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The Artist Questioning Authorship

With ready-made materials and artifacts, Danh Vo's art recasts the historical events and political ideas that have shaped his world.

By Calvin Tomkins (January 29, 2018)



Vo in his home in Mexico City. Born in Vietnam and brought up in Denmark, he divides his time between Mexico and Germany.
Photograph by José Luis Cuevas for The New Yorker

Danh Vo had just started to gain recognition as a rising young artist when he decided, in 2010, to make a full-scale replica of the Statue of Liberty. He had been offered a one-man show at the Fridericianum, a huge exhibition space in Kassel, Germany. “The curator said he had seen shows of mine, and that I could deal with big spaces without putting too much into them,” Vo told me. “I’m very childish. When people want to put me in boxes, I go the other way, so I was thinking, How can I stuff that space? And my simple mind came up with the Statue of Liberty.” The whole hundred-and-fifty-foot monolith, he meant, cast in many separate elements, which would remain separate and unassembled.

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Vo, who was born in Vietnam and brought up in Denmark, knew the statue only from photographs. He Googled it, and discovered that the outer surface was a 2.4-millimetre layer of hammered copper. “That was something interesting,” he said, “the surface being so thin and fragile. My next thought was that maybe an image like the Statue of Liberty could liberate me from being categorized as an artist who deals with his own history as a Vietnamese refugee.” More research followed. He got bids for making the aluminum casts and applying the copper skin from foundries in France (where Frédéric Bartholdi’s design for the statue was fabricated), Poland, and China.

This was a big change in Vo’s approach to art-making—until then, he had worked mainly with objects he found or appropriated. “Danh is a hunter and gatherer,” Marian Goodman, his New York-based dealer, had told me, but in this project everything would have to be made, at considerable cost. In less than a month, what had seemed like an absurd notion was on its way to becoming reality. Vo chose a Shanghai foundry, because its estimate was far lower than the others. He supervised the fabrication process, which took five years from start to finish, and cost more than a million and a half dollars. It was financed largely by Sheikha al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the Qatari art collector. She had wanted to buy all the elements—more than three hundred sculptural forms ranging from abstract shapes to a massive and recognizable section of Lady Liberty’s armpit—but Vo would only let her have a third of them. The rest, as he directed, have been dispersed, in small groups, to museums or public institutions around the world. The title of the work is “We the People.”

When the casts began appearing, in 2011, first at the Fridericianum, and then at the New Museum and City Hall Park in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and several other venues, the art press assumed that they referred to immigration and the worldwide refugee crisis. This exasperated Vo, who is hard to exasperate. “I chose the Statue of Liberty because I thought it was for all of us,” he said to me recently. “I wanted to take a very familiar icon and make it a little bit unfamiliar.” He also felt that, at a time when America’s moral authority was increasingly compromised, the Statue of Liberty broken into fragments could refer to more than one thing. “I always say that liberty has been raped often enough,” Vo said. “Words like that are not static. Sometimes we have to throw them up in the air to reclaim their meaning.”

A group of “We the People” elements will be in Vo’s first big survey show in the United States, which opens at the Guggenheim Museum on February 9th. Vo, who is forty-two, with permanently dishevelled dark hair and a gently humorous kind of authority, has been involved in every aspect of the installation process. Although he lives mainly in Berlin and Mexico City, he has made many trips to New York, to work with the Guggenheim’s curatorial staff. The most important decisions, about where and how individual pieces will be displayed, won’t be finalized until the last two weeks before the opening, and those decisions will be made by Vo. Katherine Brinson, the Guggenheim curator who proposed the exhibition and made it happen, has worked with Vo before, and she is at ease with his largely intuitive, unpredictable, and playful approach to the process—which he on

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For the Guggenheim, the show is a risk. Works by Vo have appeared in New York before, but he is not well known here, and the Guggenheim’s tourist-heavy audience, about half of whom will be visiting the museum for the first time, may be put off by the diversity of strange objects and images in his work—kitchen appliances, furniture, tombstones, historical documents, packing cartons, chandeliers, mammoth bones, parts of Roman and early-Christian sculptures, a list of the obscenities and ravings voiced by the demon Pazuzu in William Friedkin’s 1973 film “The Exorcist,” to name a few. In Vo’s art, elements of his biography interact with and vivify evidence of the historical events and the political ideas that have shaped the world he lives in. The connections may not be apparent to every viewer, but, as Vo sees it, “That’s the strange and beautiful thing about the art world. It’s not mass communication. If you want mass communication, then you are in the wrong field.”

Vo’s rise to prominence in contemporary art still surprises him. “I don’t know how I did it,” he told me. “The whole thing is crazy. When I came out of art school, I couldn’t even take care of myself.” A major work by Vo can now sell for up to a million dollars on the primary market (he also sells other works for much less). He owns a town house in Mexico City and an apartment in Berlin, and he is restoring a house on the island of Pantelleria, off the coast of Sicily. “I’m a lucky man,” Vo says. The demand for what he does led a Dutch collector to sue him for not producing a promised work. A Dutch court ruled against Vo, saying he must deliver a large new work in the style of his recent pieces; Vo offered the collector a text piece that would read, in large letters, “Shove it up your ass, you faggot!,” which happens to be the title of one of his sculptural collages. In the end, that wasn’t necessary, because his legal team managed to reach a settlement, and the collector dropped the suit.

Trung Ky-Danh Vo was born in August, 1975, in the village of Ba Ria, outside Saigon. The Vietnam War had ended three months earlier. In its final stages, as the North Vietnamese advanced, the Vo family—mother and father, two sons, and a daughter—was among thousands of South Vietnamese evacuated, in American ships, from Quy Nhon, on the central coast, to the island of Phu Quoc, at the southern end of the country. One of the sons, Thanh, died there, the day after the fall of Saigon, of a childhood disease that went untreated. That summer, the Vo family was allowed to resettle in Ba Ria, where Danh was born. (A younger sister followed three years later.) Danh has no memory of the next four years. By 1979, Vietnam was at war with

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Cambodia and China, and hundreds of thousands of people were leaving the country in makeshift boats. Phung Vo, Danh's father, who had been exempt from military service, was an energetic and resourceful man. He went around to all his relatives and friends and collected enough money to buy a fairly large wooden boat, and in 1979 the Vos and more than a hundred other people embarked on a voyage that they hoped would take them to the United States.

They got as far as the shipping lanes between Vietnam and Singapore, where a container ship of the Danish Maersk line spotted their obviously unseaworthy vessel, picked up the passengers, and dropped them in Singapore. After four months in a refugee camp, the Vo family, including Danh's paternal grandmother, received emigration papers and took a commercial airliner to Denmark. (They were also given the option of going to Germany, and Danh's maternal grandmother, who had three children already living there, elected to do so.) "We lived in the suburbs of Copenhagen," Vo told me. "My first memories are of there." His parents ran a coffee shop for factory workers—the first in a succession of food carts, cafés, and restaurants that became the family business. "In that town, we were the only Vietnamese," Vo said. "I just hated the idea of being different, and I knew I was."

He was an extremely bright and somewhat mischievous child, who excelled in math at school and who tended to argue with teachers. (When a teacher wrote a letter to his parents about Danh's disruptive behavior, Danh intercepted it and wrote the reply, deftly copying his mother's handwriting. It said, "I accept my son as he is.") The four children learned to speak Danish at school. Their mother, Hao Thi Nguyen, picked up enough of the language to get by, but Phung Vo never became fluent—the family spoke Vietnamese at home. Hao Thi was a devout Catholic, and Phung had converted to Catholicism during the war, as a silent protest against the American-sanctioned assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam's Catholic President. "My parents decided, because I was such a troublemaker at school, to send all four of us to a private Catholic school," Vo said. "I have no idea how they managed to pay for it. I went to church until I was eighteen, but by then I understood that the Church wasn't for people like me, gay people. My mother, who was very concerned, knew I was gay before I did. She was always asking, 'You're not gay, are you?' I didn't know what gay was, but I knew that I should say no."

In high school, he took several art classes, and a teacher told him that he had a good sense of form and color. After graduating, he applied for admission to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, in Copenhagen. The application was rejected. For the next three years, he lived at home and worked in the family restaurant. He kept applying to the Royal Academy, though, and in 1998, on his third try, he was accepted. The teachers were somewhat provincial, Vo remembers. "Trung Ky-Danh Vo has been in my class for one year," his painting teacher wrote, in a recommendation letter, "and I might / might not understand his agenda, but I strongly recommend he quit painting." (Vo kept the letter and used it as one of his art works.) Vo told me, "I knew I was not going to make art, because to me art was painting, and my painting was terrible. I was about to drop out of school, but in Denmark you get money while you study, and in art school you meet a lot of great people. So I decided to stay and get the best out of it. I'd never travelled much—why not use the school to do that?" He was planning to apply to an exchange program with the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, and asked Rirkrit Tiravanija, a visiting

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artist at the Royal Academy, to write him a letter of recommendation. Tiravanija, a leading figure in the new, socially based form of conceptual art called relational aesthetics—he was known for turning art galleries into kitchens, and serving Thai food to the visitors—told him to forget about Düsseldorf. “Don’t go there!” he said. “I’ll call a friend.” His friend was Tobias Rehberger, an artist who taught at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, one of Germany’s most progressive art schools, which accepted Vo as an exchange student.

His first significant art work, done while he was at the Royal Academy, was a performance piece that consisted of Vo marrying and almost immediately divorcing, in succession, two friends, whose last names he then added to his own. The first, Mia Rosasco, was a female student at the Royal Academy. As soon as their divorce was official, he entered into a civil union with Mads Rasmussen, a male bartender in a gay bar in Copenhagen, where Vo also worked. All three of them saw the project as a conceptual art work, using a social structure (marriage) for a purpose (art-making) that it was not intended to serve, and they all agreed that no trace of romanticism was involved. Vo’s official name, which he uses to sign important documents, is Trung Ky-Danh Vo Rosasco Rasmussen. But the project is ongoing, and if there are additional marriages his name will get longer.

In 2006, while he was still at the Städelschule, Vo moved to Berlin. “That’s what you did then,” he said. “Berlin was very cheap. I still never thought I would have an artist career, but I came into a circle of friends whom I felt affiliated with, and whose work made sense to me.” He started seeing Michael Elmgreen, of the duo Elmgreen & Dragset, whose avant-garde architectural and sculptural installations were attracting attention in Europe. “They got me into a few exhibitions, but it didn’t help,” Vo told me. “It was just one failure after another.” The relationship broke up when Vo used Elmgreen’s name (without permission) as a reference in applying for a travel grant to Marfa, Texas, so he could see the mock Prada store that Elmgreen & Dragset had built there. Vo said, “I needed to find my own environment and my own peers.”

Vo’s work found him, purely by chance, in 2006. He had gone to California on a three-month residency at the Villa Aurora, a retreat for writers and artists in Pacific Palisades. During a reception to introduce the residents to the local community, a seventy-eight-year-old man named Joseph Carrier addressed him by his first name, pronouncing it, correctly, as “Yan.” Surprised, because most non-Asians pronounced it “Daan,” Vo asked how he knew to do this. Carrier explained that he had been in Vietnam for several years during the war, as a counter-insurgency analyst working for the Rand Corporation. His house was nearby, he said, and he would be happy if Vo came over. Vo went the next day, and on many days after that—it was the start of a deep platonic friendship that would change Vo’s life.

The Rand people had fired Carrier in 1967, when they realized that he was gay, but in 1972 the National Academy of Sciences had sent him back to Vietnam to study the effects of Agent Orange, a defoliant that the U.S. forces had used extensively. Carrier had taken photographs of the tribal people in the Central Highlands, where Agent Orange had caused great devastation. He wanted to go back and get current pictures of the same areas, for a photography exhibition

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he was having at the University of California, Irvine, called “Surviving War, Surviving Peace,” but he needed someone who spoke Vietnamese more fluently than he did. Carrier asked whether Vo would be interested, and Vo immediately said yes. They met in Saigon—now called Ho Chi Minh City—six months later. It was the first time Vo had been there since he left, in 1979. “I wasn’t interested before,” he told me. “If I was raised with anything, it was the understanding of not having a place to come from. My mother looks back sometimes, but my father never does.” Vo and Carrier spent a week in the Central Highlands, and then visited Hanoi, where Vo bought tribal blankets with images of American helicopters woven into them.

Soon after this trip, Vo returned to Los Angeles. He spent a week in Carrier’s Pacific Palisades garage, going through Carrier’s Vietnam diaries and looking at hundreds of photographs he had taken there during the nineteen-sixties. “He was very nosy,” Carrier wrote, in a privately published autobiography. “Before leaving he told me he was particularly interested in using a series of black and white photographs I had taken of young Vietnamese men holding hands . . . to illustrate cultural differences between American and Vietnamese men.” (Physical intimacy between men is fairly common in Vietnam, where, for the most part, it has no homoerotic overtones.) Carrier gave Vo his enthusiastic permission to use the photographs in his work. Many of them, along with other mementos of Carrier’s time in Vietnam, appeared soon afterward in Vo’s first important solo show, in 2007, at the Isabella Bortolozzi gallery, in Berlin. “It’s a weird thing—how do I put this?” Vo said to me. “I never thought the material belonged to Joe. I thought it belonged equally to me, so I had no guilt.” Carrier wrote part of the show’s press release, and in his autobiography he states that he is immensely grateful to Vo because “my photos were being seen by an international audience instead of being hidden forever in boxes in my garage.” In his will, Carrier has bequeathed his entire Vietnam archive to Vo.

With that show, which was called “Good Life,” Vo gave himself permission to use ready-made material of all kinds, and to challenge the whole idea of aesthetic authorship. Many of his early works referred, in one way or another, to members of his family. One, dated 2006, is a glass display case containing three of his father’s most prized possessions—a Rolex watch, a Dupont lighter, and a U.S. military signet ring. Phung Vo had bought them soon after leaving Vietnam, and each one reflects his pride in acquiring symbols of Western culture. (Vo gave him the money to replace them.) The work’s title is from a Rolex ad: “If You Were to Climb the Himalayas Tomorrow.” “Grave Marker for Maria Ngo Thi Ha,” which came two years later, is a white wooden cross that had been used as a temporary marker for the Copenhagen grave site of Vo’s recently deceased grandmother until the ground settled enough to support a permanent stone. “My father made the crucifix, and when the headstone came, somebody threw it out,” Vo explained. “But my little sister saved the marker and brought it to me in Berlin. It stayed in a corner with the beer bottles for half a year, maybe, and then, one day, it just seemed to have inherited all the traces of my grandmother.” “Oma Totem,” from 2009, is a stacked tower of household appliances—a washing machine, a small refrigerator, and a television set, with a crucifix mounted on the front. The appliances were gifts from an immigrant relief program in Hamburg to Vo’s other grandmother. Her local Catholic church had sent the cross. Vo, who had

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spent summer vacations with his Hamburg grandmother, persuaded her to let him replace all three appliances, plus the cross, so that he could take away the originals.

All these works have appeared in a number of Vo's exhibitions, in different settings, and with little or no explanatory material for the viewer. "I hate all this idea of the press release," Vo told me. "I want people to see the show before they have any information." But what can a viewer who knows nothing about Phung Vo get from seeing his watch, lighter, and signet ring in a glass case? Quite a lot, apparently. The emotional charge that Vo implants in these family-oriented works seems to get through to viewers—some of them, anyway—and my guess is that their impact is due in large part to the way he installs them. "My work is really through installation," he told me. "It's always about how things speak together." His exhibitions, then and now, can be very spare, with a lot of empty space between objects. Each work invites close attention, to itself and to the repercussions that it sets off with others. A quietly intense conversation is going on, which we can enter or not, as we choose.

In 2009, the Kadist Art Foundation in Paris, an interdisciplinary study center for contemporary art, awarded Vo a five-month residency. This was his first time in Paris, and one of the places he wanted to visit was the archives of the Missions Étrangères de Paris, an organization devoted to preserving and carrying on the three-century history of French Catholic missionaries, primarily in Asia. In Vietnam, Vo had been shown, in a Catholic church, the head of a young priest named Jean-Théophane Vénard, who had been decapitated on February 2, 1861; the body had been sent back to France, he learned, and it was interred in the vaults of the Missions Étrangères. Vo didn't see the body, but he found a sizable archive of material about Vénard and other nineteenth-century French missionaries, many of whom had been executed by the country's Confucian overlords. Vo went back again and again, to learn more about the missionaries and about Vietnamese history. Some of the young priests had been tortured to death. The killings had eventually led to French military intervention, which had led in turn to the colonization of Vietnam, Cambodia, and adjacent territories—what would become French Indochina. "People really believe they are doing good, and that's the terrible part," he said to me.

On one visit, Vo found a letter that Vénard had written to his father, in France, shortly before his execution. It is a remarkable document—calm, poetic, almost joyous. "A slight sabre cut will separate my head from my body, like the spring flower which the Master of the Garden gathers for His pleasure. We are all flowers planted on this earth, which God plucks in His own good time, some a little sooner, some a little later."

Reading the letter, Vo was seized by the idea of getting his own father to reproduce it, in the calligraphy that he had learned as a child. "I remember my father's handwriting on the menus of their cafés," he told me. "He'd write 'Burger and Fries, Twenty Kroner,' but so beautifully, and I wanted to reactivate that." His father copied the letter, and kept on doing so. Although Phung Vo knows no French, and has only a vague idea of what the words mean, in the last nine years he has copied Vénard's letter more than twelve hundred times. The copies are all sold as art works by Danh Vo, who pays his father a third of the three-hundred-euro purchase price. (Vo

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and his gallery share the rest.) The price will not change, he has said, and new copies will be produced until his father is no longer able to make them. Entitled “2.2.1861,” the document has become a signature item in Vo’s exhibitions. “It breaks all conventions of thinking about works of art,” he says, “and it has its own life.”

During his Paris residency, Vo also went to see the grand ballroom of the Hotel Majestic, where the 1973 Paris Peace Accords to end the Vietnam War were signed. The hotel was closed down, but he looked through a window on the ground floor and saw, in the ballroom, the three magnificent chandeliers he remembered from photographs of the treaty-signing. Vo became obsessed with the idea of buying them. When he found out that the French government, which had owned the Majestic, had sold it to a company run by members of the royal family of Qatar, and that a hotel group in China was partnering with the Qataris to sell the furnishings, he got in touch with the Chinese. After lengthy negotiations, they agreed to sell all three chandeliers to him for seventy-five thousand dollars, which, of course, he did not have. Vo somehow talked the sellers into letting him exhibit the chandeliers, as art works, before he paid for them. He showed one of them in a small exhibition at the Kadist Art Foundation in 2009, and, shortly afterward, included a chandelier in his breakthrough show at the Kunsthalle Basel, which was seen by curators and collectors attending the annual Basel art fair. Among the other works on view there were a horizontal re-creation of “Oma Totem” (the stacked household appliances), which Vo had paid a stonecutter to carve in marble, as a gravestone for his grandmother; some branches that Vo had cut from a tree in the Phu Quoc cemetery where his older brother was buried; and several small relics and photographs of nineteenth-century missionaries. But the exhibition was really built around the chandelier—which Vo hadn’t been sure he would get until the last minute. “I don’t think I’d have that sort of nerve today,” he told me. “You need nerve, but you also need ignorance.” It hung from the ceiling of the Kunsthalle’s main gallery. At subsequent shows, one of the two smaller chandeliers was disassembled and spread out on the floor, and its twin was mounted on a floor-based metal rack.

Christian Rattemeyer, the associate curator of drawings and prints at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, saw the Kunsthalle Basel show. It struck him as “a quantum leap” by a uniquely gifted young artist: “He’d found a way to take a very dramatic personal story and make it speak about the fate of his native country.” Rattemeyer and Doryun Chong, at the time an associate curator of painting and sculpture at *MOMA*, persuaded the museum to buy one of the smaller chandeliers in 2010, and the sale allowed Vo to pay off the Chinese hotel group. “I sold it before I bought it,” Vo said, gleefully. He sold another to the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris, and the largest of the three went to the National Gallery of Denmark, in Copenhagen. What, I wondered, had given a thirty-four-year-old Danish-speaking immigrant the chutzpah to negotiate this complex international operation? I put the question to Julie Ault, an American artist and teacher who met Vo in 2003, when she taught a course at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. (They became very close friends—Vo says she knows him and his work better than he does.) “It was a big risk, and he didn’t know he was going to pull it off,” Ault said. “But Danh is a buoyant person. He’s very good at choosing the people he works with, and he doesn’t worry

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about what's going to happen." Most of Vo's projects come out of his talent for working with others. His combination of irreverence, humor, and generosity makes it hard to say no to him.

In the midst of his negotiations, Vo took his father to see the Hotel Majestic ballroom. Phung Vo had been reluctant to go. The Paris Peace Accords, as they both knew, had been a cynical farce, a way for the U.S. to declare peace and remove most of its troops from a war it was losing. The truce was broken almost immediately, and the war went on for two more years. Why, his father asked, was Danh taking him to this room of betrayal? But when they got there, Phung became very quiet. Overcome by the splendor of the chandeliers, which had shed their light impartially on society balls and on the Nazi high command during the Occupation, he said, reverently, "I think the Queen of Denmark must have one of these in her castle." His words removed any lingering doubt on Vo's part about going after them. Sometimes, mere beauty was enough. Vo knew then that he wanted the big one to go eventually to Denmark's National Gallery, "so my father could see it whenever he wanted."

Vo's house in Mexico City is in the Roma Norte section, which has become popular with artists and professional people. A giant cypress, a tree that can live for more than a thousand years, towers over the three-story house and overwhelms the uneven sidewalk in front. Embedded in the floor of the entrance hall is a roughly seven-foot steel shaft, shaped like a javelin and tapering to a sharp point at both ends; it's a sculpture by the Portuguese artist Leonor Antunes, who carried it to an upper floor and dropped it through a hole cut for that purpose. Vo has turned the front room into a spacious kitchen and dining space. The rest of the ground floor is a mostly uncovered patio, with high walls and folding glass panels that can be closed in bad weather. There's a fig tree, and a bush that attracts hummingbirds, and a variety of plants and handmade stools and low tables, and baskets with local fruit, and objects Vo has found on his Mexican travels—a braided leather lasso, Coca-Cola bottles with scorpions embalmed in mezcal. There is a sectional sofa in one corner; an outdoor flight of open concrete stairs (with no handrail) leads to the second floor.

In 2012, Vo was invited to be in a group show at the Museo Tamayo, in Mexico City. He returned to Mexico several times after that. He met a lot of artists, saw his first bullfights, and had many long conversations with José Kuri and his wife, Mónica Manzutto, the owners of the Kurimanzutto gallery, which gave him a show the next year. Vo had been thinking about other places to live. He'd been travelling more or less continuously since 2007, when he'd won the Blauorange prize for young artists working in Germany, and used the prize money to buy a round-the-world airline ticket. He had gone back to Vietnam with his mother, who wanted to visit her older son's grave and connect with relatives. Vo had no personal life at all in those years, he remembers, because all his energy went into work and travel. But in 2010 he met Heinz Peter Knes, a Berlin-based photographer, and discovered the pleasures of travelling with someone he cared about. "Heinz saved my life in so many ways," Vo told me. They share the apartment in Berlin. Vo wanted another place, though, a place outside Europe. He and Knes had driven across the United States and back several times, by different routes, visiting all but seven states, and Vo had spent a year in New York. But New York was "too tough," he had decided. Mexico City,

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with its dramatic history, intersecting cultures, and native art traditions that stretched from pre-Columbian Mayan and Aztec sculpture to a lively contemporary-art scene, presented an interesting alternative.

“It’s the only place outside Europe and the United States where you find a modernism so strong and self-contained,” Vo told me. “I feel an affinity to Asia, and I would never move there for that reason—it’s too close to me. Mexico seemed like the right balance.” He bought the Roma Norte house and moved into it in 2014, just in time for the opening of his biggest museum show to date, at the Museo Jumex, in Mexico City.

The exhibition included several of the early family pieces, but the emphasis was on Vo’s more recent work, in which political elements were dominant. From a Sotheby’s auction called “The White House Years of Robert S. McNamara,” Vo had bought a carved ivory tusk, given to McNamara by a South Vietnamese military officer, and the nibs of fountain pens that were used, while McNamara was the United States Secretary of Defense, to sign key documents, one of which was the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which led to a major escalation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. At the Museo Jumex, these and other objects and documents relating to the war were joined by two office chairs from the Kennedy Administration—shown in a dismantled state, with their leather and muslin coverings stripped off and drooping forlornly from nails in the wall. There was also a set of framed letters from Henry Kissinger to the New York *Post* columnist Leonard Lyons. Dated from 1969 through 1975—the years when Kissinger was acting as the mastermind behind Richard Nixon’s conduct of the Vietnam War—they all concerned getting or declining tickets to popular Broadway shows.

Not all Vo’s recent work is political. His cardboard sculptures—shipping cartons whose labels are relettered in gold leaf—seem untouched by any message at all, except, perhaps, his admiration for somewhat similar works that Robert Rauschenberg did in the nineteen-seventies. Vo started making them in 2009, after travelling to Thailand, where restoring the gold leaf on temples is an active profession. Around the same time, Vo began making sculptural collages, which he described to me as “looking at different periods in art history and squeezing them together.” The collages consist of Roman marble busts, medieval wooden saints and Madonnas, and other relics that he finds in antique shops or buys at auction; he cuts each one up into two or more parts, and joins part of one to part of another. Some of the mismatches become freestanding sculptures, others are cut to fit precisely into wooden crates that were once used for Carnation milk, Johnnie Walker Scotch, or other products.

In her catalogue essay for the Guggenheim show, Katherine Brinson links this dismemberment of relatively unimportant but still genuine art works to “the dense compression and intermingling of narrative strata that is the hallmark of his work.” A certain amount of black humor is also involved, and it becomes overt in some of the titles. “Shove It Up Your Ass, You Faggot!” and “Your Mother Sucks Cock in Hell,” the titles of two sculptural collages that combine classical and early-Christian fragments, are phrases spoken by the demon in “The Exorcist,”

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which Vo saw on video when he was a young boy. His mother was addicted to horror films, but found them too scary to watch alone, so the children watched with her.

Vo has continued the practice of putting works by other artists in his exhibitions. David Wojnarowicz's indelible late-nineteen-eighties photograph of three bison plunging head first over a cliff has been in several of them, and so have Peter Hujar's photographs of the New York cultural underground in the nineteen-seventies. A small photograph, he has found, can converse eloquently with a large-scale sculpture. In 2010, Vo co-curated a show of work by the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose use of mundane but evocative materials (piles of wrapped candies that viewers were invited to share, strings of unadorned light bulbs) had been an inspiration for him when he was starting out. When Vo won the Hugo Boss Prize, in 2012, he chose not to show his own work in the small Guggenheim Museum exhibition that goes with it; instead, he put together a display of hundreds of small figurines, ceramics, and gift-shop tchotchkes that had been collected by Martin Wong, a little-known (up to then) Chinese-American artist who died of AIDS in 1999. "That show really changed me as a curator," Katherine Brinson told me. "Who was the author? Was it collaboration, or appropriation? The show criticized our concepts of authorship, in a way, but it was also a beautiful, generous gesture."

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Travel is still a big part of Vo's life. He has spent a lot of time in China and explored Sinaloa, Chiapas, Yucatán, and other parts of Mexico. "The more you travel, the less you know," he quips. "Danh's a great observer," his friend Eungie Joo, a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, said recently. "He is the only person I know who does not get lost in Venice." When he and Knes are not travelling, they divide their time between Mexico City and Berlin. Vo and three other artists, Nairy Baghramian, Haegue Yang, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, are currently renovating an old barn in the countryside near Berlin, to use as a multipurpose space where other artists can come to work, teach classes, and share experiences. "Berlin is for work," Vo told me. "Mexico is for discovery." Sitting on the patio of his house in Roma Norte, we drank hibiscus tea and talked about his family. All of them still live in or near Copenhagen, he said, and he goes back to see them once a year. (His older brother and sister are engineers; his younger sister works in catering.) "I think my father and my family have always been something for me to look into, something that I was not really part of," he said. "Like most immigrants, they trained their children to move on."

Although his father figures in many of his works, Vo told me that "I was my mother's child. My father and I became closer through the work he does for me—reactivating his calligraphy has always felt like one of my biggest accomplishments. But I don't want to get that close. I love my family, I have a lot of fun with them, and I support my parents financially, but I'm not so emotionally attached." I asked him if his parents understand what he does. "No," he said. His work and his success "just baffle them." Some years back, Vo and his father collaborated on what will be Phung Vo's tombstone, a black granite slab with the words "Here Lies One Whose Name Was Writ in Water" inscribed on it in gold. Vo had seen this inscription on John Keats's

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grave, in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. He asked his father if he would like to have it on his gravestone; his father said yes, and chose the Gothic typeface to be used. “Tombstone for Phung Vo” is temporarily installed in the garden of the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis. When Phung dies, the stone will be shipped to Copenhagen, and the Walker will receive, in return, a new version of the piece with Phung’s watch, lighter, and signet ring.

Vo is bringing his entire family—parents, three siblings, and nine nieces and nephews—to New York for the Guggenheim opening. Phung Vo arrived in January and is at work etching the show’s title on the museum’s south window. Vo wants a live, potted chestnut tree in the ground-floor atrium, and he has been working with a landscape designer to redo the plantings inside and outside the museum—not as part of the exhibition, he explained, but as “a good thing for the institution and for the future.” At Vo’s request, the covering over the central skylight will be removed before the opening—something that has not been done in years—to allow unfiltered daylight into the museum. Daylight is not kind to paintings, and Vo is borrowing an Old Master for this exhibition.

In September, he e-mailed Katherine Brinson the image of a Renaissance painting called “Charity,” showing a woman with a baby at her breast, and two other small children. Brinson thought it was a joke—she was about to give birth to her second child. But a few days later, Vo told her that he wanted to borrow the painting from the National Gallery of Denmark, in Copenhagen, to use in the show. (The artist who painted it, called the Master of the Copenhagen Charity, was recently identified as a little-known Florentine painter named Bartolomeo Ghetti.) Vo negotiated the loan himself—he has a close relationship with Marianne Torp, the chief curator there. Brinson didn’t know how he would use the picture, and when I called Vo to ask that question, I got one of his adroitly elusive answers. “Breastfeeding is pure charity,” he said. “It’s a voluptuous charity, and that’s maybe why I want to combine it with condensed milk. We haven’t figured out how that works, but it should be possible.” Brinson is not worried about the painting’s safety. “It’s total trust,” she said. “It always is.” ♦

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