

PLÁSTICA: DAHN VO By Simon Castets



ARTIST AND PROP MASTER DANH VO EXPLORES THE GRAND THEMES OF HISTORY AND RELIGION

A highlight of this year's Art Statements at Art Basel, the work of Danish-Vietnamese artist Danh Vo is currently on view at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, and at the European contemporary art fair Manifesta 7. Born in 1975, Vo, who currently resides in Berlin, draws from his personal history to create installations that oscillate between storytelling and pure testimony. He sat down with V before embarking on a trip to Asia, and told us about German strawberry fields, lusty silkworms, and the convenience of carry-on luggage. **Simon Castets**

SIMON CASTETS While your installation for the Stedelijk makes use of an archival aesthetic, a sense of fiction also pervades the works. What part do facts play in your autobiographical narrative?

DANH VO Narratives based on conventional logic bore me to death. I tend not to build clear narratives since I'm more focused on displaying (arti-)facts that disturb and interrupt linear storytelling. That's the main reason for me not to be the producer or, you could even say "author," of the stuff that I show. I prefer to choreograph and arrange pre-existing facts and objects that have an established history—their own lives and intentions—and use them to portray either biographical or political issues. I'm interested in displaying, not in creating any kind of fantasy or illusion.

SC Still, your selection of facts and objects develops into a story, repeated in different forms over your latest exhibitions.

DV Okay, I admit there is a narrative, but it's a narrative in the way of Shohei Imamura. It's about a protagonist you can't rely on.

SC To which of his films would that most relate to?

DV The Eel is a classic. A Man Vanishes maybe, but the one that really inspired me is Unholy Desire/Intentions of Murder, from 1964. It's about a woman in an abused marriage. One day she is home alone and a burglar breaks in with the intention of stealing money, but he ends up raping her. During the rape scene, she thinks back to the very moment that she discovered her sexuality. It's a flashback scene in which a silkworm crawls up her skirt; the situation gets interrupted by supposedly her mother or another woman. There is a perverted and highly sophisticated jump in the logic in between these scenes, something very Bataille or Genet, a message beyond logic, and it is amazing how this confused narration can trigger multiple emotions and new stories.

SC Your installations reflect similarly striking contrasts, like the old sword next to the Nixon dress in Basel.

DV I think that the overload of images today is not necessarily informative but often used as an opium for the masses—image dope, a soma to pamper, to comfort, to evoke instant emotions, and to silence. If we look at mainstream cinema today, it is used for people to blow their minds in a way. You select a film depending on your mood, not because you want to get enlightened or disturbed. If I were a director I would like to make movies that would make people freak out, get divorced, or quit their job. Film has such potential. But I'm not a filmmaker and maybe my installations are a modest compensation for that.

SC Maybe they are props for a potential film. The recent ones seem to be all connected to a single chronicle.

DV Yeah, I like the terms chronicle and props. I must admit that my work is strongly depending on certain existing narratives, even though I might disagree with them.



SC Can you tell me more about the title of the Stedelijk exhibition, "Package Tour"?

DV The "Package Tour" is something that I always had an awkward relation to. As a kid in Denmark all my classmates went with their parents on these all-inclusive tours over the holidays. But coming from a refugee family and belonging to the lower middle classes, my summer vacations would consist of visiting some family members in Hamburg and helping them pick strawberries in order to earn some fast money. They lived like characters in a Dardenne movie, surviving by peeling shrimp at home or working in strawberry fields. But actually, I remember these summers as being pleasant experiences because we could eat all the strawberries we wanted and we were in the countryside. The only problem was that I could not tell the same stories as my classmates when I returned home. So I just invented them. I heard stories about Mallorca and Ibiza but I had no real clue what my classmates' holidays would be like. Of course later I realized that this kind of holiday isn't exactly as magical and prestigious as I imagined them in my fantasies.

SC Your recent installations explored a particular area of history. What about your upcoming projects?

DV I go back and forth. My next project is about missionaries and Christianity. I'm very attracted to them. I feel a strange sympathy for their utopian beliefs; there is something very common in our approach. It's just that we have very different ideologies. I will show projects focusing on these topics at the Yokohama Triennale and the Busan Biennale. In Yokohama I am showing the saddle of the last missionary who traveled by horse in the central highlands of Vietnam, and in Busan I'm displaying this sculpture of Joseph from the 17th century, a very beautiful one made of oak, that we sliced up in six equal pieces, very precisely, so that the chopped up pieces fit into my carry-on luggage. Upon arrival at the exhibition venue, I will simply unzip my little trolley and unveil the sculpture.

SC What prompted your decision to use a sculpture found in an antique store in Amsterdam?

DV When I discovered the sculpture I immediately fell in love with it. I wanted to transform it one way or the other, and then Mia, who works for me, came up with the great idea of chopping it up and putting it in carry-on luggage. I think of the slicing up as a response to world history, to the dominance of western cultures. We have always brought these items around the world, and the exportation of religious relics is similar to the transport of art for today's international biennials and art fairs. I think it makes a lot of sense to put a piece as ancient as Joseph—a sculptural work made for the pilgrim roads—in a Samsonite carry-on and display it on another continent.

Above: "Package Tour," installation view
Artwork Danh Vo
Courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam