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## Art in Review

## Danh Vo

## 'Autoerotic Asphyxiation'

Artists Space  
38 Greene Street, at Grand  
Street, third floor  
SoHo  
Through Sunday

Aside from the sheer white curtains covering its windows and walls, the gallery at Artists Space appears at first to be empty for the New York debut of the young, Vietnamese-born conceptual artist Danh Vo. But gradually work comes into view. Seen up close, the curtains

turn out to be embroidered with wispy forms of flowering plants. Half-hidden on the walls behind are documentary-style photographs of young Asian men, alone or in pairs, some holding hands. There are other pictures in the gallery too: a stiffly posed 19th-century group portrait of five non-Asian men, and a contemporary snapshot of an Asian child.

And there are documents: a framed letter of farewell, handwritten in French, from a son to his father; a printed list of instructions, attributed to the Department of Corrections of the State of Delaware, for how to conduct an execution by hanging; and a copy of a recently dated will that names Mr. Vo as a beneficiary in the estate of one Joseph Carrier.

In an exhibition as much about information as about objects, all these pieces interconnect, some in the distant past. The five men in the 19th-century photograph were Roman Catholic priests about to leave France for missionary work in Asia. The embroidered plants on the curtains were species collected by a later missionary, Jean-André Soulié, in China and Tibet.

In 1905 Soulié was killed by Tibetan Buddhist monks. One of

the priests in the group portrait, Théopane Vénard, was beheaded in Vietnam in 1861 during a wave of anti-Christian violence. The framed farewell letter here is the one he wrote to his father in France, in which he likens himself to a flower about to be picked by the hand of God.

The bizarrely clinical execution instructions from Delaware can be taken as a corrective to that romantic vision of martyrdom, but by itself the Vénard letter snaps us into the modern world. The copy of it in the show was handwritten by Mr. Vo's father, a devout Catholic who doesn't understand French but considers the words of the letter sacred, since Vénard was canonized as a saint in 1988.

Then there are the modern photographs. The child in the snapshot is Mr. Vo at 4 in 1979, when he and his family arrived as refugees in Europe from their Vietnamese home near the Cambodian border. The documentary pictures of young Asian men were taken by Mr. Carrier, an American counterinsurgency specialist who worked in Vietnam for the RAND Corporation from 1962 to 1973.

While there, he privately documented the casual interactions he observed, intimate without necessarily being homoerotic, between Vietnamese men.

An anthropologist by training, Mr. Carrier left his job because his homosexuality was considered a security risk. But by then he had produced a substantial photographic archive, which he bequeathed to Mr. Vo after they met a few years ago. To Mr. Vo

the archive has a personal meaning: it is the record of a cultural past that he recognizes as his own, but that, as a refugee, he missed experiencing firsthand.

In the end Mr. Vo's stirring and deftly calculated exhibition is autobiographical through and through, but operates in ways very different from those of the identity-politics art of a decade ago. His purpose is not to nail down a culturally specific sense of self, but to suggest how diffuse and elusive a thing the self is, and should be. The narrow pursuit of it can be deeply seductive, but also constrictive, even suffocating, as the show's title suggests.

HOLLAND COTTER



DANIEL PÉREZ

A 19th-century photograph of Roman Catholic priests in Danh Vo's "Autoerotic Asphyxiation," at Artists Space.