

NEW YORK

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

DANH VÕ

TAKE MY BREATH AWAY

Even today, historians still do not know the exact number of casualties from the Cambodian Campaign, which US President Richard Nixon covertly ordered in 1969 as an extension of the American war in Vietnam. Discussions of this operation, as disclosed in one of 14 letters procured by artist Danh Võ and shown at his midcareer survey at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, had prevented national security advisor Henry Kissinger from attending a ballet performance one evening. In his letters to the *New York Post* theater critic who helped him secure tickets to such events, Kissinger lamented his duties, signing off with “Keep tempting me; one day perhaps I will succumb”—a comment as glib as the code names for the six areas in Cambodia that the US military carpet-bombed over four years: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, Snack, Dessert and Supper.

Kissinger’s sentences, which juxtapose the decimation of Southeast Asia with a civilized evening at the theater, mirror Võ’s own formative experiences. Born in 1975, he and his family fled Vietnam after the war in a makeshift boat, and the artist was raised in relatively conflict-free Denmark. Catholic, gay, Asian and European, Võ and his practice represent the oxymoronic narratives that exist in our world.

For the first time in the United States, all of the artist’s key themes from the last 15 years—of labor, identity, immigration, religion and politics—were comprehensively laid out in one space, evincing his skill in balancing extreme gravity with beauty. We saw a variety of appropriations, some drastically doctored, others left untouched, like the set of hotel, car and apartment keys that signify the dissolution of Võ’s relationship with artist Michael Elmgreen. The show opened with a powerful example of this, *Christmas (Rome) 2012* (2013), comprised of sun-exposed velvet carpets once used as backdrops for votive offerings in the Vatican City’s complex of churches and cathedrals. The fabrics were arranged like an institutional display of rare Asian rugs, and overlapped as if to accentuate the complex history of Catholicism—from missionary forts in Asia to cases of sexual abuse—while displaying subtle differences in each one’s photogram-like silhouettes of candlesticks, crosses and ecclesiastical paintings.

Some of Võ’s works, which deserve expansive, bright rooms, lurked in awkward, shadowed spaces of the Guggenheim’s rotunda. Only at the very top of the spiral, on the sixth floor, did natural light bathe some of the more sublime pieces of the survey. Diaphanous veils separated chambers hiding deconstructed chandeliers that the artist sourced from the Hotel Majestic in Paris, where the Paris Peace Accords were signed, ending the Vietnam War. The gleaming copper hand and torso from *We the People* (2010–14), a 1:1 scale replica in

fragmented pieces of the Statue of Liberty, offered pointed perspectives on immigration and nationhood. On a floor-to-ceiling sheet of glass, Võ’s father had etched the words, “Fabulous Muscles Take My Breath Away,” a portmanteau expression derived from homoerotic love songs by experimental bands Xiu Xiu and Berlin. The work speaks to Võ’s probing of his own sexuality as well as his closeness with his father. One could see Võ’s life reflected here: the obsessive analyses of his family’s history, and his infatuation with contradiction, such as between filial and religious piety and deviant personalities, seen in *Your Mother Sucks Cock in Hell* (2015), a coarsely sawed-off head of a 17th-century cherub sculpture crammed uncomfortably inside a wooden crate.

Despite the visual splendor, the artist’s usual radical takeaways, whether on US imperialism or autoerotic asphyxiation, were absent; the effects were watered down. (Curators Katherine Brinson, with Susan Thompson and Ylinka Barotto, perhaps anticipating that viewers might be bored by the nonabrasive showcase, withheld full descriptions of several series until the top floor, leaving teasers of information as visitors circled upward.) Instead, moments of sentimentality asked one to pause, such as for the temporary, wooden grave marker for the artist’s grandmother, preceded by a black-and-white photograph of her in a chair. In this image, the subject is blurred, the only aspect in focus a gently placed, wrinkled hand—representing the hand of an artist, and the layered, lived histories of the multiple people present in Võ’s works.

YSABELLE CHEUNG

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**TORONTO**

Gardiner Museum

YOKO ONO

THE RIVERBED



On an unsettlingly warm February’s day in Toronto, a hodgepodge of geriatrics, hipsters and curious children gathered at a table at the Gardiner Museum. Taking their cues from the captions on the walls, they fumbled as they tried to join ceramic shards using glue, paper cement, tape and twine. The sound of stones being knocked over further punctuated the white-cube gravitas, barely raising the eyebrows of the bored-to-tears assistants ambling around the room. Resembling and feeling like an elementary school classroom, it’s difficult to imagine this as the setting of a serious exhibition, let alone a major Toronto show—but then again, perhaps not, when one considers the artist behind it.

Yoko Ono’s “The Riverbed” enjoyed its premiere in New York in 2015 before journeying north of the border in February. The show featured three works by the conceptual artist and exponent of the radical Fluxus movement. Known for favoring process over product—as in her 1964 book *Grapefruit*, which comprises a list of bizarre instructions, including one to “imagine a thousand suns in the sky before making a tuna sandwich,” and installation *Wish Tree* (1996), for which she asked participants to pen their wishes on a piece of paper and tie them to a tree—there was very little in terms of the exhibits that were made solely by Ono herself. Instead, visitors were asked to fill in the spaces by activating the artist’s prompts. In this sense, it’s often difficult to critique the end product of Ono’s prescriptions, as it’s very much what each individual wants to make of it.

Upon entering the main exhibition space, one immediately encounters *Stone Piece* (2015). A line of stones divided one portion of the room in half. Written on the rocks’ smooth surfaces were words such as “wish” and “dream.” Exemplifying how Ono has drawn from Zen philosophies over the course of her artistic career, visitors were asked to pick the objects up in an act of meditation and self-healing. “Choose a stone and hold it until all your anger and sadness have been let go,” read the didactic label.

Nearby, visitors had to bend under a sprawling web of strings in order to access the partly walled-off room that housed *Line Piece* (2015). “Take me to the farthest place in our planet by extending the line,” Ono instructs in one corner of the space. Visitors were offered pencils and little notebooks to draw lines in for one possible interpretation of the text. Elsewhere, one could also hammer nails into the walls and connect them via strings. Ono’s idea was that the installation would evolve and transform over the course of the exhibition into an intricate matrix.

While both *Stone Piece* and *Line Piece* were originally made for the New York iterations of the show, the third work—*Mend Piece*—dates back to 1966. Visitors were encouraged to connect ceramic slabs that had been smashed to pieces with an array of tools and later display their creations to future audiences on rows of shelves. Bringing together *Stone Piece*’s aims of sparking reflection and catharsis, and the underscoring of unity in *Line Piece*, the work serves as a fitting denouement to the experience (although there’s no prescribed sequence for how the pieces are to be encountered).

While the sentiments expressed in “The Riverbed” are certainly noble and valuable, one is left wondering as to the practicality and significance of the artist’s instructions in the real world. For over half a century, Ono has, through her art, encouraged audiences to imagine better days and make wishes for the future; but is it enough to simply hope and dream? More often than not, the impracticalities of the works are eclipsed by mere sensations of humanitarianism and optimism, and the thrill of interacting with a figure like Ono. In this sense, the exhibition imparts the feeling of having wished for world peace while blowing out birthday candles—an empty gesture repeated for the sake of keeping up appearances.

JOOBIN BEKHRAD

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Opposite page

Installation view of “Take My Breath Away,” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2018. Photo by David Heald. Courtesy the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

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YOKO ONO
Mend Piece
1966/2015
Ceramic, glue, tape, paper, cement, scissors and twine, dimensions variable.
Installation view of “The Riverbed” at Galerie Lelong, New York, 2015–16. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.