Danh Vo’s Exorcism of Vietnam

Andrew Stooke

Danh Vo, ‘Untitled’, South London Gallery (SLG), London
19 September – 24 November 2019

18 September – 1 November 2019

______________________________

And if a text always gives itself a certain representation of its own roots, those roots live only by that representation, by never touching the soil, so to speak.

Jacques Derrida 1

... people own their own land, build their own schools – the children learning, literacy – illiteracy is being wiped out, there is no more prostitution as there was during the time when this was a French colony. In other words, the people have taken power into their own hands, and they are controlling their own lives.

Jane Fonda 2

Without irony, not so many words are required.

Susan Sontag 3

Behind a veil of complexity, two concurrent exhibitions by Danh Vo provided a twisted spectacle of the enduring grip of colonialism. The imperious global view is encountered as a deep root with tenacious offshoots. The exhibitions, ‘Untitled’ at South London Art Gallery (19 September – 24 November 2019) and ‘Cathedral Block Prayer Stage Gun Stock’ at Marian Goodman Gallery, London (18 September – 1 November 2019), presented two perspectives on the experience of diaspora. Vietnam, the country of Vo’s birth, was seen through a lens of atavism and detachment.

Vo left the coastal town of Bà Rịa in the southeastern Vũng Tàu province with his family in 1979 when he was four years old. They were among an exodus of refugees leaving the country amid the chaos of protracted conflicts following French rule, and the

rebuilding of an independent nation after the war of 1954–75. In Vo’s case, a Danish freighter saved the family from their stricken improvised boat. Vo adopted Danish nationality, and he studied art in Copenhagen and subsequently at the Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main.

**Exorcism**

Vo’s choice is to be a weightless multinational citizen. His Danish citizenship is rarely separated from the full legend of his ‘escape’ from Vietnam. His chimerical, visa-free habitat lies between Mexico City and Berlin, occasionally wandering into New York. Being untethered from the chronicling of nationhood, Vo’s displacements propose nomadism as ‘a continuous flux and the disruption of flux’ where the intensity of experience usurps meaning. Vo’s viewpoint is always turned outward, to a territory other than that which he inhabits and populated by others. Writing about the show for *Art Agenda*, Harry Thorne describes Vo’s strategy as assembling ‘extant personal/public narratives so as to tap the deep reserves of meaning they accrue as they drift through the world’.

In the main gallery of the South London Gallery exhibition, Vo initiated five types of work, each a hands-off collaboration with associates scattered around the globe, both corporal and evanescent: German photographer Heinz Peter Knes, Italian designer Enzo Mari, Danish painter Peter Bonde, Vo’s father Phung Vo, and cousin Victor. Arguably, to understand Vo’s work in the gallery, some knowledge of provenances is needed.

Dominating the arrangement were Bonde’s paintings, skeins of transparent gel medium, streaked with luminous pigment, smeared or squeegeed like Vaseline on large rectangular mirrors. These were juxtaposed with framed sheets of outlined writing, executed by Phung Vo in a Teutonic font. The text quotes profanities from the script of the 1973 movie adaptation by William Friedkin of William Peter Blatty’s demonic possession novel *The Exorcist* (1971). Also framed on the walls were Knes’s shots of Victor, who Vo describes as a *muse*, in *contrapposto* poses, Victor’s striking red and black clothes an incongruous accent in the dusty environment of Vo’s studio. The model’s anatomy, particularly his buttocks, was occasionally accentuated with powder from the studio floor.

As the images are also tightly cropped, editing out the subject’s features, the poses hint at an objectifying erotic gaze. The gallery also featured some furnishings, fabricated following DIY patterns produced by Mari, fragments of archaic Roman sculpture, and an *objet trouvé*: a crate of Nestlé’s Carnation condensed milk.

---


5 Harry Thorne, ‘Danh Vo’s “untitled” and “Cathedral Block, Prayer Stage, Gun Stock”’, *Art Agenda*, 12 November 2019

Among the collected items, text provided the most directly comprehensible referent in the installation. *The Exorcist* tells of twelve-year-old Regan who becomes possessed by demons, one of whom, Pazuzu, emerges as a lead character. Regan is the daughter of a successful film actress. The impoverished and unbelieving priest, Father Damien Karras, arranges her exorcism, initially under the guise of a placebo. The story is adapted from a real incident, and Director Friedkin went to great lengths to reconstruct the locations and details of the source events.

It was easy to associate the gloopy luminous material slopped and smeared on Bonde’s reflective surfaces with the vomited bile and ectoplasmic fluid that feature in the movie, or the fashionable red and black clothing modelled by Victor with the priestly vestments and the red book containing the rite of exorcism in the movie’s climactic scene. The pack of Marlboro cigarettes flagrantly poking out from Victor’s pocket sutures the controversy over the brand’s use of subliminal advertising, and the unsettling use of a demonic image flashed for an eighth of a second in the film. The upholstered furnishings, with their makeshift means of construction, hint at the bedposts strapped with improvised padding in the movie. The fragments of sculpture connect to the figure of the demon Pazuzu, a personage of ancient culture composed of parts, often a human body with animal head and wings.

*The Exorcist’s* characters are unsettled, living in temporary accommodation, or acting religious roles out-of-synch with their current beliefs. Commitment to the empirical and rational is swiftly overawed by a reaction to the paranormal as the narrative builds with
viscid affect. Director Friedkin claimed that his auteur skills were enhanced: ‘Forces beyond me brought things to the film, like offerings’.  

The process involved in the production of Vo’s text transcripts represents a commitment to a verbatim record of a dislocated referent. The cultural source of the emotive words was, most probably, beyond the compass of the typical gallery visitor – just as the utterances they record are attitudes incoherent to the body that vocalises them, the words of a possessing demon. The demon highlights a predicament to the priest: ‘You don't blame us for being here, do you? After all, we have no place to go. No home.’  

The Exorcist is the story of a denizen whose abject outpourings negate the need for his interlocutors to understand their actual meaning, they respond to their effect.

Exodus

An epigraph to The Exorcist novel quotes Dr Tom Dooley:

There’s no other explanation for some of the things the Communists did. Like the priest who had eight nails driven into his skull… And there were seven little boys and their teacher. They were praying the Our Father when soldiers came upon them. One soldier

6 Spoken by William Friedkin in 'Leap of Faith: William Friedkin on The Exorcist', directed by Alexandre O Philippe, 2019
whipped out his bayonet and sliced off the teacher’s tongue. The other took chopsticks and drove them into the ears of the seven little boys. How do you treat cases like that?\(^8\)

The acts reported are lifted from Dooley’s book, *Deliver Us From Evil*, an allegedly apocryphal autobiographical account of time spent in Vietnam. The book became a bestselling organ of propaganda in the US around gory accounts of religious persecution under the nascent communist regime. Dooley was charged in *The Critic* magazine, by Nicholas von Hoffman, for fostering the ‘climate of public misunderstanding that made the war in Vietnam possible’.\(^9\)

The epigraph locates evil explicitly in a communist situation. The nuance was not lost on Jane Fonda, a proponent of engagement with North Vietnam. She dismissed the offer to play the character of Chris in the movie, asking, ‘Why would anyone want to make this piece of capitalist rip-off bullshit?’\(^10\)

In the story, Regan’s mother lavishes money on tests and medical attention for her daughter. Two lives are expended in the act of expunging the demon from Regan. One priest dies in the struggle, and Karras ultimately gives his life, too, having tricked the devil into migrating into his body. Dave Schneider suggests he ‘literally internalizes the evil of a system that denies sick people health care’\(^11\)

The *Exorcist* wants us to see Karras’ sacrifice as a spiritual victory over evil, in which a doubting priest regains his faith. … there’s nothing particularly spiritual about Karras’ internal struggle. His guilt has very real economic roots in the class inequalities of U.S. capitalism. Mrs. Karras, a first generation Greek immigrant living in dire poverty, cannot afford the care she needs in a for-profit health care system.\(^12\)

The real privations of life in the US are supplanted in a battle between good and fantastical evil. US civilisation is contrasted as zealous, astute, and disciplined to slovenly demonic savagery. The impetuous violence, described by Dooley, enacted with rudimentary improvised tools, and his appeal ‘How do you treat cases like that?’, similarly weighs callous acts against reason.

The epigraph roots the obscene invectives, carefully transcribed, in brutality. The writing in the exhibition is neither Vo’s own imminent act nor an act with a cogent phonetic origin. The Vietnam that is prologue is the deferred site of horrific aberration.

---

8 Ibid (e-book location 4)
13 Ibid
Vo initiates the mechanistic retracing of words; words are not chosen for their intrinsic meaning but for their strategic relationship to meaning. They were spoken by an actor playing an apparition through the mouth of another playing one possessed whose words are taken from a prior text that itself responds to unverifiable accounts, the true story of inarticulate exorcism. The book’s text follows a disputed story of a real place, where speech and hearing relating to the word of God are denied, by cutting off the tongue and harming the ears. The move, from the personal account to the body of the text connects with Derrida’s *evil prohibition* in the act of the transition of speech to the written word. The ‘immanence of language is essentially exposed to the intervention of forces that are apparently alien to its system’. In this respect, Frantz Fanon is more direct, stressing the power that is vested in whoever fixes meaning.

The title of the South London Gallery exhibition, ‘Untitled’, extends Vo’s preoccupation with his own biography, his family’s flight from adversity and his personal triumph of self-constitution in other tongues. In the exhibition booklet, an anecdote relates that in Vietnamese the semordnilap *vô danh*, seen by Vo and his mother on graves, means *nameless*. Vo’s mid life revelation serves to mystify the language while unmasking its underlying simplicity. The language’s impenetrableness is overcome by serendipity. The effect is the same in *The Exorcist*. The demon speaks backwards. Word order is inverted too. At first dumbfounded, by playing a tape in reverse Karras deciphers the words ‘I am no me. I am no one.’

Vo’s (dis)engagement with the wily cultural referent of *The Exorcist* script is a single point in the constellation of sources. Reviews of the show were coyly evasive, preferring to be awestruck by density. The response connects to the need for a colonial power to command superior intellect, justifying a natural right to hegemony. At the age of seven, Vo allegedly watched *The Exorcist* at his mother’s side, underscoring his latent sophistication. The old head on young shoulders of someone gaining the wisdom, or the sophisticated horror, of acquired civilisation. Regan’s head is independent too. Sometimes it rotates separately, a guileful obscenity above its perverted natural body – a body, charged with primitive strength, in restraint.

**Vo’s Vietnam**

An autobiographical tone was sustained as the exhibition continued in another building. Here, by collecting works executed or initiated by others, Vo continued to adopt an air of ‘deplorable confusion’ and detachment. Some items are pinned to his friendship with

---

14 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, op cit, p 43
15 ‘A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. Paul Valery knew this, for he called language “the god gone astray in the flesh”’. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann, trans, Pluto Press, London 1986, p 18
16 William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist*, op cit (e-book location 343)
17 Frantz Fanon quotes Gabriel d’Arbousier, ‘Une dangereuse mystification: la théorie de la négritude’, *La Nouvelle revue critique*, June 1949: ‘This anthology, which puts Antillians, Cuanans, Senegalese, and Malagasy on the same footing, creates a
Craig McNamara, the son of the US secretary of defence from 1961–1968 who was one of the architects of US aggression in Vietnam. An exhibition booklet states that Craig befriended Vo ‘when the artist started to acquire and exhibit objects from the estate of his father’. The show across town at Marian Goodman Gallery comprised an entire wood-yard gifted by Craig. The same timber was used to make the furnishings in the main gallery. On walls lined with walnut planks, Vo displayed a collection of photographs taken by Dr Joseph M Carrier, an anthropologist and researcher specialising in the analysis of homosexuality among men in Vietnam and Mexico. Described as ‘candid and voyeuristic’, the reception of the images, with ‘power dynamics implicit’, is predicated on a stranger’s gaze, in this case both Carrier’s and Vo’s. Erotic connotations are conditional on availability for procurement; otherwise, the youth are simply people in an everyday context. Vo conflates the objectifications of an anthropological, and a desiring, gaze.

Vo is acquisitive. The youths, along with the album of photographs that records their appearance, join a Wunderkammer of things borrowed, brought at auction, donated, or made to Vo’s order. Several items commemorate the endeavours of French missionaries —

---

deporable confusion. In this way it states the cultural problem of the overseas countries by detaching it from the historical and social reality of each of them, from the national characteristics and the varying conditions imposed on each of them by imperialist exploitation and oppression.’ Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, op cit, p 172
to southeast Asia. Two, naturalist Jean-André Soulié and St Jean-Théophane Vénard, one of the martyrs of Vietnam, are represented with poetic items out of synch with the gruesome details of their executions far from home. A found photograph exhibited as *Bye bye*, 2010, shows a group, including Vénard, about to depart. The image reverses Vo’s origin story, leaving a dangerous territory for security, departing good to confront evil.

Artefacts, such as a letter composed by Vénard on the eve of his execution, in the form of a dutiful facsimile – copied out, again, by Vo’s father – stake a claim to a particular history of Western engagement with Asia. The visitations of earnest and well-meaning youth, rendered as a sweet story told via a succession of tangential curios. The unhappy fates of Vénard and Soulié can be partly attributed to ongoing French hostilities in Vietnam and the fallout from the attempted British invasion of Tibet in 1903. The exhibition’s sprawling provision of contextual information circumvented engagement with geopolitical issues.

Quotations are from the exhibition booklet *Danh Vo: Untitled*, South London Gallery, Margot Heller, Rachel Cass and Studio Danh Vo, eds.
The fetishisation of collecting intellectually significant treasures follows the Orientalist habit detailed by Edward Said:

To restore a region from its present barbarism to its former classical greatness; to instruct (for its own benefit) the Orient in the ways of the modem West; to subordinate or underplay military power in order to aggrandize the project of glorious knowledge acquired in the process of political domination of the Orient; to formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its ‘natural’ role as an appendage to Europe; to dignify all the knowledge collected during colonial occupation with the title ‘contribution to modern learning’. 19

Vo’s collecting is materialistic. Vietnam exists between artefacts. Another section of the exhibition comprised contemporary artworks amassed by Vo and Julie Ault. Their association folds back in Vo’s personal narrative; they met at the Copenhagen Royal Academy. The diverse ensemble has, as Ault has noted, ‘great personal resonance’. 20 The works were all exchanged and given across a network of artist friends and connections with intellectual and emotional affinities. The status of these associations situates Vo in a particular milieu. Ault’s New York of the 1980s and 1990s becomes more imminent in London’s Camberwell than the temporally remote Vietnam; the capitalist art world bright and amiable, communism foreboding. In the interpretation of critics, such as Harry Thorne and Adrian Searle, Vietnam is ‘that which comes before’ 21 or an ‘amalgam of stories, references and symbols’. 22

Roots

An impressive quantity of lumber was amassed in Vo’s other simultaneous exhibition in Marian Goodman, a commercial gallery in central London. Downstairs was more timber from the McNamara walnut benefaction. The gallery was little more than a stock room for raw stuff to be processed in an upstairs workshop, kitted out with brand new tools. The concept of the installation was that the wood below could be crafted into bespoke modernist furnishings above. The situation was a microcosm of capitalist extraction and processing generating surplus value. The connection, even to a historical Vietnam, was deferred. Vietnam was not a nation of the living but trapped in an oblique past. The wood as essence had a significant relationship to Vo’s place of birth, significant but oppositional.

---

21 Harry Thorne, ‘Danh Vo’s “untitled” and “Cathedral Block, Prayer Stage, Gun Stock”’, Art Agenda, op cit
and separated by a generation. In a review for *Art Asia Pacific*, Ned Carter-Miles observed the hermetic elitism of the situation:

> All visitors were really privy to was a stage in a commercial transaction, the best possible outcome of which may be realized in private, and constitute little more than someone buying the right to sit on a little piece of history.\(^{23}\)

Vo says, ‘When you examine the present you must understand your past: the past that has identified your present’.\(^{24}\) This might suggest that the work can expose the construction of the subjects of diaspora. However, it appears the only available perspective for Vo is colonialist. His only access to knowledge is the habit of acquisition, the collecting of authentic materials that grant pseudo-scientific objectivity to subjective preconceptions. His strategy, commanding and deploying the refined skills of others, follows the pattern of expatriate commissioning, an act of establishing supremacy, and marshalling outcomes under their totalising order. Like these denizens, Vo fetishises foreign language, erotikises and objectifies people, pronouncing on the land of his past from his superior standpoint. Personal ethnicity grants his perspective authority. The exhibitions contrive, problematise and conceal, addressing Vietnam as a trope – Vo’s adopted fiction.

---

\(^{22}\) Ned Carter Miles, ‘Cathedral Block Prayer Stage Gun Stock: Danh Vo’, *Art Asia Pacific*, nd

\(^{23}\) Danh Vo, quoted in *Danh Vo:Untitled*, op cit
Regarding wood, far removed from where it was uprooted, it is poignant to remember ‘a coffin of good wood’ from an episode in Susan Sontag’s account of Hanoi:

The pilot had been buried, and in ‘a coffin of good wood,’ so that his family in America could come after the war and take his body home, I felt almost undone. What is one to make of this amazing act? How could these people, who have had spouses and parents and children murdered by this pilot and his comrades (the load of one F-105, four canisters of CBU’s, kills every unsheltered living creature within an area of one square kilometer), quietly take up their shovels and tastefully arrange his grave?25

Vo’s Vietnam is exotic, but as Adrian Searle said, writing in The Guardian, ‘Vo sucks you in’.26

Andrew Stooke is a non-affiliated artist, writer and researcher based in Shanghai and London. His work in video, performance and diverse media has featured regularly in international festivals and gallery presentations, most recently at Project Anywhere, New York; Fågelbo Festival, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; MOSTYN Gallery, Llandudno; and Impossible Bands, Shanghai Power Station of Art. His writing on society, contemporary art and media can be found on various platforms, including Art Asia Pacific, Frieze, Hyperallergic, Art Africa, Art Monthly, ArtRadar, RanDian and Third Text Online.

26 Adrian Searle, ‘Danh Vo review – the extraordinary artefacts of a Vietnam escapee’, op cit