

DANH VO

in Conversation with Dominic Eichler

Danh Vo Born 1975 Ba Ria, VN. Lives and works in Berlin, DE

Dominic Eichler Born 1966 in Ballarat, AUS. Lives and works in Berlin, DE

Three Sides of the Same Coin

I The Museum of Unwanted Things

We decided to meet for an hour and eat a Turkish omelette in a breakfast cafe on Kottbusser Tor, Kreuzberg in Berlin. Danh talks about what it was like to realise his recent exhibition Where the Lions Are (2009) at the Kunsthalle Basel. Part of that exhibition entangled him in near impossible negotiations to purchase three historic, 400 kg ballroom chandeliers from the global consortium that now owns and is redeveloping the former Majestic Hotel in Paris. It was in this hotel, and beneath these very chandeliers that: the modernist avant-garde held parties, Hitler set up his wartime headquarters and, in 1973, the peace treaty was signed to end the Vietnam War. In the Kunsthalle exhibition one of the three chandeliers was hung and lit only by natural light. Below lay a granite and marble tombstone that the artist designed for his grandmother consisting of reproductions of a washing machine, a refrigerator and a television set on which a crucifix lays.

Dominic Eichler I was thinking about the premise of this book: to examine how personal histories are used in contemporary art. And I was thinking about how towards the end of the 1990s there was a sense of fatigue, rightly or wrongly, about what might be loosely called 'political identity art'. You know the kind of works, which involve showing 'other' cultures: autobiographical or doc-, semi-doc- or mock-umentary work drawing on the experience of socio-politically or culturally marginalised people. Seen, that is, from a Western or Eurocentric point of view in what remains a very middle-class, white-bread cultural context, whether we are talking about biennales, art galleries or institutions. Then I also thought about how much has changed since the coining of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political'. These days, people are expected to bare everything about their feelings and family on television, on websites and in conversation. Maybe contemporary art hasn't quite kept up with the mainstreaming of the 'personal'? My question is this: is the personal still political for you?

Danh Vo I think that a question like this really closes down discourse. There is no single way to answer. Of course every artist does things out of their personal interest or involvement.

Dominic Eichler Well do you think that some people's personal is more political than others? Yours for example, growing up as the son of Vietnamese refugees picked up by a Danish oil tanker?

Danh Vo No – definitely not. Every exhibition in a big white cube is very personal and political, regardless of the work being shown.

Dominic Eichler Amongst your first works was a project in which you embarked on an examination of what constituted your own identity and a

kind of reconstruction of it using official legal channels. For instance, you married a few different people to take their Danish-sounding names.

Danh Vo Without the desire – my strong desire – to be just like everybody else I wouldn't be in the position I am now. That project specifically was about my own perverse desire to be like everyone else. I wanted to have what everyone else had, but at the same time not to want it at all. I got what I wanted, but it wasn't very exciting. One has to try it out [laughs]. The difference between most of the many others at art school and me was that they had a certain background, which informed the way they thought. Most of them were upper-middle class, they knew their cultural references, they owned expensive baggage. I wasn't raised in a home with a lot of books or with the idea of art. When you don't have the same luggage you are perceived as different.

Dominic Eichler In continental Europe, artists from immigrant backgrounds are often immediately exoticised in a way that's not as extreme in the USA, Australia or to an extent in the UK. It seems to me that in Western social democracies there is a sense, particularly in cultural spheres, that minorities and marginalised positions need to be actively included. The problem is that that inclusiveness can be double-edged. In the way that in the past – I hope – a female artist couldn't just be an artist, she would always have to be a 'woman artist'. What I mean is that in that inclusiveness there is also ghettoisation at play. For me the work of say Martin Kippenberger, Joseph Beuys or even Liam Gillick says just as much about a cultural history from a particular subjective point of view as the work of someone perceived as the racially, sexually, culturally 'other'. The difference is that their 'personal' doesn't ghettoise their work. Within their cultural frame it's taken as normal.

*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year
(Refugee Camp Singapore 1979), 2007*



Danh Vo I try to ignore this problematic fetish. I really believe that cultural production only happens when it is needed. I think it's more interesting to dig to the roots of this need rather than falling into the trap of discussing from the point of view of the 'other'. It's much more interesting to discuss who created this category and who benefits from it.

Dominic Eichler Have you come up with any answers?

Danh Vo No – not yet. That's really why I am actively participating – as much as possible – in existing cultural systems. To get experience and to find out who is operating it, who is controlling what, who 'needs' 'them' and who is forming us.

The moody summer wind is too strong for my computer's microphone so we decide to continue in Danh's kitchen. He has a new set of kitchen knives – in a quality and variety, which suggest that he will never need to buy knives in his life again. They are his trophies from Basel.

Dominic Eichler Do you think that Western audiences who empathise with images or stories of people from the rest of the world are just placating their bad consciences – one perhaps inherited from the colonial era, or relating to a consciousness and structural helplessness in the face of the obscene injustice in the world?

Danh Vo There is a well-intended tradition where in cultural affairs there can be some kind of reconciliation or a reconsolidation. We all have to be a bit more real and acknowledge the brutality of our everyday life. There is nothing worse than the tendency in art to imagine that a country might be bombed or invaded, but then that somehow a cultural discussion could save the situation. Is there anything more hypocritical than that?

Dominic Eichler We could link this back to the history of the museum, certainly those of imperial powers. From the Enlightenment on, museums were also trophy houses and proof of the 'civilisation alibi' used to justify colonialism. I'm thinking of this in relationship to the way you use private collections, historical items and artefacts in your work. For instance, objects purchased from servicemen who served in the Vietnam War or borrowed from your friend Dr. Joseph Carrier's personal archive of mementoes from a life of travel, love affairs and research. Or the way that you treat online auction houses such as EBay as a kind of 21st-century museum of unwanted, notionally valuable things.

Danh Vo My own work hasn't ended up in museums or on EBay yet [laughs]. It's mostly in private collections. Things just happen; you can only observe the exchanges that take place. I try not to worry about where things end up. It is more interesting to observe who participates in the transactions and



Installation view, *Where the Lions Are*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2009

why, rather than to control them. I buy and sell a lot of things to interfere in the system. I am making a proposal about the significance inherent to certain objects. But I think people should make their own determinations about such an object's cultural value. I might very well be wrong.

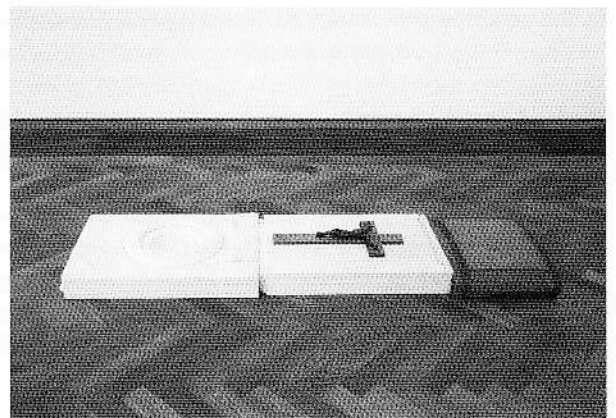
Dominic Eichler What is the status of the object in your work? For me your work is conceptual, because your projects – many ongoing for years – are as much about the chain of non-material negotiations and the correspondence happening around the objects as they are about the objects themselves. I made a list of things I think any given object in your work might be thought of as: symbol, artefact, evidence, sculpture, product, souvenir, clue, remnant, totem, memorial, or even as a kind of voodoo doll.

Danh Vo The objects that fascinate me are all of these things. If they weren't all of these things at the same time they would be a failure. I think that it is a problem to occupy the meaning of an object for too long. It needs to change. One of the exquisite qualities of an object is that it makes space for possible meanings. Actually, you know, when I told people about the chandelier work, they would think of Cerith Wyn Evans' Morse code works, whereas I thought of them as a bad copy of Félix González-Torres's light bulb piece [laughs]. I was inspired by the idea of a kind of momentary or fleeting occupation of light, so I installed the chandelier under a skylight where the sun, moving around it and shining through it, would rip it from history and time itself.

Dominic Eichler But the accompanying work – the gravestone sculpture for your grandmother – definitely suggests a fixed endpoint.

Danh Vo I don't install things together so that they necessarily make sense, even though they might end up doing so. A tombstone indicates the end of a personal life, but it's also a monument to social continuity. They also manifest our inherited fear of death. This work is about the impossibility and absurdity of representing the experience of life in a single object. The household objects that make up the tombstone are what some welfare bureaucrat decided were basic necessities my grandmother needed when she arrived in Germany. So in a way the tombstone is also about my grandmother's big dream of coming to the West and starting a new 'prosperous' life without worrying about the consequences and the difficulties of starting fresh at the age of 55, with no language skills and at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. She couldn't afford to look back.

Dominic Eichler That is typical of migrants everywhere isn't it? Certainly it was the same in my mother's family who immigrated to Australia from the Netherlands in the 1950s. It was taboo for them to count the personal cost of emigration. Ironically, I have never felt the need to mention this within an art context before.



*Tombstone for Nguyễn Thị Tý,
part of the sculpture: Oma Totem, 2009*

Danh Vo It's not a taboo so much as a choice. It's a psychological imperative to accept where you are as the only possibility. My father for instance never returned to Vietnam. He creates reasons for not going back that aren't at all rational. It's a way of protecting himself from looking at all the losses. But people like you and me actually don't know what that really feels like. I was never taught about where my family came from. When I made a sculpture for the grave of my dead brother my father asked me: 'But why Danh? Why are you digging all this up?' Why do I do it? I don't know.



16.06.1974, 2009, detail

He left it all behind, so why am I unearthing that which is not mine? I want to pose all of these questions. Maybe it's the art system we work in that forces me to make such work! [laughs] What I use from my background is to look at my parents in order to understand the differences between us. By the way, now that I make some money and give some of it to my father, he doesn't ask so many questions.

Dominic Eichler I think that money is as important as the object in your work. The idea of finding out what money can make possible in art – like a Midas touch. For example, where something relatively cheap bought in an Internet auction, in an antique store or borrowed from the collection of mementoes might become a valuable piece of conceptual art. Or on the other hand where something really valuable to the non-art world, like the chandeliers, not to mention the cost of moving and installing them, has to be accommodated by your galleries' and collectors' economies with respect to your work.

Danh Vo Selling my *Meisterschule* Diploma for € 99 and selling other things for 10,000-times more carries a lot of meaning. Value systems appear everywhere in all kinds of forms. To an extent, art is about creating value, and the experience of creating value – at both ends.

Dominic Eichler Are you as much a businessman as an artist? You once told me that most commercial galleries operate and think like small businesses. But with the chandelier works you were dealing with people involved in global business, corporate interests, oil money, people thinking in entirely different dimensions. This puts everything into a crazy perspective with respect to economy and art. Don't you think it's telling that talking about money makes art people nervous whereas they might take a discussion about globalism, colonialism, or war in an artwork in their stride?

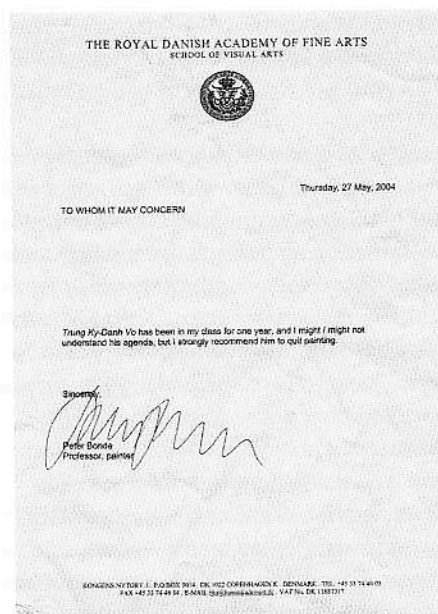
Danh Vo My gallerists are going to kill me because they are serious galleries with a profound dedication to cultural production. However, I think it's very telling that money in large sums is a tiny taboo, because in reality we are the fluffers.

Dominic Eichler Perhaps we could go back to Félix González-Torres and your relationship to artist, curator and writer Julie Ault.

Danh Vo My relationship with Julie Ault developed amongst other things through how I approached Félix González-Torres's work. When I was studying, I was so obsessive that I read all of the reference points that his work came from. I watched all the same movies, read all the same books. I think I was a bit of a psychopath. Ault was in a dialogue with González-Torres for many years. Now she is perhaps continuing that dialogue by feeding – and torturing – my brain. You know González-Torres hated the idea of fulfilling the expectation of being a 'Cuban gay artist' – that he should show up wearing Bermuda shorts and carrying coconuts. Ironically, in a way, that's what I do a lot! Here is a passage I like that González-Torres wrote in his review of Roni Horn's work *Gold Field*:

And it's precisely here where the radical right and their allies in the religious industry have been so brilliant in their strategy of deflecting meaning by using charged symbolic images of homosexual acts (among others). Why bother with the destruction of the environment or lack of adequate health care when we have a black-and-white photo

Self-Portrait (Peter)
Letter of Recommendation, 2004



of two men kissing? Now that's real meaning. Unfortunately, we in the cultural left are more than eager to play the role assigned to us. We are invited to participate in a debate that has never really been a debate, but a travesty, a red herring to keep us occupied. We should not reply with the first amendment and so-called freedom of expression, we should redirect the circus toward our agenda and expose what they really want to avoid mentioning. We should fight hate and the dissemination of ignorance and fear with the effective use of history and fact. Ideology cannot stand it when we make connections.

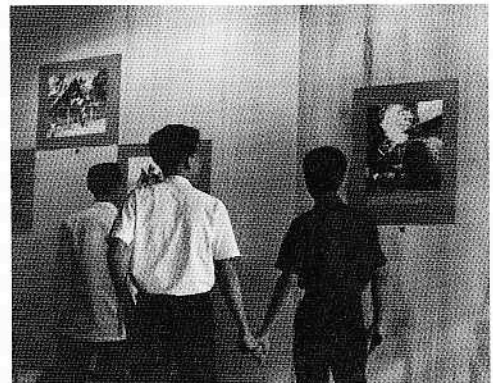
II Putting Things in Boxes

The next day we take a taxi to Lichtenberg in Berlin, to an industrial neighbourhood still scattered with factory buildings baring the scars of World War II interspersed with now equally ruinous GDR architecture and, here and there, new millennium commercial architecture, typical of global franchises and ubiquitous everywhere. Amongst it all is the Vietnamese market, housed in a row of identical, nondescript, no-frills warehouses. Walking into one brings back the atmosphere of the outskirts of Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) strongly to me, where shopkeepers are equally pragmatic about display. Cheap textiles, shoes and fake flowers are all unpacked and arranged all over the floor and walls. Next door are nail studios, hairdressers and of course food vendors. I can hardly believe it's not tropical outside. We order a noodle soup and start talking even though the Vietnamese pop music pretty much drowns out what we are saying.

Dominic Eichler I feel ridiculously nostalgic here for our trip last year to the Central Highlands of Vietnam. But you told me that your mother really liked it here too and even more than Vietnam when she finally went back with you.

Danh Vo I've been to Vietnam with my mother a couple of times. But there she only complains all the time about the food not being like she remembered it, that things aren't right, that they taste different. When she and my father came to Berlin for the first time I brought them to this market. It was originally a cultural centre set up for mainly North Vietnamese contract workers allowed into the GDR. My parents got obsessed with this place. They had to come here every day. They identified a lot with this place, which was perverse considering that, for example, my father usually hates anything connected to communism. But here he just forgot about that, or was at least able to put it out of his mind. That was an interesting contradiction. You know during the Vietnam War the Americans only controlled the cities and not all the rural areas in the South. As my mother lived within the American-controlled area she was subjected to a massive amount of propaganda. The first time she ever saw her 'enemy' was after the Tet Offensive – the only offensive that reached into the larger cities. After a few days of

Cultural Boys, 2007
(Photo taken by
Joseph Carrier in Saigon, 1962)



occupation, a tour was arranged for people to go out in the battlefield to see the dead insurgency – the Vietcong. My mother told me she was in shock, because they didn't look like monsters, as she had imagined, but on the contrary they looked just like her. For thirty years she lived with war and for the next thirty years she tried to survive in a Scandinavian model of social democracy. All this history piling up is messy, because history itself is messy. We can't ever truly organise it, and that's probably what I like so much about observing my parents – that their history, sense of authenticity and origins are complicated and basically just fucked up.

Dominic Eichler Vietnam in the present day struck me as enormously youthful, very un-nostalgic, very pragmatic, very future-orientated, certainly not worried about preserving an authentic notion of their own past or culture, nor examining its complex origins. Maybe the overkill of romantic pop music, which is all about longing and loss, fills this kind of gap. Of course this is a generalisation and an outsider's point of view.

Danh Vo I think that it's people like us who get bogged down in questions about what's 'authentic', what has been lost or the so-called origins of things. Other people – in a good sense – don't need to give this a second thought. Look at that box of sweet, deep-fried snacks on the counter there, the Martell cognac, the Johnny Walker whisky, the Marlboros and Pall Mall they are selling. Even the beef noodle soup we are eating is the result of a foreign influence on Vietnamese tradition. This is not even to mention the 1,000 years of Chinese influence on what we today call Vietnam. Things are not organised.

Dominic Eichler Every manufactured object is embedded with historical narratives; they tell the incredibly complex story of global trade and politics, in the case of the things you pointed out; partly that of the French colonisation of Indochina in the 19th century and the subsequent wars. How do these kind of narratives play a role in your work?

Danh Vo We have been assigned the task of sitting down and burying ourselves in the ocean of information about all of the injustice that has occurred in the history of mankind. This keeps us occupied and silent. We should start to define our own role and our own agendas. Perhaps my most significant work to date is the temporary marker I had made for my grandmother's graves. It was made by my father and consists of a wooden crucifix with her name written in the Latin alphabet and with numbers that indicate her dates of birth and death. For me, this sign involves language, its migration and its return, albeit in a mutated form, as well as a confrontation. To try to dig into the myriad of conflicts implied by this piece would be like committing suicide – like drowning yourself.

Dominic Eichler Are you thinking about ideas like those in the last documenta with respect to their idea of an aesthetic trail, or the 'Migration of Forms'?

Danh Vo I really liked the last documenta, but it seems like a long time ago already. More recently I was thinking more of the recent retrospective of Paul Thek's work at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, where the curators tried to recreate Thek's installations, but ultimately failed, especially with respect to his later work. However, I found this extremely beautiful, because it showed the impossibility of making a retrospective of this type of production.

Dominic Eichler Our artist friend Henrik Olesen said we should remember to talk about your work in terms of sexuality. Your various works with Dr. Joseph Carrier and his private archive are the most explicit works in this regard. Joe was in Vietnam in the 1960s and aside from his job he also had love affairs and photographed attractive young men on the streets. Through his lens the men are often shown holding hands or otherwise ambiguously engaged with each other.

Danh Vo In a way Joe wasn't so much different to a Christian missionary in the colonial era. His photographs are mainly about his projection. The hand-holding men probably aren't homosexual, or don't even have a 'softer idea' of masculinity. It's the opposite I think. It stems from a kind of hyper-masculinity, a super-denial of even the vaguest possibility of homosexuality. We are so caught up with visibility whereas in fact it is invisibility; the total absence of things like homosexuality as a possibility is what is interesting here.

Dominic Eichler The products in the shops at this market look like they have been dumped directly out of a big shipping container in Hamburg. It makes me think about your installations too. For example, your exhibition *Untitled* (2007) at the Brandenburgischer Kunstverein in Potsdam where the works consisted of some artefacts presented in their postal packaging, lying around as if they weren't installed yet, as if everything is temporary.

Danh Vo I thought that was a context with no adequate pre-existing reference system, or in which I didn't agree with any of the previous attempts to represent the things I'm interested in. My approach to the installation was really about doubt. As to me there seemed to be no pretext for my work I decided the best thing to do is just load my things into a rented van the day before the opening, drive it to the exhibition venue and just put it in there. And that is what I did.

Dominic Eichler I'm sure this must have made the curator really nervous. I think the amount of emptiness in your exhibitions is also a confrontation. Sometimes your installations look so provisional that they might almost dissipate. Does the art space and its emptiness mean something particular to you?

Danh Vo Maybe this is a bit myopic, but I don't consider my exhibitions empty; on the contrary I think they are massive and intrusive. The space between carries a lot of meaning. The absence of space is also significant. It's purely coincidental that my shows seem spatially empty. One day if it makes sense I will show you how I can fill up spaces. I think the best way to install is to simply bring what you have.

Dominic Eichler You often talk of ceilings and floors and not walls...

Danh Vo Yes – ups and downs make your life more interesting [laughs], and it's about formal issues and architecture and destinations on a trade route. Anyway to go back – the three chandeliers from the ballroom of the former Majestic Hotel were meant to hang in a sort of axis across three exhibition venues. Two of the curators got annoyed about their institutions not being the first to show one of the new chandelier works. It was ridiculous because

Assembling of chandelier for Kunsthalle Basel, 2009



each of them is a new piece titled after the exact time and date that they were removed from the ballroom, and at the same time showing one after the other in three venues in Paris, Basel and finally Berlin was meant to be a joint project reconstructing the axis of the chandeliers. I got really fed up, so I sent them all an email explaining how their idea of being the 'first to fill up a space' is an old-fashioned idea of sex that I don't agree with.

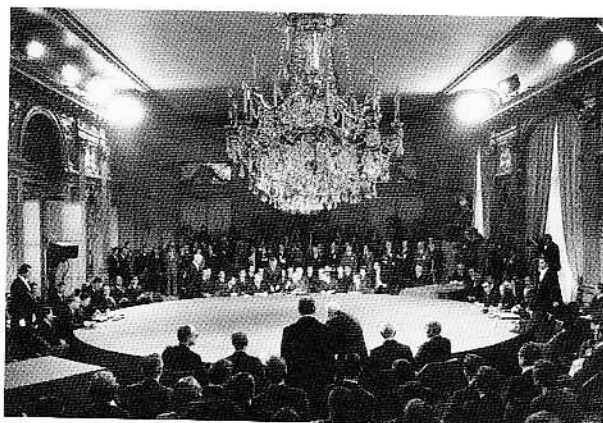
Dominic Eichler Many of your works involve and exploit the art system to redistribute objects or disseminate or even dissipate them. Is this impulse related somehow to your interest in cultural diasporas?

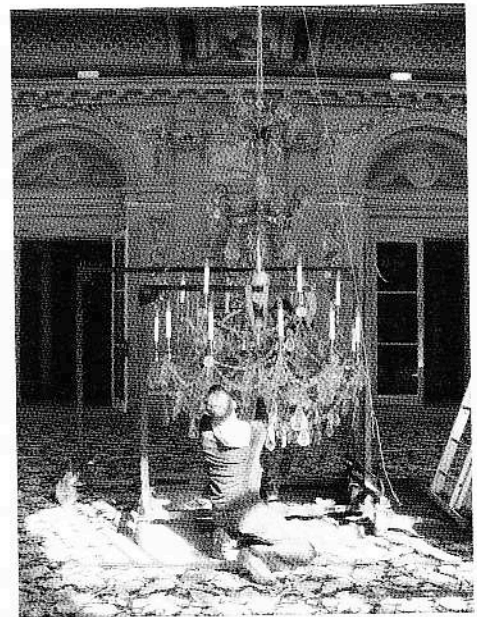
Danh Vo You're damn right – I hope my production can be bombed and torn apart: forced to expand, to change and contaminate other destinations. The process of taking the chandeliers out of their ballroom and then distributing them to different places across a changing and crooked axis is what makes the work perversely fascinating. If I just hung them together somewhere else it would be nostalgic and banal. What attracted me to them in the first place was the idea that they were designed to make you forget. That the people who danced and partied under them were encouraged to forget their daily cares, to leave their sorrows behind. This is the brutal beauty of history.

Dominic Eichler What, as a communal festival of forgetting?

Danh Vo The biggest failure in the work comes from my warped ego. I put too much personal interest in the work and it restricts and confines the meaning. I think the real success of such a work would be if it remained more open and if the audience would enter and think 'yes, we want to forget'.

Paris Peace Accord, 2009





Removal of the chandeliers at
the former Majestic Hotel

Dominic Eichler The Internet and EBay are your studio, right? You also have a really obtuse email style. Once again it seems to me that all of your partial- and mis-communications are part of your work. You also don't make the usual division between 'production' and 'the work'.

Danh Vo I'm not sure... sometimes I provide too much information, and sometimes my parents' apartment is my studio. In order to create doubts in society, and be the worst threat to hegemonic structures, you have to work and think against yourself, because these structures define you by either including you or excluding you. Once I took a LSD trip and for the first time I experienced a sense that there were no real borders between anything, that everything weaves in and out of everything else. I hope my approach to art has a similar quality: one where everything is interconnected, where the walls one usually constructs dissipate.

Dominic Eichler You are referring to the ordering of the world? Or the collapse of the attempt to order history and meaning?

Danh Vo Yes, the failure of categorisations... of putting things in boxes.

III Digging Up

For the final part of this conversation, which was conducted over the course of a couple of weeks, we had planned to meet in some church somewhere and whisper in the pews up the back about missionaries and tombstones.

Danh originally suggested Berlin's iconic, bombed Gedächtniskirche (Memorial Church) as a pointed joke. Instead we took a trip together to Edinburgh thinking that that city's Gothic architecture might offer a constructive backdrop. But after the other business of the day we went out to a gay club instead and spent the entire next morning looking at the decommissioned Royal Yacht Britannia. Two days later we met again back in Danh's kitchen.

Dominic Eichler The reason we wanted to go to a church was to think about the role belief plays in your work. Or I could also ask you what role fakes and lies play in your work. For example, the work you made involving a horse-riding saddle from the missionary museum in Kon Tum, Vietnam, which is believed to have been used by the last missionary to ride into the jungle to minister to the indigenous hill-tribes.

Danh Vo You know there is not much difference between that museum in Kon Tum and museums in the West. It is just perhaps a little bit more obvious that they are trying to convince the public of certain ideas, but without the resources of other museums to create a convincing display or a convincing conquering of the history. Despite their limited means and the transparency of their aims, ironically they believe much more in the notion of a 'museum' than we do. The saddle piece is about all of the possibilities that are embedded in this kind of object, all of the incoherent, incongruous ideologies. No one knows if the saddle was truly used by this famous missionary. It was just found after the Vietnam War. It might have been, because the only people to have such fancy saddles were the priests, but no one knows really. They just believe it.

Dominic Eichler When this object gets imported into an international contemporary art context doesn't it also then speak to the belief systems around art?

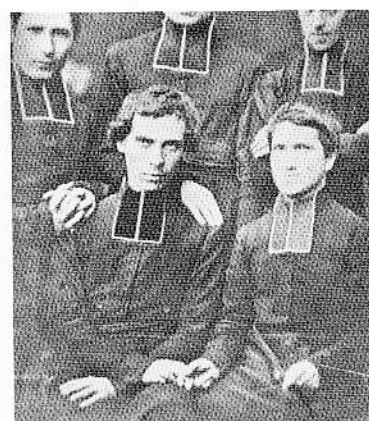
Danh Vo I like the idea of objects that can communicate contradictions. Or that carry with them the conflicts we have inherited. Art spaces work by isolating things or by cutting them off.

Dominic Eichler Can we also talk about the afterlife you planned for your tombstone piece? It's not intended to enter the art system as a commodity after being shown. It will actually be used for your grandmother's grave, correct?

Danh Vo It will still be in the art system. The idea was to make a public monument. Cemeteries have free entry.

Dominic Eichler But you encountered a problem of scale, right? The tombstone you created doesn't fit her grave in Germany... and I understand that now your idea is to have her remains exhumed and reburied in Denmark.

Théophane Venard, 2009
 (Photocopy of the last
 picture of the missionaries
 Th. Vénard, G. Goulon,
 J. Perrier, J. Lavigne, J. Theurel
 before leaving Paris on
 September 19, 1852)



Danh Vo I didn't think about this problem when I made the piece. I just reproduced the objects she was given one-to-one in marble and granite. My family in Germany didn't have much money so when they bought the grave plot for her coffin they only bought the rights to one square meter of ground on the surface, which is far too short for the tombstone I produced. I gathered the family together to discuss the possibility of a reburial. They agreed, but because they believe in ghosts, it can only happen after three years, at which point they believe her flesh will be gone. Then she will go to Copenhagen. That was my mother's decision. It is a practical decision about bringing my grandmother closer to the rest of the family.

Dominic Eichler But now there is discussion about digging up your grandmother's sister as well? It's almost as if their refugee status and history of migration is continuing even after their deaths.

Danh Vo It's a very practical approach to an emotional matter. That's why we tried to find my dead brother in Vietnam – my mother wanted to bring the family back together. I think it's a consequence of the recent history of Vietnam and the war and all of the mass displacement of people, both living and dead – meaning that plenty of people had to be dug up again and moved. It's very simple.

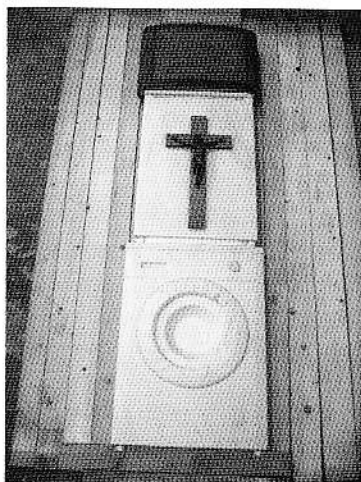
Dominic Eichler It is an aspect of the Vietnamese Diaspora. Talking of bodies and parts and separations makes me think about the works you made which pertain to the best-known Vietnamese missionary, Théophane Vénard, who was martyred by decapitation. Take, for example, your unlimited edition work consisting of handwritten reproductions of his last letter.

Danh Vo He was so famous that after his death everyone wanted his remains. So in the end his head ended up in a church in Vietnam and his body was smuggled out to the Missions-Etrangères in Paris. He was also

known for his beautiful letters. His last letter was written to his father. In it he talks about God as a gardener who picks flowers as and when he wishes. But actually what motivated this work was my interest in my own father's handwriting. He has very beautiful handwriting and in Vietnam that meant that he was well respected and had a lot of important jobs. You know Vietnam adopted the Latin alphabet, but with complicated additional accents. When he went to Denmark he couldn't use this talent any more except for signs for his takeaway food stall. It was an amputated talent. He also doesn't understand the letter he is copying, as he doesn't speak or read a word of French. He does it visually. For him it's like making an abstract drawing. Recently, I have a lot of discussions with art institutions and they always talk about a responsibility to the public, as if the public is one entity. I prefer the idea of believing in the possibility of just one person out there, someone very distanced from you, a stranger who feels connected to the work, that's my public.

Dominic Eichler You sound like a missionary yourself.

Danh Vo Yes, of course. That's also why I'm interested in them! [laughs] Some missionaries name flowers and artists have to name pieces. Of course, I have totally different beliefs, but that's the intriguing part of life: the problem of being together, of connecting, knowing of course, that most of the ideas about sharing things are so completely fucked.



*Tombstone for Nguyễn Thị Tý,
2009*