VENICE 2015

History Depletes Itself

CLAIRE BISHOP ON DANH VO AT THE DANISH PAVILION AND PUNTA DELLA DOGANA

Danh Vo, *Lick Me Lick Me*, 2015, white crystalline Greek-marble torso of Apollo, wood, nails. Installation view, Danish pavilion, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey.

THE FIFTY-SIXTH VENICE BIENNALE is dominated by a Danh Vo double bill: "mothertongue," a solo show in the Danish pavilion, and "Slip of the Tongue," a large exhibition curated by the artist at the François Pinault Foundation's Punta della Dogana, where Vo has mixed his own work with that of some three dozen others. Vo's solo outing makes for one of this year's most striking national pavilions, an exquisitely spare arrangement of Danish modern furniture, Oaxacan tiles, sinuous dead branches, and sawn-off or crated-up statuary from the first through seventeenth centuries. The tasteful atmosphere is subtly undercut by the venue's plate-glass windows, which are covered in barely legible words (e.g., YOU'RE GONNA DIE) that turn out to be quotes from *The Exorcist*, as are many of the works' expletive-laden titles (e.g., *Do you know what she did, your cunting daughter?*). Some of these elements have obvious autobiographical significance—the tiles and branches were shipped from the Vietnamese-born artist's latest country of residence, Mexico—but understanding what, if anything, connects these meticulously arranged artifacts to one another is something of a challenge. An accompanying pamphlet offers extended captions, an essay by art historian Patricia Falguières, and an artist's statement in which allusions to colonialism and Catholicism are interspersed among stories about Vo's father, Phung. However, these texts are so aleatory and fragmented that they ultimately reinforce the installation's poetic opacity.

In the sprawling Punta della Dogana, "Slip of the Tongue" is just as sparse and striking. Here, as in the pavilion, modestly scaled objects are judiciously distributed in a great deal of empty space, and even manage to counteract the relentless machismo of Tadao Ando's architecture. Once again the configuration of works is transhistorical: Illuminated manuscript fragments by late-medieval masters, borrowed from the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, are displayed alongside modern and contemporary pieces from the Pinault holdings—including Bertrand Lavier, Lee Lozano, Pablo Picasso, Auguste Rodin, Nancy Spero, and Alina

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Szapocznikow—and more than twenty pieces by Vo himself. Identifying the works is tricky until you spot the floor plan in each room; this in turn enables you to navigate a thick brochure with yet more lengthy captions. These were written by another French art historian, Elisabeth Lebovici, who has also contributed a short essay in which she explains that the Roman word *curator* denoted responsibility for repairing civic utilities, and that Vo's show, too, is concerned with the vicissitudes of the object—its transitions and restorations, its vulnerability to destruction. To this viewer, however, it appeared that Vo is equally preoccupied by the distorted and fragmented (male) body, nature (coral, branches, caddisworms), and the iconography of Catholicism. More persuasive is Lebovici's contention that the show is about "mapping friendship," i.e., tracing networks of affinity among previous generations of gay artists, among them Peter Hujar, Paul Thek, and Martin Wong.

Both shows are typical of Vo's practice, offering a high-end form of conceptualism in which carefully arrayed objects are supplemented by a *studium* of explanatory text. The latter is often a blend of macro and micro, personal reflection and historical allusion. The more abstract musings gain substance and emotional traction from the artist's frequent references to his own transcultural upbringing and direct connection to Vietnam's troubled history. And Vo's formal strategies evoke a slew of time-honored art-historical tropes (*spolia*, the ready-made, aura, the index) while gesturing toward a number of current theoretical touchstones (outsourced labor, performative objects, queerness, the archive, new materialism). Taken together, these qualities have rendered Vo a favorite of critics (some writing for this magazine) and blue-chip galleries, a biennial staple, and the recipient of the 2012 Hugo Boss Prize.

So why does Vo's success make me feel uneasy? In part, it has to do with the artist's use of history and the way in which his poetics of the past is prone to devolving into information as ornament. The nuggets of evidence Vo deploys in his own work aren't exactly gratuitous, but they do privilege the biographical in a way that is directly analogous to the foregrounding of individual sensibility in the contemporary artist-curated exhibition. Vo's art, the type of conceptualism it typifies, and the contemporary paradigm of the artist-curated show are all based on an introversion that labors to keep meaning withheld from the viewer, and as such unchallengeable—as the saying goes, you can't argue with taste. It is therefore nearly impossible to draw a clear distinction between an artist-curated exhibition and an exhibition-as-artwork—a slippage that the shows' titles, "Slip of the Tongue" and "mothertongue," seem to acknowledge. The result is an ambience that you just kind of *feel* rather than understand. The artist's recourse to his own experience gives the work a frisson of historical significance, but this is ultimately grounded in biography and sensibility, two authority-granting aspects of the author-function that have long been criticized as regressive.

View of "mothertongue," 2015, Danish pavilion, Venice. Table: Danh Vo, *Judas*, 2015. On table: Danh Vo, *Untitled*, 2015; copies of Heinz Peter Knes's artist's book *On Distance*, 2015; one of 150 bottles of Danh Vo Special Edition Punta della Dogana 2015 tequila. Photo: Nick Ash.

Left: **Danh Vo, *Do you know what she did, your cunting daughter?*, 2015,** chestnut wood and polychrome Christ figure, Burmese teak, glass engraving by Phung Vo. Installation view, Danish pavilion, Venice. Photo: Nick Ash.

Right: **View of "Slip of the Tongue," 2015,** Punta della Dogana, Venice. From left: David Hammons, *Untitled*, 2007; Peter Hujar, *Draped Male Nude (I)*, 1979. Photo: Kate Lacey.

VIEWERS SEEM especially to love "Slip of the Tongue," relishing its mood and lack of overt message as a welcome contrast to Okwui Enwezor's "All the World's Futures," which (while substantive) has struck some as too gloomy and programmatic. Yet the obliqueness and hermeticism of Vo's exhibition have been hallmarks of artist-curated exhibitions since the turn of the millennium. I can think of only a handful of such shows from the past fifteen years that have had an intelligible organizing principle and that have produced something more than a manifesto of the artist's own aesthetic preferences.[1] More generally, contemporary artist-curated shows are characterized by a gnomic, highly subjective allusiveness.

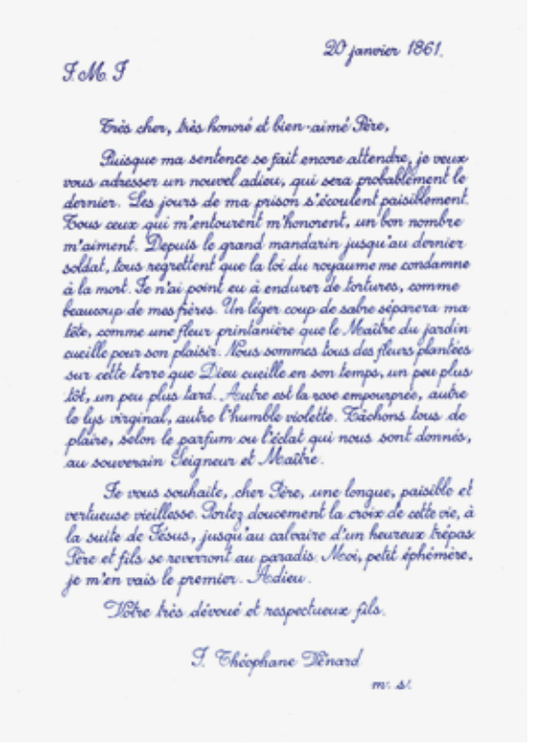
By inviting Vo to select works from the collection, the Pinault Foundation follows a long line of illustrious institutions commissioning artists to rearrange and rehang their holdings: The National Gallery in London began its series "The Artist's Eye" in 1977, followed by "Artist's Choice" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1989–) and "*Parti Pris*" (Taking Sides) at the Louvre (1990–98).[2] By the early 1990s, artists had begun to use these invitations as a form of institutional critique, reflecting their engagement with identity politics, postcolonial theory, and critical anthropology. The signal example here is, of course, Fred Wilson's "Mining the Museum" (Maryland Historical Society, 1992–93), but there are many more besides. Today, artist-curated collection hangs (e.g., Trisha Donnelly's indeterminate, atmospheric 2012–13 staging of MoMA's holdings) are really about the artist's eye. They present the artist-curator not as a critic but as a connoisseur, flexing her sensibilities, making decisions in accordance with the dictates of impulse, affinity, predilection—in other words, taste. Of course, predilection plays a role in all aesthetic decisions, but in these shows, unlike in Wilson's museological mise-en-scènes (and those of his '70s predecessors), it dominates. It doesn't inflect the curatorial methodology—it simply *is* the methodology.

It therefore makes perfect sense that Lebovici's texts in the Venice booklet offer a stream of consciousness about each work's origin, exhibition history, and provenance, as meandering as the twists and turns of taste. Presumably, the intention was to trace the passage of an object's life through a literary performance of free association. At a stretch we could posit such a gesture as institutional critique, but in fact, Lebovici here steers clear of analyzing the economic and institutional histories of the objects on view; instead, we find an oneiric mélange of data points that, like the texts in "mothertongue," just keep things opaque. The caption accompanying Robert Manson's photographs of daily life and labor in rural France, for example, discusses a *different* series by the artist (his photos of the scouting movement, not included in the exhibition) and a film possibly inspired by them. The photographs that *are* included in show are then contextualized by a digression into Georges Henri Rivière's work in French museums and the changing status of ethnography in France. The opening declaration that "this series of photographs was acquired at auction on Saturday 18 June 2011" seems as arbitrary as all the other details. What does any of this have to do with why Manson's photographs are in the show?

The only coherent thematic strand in "Slip of the Tongue" is the idea of "mapping friendship," here understood as a transhistorical get-together of forebears and interlocutors: not just Hujar, Thek, and Wong but also Elmgreen & Dragset, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Roni Horn, Tetsumi Kudo, and Sturtevant. These figures amount to a more coherent clique than the other artists included in the show (Bellini, Brancusi, Broodthaers . . .); together, they imply that "Slip of the Tongue," and aspects of Vo's work in general, might be read in the context of a queer artistic genealogy. Since its inception in the early '90s, queer theory has recuperated and mobilized a whole host of terms repressed by the heteronormativity of mainstream academia: Subjective instability, camp sensibility, and personal experience have been presented as antidotes to static definitions, binary identifications, and a host of other ethical and aesthetic failings. In this account,

Left: **View of "Slip of the Tongue," 2015**, Punta della Dogana, Venice. Background, from left: Henrik Olesen, *Untitled #05*, 2011; Lee Lozano, *Crook*, 1968. Foreground: Nairy Baghramian, *French Curve*, 2014. Photo: Kate Lacey.

Right: **Danh Vo, *02.02.1861* (detail), 2009–**, ink on paper, multiple sheets, each 11⅜ × 8¼".



20 janvier 1861.

J M J

Très cher, très honoré et bien-aimé Père,

Puisque ma sentence se fait encore attendre, je veux vous adresser un nouvel adieu, qui sera probablement le dernier. Les jours de ma prison s'écoulent paisiblement. Tous ceux qui m'entourent m'honorent, un bon nombre m'aiment. Depuis le grand mandarin jusqu'au dernier soldat, tous regrettent que la loi du royaume me condamne à la mort. Je n'ai point eu à endurer de tortures, comme beaucoup de mes frères. Un léger coup de sabre séparera ma tête, comme une fleur printanière que le Maître du jardin cueille pour son plaisir. Nous sommes tous des fleurs plantées sur cette terre que Dieu cueille en son temps, un peu plus tôt, un peu plus tard. Autre est la rose empourprée, autre le lys virginal, autre l'humble violette. Efforçons tous de plaire, selon le parfum ou l'éclat qui nous sont donnés, au souverain Seigneur et Maître.

Je vous souhaite, cher Père, une longue, paisible et vertueuse vieillesse. Portez doucement la croix de cette vie, à la suite de Jésus, jusqu'au calvaire d'un heureux trépas. Père et fils se reverront au paradis. Moi, petit éphémère, je m'en vais le premier. Adieu.

Votre très dévoué et respectueux fils.

J. Théophane Vénard

m. s.

The ready-made object is injected with history-as-readymade: Both are presented wholesale, without any further complication.

the decorative, say, can be political as well as pleasurable, as long as it works against dominant norms. It seems ironic, then, that Vo's family tree—a group of artists who may have been marginalized in the past, but who together now constitute an impeccable artistic pedigree—has a legitimating effect that serves to undercut any subversive or transgressive force that his eclectic connoisseurship might have. In any case, as the very invitation to show in Pinault's institution indicates, this kind of recherché tableau is now completely mainstream.

Moreover, if this were a gathering of friends, they would seem to be half-heartedly waving at one another across a void rather than engaging in actual conversation. For example, one of the upstairs galleries finds Nairy Baghramian's large, low, L-shaped sculpture *French Curve*, 2014, next to a 1981 Hujar photograph of a Great Dane, a couple of bombastic abstract paintings by Lee Lozano from the late '60s, and three 2011 works from Henrik Olesen's minimalist series of screws, nails, and canvases. Two gay male artists (Hujar and Olesen) and two formalist females (Lozano and Baghramian) with completely disparate visual languages are juxtaposed; the whole ensemble only makes sense as a map of Vo's preferred identifications. Yet this does a disservice to the works: The artists are presented as representative of certain positions, rather than allowing their specific pieces to flourish in dialogue with one another. This grouping signifies a conversation, but it is all about *who* is talking, not *what* they are saying.

INCLUDED IN BOTH the Danish pavilion and "Slip of the Tongue" is a handwritten copy of the last letter written by Saint Jean-Théophane Vénard—a French missionary who was beheaded for evangelizing in Vietnam—to his father. The edition, *02.02.1861*, 2009–, is made by Phung Vo and written in a precise calligraphic font whose language he doesn't understand; it will continue to be produced for as long as Phung is able to continue making copies. The letter is central to Vo's oeuvre and indicates how indebted the artist feels to his father. But while all artists operate with and from their own experience, the extent to which personal history forms the epicenter of Vo's art is unusual, and is reflected in critics' continual reliance on the story of Phung: his conversion to Catholicism, his family's escape from Vietnam in 1979 on a boat that he built, its interception by a Danish tanker, which brought them to Scandinavia. This is admittedly an amazing story, but it has by now acquired almost Beuysian levels of myth. It's also the exegetical code that binds together the diverse elements of Vo's practice: his interests in Catholicism, Western missionaries to Vietnam, ephemera relating to the Vietnam War, and, more generally, homosocial, homosexual, and father-son relationships.

Vo leans on these biographical connections not only to unify objects but to imbue them with significance. One of the earliest of his works in "Slip of the Tongue," *If you were to climb the Himalayas tomorrow*, 2007, for example, is a vitrine containing three objects that the artist acquired from his father—a Rolex, a lighter, and an American military ring. By themselves, these objects and their arrangement are utterly unremarkable. What matters is the elaborate backstory, which is conveyed via a caption in the brochure: when and how these personal effects were acquired by Phung (using gold left over from organizing the family's escape from Vietnam and his first earnings in Denmark); the fact that Vo paid his father for their replacements; the knowledge that these replacements will go to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis on Phung's death; and so on.[3] *Oma Totem*, 2009, also included in "Slip of the Tongue," comprises a television atop a refrigerator atop a washing machine, plus some other artifacts (including a crucifix): These electronic goods were given to Vo's grandmother on arrival in Germany in the '70s as part of that country's immigrant-relief program. In both of these works, familial keepsakes are elevated to the status of art (the consummate cultural totem), but it is Vo's captions that perform the magic, establishing these items as relics laden with import. Without this information, the sculptures are just arbitrary agglomerations of consumables.

Vo's installation in the Danish pavilion trades on a similar conjunction of the personal and historical, though here Catholicism (his father's religion, and the one in which Vo was brought up) comes to the fore. *Ο Θεός μαύρο*, 2015, the most photographed work in "mothertongue," is both a sculpture (a fragment of a

Left: **View of "Slip of the Tongue," 2015**, Punta della Dogana, Venice. From ceiling: Danh Vo, *08:03, 28.05*, 2009. On floor: Jean-Luc Moulène, *Tronche/Moon Face (Paris, May 2014)*.

Right: **Danh Vo, *Oma Totem*, 2009**, 26" Philips television, Gorenje washing machine, Bomann refrigerator, wooden crucifix, casino card. Installation view, Punta della Dogana, Venice, 2015. Photo: Heinz Peter Knes.

Greek sarcophagus attached to a fourteenth-century polychrome wood Virgin of the Annunciation) and an environment (the surrounding walls are covered in silk dyed red with cochineal). The title, taken from lines spoken by *The Exorcist*'s erudite demon, translates as *black god*. Vo's caption tells us that cochineal is derived from an insect in Mexico and Peru, that it was important for both indigenous cultures and colonizers, and that the red silk is dyed precisely to the color of cardinals' robes (RAL 3020, as per the Vatican's tailor in Rome). Later in the booklet, he tells us that his father secretly converted from Confucianism to Catholicism as a protest against the assassination of South Vietnamese leader Ngô Đình Diêm in 1963. These notes, while fascinating, once again rely on Vo's own biographical itinerary—from Vietnam to Denmark to Mexico and Italy—as the only connector between all the far-flung dots.

It's worth recalling how many artists have produced excellent works exploring collective trauma through personal history: Think of Eastern European artists dealing with the fall of Communism (Anri Sala's *Intervista*, 1998; Marta Popivoda's *Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body*, 2013) or Lebanese artists exploring the civil war (Lamia Joreige's *Objects of War*, 2000; Rabih Mroué's *I, the Undersigned*, 2008). In each of these instances, artists deal with issues that were suppressed or couldn't be confronted by official institutions in their respective countries. All of them address relatively recent histories, and toward collective ends; the goal is to make some sense of a shared historical rupture. For Vo, by contrast, the dynamic almost seems to work the other way—the political gets buried in the personal.

One is even tempted to ask whether *history* is the best term for what is being summoned here. Is it really history (personal or otherwise), or just "the past" in a generic sense? *08:03, 28.05*, 2009, for example, included in "Slip of the Tongue," is one of three chandeliers from the ballroom of the former Hôtel Majestic in Paris that were acquired by the artist from Sotheby's. This ballroom is where the Paris Peace Accords, intended to end direct US military intervention in Vietnam, were signed in 1973.[4] The chandelier is presented as a bystander to political history, but without Vo's caption, *08:03, 28.05* is just another nineteenth-century chandelier. The ready-made object is injected with history-as-readymade: Both are presented wholesale, without any further complication.

Vo's mobilization of history is arguably typical of a generation of artists working today. One of the biggest trends in contemporary art since the '90s has been what Mark Godfrey calls "the artist as historian"—artists whose research-based practices recuperate overlooked histories and marginal figures. This approach arose in part as a response to critiques of postmodern presentism, and in part as a way to explore alternative (often utopian) models of knowledge and existence. Such artistic research has been facilitated by the rise of digital technology, while, at the same time, the aura of the archive serves as a compelling counterpoint to our daily interface with the screen. But the work of artist-historians is often marked by a melancholic, nostalgic relationship to previous eras, especially the '60s and '70s, when many of these artists were born. Carol Bove, Mario García Torres, and Jonathan Monk, among many others, obsessively return to the art and culture of those decades, working with yellowing publications, old photographs, outmoded objects, or preexisting works of art.[5] Vo's fascination with the material culture associated with the Vietnam War sits squarely within this artistic trend. So, too, does his tendency to present this history as a cut-and-paste accumulation of details: as invocation, one might say, rather than interpretation.

One senses that the extended captions in "mothertongue" and "Slip of the Tongue" are needed because, without them, the sculptures would risk appearing too slight and too beautiful (all those forlorn medieval fragments, all that gold leaf!). Rather than being an object of investigation, the institution—obsessively invoked in all those provenances and auction references—is recruited in its tra-

Today we are facing a widespread impulse to take refuge in the past, rather than to mobilize history as a weapon for present-day battles.

Danh Vo, *O Θεός μαυρο* (**Black God**), **2015**, marble sarcophagus fragment, dyed silk. Installation view, Danish pavilion, Venice. From "mothertongue." Photo: Kate Lacey.

ditional capacity as the guarantor of aura and authenticity. As Arnaud Gerspacher has observed, the result is a frictionless traffic between the auction house and the commercial gallery: History from below has been replaced by the trinkets of those at the top.[6] Provenance trumps history, which is reduced to the eye-catching ephemera of famous (male) names—Bobby Kennedy, Robert McNamara—acting as ciphers for the mute, haunted glamour of the past.[7]

I am reluctant to name this contemporary (pseudo)historicity "conservatism," but its causes are readily visible and overdetermined: an ideological effect of the "end of history" (in which the present ceases to be an object of inquiry, because we've supposedly arrived at history's neoliberal culmination), the digitization of information, the rise of doctorates in studio art and the status of research within MFA programs generally, the growth of memory studies in the academy, and a rampant heritage industry. At a certain moment in the not-too-distant past, glancing in the rearview mirror did indeed provide a much-needed counterbalance to presentism. Today, however, we are facing a widespread impulse to take refuge in the past, rather than to mobilize history as a powerful cultural weapon from which we might draw inspiration for present-day battles. It's an academic cliché to invoke Walter Benjamin, who recommended taking "a tiger's leap into the past," a turn to explosive historical moments informed by present-day urgencies and concerns.[8] But his phrase hasn't lost its relevance—to the contrary, such a leap is increasingly needed. Yet contemporary artists are more likely to keep their feet (and eyes) on the ground, digging into the soil to excavate curios—as per Dieter Roelstraete's archaeological metaphor.[9]

To be fair, Vo's approach to research results in seductive sculptures—and in this respect he is unlike many of his peers, who are content to present vitrines full of texts, and slide shows of appropriated images. But both strategies of research-based art evince a reluctance to synthesize and organize the information in which they are trading; such installations demonstrate that research has taken place but leave it up to the viewer to do the work of drawing the strands together. Again, this operation was once valuable as a counterpoint to dogmatic, elitist histories, but today this open-endedness reads more like a symptom of information overload. Without the work of distillation and synthesis, the past can't be turned into meaning for today. Nicolas Bourriaud's term *semionaut* might be the best designation for this tendency: Surfing from signifier to signifier, the artist invents meandering trajectories between cultural signs.[10] Raw data is gathered and presented, but to aesthetic and ornamental ends.

In Vo's case, the intensely subjective presentation of biographical or historical detail has a hermetic quality that is at odds with the very idea of intersubjective communication and, by extension, the task of history. Were this tension to be acknowledged, it might be one thing, but it's much more likely to be suppressed. Yet for Vo's many fans, the idea of research and the lure of history still lend a certain assurance of critical substance to his art. This is not to criticize his supporters, simply to point up the curious fact that Vo's totemic, poignant, yet finally disconnected allusions are more akin to diamonds on a necklace—or, better, crystals dangling on a chandelier.

It is worth recalling that the Benjaminian model of history is fundamentally curatorial, revolving around the novel juxtaposition of preexisting objects that jolt the viewer into new awarenesses. The artist-curated exhibitions of the late twentieth century were fundamental to the realization and elaboration of this montage-based curatorial model: not just "Mining the Museum" or Hans Haacke's shows of the late '90s but the internalization of institutional critique among a generation of '90s curators who now run museums in a dynamic and politicized fashion.[11] Their institutions frequently demonstrate that curatorial engagements with history and display are most creative, and most moving, when driven by an engagement with the present, and when they offer—however provisionally—a stab at interpretation. It is all the more painfully ironic, then, that at some point around the millennium, the artist-curated show morphed into a creature that forsakes interpretation (historical or otherwise) for the short-term seductions of captioned sensibility—and who needs artists for this job, when such pleasures exist all over Instagram? □

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For notes, see page 408.

NOTES

1. These include Jeremy Deller's "All That Is Solid Melts into Air," which looked at the impact of the Industrial Revolution on British popular culture, and Mark Leckey's "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things" (also the title of his September 2010 project for this magazine), an exploration of techno-animism and the life of objects, both 2013.

2. The information in this paragraph is indebted to the research of Natalie Musteata, whose dissertation, "From Radicality to Romanticism: The Institutionalization of the Artist-as-Curator, 1970–2010," is in progress at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

3. The arrangement is complicated and contractual: The Walker has acquired Vo's *Tombstone for Phung Vo*, 2010, but on Phung's death the work will be returned to Copenhagen for use as his gravestone. In return, Vo will give the institution the vitrine of artifacts comprising *If you were to climb the Himalayas tomorrow*.

4. Lebovici mistakenly notes that the accords were signed in 1975, the year Vo was born.

5. See also: Mariana Castillo Deball, Iman Issa, Joachim Koester, Simon Starling . . .

6. Arnaud Gerspacher, "Danh Vo's 'Mother Tongue,'" art-agenda, April 22, 2013, http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/danh-vo's-"mother-tongue".

7. I don't have space here to show how these ciphers fuse with a Catholic approach to symbolism, resulting in a particularly liturgical iteration of the found object. Given Vo's interest in Catholicism, this cultivation of hidden meanings is entirely knowing. But it also sends into reverse everything that was radical about the readymade and the found object, replacing critical and psychological subversiveness with the glow of metaphysics.

8. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261.

9. Dieter Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

10. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

11. For a discussion of three examples, see my *Radical Museology, or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (Cologne: Walther König, 2013).