



“TRÈS CHER, TRÈS HONORÉ ET BIEN-AIMÉ PÈRE”

Danh Vo’s work defies authorship or categorical belonging. He finds identity in the gaps between words in any given social contract. He has shown Joseph M. Carrier’s photographs and objects in exhibits that are labeled as his own, and asks his father Phung Vo to copy out, over and over again, the final letter of missionary J. Théophane Vénard to his father (before he was decapitated at the hands of the Vietnamese) in the work *2.2.1861*. Any time someone commissions one of these letter-artworks, Phung Vo will sit down to copy it in purple ink, in his characteristic caring calligraphic hand, and the letter is mailed to the recipient. Fictional and factual family figures stand side by side, creating a fairytale aura around Vo’s work. The son does not compete with his father figure. He is the very dear, very honoured and much-loved father. The father too is at the margins of power. The father too is the glue that binds.

Art is often only seen by those who take the time to notice the overlooked. What is beyond the most banally obvious or institutionally normalized. Vo’s work is for those who don’t take the world at face value, who are marked by difference. There is an art that is made from what is left over or behind; from what makes no sense initially, but is used for other purposes later. The same could be said for skills that have become obsolete. One prefers not to give in to the ultimatum of starting over, again and again, as life’s capitalist rhythms—flexible, efficient, and under constant scrutiny—demand of us day by day.

Artificial and prosthetic. The enhanced object and the missing part. Art has been explained as an extension of sexual selection, superseding the coarseness of natural selection—nothing to do with reproduction and mere survival. It is in the domain of what exceeds or falls short. Like purple prose. Or, undecorated flesh with a missing limb. Or, a part that juts

out awkwardly. Serving intensity rather than exchangeability. It is becoming, even when it looks like nothing more than the ceaseless over and over again of copying. Give it time and it morphs, mutates. The story advances in unforeseen ways. One must learn to *seem*, stealthily. Spend time cultivating sleights of hand. The subtle gesture that only the most attentive will not let pass unnoticed. The key is not to let the master know that you know. Not give the game away. Instead, hire someone to pick the lentils out of the cinders for you. Let them think that art comes from the suffering body, when in fact it emerges from a mishap, a misunderstanding, a getting away with. One day the struggling line of figures, as fragile as birds, is sublimated into gold.

Not belonging, but wanting to. Somewhere between the no longer and the not yet. Still, you stake out a space of idiosyncratic order within the chaos, a process of selection. In order to exceed the self, and what already exists. It is in the domain of privilege, but not in the usual sense of money. Otherwise one could use it. Instead, one is given the floor.

Foot
The foot is the basest part of the body. It is in contact with the filthy earth. A reeking loaf of fleshy cheese. Chop a little off, and beauty consumes it. Its vapours enter the nostrils, as one masticates the tough lumpy chunks. The eyes, their attention directed aloft, are different in taste and texture altogether. Lugubrious rubbery orbs for birds.

A wooden chair, of plain office stock, green, but with a bare foot. Vo asked Kim Nguyen to chop three inches off one of its legs, while he drove a nail into the side of the chair back. Then the staff is asked to paint the entire chair green, minus the three inches of severed chair leg. Finally the severed chair leg is glued back on. What kind of glue? Oh I don’t know, replies Vo.

Marina Roy on Danh Vo

Peter Gazendam suggests wood glue. So they use crazy glue. At times the innocent visitor is caught unawares, falling off the chair when attempting to sit on it. The foot of the chair always risks falling off, due to the use of the wrong glue. The bare foot falls, the buttocks slide off and hit the floor. Schadenfreude.

Why are the birds so helpful? They stick together, a tight fluttering workshop of activity. Insinuated is the idea that they are able to peel back the shabby garb and bring about the marriage of suffering, goodness, and beauty. Uncovering the princess within. Just one beauty sleep away from reaching her fullest potential. Cinderella’s daddy didn’t really give a fuck, so she set her sights higher.

Wing
Initially I got the context of the photograph wrong. I associated the roughly trimmed photograph of the artist’s nephew with the photographer-anthropologist Joseph M. Carrier, who, after his death, bequeathed many of his belongings and all of his photographs to Vo. Carrier’s photographs depict the intimacy of boys. Vo’s photo could be read in a similar register: his nephew has his shirt off, and is showing off his ‘wing’—his scapula juts out, like a Blackletter “D.” This looks somewhat erotic, like a bird in the midst of display ritual. Only weeks later, while looking up the word ‘scapula’ a medical accident, do I discover that there is a quide condition of the shoulder blade called “winged scapula.” It is a rare condition in which the shoulder blade sticks out from the back in an abnormal way, and this can lead to difficulty in completing daily tasks, such as changing one’s clothes.

The usual artistic task of trimming off the traces of the production process are surely lacking in Vo’s photograph. Details of incompleteness are left behind to snag at vision. Likewise, holes and screws are left

Danh Vo, *Wall and Gustav’s Wing*, 2012. Photo: Blaine Campbell

behind in the makeshift plywood wall adjacent to the photograph. Unfinished, and full of imperfections, this is not normal procedure for an art gallery. This abnormality is reflected back onto the back of the boy in the photograph.

Head to toe
Outside the gallery, one discovers on the window a manuscript-style artwork made of taped up sheets of white paper covered with Blackletter gold lettering. The text is in German, and it glows sublimely even on the most gloomy of days. It is a passage from the Brothers Grimm’s fairytale *Aschenputtel* (*Cinderella*). The part where Cinderella’s sisters cut either their big toe or part of their heel off in order to fit into the gold slipper. Their ambition and lust knows no bounds. They mutilate themselves in order to be mistaken as the woman of the prince’s dreams. Mimicry is nature’s adaptation to the environment, for sexual advantage and survival... But to deliberately cut off one’s own body part is beyond the pale, even surpassing the self-sacrifice of the praying mantis which allows its head to be lopped off, while still managing to go through the motions of copulation.

For several months in 1860-1861, Christian missionary J. Théophane Vénard lived in a cage, imprisoned for having exercised his ministry at a time when it was illegal to do so in Vietnam. A bishop wrote, “Though in chains, he is as gay as a little bird.” He lived his last days as humbly as a lone violet. He was happy, as his head would soon be plucked, disseminating divine faith to all around him, before acceding to the realm of his sovereign master.

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