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Frieze

Exorcisms of the Self

Connections across time and place in the work of Danh Vo

April 24, 2015



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

The web of relations that the Vietnamese-born, Danish artist Danh Vo might describe as ‘me’ is integral to the ‘we’ of the many works he has realized over the course of the last decade. But, compared to Kermani’s understanding of the word, Vo’s web feels more like a thicket of entanglement, formed not just by friends, colleagues and relatives, but also by a cast of characters including a Copenhagen policeman, a 19th-century French missionary in Vietnam, and a politician in 1960s Washington D.C.

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

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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. Courtesy: Galleria Zero, Milan; photograph: Jacopo Menzani

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-Théophile 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*

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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.



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

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

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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.)



Dimmy, why you do this to me?, 2015, oak and polychrome Madonna and child, French early gothic; marble torso of a satyr from a Roman workshop, 1st–2nd century CE; steel, 146 × 50 × 50 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman, London and New York; photographs: Stephen White

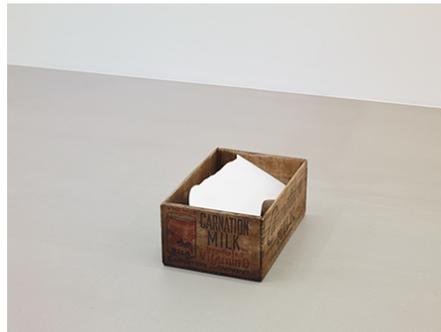
Apart from Vo's unabashedly juvenile delight in profanity, there are two things that make the figure of Regan – the 12-year-old protagonist of *The Exorcist* (played by Linda Blair), who is possessed by the ancient demon Pazuzu – so striking for the artist. One is that, while her body remains that of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

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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.



Lick me, lick me, 2015, Marble torso of Apollo from a Roman workshop, 1st–2nd century CE; wood; nails, 21 × 32 × 48 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman, London and New York; photographs: Stephen White

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 Kunsthau Bregenz, in a characteristic mix of humility and exaggeration: ‘I

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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