



***It's about the way you look.* The art of Danh Võ's exhibitions as told by his invitation cards**

É como você se parece. A arte das exposições de Danh Võ contadas por seus cartões de convite

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Imagem: Installation view of Danh Võ's 2010 exhibition *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* (Artist Space, New York). ©Daniel Perez, courtesy Studio Danh Võ.

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Abstract

Often considered as "enigmatic" by art critics and museum professionals, Danh Vo's exhibitions have been regularly presented as building a "network of relationships" that seems hard to decipher at first. As equivocal as his art itself (made with artifacts that one can describe as contradicting each other), his shows are arranged with an eclectic selection of pieces that look, indeed, ill-assorted. This paper proposes to consider this issue with regard to Danh Vo's invitation cards and exhibition ephemera. It argues that, in many cases, the tools used by the artist to communicate his shows offer valuable hints helping to better comprehend the thinking process that had led him to propose those unconventional arrangements of artworks. Focusing on two representative exhibitions (*Go Mo Ni Ma Da*, in Paris, and *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, in New York) the following essay invites to embrace an original interpretation method, and to reexamine the way the "network of relationships" highlighted by his shows has been regarded until now.

Keywords

Danh Võ; curatorial studies; exhibition; invitation card; conceptual art.

Resumo

Frequentemente consideradas "enigmáticas" por críticos de arte e profissionais de museus, as exposições de Dahn Võ têm sido regularmente apresentadas de modo a construir uma "rede de relacionamentos" que, a princípio, parece difícil de decifrar. Tão enigmáticas quando suas próprias obras (feitas com artefatos que podem ser descritos como contraditórios entre si), suas exposições são organizadas com uma seleção eclética de peças que, de fato, parecem mal arranjadas. Este artigo se propõe a compreender este tema a partir dos cartões de visita de Danh Võ e dos materiais efêmeros de suas exposições. Argumenta-se que, em muitos casos, as ferramentas utilizadas pelo artista para anunciar suas mostras oferecem dicas valiosas, que nos ajudam a melhor compreender o processo de criação que o levou a propor esses arranjos não convencionais de obras de arte. Com foco em duas exposições representativas (*Go Mo Ni Ma Da*, em Paris, e *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, em Nova York), o texto a seguir convida a abraçar um método de interpretação original e a reexaminar a maneira como a "rede de relacionamentos" acionada suas exposições foi analisada até o presente.

Palavras chave

Danh Võ; Estudos curatoriais; exposição; cartão de visita; arte conceitual.

Often considered as “enigmatic” (Zion, 2011) by art critics and museum professionals, Danh Võ’s (*1975) exhibitions have been understood as building a “network of relationships” that, at first, is indeed disconcerting. There is a consensus regarding the challenge that his solo shows form, the latter being almost always arranged around an eclectic setting of artworks which appear to be even more puzzling once considered in relation to one another. Thus, in this case, not only the art itself can be described as being ambiguous – with pieces built, for instance, with an Italian Virgin carved from poplar wood from the 14th century, fitted onto a second century fragment of a Greek-marble sarcophagus from Rome –; but also, the narrative suggested by the pieces that the artist decided to present together. In Võ’s exhibitions, a fridge, a washing-machine and a TV-set stacked one onto another can be exhibited next to a 19th century chandelier and a modern hand-knotted wool rug dyed with cochineal extract (Museo Jumex, Mexico City, 2014); a series of photographs showing young Vietnamese men, hung onto mirror walls, adjoins imposing marble blocks from Italy, which, themselves, stand next to a row of industrial shelving units on which lay panels of a dismantled Portuguese altar (CAPC, Bordeaux, 2018). When visiting his exhibitions, even the most experienced art historian or museum goer might think of being confronted to documents written in a language he or she has yet to learn.

Yet one should understand this way of doing as being deliberate. “(...) the fact that Võ’s works or identity puzzle certain viewers might not displease the artist”, wrote art historian Nora Taylor (Taylor, 2018: 71). As Danh Võ puts it himself, “[he is] not interested in making sense. [He] want[s] to put things together that raise questions, that challenge people, that make them think: ‘but why?!’”¹. Within the last ten years, making the viewers doubtful has become, for him, a *modus operandi* according to which even certitudes have to be reconsider. For the Danish, Vietnamese-born artist, “art must create questions, not answers” (*apud* Brovall 2013: 9, my translation).

If Danh Võ’s shows have been described as being as enigmatic as the art that he creates, they have also been praised for the sense of space, color, and balance that they attest. Võ’s exhibitions have something extremely appealing, mirroring the alluring aspect of his artworks. In both cases, they catch the visitors’ attention (even the most perplex of them), encouraging them to go beyond the puzzling aspect that they may be struck by at first.

Attracted by Võ’s pleasing arrangements, the exhibitions’ visitors might notice that they are actually given bits of explanations – for lack of answers – if they accept to consider his shows with an original approach. Among the elements offering hints, Võ’s invitation cards and exhibition ephemera shall be considered as some of the most telling. As shown by the catalogue of a survey presented at Guggenheim in New York in 2018 (that many regarded as a mid-career retrospective at the time), advertisement tools are, for Võ, almost as important as the artifacts he presents. In this major publication, every chapter dedicated to a selection of 28 solo shows held in institutional or commercial venues starts with an invitation. Where other artists would have relied on installation views and a short essay only, Võ decided to introduce every section of that book by the mail that his guests had received before the opening.

A true announcement to an exhibition that had yet to come, those cards and foldouts have been regarded by Danh Võ as more than a tool used to reach out to people. If they were featured in every chapter of the Guggenheim’s catalog, it is because they often have to be considered not only before but also while

attending the show, and while thinking about it long after having left the place. For the visitors as for the readers of his catalogs, they are an invitation to think anew.

The following paragraphs propose to consider this concept with the study of two representative shows. They argue that, in many cases, ephemera and invitations are key in understanding Danh Võ's exhibition practice.

From Memnon to New York via Paris, and back again. *Go Mo Ni Ma Da*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2013)

If one can tell that Danh Võ's invitation cards are for the most part meaningful complements to his exhibitions (documenting the making of his artworks, for example, as in 2014 for his show at the Kitchen, in New York²), one shall not describe every single mail sent for his openings as equally revealing – or as giving evidence of a hypothetical curatorial strategy that would be systematically repeated.

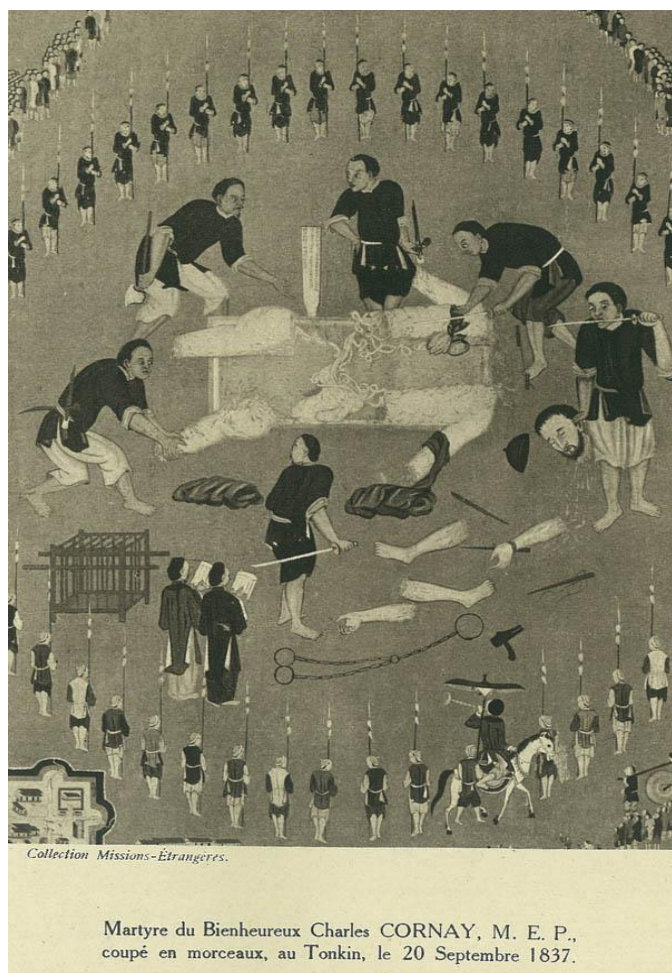


Fig. 1. Invitation card to Danh Võ's 2009 exhibition *Les fleurs d'intérieur* (Kadist Art Foundation, Paris). © Studio Danh Võ.

Looking for a common thread between the invitations sent by the artist, one shall describe them as *introducing* an exhibition, in the true sense of the word. They are the first element of a presentation, the “number one” artifact that, although absent from the gallery or the museum, opens his show. As other artists did before him (one thinks, for instance, about the late Robert Rauschenberg, who paid a lot of attention to his invitation cards in the first part of his career, stating that “an exhibition doesn’t begin when you enter a gallery” but “the minute you get an invitation in the mail” (*apud* Morrisroe, 1995: 128-129)), Võ most probably regards exhibition ephemera as getting the viewer in condition before he or she might go see his show.

If some of them display an image which is directly related to what is presented in the exhibition – for instance in 2015, as a photographic portrait of five French missionaries was featured both on the invitation card and in the galleries of the Mirrored Gardens, in Guangzhou –, many presented an image that counts as a complementary document helping to understand an issue or a process addressed with other items in the show. While optional, their inclusion allows the visitors to better comprehend what was exhibited by the artist. In 2013, Võ used the blue print of the Statue of Liberty to advertise his exhibition at PEER, in London, so as to draw the attention on the way the monument was constructed. This show featured some of the most abstract elements of Võ’s famous *We The People* installation (2011-16), a fragmental life-size replica of Lady Liberty, which was initially meant to reveal the fragility of that monument. In 2015, as he represented Denmark at the 56th Venice Biennale, he announced his show with a paper pop-up cake that the recipients were unfolding when opening their mail. Coming along with a candle and confetti Danish flags, it evoked the celebration of “Danishness”, the very concept that the artist questioned in the Danish pavilion. On a more pragmatic note, Võ has sometimes used the invitation mail as a support that complements the show by providing basic information such as the gallery plan (at the Académie de France à Rome, in 2013), or the artworks list (at Daniel Buchholz, in Cologne, in 2010), for example.

One also notices that some invitation cards were featured as an element of the show that was more meaningful if mailed. In 2009 for instance, his exhibit at the Kadist Art Foundation, in the French capital, was announced with the reproduction of a postcard edited by the end of the 19th century by the *Missions étrangères de Paris*, a catholic missionary organization. Rather than presenting it as a museum piece, Võ made that postcard – featuring an image of a missionary’s execution [fig. 1] – travel again, obviously intrigued by the fact that, not so long ago, making gruesome representations circulate was the easiest way to persuade young Frenchmen to be sent abroad on a religious mission...

The examples this paper propose to focus on are less univocal. As with Danh Võ’s artworks or exhibitions – made both with elements that one can regard as “contradicting” each other – the invitation cards and other ephemera discussed in the following paragraphs could be, here as well, described as “enigmatic”, especially once considered with regard to the exhibitions they were meant to announce. Yet, as we are about to show, it is the complicated “network of relationships” that they help building that make them all the more relevant and helpful. The same way the artifacts combined by Võ in his art might seem ill-assorted at first, many of the images and objects that he chooses to advertise appear to be disconnected from the subject of his shows – until one accepts to look at both with an open mind.

One of the best examples concerns the image used to communicate *during* a show, and not the actual invitation sent to happy few two weeks before it opened. The letter inviting to the opening of *Go Mo Ni Ma Da* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (MAMVP), on May 23rd, 2013, seems to attest that Danh Võ didn't have a say: it is a bland, formal letter, the kind probably printed for every show organized by the institution, and written by local government official working for the Paris city hall, the museum's administrative supervisor. Võ therefore put all his efforts in the tools used to communicate publicly – namely, the poster (and the flyer) produced for the occasion.



Fig. 2. Poster (and flyer) produced for Danh Võ's 2013 exhibition *Go Mo Ni Ma Da* (MAMVP, Paris). © Christian Kempf, courtesy Studio Danh Võ.

The picture chosen by Danh Võ at the time [fig. 2] was an old photograph taken by Frédéric August Bartholdi (1834-1904), a Frenchman best known for having designed the *Liberty Enlightening the World*, commonly called “the Statue of Liberty”. As one read about the show that Võ presented in the Parisian museum – or as entering its galleries – one could not be surprised to see that he decided to feature an image produced by that French artist: at the MAMVP were presented 30 fragments of a life-size reproduction of the Statue of Liberty that Võ had had manufactured starting in 2011 [fig. 3]. Thus, the big copper pieces scattered in the galleries, formed by hand according to a metalworking technique that was used for the original monument as well, were presented to visitors invited to bare a new look on an icon

they would have never been able to consider so closely otherwise. The thinness of its metal robe, the hand-made aspect of its surface, and its fragility were striking. Yet, on the poster of the exhibition, the visitors didn't see a vintage photograph related to this metal giant; instead, they saw two sculptures made of stone blocks that were easy to identify as being Egyptian. Captioned by the MAMVP as the "Colossi of Memnon, archive photograph from Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi's trip to Egypt, 1856", the monochrome image had been taken by the young sculptor as he was traveling in North Africa. The original picture counts as one of the many calotypes produced during a study trip that he undertook with other French artists between 1855 and 1856.



Fig. 3. Installation view of Danh Vo's 2013 exhibition *Go Mo Ni Ma Da* (MAMVP, Paris), showing copper fragments belonging to the installation *We the People* (2011-16). ©Pierre Antoine, courtesy Studio Danh Võ.

The lack of direct relation between the content of the show and the image used to advertise it had to be questioned, the museum visitors being encouraged to ask themselves what motivated this unexpected choice. To paraphrase Danh Võ, one could not help thinking: "but why?!" Why an exhibition featuring pieces of a replica of one of the most iconic American monuments had to be contextualized with two Egyptian statues?

In many interviews, Võ stated that he started thinking about such a large-scale project as he discovered that the Statue of Liberty's copper envelope is extremely thin – and, therefore, very fragile. "The fact that her skin or surface is only two millimeters thick, fascinated me", he said; "you think about this monumental sculpture, but its image is stronger than its materiality"³. Visibly interested in the change of

perception this kind of information allows, Vĩ was encouraged to produce an installation that would trigger people's curiosity as well. "I thought that it would be a great challenge to take an image that everyone has some idea about and twist it" (*Ibidem*). In short: he wanted to force the viewers to think again about something they wouldn't have questioned otherwise. This is a core concept in Danh Vĩ's work: put preconceived ideas to the test by presenting objects or documents that contradict those very ideas. Here, exposing Lady Liberty's fragility amounts to question everything one might think about the monument.

This approach can be described as setting a frame of mind according to which every other artifact and story featured in the show has to be reexamined. Thus, in Paris, the 30 cooper fragments belonging to *We the People* were not the only pieces exhibited by the artist. Scattered in different rooms, they were presented next to four other groups of artworks: three antic chandeliers that came from the former Majestic hotel, in Paris; two handwritten letters, two paintings, as well as a photograph, telling the story of French missionaries executed in the Indochinese-peninsula by the mid-19th century; half a dozen gold-leaf-embossed cardboard boxes; as well as nine items acquired by Danh Vĩ at a Sotheby's auction sale of the Estate of Robert McNamara. The visitors of *Go Mo Ni Ma Da* (a monosyllabic pronunciation of "Good morning, Madam" with a Vietnamese accent) were therefore confronted with a very eclectic selection of artworks that, needless to say, weren't arranged so as to ease their interpretation. Every set seemed even more confusing when consider as being part of a whole, and as being part of an exhibition put up by one single artist. As if thinking about the fragmental replica of Bartholdi's monument with regard to a photograph of two Egyptian statues wasn't disconcerting enough, considering the entire show as being advertised by that old image was even more puzzling.

As a matter of fact, the picture chosen by Vĩ for his show wasn't meant to speak for the whole. Moreover, if it had a relation to one of the installations presented there – since both referred to the same author, it had to be regarded as encouraging the visitors to think about connections that would be of a conceptual (and not of a formal) matter. In other words: it is the *way* those different elements force the viewers to think, that was relational, not *what* they made them think about. The same way the thin cooper pieces were meant to make the exhibition visitors rethink the preconceived ideas that they had on the Statue of Liberty, the poster invited them to have another look at that same monument, initiating an original approach to interpreting everything that was presented in the show. If that famous lady had to be reexamined, why not the other objects and stories featured elsewhere in the museum?

The image used for the poster and flyer shows two well-known statues that might be recognized even by non-specialists: the now-called *Colossi of Memnon*, representing the Pharaoh Amenhotep III, named after their location by the Nile River, and made around 1350 BCE. Today regarded as iconic figures of the ancient Egypt, they were already famous two centuries ago, as an Egyptomania triggered by Napoleon's Egyptian Campaign was still having a profound aesthetic impact on the arts in France. For a young sculptor such as Frédéric August Bartholdi, a study trip to North Africa was an obligatory step in his training.

This is, partly, the story that Danh Vĩ was referring to: the tale of a young Frenchman looking for inspiration in what many of his landsmen simply called "*l'Orient*" at the time – a term covering fantasmatic

representations and conceptions as much as a geographic area. As one now knows, a European subject who dreamed about the Orient during the 19th century didn't dream about an actual place or culture, but mainly about the preconceived ideas that he or she applied to remote places. Yet, Vö's point wasn't so much about what we mainly know today as *Orientalism* (as theorized by Edward Said), but about Bartholdi's initial inspiration source. With his poster, Vö rescued from oblivion the memories of an artist who, as one of his biographers wrote, "was attracted by the old land of the Pharaohs" for "the monuments with enormous proportions [that were there] made him understand the principles ruling the large-scale statuary, which he was so fond of" (Betz, 1954: 30, my translation). Hence, the reproduction of Bartholdi's calotype used to advertise Danh Vö's show was meant to remind us that the monument that has been standing in the bay of New York since 1886 tells us about a French sculptor instructed by the Egyptian culture (and the Pharaohs' love of the colossal) in the first place.

Those who would find such theory hard to believe – or those who haven't heard about it yet, the story having being told quite often in the media as well as in dedicated publications within the last decade⁴ – would just need to look at Bartholdi's first clay models of the monument, made as early as in the late 1860s. The few that are conserved at the Musée Bartholdi in Colmar (his birth town) show a figure in the shaped of a robed female Fellah. That hand-modeled North-African peasant lady shows a familiar posture: raising her arm, holding a torch, while placing one foot in front of the other (suggesting that she is walking). Yet, this time, part of her draping covers the back of her head, held by a simple headdress, in the fashion of the Muslim women working in the fields of Egypt when Bartholdi was traveling. Before she was called "Liberty Enlightening the World", this allegory was title "Egypt Carrying the Light to Asia", and meant to be a lighthouse marking the entrance of the Suez Canal that the French were about to complete. Two decades later, Bartholdi denied having created that monument for that purpose, trying not to offend his American friends who, in the meantime, had accepted a "recycled" gift (the Egyptian authorities having declined it, mainly for financial reasons). One of the most iconic American monuments is, in fact, a hybrid: the Statue of Liberty standing in front of Manhattan shows us a neoclassical face with a strict pout, but also a "toga" that reminds of the outfit of the Arab peasant lady modeled by Bartholdi after he came back from Egypt...

Once one knows that Bartholdi took inspiration in North Africa – or once one sees that the surface of the monument is so thin and fragile, as revealed by Danh Vö's installation –, one cannot look at the Statue of Liberty the same way, and see in her a symbol of freedom only. And this is exactly what Vö is looking for: to show us that no icon or historical tale should be considered as so strong and definite that it couldn't be challenged.

As mentioned earlier, the relation between the different elements of Vo's exhibition are of a conceptual matter. The link between the 30 cooper pieces and the picture chosen to ad for the show lies in the fact that they advocate for a new take on a monument that might otherwise be regarded as having only one story to tell. Thus, the other pieces exhibited at the MAMVP had to be considered not for the formal, or even thematic, relationships they may have with one another; but, instead, as being all made to invite the viewers to reexamine several ideas and historical narrations.

Among them, one noticed several artworks dedicated to two French missionaries: Jean-Théophane Vénard (1829-61) and Jean-Charles Cornay (1809-37). The photograph of five departing priests (with Vénard standing on the left), Vénard's farewell letter to his father before his execution in Hanoi (copied by Vỗ's father, a skilled calligrapher), and the paintings lent by the *Missions étrangères de Paris* showing the persecution and the execution of several priests (one of them depicting Cornay's agony in a region that was called "Tonkin" at the time), were, of course, "connected". Historically, first: at the age of 9, Vénard decided to become a missionary as he learned about Cornay's terrible fate. But also "thematically", since the photograph, the letters, and the paintings were all propaganda tools that have been used by the catholic institution since the mid-19th century (an institution looking to spread the word of God through its missionaries, but also to have a great number of them killed so as to produce Martyrs and Saints). Yet, as encouraged by Vỗ, the exhibition visitors were able to interpret those items according to other narratives. Why not see in them communication tools promoting – by anticipation, if one will – the colonization of the Indochinese peninsula by the French, for example? Indeed, the iconography and written stories of torture performed by people presented as barbarians who respected no law (be it of a natural or religious matter) were the only medias through which European citizens were able to form an idea of off-shore territories at the time (the Church being one the biggest image producers of the 19th century). Shaping western minds for decades, these tales of bloodthirsty people helped convincing French citizens that a military invasion of the Indochinese-peninsula was not only needed (to protect the French missionaries from persecutions, allegedly) but also fair (since the Vietnamese were understood as knowing violence only).

The pieces gathered by Danh Vỗ in Paris had as a common feature the fact that they had more than one meaning. With this in mind, the viewers were encouraged to go very far in the interpretation of his work, leaving the most obvious readings behind. Regarding the Statue of Liberty, for instance – known as a gift of the French to the American people –, they may have thought about a concept that has been often promoted by western nations (such as France and the United-States of America) while invading someone else's territory. Wasn't it with the "liberation" of Irak that the USA justified (twice!) the invasion of a Middle Eastern country? Wasn't it to promote the Republic's ideal of *Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité*, that France engaged in a large-scaled colonization enterprise, notably in South-East Asia, during the second part of the 19th century? One of the questions asked in the show mounted by Vỗ at the MAMVP – namely, "what are we talking about when talking about the Statue of Liberty, actually?" – called for another one, even harder to answer: "what is it that we called, in Western countries, Liberty?".

Going further in the interpretation, the exhibition's visitors were probably most intrigued by one of the two letters featured in the show. Titled *02.02.1861* (2009-), it is a hand-made replica of Jean-Théophane Vénard's goodbye message to his father, transposed in ink by the artist's own dad, Phung Vỗ. Informed by an introducing wall label, the viewers were confronted with a copy produced on-demand by a man whose skilled calligraphy had been reactivated by his son with a long-run project. Stunk by the beautiful words chosen by Vénard to describe a horrible act ("A slight sabre-cut will separate my head from my body, like the spring flower which the Master of the Garden gathers for His pleasure. We are all flowers planted on this earth, which God plucks in His own good time, some a little sooner, some a little later (...)", wrote Vénard, in French, in 1861), Danh Vỗ thought to work with this letter to make a better use of

his own father's talent, the latter having been used only to copy menus for the food stalls that Võ's parents owned in Denmark for 30 years.

Here as well, the disconnection between the subject of the original letter and the work provided by Vo's father didn't have to be regarded as important. Way more meaningful was the fact that they both highlighted strong paradoxes (regarding what one chooses to write, or how to write, when dealing with a content that no one would described as being beautiful), and the fact that the two stories told forced the reader to accept those paradoxes (yes, Vénard was about to die but couldn't help being poetic about it; yes, Võ's father wrote things as banal as "French fries, 20 kroner" but had to use the most beautiful handwriting for it). "I like the idea that objects can communicate contradictions. Or that carry with them the conflicts we have inherited", says Võ (Eichler, 2009: 259). Therefore, if the letter's copy presented by the artist regards two father-and-son relationships, it also tells us about the value accorded to someone's abilities, the latter being defined very differently depending on the context. While in Vietnam, Phung Vo's remarkable calligraphy "meant that he was well respected and had a lot of important jobs" (*Ibidem*: 260), the same qualification became almost useless once having immigrated with his wife and children to Denmark, not knowing how to write (if not speak) Danish. By putting his retired father into work – more than 1300 copies have been ordered and delivered since 2009 –, Võ revalued his dad's position, getting him involved in the ongoing production of an art piece (one of the most valued activities in society, if any), showing his talent to visitors around the world (a copy of that letter has been included almost systemically in every show organized by Võ within the last 10 years), and allowing him to earn some money at the same time (a third of the 300€ spent by every buyer falls to Võ's father).

In Paris, it is another way of looking that Danh Võ was inviting to. As simple, or even bland, as this might sound, it actually requires a tremendous effort to visitors whose minds have already been made on many ideas, concepts, or historical events. Shaped by institutional narratives (and what they were told in school on colonialism, for instance) or culturally well-spread conceptions (trained to interpret art according to one pattern only), many of them might actually need to be forced to embrace contradictions and complicated narratives to "allow" themselves to interpret a letter as being more than the evidence of a dual father-and-son relationship inspired by a beautiful (hand)writing, for instance. With his show, Võ created the set-up that helped reach that state of mind, highlighting meaningful oppositions with items as simple as a piece of cooper and a photograph of two statues.

Blinded by misconception and choked with erotic fantasy. *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, Artist Space, New York (2010)

The mail sent to guests invited to the opening of Danh Vo's show at Artist Space, in New York, in September 2010, hardly fit in a standard mailbox. In lieu of a simple card, they received a thin cardboard box protected by an envelope that was sent through the postal system. Once opened, it appeared to entail a tie box containing an actual necktie on which the title of the show, *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, was written [fig. 4]. Wrapped in a thin piece of paper, the tie was sent along with a tiny business card providing information on the opening as well as on the fashion brand that produced it⁵. The invitations were all the same, distinguished only by the color of the fabric. Now available as a multiple, some of them were sold at the Guggenheim's gift-shop last year.

Intrigued to receive such an item as an invitation card, Vỗ's guests weren't given much explanation as they came to the show. The first thing that they might have seen at the time was that the Artist Space's main gallery had been left almost empty. Yet regulars also noticed that its large windows were obscured by long curtains: made in a light silk fabric, they slightly deemed the light that normally pour into the space; they ran on the whole walls length, descending ceiling to floor, and covering both the windows and the narrow strips of wall left between them. Upon closer inspection, the exhibition's visitor noticed two other things: first, that the net curtains installed by Danh Vỗ were embroidered with white flowers, buds, and branches; and second, that the curtain's semi-transparency let them see that a whole series of framed photographs was exhibited behind them.

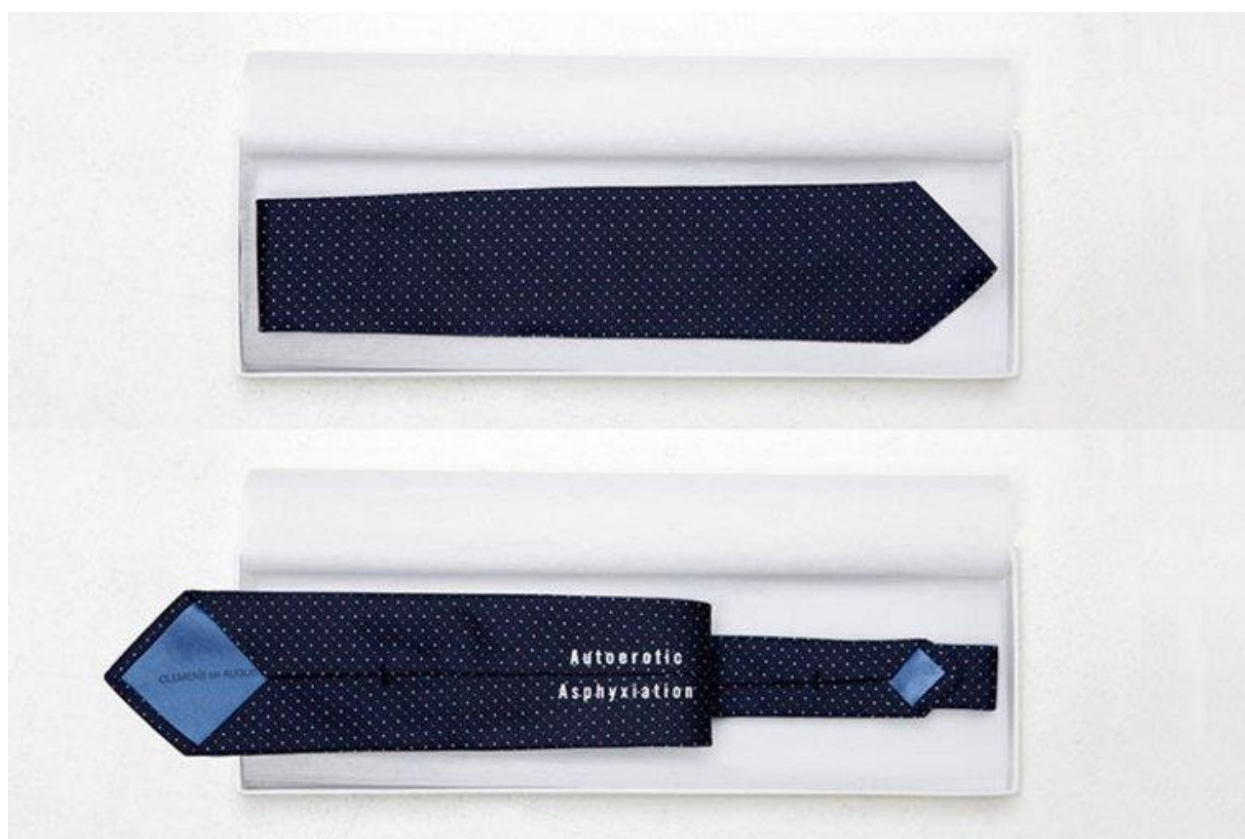


Fig. 4. Invitation to Danh Vỗ's 2010 exhibition *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* (Artist Space, New York). © Clemens en August, courtesy Studio Danh Vỗ.

The visitors were allowed to touch part of the installation in so that they were invited "to part the curtain to reveal groupings of photographs that hung between the paned windows" (Brinson, 2018: 197). The monochrome pictures were from the archives of an American consultant who lived in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Responding to the name of Dr. Joseph ("Joe") M. Carrier, he worked as a research analyst in counter-insurgency for an organization called RAND Corporation. After having met Danh Vỗ

in Los Angeles, in 2006 (as Vỗ was in Residency at Villa Aurora), the anthropologist had invited the artist to consult his personal archive – including the many negatives produced during his stay in Ho Chi Minh City. The 24 photographs selected by Danh Vỗ for his 2010 exhibition often had as their subject apparent signs of affection exchanged publicly between young Vietnamese men. Most of the time, those pictures had been taken at a distance, on-the-fly. They mainly featured people photographed from behind. One saw different men visiting an exhibition, chatting on the street, or enjoying an improvised swim (*Swimming Boys, Vung Tau, 1967, 2007*), for instance. On the images showing boys photographed alone, one often saw them hanging out shirtless (*Boy By the River, Vinh Long, 1966, 2007*).

As far as the flowers embroidered on the silk curtains were concerned, they had been made after the botanical illustrations produced around a century ago by a French priest named Jean-André Soulié (1858-1905). Before being captured and shot by Buddhist monks (on his arrival in Tibet), Soulié had studied the local flora for many years, which allowed him to better understand the power of medicinal plants, notably. The presence of his drawings in the collections of the National Museum of Natural History, in Paris (as the use of Latin-sounding terms, such as *Rosa soulieana* or *Lilium souliei*, derived from the priest's surname, to call those species since then), testifies that "in the 19th century, the most discoveries in the field of French natural history were made by missionaries", as Danh Vỗ noted himself (Maerkle, 2011). Fascinated by the tragic destiny of this priest, and even more by the documentation that he had discovered in Paris during his Residency at Kadist (a documentation which certainly reminded him of the floral metaphors used by Jean-Théophane Vénard in his farewell letter), Vỗ has worked with these botanical sketches very often since then. "I love this story and that is why I use [Soulié's] flowers all the time", he said (*Ibidem*).

Here, again, the arrangement set by Danh Vỗ had something enigmatic, and was even more intriguing once considered in relation to the invitation mail. What did a simple necktie, a set of curtains embroidered with flowers collected by a priest, and series of photographs showing young Vietnamese men, had to do with one another?

Even if Danh Vỗ "like[s] titles that do not obviously explain the exhibition" (*Ibidem*), the name given to his 2010 show definitely set the tone, this time. As some of the Art Space's visitors might have known it already, the "autoerotic asphyxiation" refers to a practice according to which a restriction of oxygen is performed to the brain for the purposes of sexual arousal. Being *auto*-erotic, it is performed alone, in an act of self-stimulation heightened by the euphoria triggered by the loss of consciousness. Using this term to name his exhibition, Vỗ had chosen to direct the interpretations towards a sexual act associated both with brutality and fantasy.

The artist suggested that the pictures taken in Vietnam by an American anthropologist decades ago are a matter of fantasy as well. Indeed, the series of framed images concealed behind the gauzy curtains tell us about the photographer's fascination with male social relations that he wrongly interpreted as attesting tenderness, although casual physical contacts between men – when they are holding each other's hand, for example – are, in Vietnam, in no way connoted. Vỗ explains that the theoretical nonexistence of homosexuality in Vietnam allows men to touch each other without any ulterior motives.

The photos taken by Joe Carrier “are mainly about his projection”, says Vĩ (Eichler, 2009: 254). They symbolize, in their own way, the illusions and the prejudices of the West on Southeast-Asia.

Deeply disturbed by what he witnessed in Vietnam daily, the anthropologist, gay himself, could not help but capture what he over-interpreted with the gaze of a western man – a *veiled* gaze, as suggested by the row of semi-transparent curtains that hid those images. As the amateur photographer himself, when one observes those images now, “we are so caught up with visibility whereas in fact it is invisibility [that matters]; the total absence of things like homosexuality as a possibility is what is interesting here”, notes Vĩ (*Ibidem*). For the artist, this photographic documentation, where the anthropological approach is confused with erotic voyeurism, tells us much more about Joe Carrier than about the Vietnamese men that he had observed. As with the paintings, the scientific publications, the novels, and the travel stories produced on the Orient during the 19th century – on a “mirage”, as the Algerian writer Malek Alloula put it – the photographs taken by the American anthropologist in Vietnam 50 years ago reflect his own desire only.

The arrangement proposed by Danh Vĩ at Artist Space was therefore announced with an object putting the focus on erotic fantasies. The necktie is indeed one of the every-day articles used by autoerotic asphyxiators to restrict the oxygen delivered to their brain (using the piece as a rope, to choke). It is an item therefore associable with a dress code as much as with erotic, but also death, since the autoerotic asphyxiation is also known as leading, in some case, to the accidental strangulation of its performer. Thus, the mail sent in September 2010 to announce Vĩ’s show invited the viewers not only to see in a banal item more than just a piece of clothes worn by men for decorative (or work) purposes, but also to question one’s assumptions on anything presented in the exhibition. As in Paris, Vĩ highlighted a plurality of connotations that had to be considered regardless their contradictory, or incongruous, aspects.

Encouraged to think about the boldest interpretations – if an article as banal as a necktie could be associated with sex and death, what about the other artefacts shown in the room?, suggested Vĩ –, the exhibition’s visitors were confronted with a series of items bearing several meanings.

Looking back at the gauzy silk curtains, for instance, one was inspired to see more than just decorative pieces helping to create a more intimate atmosphere and to slightly dim the light in a room where light-sensitive photographs were shown. A focus on their materiality, for instance, allowed to think about a veil bearing several metaphorical meanings: the *veiled* gaze of a western man unable to see anything else than his fantasies once confronted to other customs in Asia (as mentioned earlier); but also the *unveiling* of a secret that that same man had to keep during his stay in Vietnam. Hence, Joe Carrier had to lie when working for a research organization tied to the US military; in the 1960s, he feared to lose his job working for an organization that “considered homosexuals a security risk and subject to dismissal”⁶ (during the Cold War, in the USA, it was common to think that gays working for government institutions were potentially subject to being blackmailed, since they had a “secret” that US enemies could use against them). Danh Vĩ therefore speaks about a series of images betraying its author, and on which the shadow of a “homosexual veil” is casted, he said (*apud* Chaillou, 2013). Allowed to part the curtains, passing their hands between the silk fabric in order to appreciate the pictures hanging on the wall behind

them, the visitors of the exhibition were, thus, invited to mimic a gesture associated with espionage and, more generally, with voyeurism [fig. 5].



Fig. 5. Installation view of Danh Vo's 2010 exhibition *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* (Artist Space, New York), showing curtains parted so as to reveal the photographs presented behind them. © Daniel Perez, courtesy Studio Danh Võ.

As far as the embroidered flowers were concerned, they could have been read as referring to a secret as well, Jean André-Soulié being subject to persecution when he drew them. Traveling in the same region as Joe carrier 70 years earlier, Soulié had to live discretely. In his case, it is the prejudice against catholic missionaries – seen as foreign agents importing their religion but also western influence in Asia – that made him lead a discreet life. Some of Soulié's counterparts had been accused by Vietnamese, Chinese and Tibetan authorities of organizing rebellion against the people in power (who, during the 19th century, had forbidden Catholicism in their respective kingdoms). Thus, for some priests, it mattered to hide the “real” aim of their activities, presenting themselves as humble missionaries and botanists by

day, while conspiring at night. In this regard, Soulié's flowers could be interpreted as attesting an alibi interest for plants and flowers.

For Danh Võ, clearly, it was the contradiction highlighted by both series that made him present them together. Soulié's flower sketches and Carrier's photographs were both characterized by the fact that they conveyed a sense of lightness and beauty that offered a strong contrast with the violent periods in which they were produced. The elegant drawings had been made in a climate of persecution, and the pictures of young people enjoying a good time had been taken while the reunification war between North and South Vietnam was raging (one of the images hung on the wall by Võ showed a bathing scene with an air raid occurring in a distant background). This contraction was emphasized by the title of the exhibition, which, in a *mise en abyme*, referred to a practice where violence and ecstasy coexist. This tension between beauty and brutality is, as we have seen, often underlined by Danh Võ. As with the farewell letter written by Jean-Théophane Vénard (in which the French missionary compares his beheading with a flower being picked⁷), the incredible cohabitation of the brutal and the poetic was, here as well, what had initially caught the artist's attention when he had discovered both series of documents. For the artist, what Soulié's flowers and Carrier's pictures also teach us, is to accept paradoxes.

One last document helped framing the show as focusing on challenging ideas. Discreetly shown next to an emergency exit (and featured in the exhibition's booklet as well as in the press release), a series of eleven guidelines were presented etched onto a metal plate. Under-titled "Excerpt from the Department of Correction, State of Delaware: *Execution by Hanging, Operation and Instruction Manual*, by Fred A. Leuchter Associated, inc. 1990"⁸, they list instructions on how to prepare for an execution, describing, among other things, the tying of a Hangman's Knot. Those guidelines gave evidence of a sense of ceremonial that appeared almost out of place considering the act described, reminding us the paradoxical care taken to perform something as violent as an execution. On a more provocative note, they hint at the fact that every condemned person executed by hanging might experience a sexual arousal comparable to an orgasm before dying (as suggested by the title of the show, which referred to an act of self-stimulation heightened by strangulation)...

When considered as being part of a whole, those very guidelines – presented in a room featuring a series of photographs that one understood as "exud[ing] an air of homoeroticism" (Harris, 2010), as well as embroidered flowers that were initially collected by a priest that became famous as a botanist and as a martyr – also "provided a further dimension to the symbiosis of eroticism and death set forth in the show's title (...), alluding to the religious ecstasy of martyrdom" (Brinson, 2018: 197). The show elicited a paradoxical search for blessedness through comparable acts: in the 19th century, the priests who were willing to give their life in Jesus's name accepted the violent path to beatification just like most autoerotic asphyxiators acknowledge today the inherent risks associated with their practice, as if, in each case, ecstasy and death were both sides of the same coin. Every artwork presented by Võ at Artist Space highlighted such conflicts, with the coexistence of contradictory facts that one just needs to be willing to see.

If one cannot describe each invitation card or exhibition ephemera produced by Danh Võ as giving hints as stimulating as the ones described here, it is nonetheless remarkable that they almost always help

setting the tone, in so that they give room for original interpretation. Even the non-telling cards (providing facts as basic as the exhibition plan or the artworks list, for instance) evidence Vỗ's will not to give information that would frame his show – and, therefore, the visitors' interpretations –, an act that, as such, is also stimulating. If the picture of the *Colossi of Memnon* and the box containing a necktie did invite to think about potential relations and concepts, these were always plural, leaving the reading open, just like a card showing a gallery plan would.

What is outstanding in every case, is that the setting of artifacts is meant to reveal original conceptual connections, creating an environment in which the visitors should feel comfortable enough to think differently. Hence, the announcements discussed here weren't so much clues given to solve a riddle, showing us *where* to look, than evidences of an unconventional reading, hinting on *how* to look. With arrangements that are both enigmatic and appealing, provoking and inviting, Danh Vỗ persuades us to challenge pre- and mis-conceptions. Simply put: *to dare*.

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Notas

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¹ Danh Võ quoted in a broadcasted interview in: "Der Marker: 'Riesig: Die Freiheitsstatue nachgebaut'", 27 September 2011, ZDF, Germany.

² At the time, Võ asked his father, Phụng Võ, to transcribe selected song lyrics on the walls of the exhibition space. The announcement for the show – a folded handout – featured a picture of Phụng Võ performing a similar action, writing letters on a piece of cardboard with red ink. The image is available on the Kitchen's website: <<https://thekitchen.org/event/danh-vo-and-xiu-xiu-metal>> (consulted 2 April 2019).

³ Danh Võ quoted in an interview by Martin Kohler Jorgensen in: "Danh Võ – We the People", *SMK TV*, May 2012, <<https://youtu.be/8glrGJxpo9A>> (consulted 2 April 2019).

⁴ I'm referring, for example, to Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts in: *Edges of Empire: orientalism and visual culture* (Malden/Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 41-44).

⁵ Pictures of the tie produced by Clemens en August can be found on the brand's website: <<https://www.clemens-en-august.com/ca/danhvo.html>> (consulted 2 April 2019).

⁶ "Finding aid of the Joseph M. Carrier papers Coll. 2007-001". *Online archive of California*, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt596nd33j/entire_text/> (consulted 3 April 2019).

⁷ Vénard's letter, copied by Võ's father, was also included in the exhibition mounted at Artist Space.

⁸ The transcript of those guidelines is still available on the Artist Space's website: <<http://artistsspace.org/exhibitions/danh-vo>> (consulted 3 April 2019).

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