The Year Is 8888

1640

Alexandre de Rhodes, a Jesuit missionary, returns to Tonkin after his initial trip to the region in 1619, and begins developing the Vietnamese alphabet based on the work of earlier Portuguese missionaries as a tool to spread Catholic teachings in the local language.

1651

de Rhodes publishes a catechism and trilingual Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary, which would later become the basis for a romanized Vietnamese alphabet – *chữ Quốc ngữ*.

1653

de Rhodes publishes *Divers voyages et missions du père Alexandre de Rhodes de la Compagnie de Jésus en la Chine et autres royaumes de l'Orient, avec son retour en Europe par la Perse et l'Arménie*, narrating 35 years of his travels and missionary work.

1847

Tự Đức ascends the throne and continues his father's and grandfather's persecution of missionaries during the Nguyễn dynasty.

1852

Jean-Théophane Vénard is ordained a priest, and in September leaves Paris for the "Far East".

1857

Shortly after the arrival of Jean-Théophane Vénard in West Tonkin, Tự Đức issues a new royal edict to consolidate his policies against Christians. Bishops and priests, including Vénard, are forced to seek refuge in caves, dense woods, and elsewhere.

1858

France and Spain respond to Tự Đức's persecution of missionaries with large military expeditions in a four-year campaign, thus beginning the conquest and colonization of Vietnam.

1860

Vénard is captured while in hiding in the mountains, where he continues to exercise his ministry. Tried before a mandarin, he refuses to renounce his religion and step on a fumi-e, and is sentenced to death.

1861

Vénard is executed.

1862

Having lost three provinces to France, Tự Đức signs the Treaty of Saigon in June, and abolishes all of his previous anti-Christian orders. Catholicism is officially recognized, and worshippers gain protection.

1890

Alexandre Yersin, a Swiss-French bacteriologist, leaves for Indochina as a physician for the Messageries Maritimes.

1897

Yersin begins cultivating the rubber tree, imported from Brazil to Vietnam, in Suối Dầu, Khánh Hoà, where he receives a permit from the colonial government to set up an agricultural station.

1924

Artists Victor Tardieu and Nam Sơn (Nguyễn Vạn Thọ) co-found the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine (EBAI; Indochina School of Fine Arts). Tardieu serves as its first Director until 1936. The EBAI closes its doors in 1945 after a Japanese coup that dismantled France's control of Indochina.

1925

The Michelin Rubber Plantation is established in Dầu Tiếng, Bình Dương. At 12,400 hectares, it is the largest rubber plantation in Vietnam. In its decades of operation, the brutal working conditions on Michelin plantations give rise to the haunting adage:
Cao su xanh tốt lạ đời,
Mỗi cây bón một xác người công nhân.
(The rubber trees grow strangely lush and green / Each one fertilized by the body of a plantation worker.)

THE YEAR IS XXXX
ĐÓ LÀ NĂM XXXX

QUỲNH ĐỒNG
NGUYỄN PHƯƠNG LINH

PHAN THẢO NGUYÊN
DANH VÕ

WITH GUEST ARTISTS
CÙNG CÁC NGHỆ SĨ KHÁCH MỜI

CURATED BY THÁI HÀ, WITH GUEST CURATORS
DO THÁI HÀ CURATE, CÙNG CÁC CURATOR KHÁCH MỜI

The Year Is 2022

I.

Words Thái Hà
Translation Vinh Sơn
Design Thái Hà *
* After *Paper Stacks* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Water sloshes dancing waves. Warm currents rush past and I stretch out my arms to feel their flow, the rushing of fish or some creature that disrupts the water with its stop-motion. I follow to see where it goes, it's strange to see a fish with limbs, I get closer and the water grows more viscous as if a giant vat of cornstarch had been stirred into the sea, with every movement the water resists, hardens. The fish keeps swimming away in this gloopy mass, I try to track it but it's too far away now and I can't see. I look back at my arms but can't even turn my neck, the mass is solid. I'm locked in. I wait.

She jolts from her sleep. Sighs. *This doesn't feel like it's going to be easy.*
The last few times weren't great, but the sunny weather made up for being chased by a pack of mutt dogs. Or the time I woke up straight into a party only to realize the music and drumming was for a funeral. Awkward, but at least I didn't have to run. Her eyes are still closed but there's a tingling on the lids like tiny fire ants marching over the top, damn they're kinda burning. *Why is it never a tropical paradise?* She's worn with sleep but waking up seems a chore. The burning doesn't let up so she gives in and peels her lids open.

Blinking, she furrows her brows and wonders why with her eyes open she can't see. A blinding fluorescence stretches out in every direction, an unending whiteness that disorients. Unable to determine which way gravity pulls, she turns her legs to try to plant her feet. *Figures it's never that simple.* As she turns, she feels a material pull on her skin and wrinkle at the folds of her legs, the crumpling helping her see through its transparence. A thin sheet of clear plastic, pulled so tight the film dips and rises with the contours of her body, is stretched over her, pressing her to the white surface like a plucked chicken in supermarket vacuum pack, here and there a knobbly elbow tries to poke free but can't quite, a scraped knee bends making a pyramid. The compression forces air from her lungs. Her breaths fog up the plastic, forming a layer of warm moisture that makes the cold space feel somehow muggy.

With her blunt nails, she claws at the plastic film, the giant sheet like an overworked dough that spreads thinner and thinner yet seemingly unable to tear. And then burst, it rips, she tumbles onto what must be the ground and peels off the film still sticking to her. Shaking off the pins and needles in her legs, she takes a step and walks straight into the wall. The expansive whiteness, slowly defining itself, is now visible to her as an endless corridor. *Who knows what's on the other end, if it even ends, so I guess it's the same to me either way.* She shrugs and starts walking in a direction that elsewhere can be described as left.

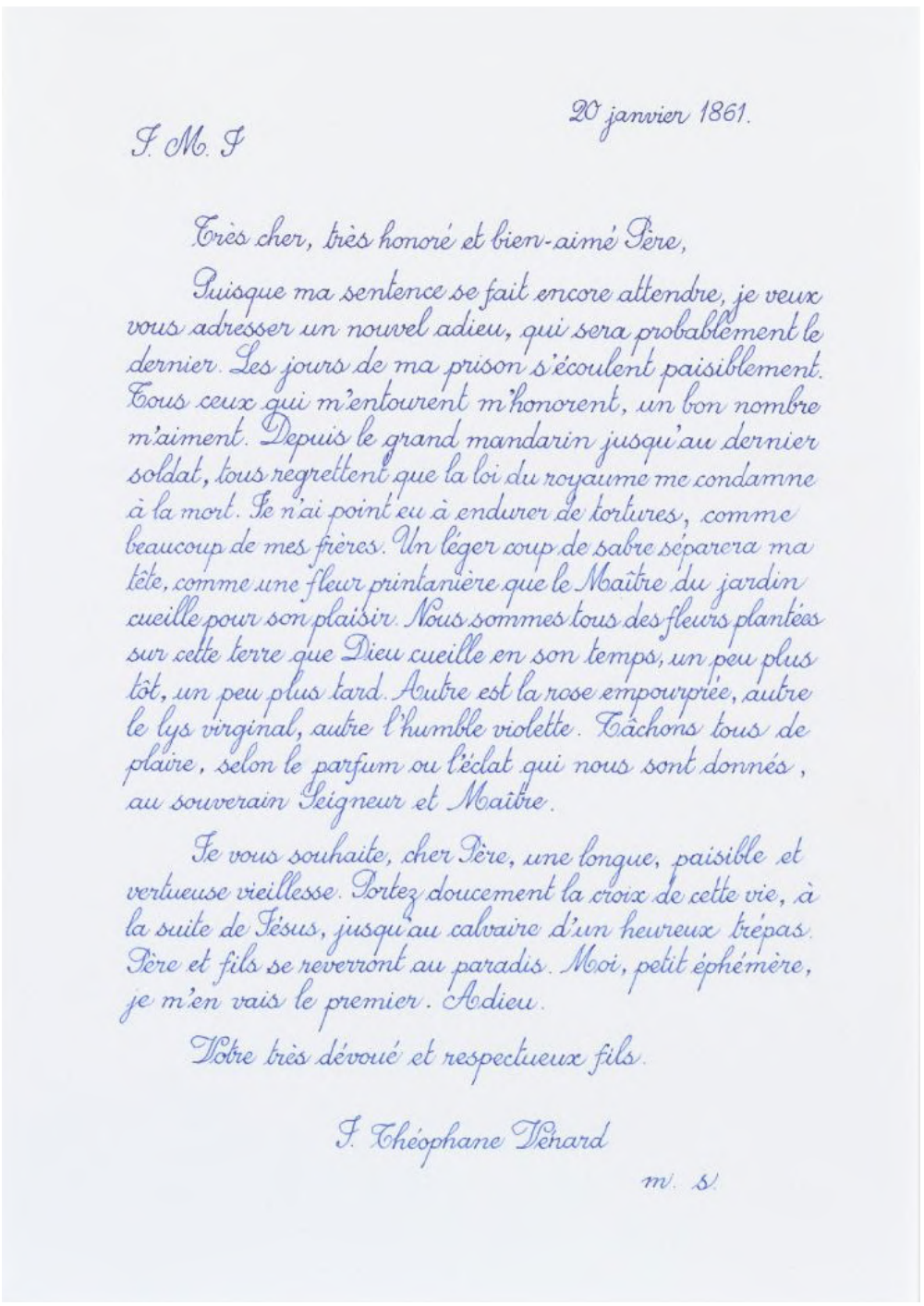
The Year Is 8888

II.

Words Thái Hà
Translation Vinh Sơn
Design Thái Hà *
* After *Paper Stacks* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

Danh Vo

2.2.1861
2009
Handwritten letter by Phung Vo
29.85 x 20.96 cm



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. Tâchons 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.

How long have I been walking left?

In the undifferentiated whiteness of it all, she cannot tell if there are bends and turns along the corridor, or maybe that the corridor stretches so far bends become straight lines. In her years of sleeping and waking, and each time waking finding herself in a new set of physics, she knows by now that keeping time is a futile exercise. Ahead and behind, the unrelenting whiteness glows. She keeps walking, wondering if she's on some perverse kind of treadmill.

Eventually, she feels the glow fading as if lights dimming. It was subtle, almost unnoticeable at first, but with each step she can see that where she is is now much brighter than what's in front of her, or rather, ahead is darker than here. Towards the darkness, a spot of light, only softer, fragile, a glow like an orb that doesn't emit light so much as absorb light into it. Edging closer, she sees the orb unspool as scribbles, plain blue on a plain page.

Dad, I'll see you again but have to go first.

Her eyes follow the winding cursive. A boy writes of a spring garden and *it'd be nice to be in that bright warmth right now*. At the final full stop, she runs over the letters again, wondering where that boy is now and if he managed to catch up with his dad. He mentions a big man who enjoys picking flowers which is quite charming and makes her giggle, although the note comes off to her as rather wilty and sad. But what perplexes her more is the mention of flowers at all; she really doubts anything can grow in this place. *Maybe there were flowers here once, every few breaths I smell a vegetal sweetness like rain's dampness stirred into honey.* The scent is familiar to her but the long sleeps make it hard to place. *I wonder if I used to live where flowers could grow.*

She walks on, curious of what's ahead, or maybe these corridors don't lead to anything, or maybe sleep will suddenly descend as it is wont to do. The floral scent is heavier now, its sharp musk creeping up the nose to linger at the back of the throat. The air, too, sinks and rises in languid cycles, forming dense clouds that refuse to dissipate. She stretches out her arm and it disappears into the fog; she swats it away only for more to float back into its place. Cautious, she slows her pace, putting one foot in front of the other like a tightrope walker so as to not bump into the walls again.

Swooooosh...

She crouches down to dodge the bird and turns her head to see where it's flying to. The fog, though, is still as ever. No sign of a bird nor any mad dives. Or rather, it wasn't so much the bird flying into her as her walking into it. Only, it isn't a bird and it isn't flying. Unable to see, she reaches up and runs her fingers over the strange objects that hang in the air like notes on a score. Scaly, grooved, and so dry, like tree branches severed from its trunk. Instinctively, she gets closer and quickly inhales, trying to determine if this is the source of the sickly floral smell, now so awfully thick.

There was that one time I woke up standing in a queue. One by one, the people in line approached a tree so large it began to subsume the other trees. Around its base were the iridescent shells of insects and still-warm birds, eyes opened but unmoving. Solemn and purposeful, the queuers inched closer to the tree to feel the cool hug of its canopy. When they reached its base, they would lay down the creatures they've been cupping in their hands, adding to the pile of the freshly dead. Closer to the trunk, the insects have shrivelled and dried, the birds all stray feathers and bones.

As I neared the tree, the sound of leaves rustling underfoot was disturbed by a thudding and fluttering. Away from the queue, a small boy had caught a bird by the tip of its wings, pulling it to earth with such force that as it hit the ground, he fell on his bottom. With one hand still clutching the bird, he sat up, hurriedly wiped away the dirt on his shorts, and dug his knees into the soft ground. His little hands closed in over the tiny creature and squeezed out its last cries. An extinguishing exhale. He stood up, rubbed the dirt from his knees, and joined the back of the queue.

The floral scent is so dense now it settles on her skin and clogs the membranes of her nostrils. She clutches at her throat and rubs her eyes raw trying to soothe the sting. Clambering down the corridor, through her squint she sees the outline of what looks like a doorway. Holding on to her last breaths, she hurls herself through the threshold.

Nguyen Phuong Linh

The light
2018
Lights, wood panelling from a Catholic church in Northern Vietnam, smoke, clear perspex
Dimensions variable

The Year Is XXXX

III.

Words Thái Hà
Translation Vinh Sơn
Design Thái Hà *
* After *Paper Stacks* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

The blinding light blinds her anew, oscillating between frequencies so sharp they seem to tear through her retinas. The whiteness is no longer a background, a generality, but instead fragments like shards of glass. The corridor, too, has turned into a huge expanse. Over its landscape, half-tubes, link chains, and other variations on scrap metal scatter freely and bounce off light, giving the impression that she's sitting inside a giant disco ball. At regular intervals, the field of metal vibrates from large steps that softly clap the ground. Overhead, a piercing ringing sends shivers down her spine. She senses something watching her, a pair of eyes that hover nearby yet is invisible.

A boy jumps up and down, his hands grab at me like a restless claw machine. The tips of his fingers manage to tug at my feathers and I come tumbling down. I see the congregation march in circles and pray on death.

A man jumps up and straddles my back. I feel his pitiful weight, the acid-sting of his whip, the jab of his bullhook. I walk to where he wants me to walk. He climbs off and I throw myself to one side, the momentum sends him flying, his foot catches the curve of the howdah. He crashes into the cliff side; the howdah rains fragments on his head. I crash onto my side and lay still. My eyes open and I see rain; they open, and I see water.

The eyes follow her every move like a patient predator, hiding under cover, waiting for its prey. She rubs the goosebumps on her arm to warm herself up and begins to run from nothing. Every time she nears its boundaries, she feels the landscape shift and spin, and before long, it dawns on her that she's running in circles. The ground picks up momentum and outpaces her run, the centrifugal force creating a vortex of girl and metal. Then, without warning, a crashing halt. The clanging of metal deafens, then goes quiet, and she continues to shoot off course into a navel darkness.

Dusting herself off after the fall, she slowly adjusts to the lack of light. Just up ahead, a lively brouhaha and unmistakable laughter. For the first time, she sees living beings in this place, a scurry of children not much smaller than her. They hopscotch, jump rope, sing rhymes, and use each other's bellies as drums in their ad lib band. Between them, neat rows of lanky trees sway gently in the wind. It all seems innocent enough, but she's been spooked since the beginning and the feeling doesn't shake. Not wanting to be seen, she dips behind the trees to observe the children's games. A viscous liquid pools at their feet but they seem rather unfazed. Focusing on the odd scene, she realizes that their jump rope is the limp body of another child. The others happily hop over it and, when their feet get caught, move aside to let another have a go. Next to them, the drum-bellies are bejeweled with maggots. With every slap of sweaty palm, the fat emeralds burst into thick goo. Her feet feel very cold now and, as she looks down, she sees the liquid spreading towards her. Dark as tar, the sticky substance seeps from the tree's wounded bark. Sap-tears run the length of their trunks and cover the ground, choking every weed and worm. She tries to run but cannot pick up her feet, the substance gluing her in place. The dread she buried now rumbles in her stomach and threatens to come back up her throat. White as a sheet, she falls onto her back, the liquid wasting no time to fuse with her hair. Inch by inch, the liquid swallows her. It feels so dark she can't tell if night has fallen or the viscous blackness has consumed her whole. The eyes hover and watch her still. Much too tired, she succumbs to sleep.

Water sloshes dancing waves. Warm currents rush past and she stretches out her arms to feel their flow...

Nguyen Phuong Linh

The last ride
2017
Aluminium pieces, plastic perspex, lights, glass and MDF pedestal
Installation dimensions variable

Thao Nguyen Phan

Voyages de Rhodes
2014–2017
Watercolor on found book pages
Dimension variable

THE YEAR IS XXXX
ĐÓ LÀ NĂM XXXX

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