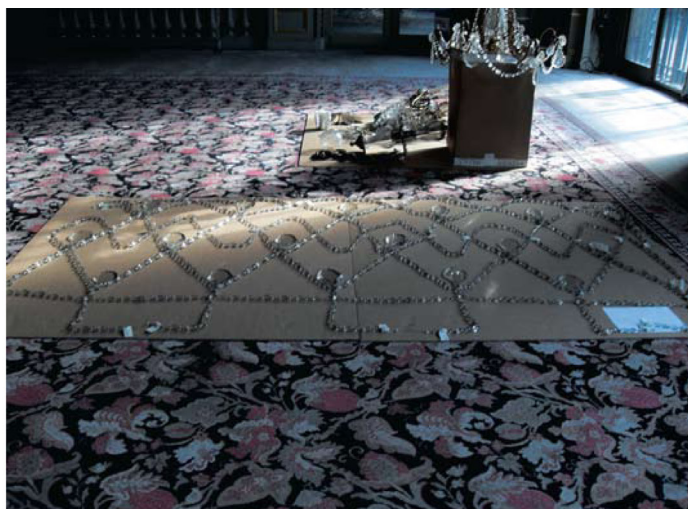
encounter with “the exotic” thus became a model for the provocation of irruptions of otherness, a means by which to question traditional cultural codes and institutional definitions. If this did not result in a rethinking of the injustices being committed against the other, it nevertheless, per Clifford, 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 monotopic 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 ideo-

logical 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,” Saigon Central Market, 1972. This page: *Dismantled chandelier at the Centre de Conférences Internationales, Paris, 2007*.