

# Spiritu Hustler

Danh Vo is constantly on the move and on the make

By Michael Slenske

STRIKING A ZEN-SLACKER POSE ON A YELLOW SOFA, beneath a yellow umbrella, wearing blue sweatpants, a white V-neck T-shirt, and a pair of woven, rainbow-colored leather loafers, Danh Vo is sipping a glass of Coca-Cola poolside while leisurely smoking Marlboros atop Mexico City's Downtown Hotel. "Always demonstrations," he says, faux-exasperated after a blast of sirens and bullhorn announcements crests over the colonial rooftops and water towers bordering Centro Histórico's famed Zócalo. The square is filled with its own imposing demonstration of tanks, helicopters, and military vehicles, positioned beneath a series of massive tents, for what my driver called "an exhibition." It's fitting somehow, in this burgeoning (if still sometimes menacing) cultural hub, that the generals of the Ejército Mexicano and those of the international art market—in town for the 11th annual Zona Maco art fair—would choose the same week in February to flaunt their wares. It's equally intriguing that the Vietnamese-born, Copenhagen-raised Vo, who's been temporarily residing in this 17th-century palace-turned-boutique urban oasis, recently put down roots amid the 20-million-strong maelstrom of the Distrito Federal.

"My life is so psychotic," says Vo, who purchased a small, century-old colonial home in the heart of Mexico's Roma Norte district last fall. "I think my friends and galleries are very happy I got a place."

By "psychotic," Vo is referring to the vagabonding lifestyle he's lived over the past decade, which has taken him from his studies in Frankfurt to Berlin, New York, Basel, and Paris, with occasional stops in Vietnam, Brussels, Shanghai, Los Angeles, and Bangkok. He visits friends when he's not installing and conceiving shows while couch surfing with various curators around the globe.

Though some might view this recent South of the Border sojourn as folly, Vo is quick to dispel that notion. "If I moved to New York or Berlin, that's what's expected, these art metropolises. That's the system. Mexico is interesting because there have

always been great artists and thinkers traveling here and putting down roots. At the same time, they have a very strong indigenous culture. It's all these kinds of things that I'm attracted to. And I must say that I would support any place that breaks with Western dominance. I'm not just interested in Mexico alone, I'm really looking forward to going to Puerto Rico and all these places I don't know shit about and which have these amazing histories," says Vo, whose first attempt to visit the DF was a nonstarter. "I tried to drive one time from L.A. and stupidly thought, I'll take two weeks and come down to Mexico City without knowing how big the country was. So I ended up in Guadalajara."

While that might sound idiotic, it's a great window onto the approach of one of the art world's most impressive thinkers. For many years—and in many ways still—Vo was your classic Churchillian riddle, wrapped in mystery. His inscrutable, if mellifluous, speaking style—peppered with its pregnant pauses, its reflexive questions, and his toothy, paroxysmal laugh—coaxed new philosophies out of whole cloth from a quiet voice that cast a veritable spell over any would-be critics. That's saying something for an artist who, a decade ago, was an all but invisible griffin punking everything from his art school (sending his parents and siblings to make his entire graduate exhibition at Frankfurt's esteemed Städelschule) to his ex-boyfriend, artist Michael Elmgreen (by using his name and signature to score a grant so Vo could travel to and photograph the opening of Elmgreen & Dragset's Prada-shop installation in Marfa, Texas), to the bureaucrats at Immigration and Naturalization (by marrying and divorcing two friends just to acquire new names for his 2003 *Vo Rocasco Rasmussen* project). Until recently, there was very little written about Vo, very few photos published of him, and his comments to reporters (including this one, a couple of years ago) were elliptical at best. Even now, when asked about



# ai



*To Feed the  
Captain's  
Greed They  
Poured Liquid  
Gold in His  
Mouth, 2013.  
Set of 23  
boxes, gold on  
cardboard.*





the practical or conceptual foundations of future projects, his favorite rejoinder is: “I have no idea.”

Today, however, Vo is an institutional darling—supported by everyone from the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris to the Guggenheim Foundation, which awarded him its 2012 Hugo Boss Prize, for which he installed his acquired collection of esoterica (from Disneyana to street art) assembled by the late painter Martin Wong. In the ensuing years, Vo has produced tightly curated solo shows at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York and Mexico City’s Kurimanzutto. He recently installed more than 50 pieces from his life-size replication of parts of the Statue of Liberty, *We the People*, in New York’s City Hall Park and Brooklyn Bridge Park. He’s also opening a still-evolving three-week performance inside an installation at the Kitchen in New York this month with Xiu Xiu frontman Jamie Stewart and will be included in the 12th Sharjah Biennale in the spring of 2015. Meanwhile, he’s prepping for a November solo show at Mexico’s Museo Jumex while looking toward a 2015 Marcel Broodthaers exhibition he’ll likely participate in at the French-Mint-turned-exhibition-hall Monnaie de Paris, not to mention his 2015 Venice Biennale spot, where he’ll represent Denmark.

“He’s definitely an individual who can juggle many projects,” says Tim Griffin, executive director and chief curator at the Kitchen, referring to the multiple conceptual and material layers cross-referenced in Vo’s oeuvre over the course of his career. Complicating matters, adds Griffin, “These histories never end, whether it’s public or private or establishing a dialogue between those two spheres.”

Astonishingly, that’s just the curatorial side of Vo’s universe. His market presence looms larger than ever. “Marian Goodman basically dropped the mic and walked off the stage,” one critic joked to me during Frieze week in New York, referring to Vo’s decision to hang his highly coveted gold-leafed cardboard boxes over her booth from the rafters of the fair’s tent, widely considered one of the highlights on Randall’s Island last May.

“I don’t expect to, nor am I interested in, reliving the last 40 years of artmaking. It’s not something that’s paramount in my sense of what I love,” says Goodman. “It’s not like I’m showing something very hot in the market. I’m really attracted to people with something to say and who have the wherewithal to find a way to express it.”

Yet it’s in a market that increasingly rewards tossed-off art history references over original thought, strategically marketed brand synergies over good old-fashioned mystique, and, most depravedly, sales over substance that an artist like Vo—and his rhapsodic interventions, which many a curator and critic define repeatedly as “haunting,” “beautiful,” and “spiritual”—feels so universally refreshing.

“I think there’s an incredible value, not only for him as an artist but for art viewers today, to actually be startled and come across something that surprises you in your own work. To have it unsettle your own assumptions about what is going to be transpiring there is sort of the lost art of art,” says Griffin. “For me, one of the things that’s beautiful about Vo’s work is what we could call allegory, where one thing in space points to something at a great distance, that nearness and farness of history and geography.” His website, [www.danhvo.com](http://www.danhvo.com), at least at press time, had nothing but a “Coming Soon” sign overlaid atop a snapshot of a 19th-century Vietnamese painting depicting the dismemberment and decapitation of the French missionary Jean-Charles Cornay, an image Vo transferred onto a curtain—behind which he installed the photograph from his childhood passport and 19th-century photos of other French missionaries en route to Vietnam, including Théophane Vénard, who

was also beheaded and whose farewell letter Vo had his amateur calligrapher father re-create—for his seminal 2010 “L’artiste et le décorateur” exhibition at Berlin’s Galerie Buchholz.

He’s since made baby T-shirts imprinted with the image, which he’ll soon sell on his website for 20 euros (limited to three per person, but free if parents take a photo of their child wearing the shirt and allow him unlimited use of the image).

“We’ve gotten quite a few orders since the Berlin Biennale,” says Vo’s assistant, Amy Zion, noting that the web portal “is not going to be an artist website. It won’t be advertising Danh’s work. It’ll be a little bit like a bazaar.” In other words, it’s more or less the online version of the Berlin pop-up shop Vo opened at Elgarafi in 2010, selling handmade brooms from Thailand. “He wasn’t the shopkeeper,” says Zion. “It was just his shop.”

The same might be said for Vo’s practice. He doesn’t require a studio or rely on making original art objects. Instead, the 39-year-old artist says he leans heavily on luck, or, as he puts it, “*fortuna*”—“I was born under a lucky star. I’m very fortunate. I think something is protecting me,” he says—to find and recontextualize historically fraught source material (whether 19th-century Christ figures and angel idols from Belgian churches; a trio of chandeliers from the Hotel Majestic, where the Paris Peace Accords were signed; Vietnam War ephemera purchased at an auction of former U.S. defense secretary Robert McNamara’s estate; or the hoarded esoterica of painter Martin Wong) into elegant installation pieces that tease out the contradictions and ironies in the colonial conquests of the Western world, the devastating failures of Catholic imperialism, or simply industrial overreach and consumer culture from Saigon to Oaxaca. However, the few items he has “made”—copper reproductions of body parts from Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi’s Statue of Liberty rendered in a “crazy” Chinese factory or cardboard beer, soda, bottled-water, and whiskey cases adorned with ads painted in gold leaf by Thai artisans—possess such a breadth of scope and vision that they force even the most myopic collectors (who can be ravenous about Vo’s work) to reinterpret the manner in which they relate to these icons as human beings. No matter how cynical your worldview, you almost can’t help such a reckoning when the juxtapositions in Vo’s oeuvre cast a soft glow over the realities that make such conspicuous consumption and disquieting inequities possible. It’s even more astonishing when, asked how he can see all these layers, the artist in question coyly responds, “I don’t think that much.”

“These are the great artists to me, the ones whose work relates to life and not to art or art history,” says Mexican gallerist José Kuri, who basically changed Vo’s life after bringing him to Mexico City two years ago to work on a solo exhibition at Kurimanzutto, the gallery he runs with his wife, Monica Manzutto. “We could feel there was some electricity between him and the city and the culture here, so we let him do whatever he wanted. We just knew from the way he approaches different cultures that something great was going to happen.” Something great did happen, with last fall’s acclaimed “Log Dog” exhibition, inspired by two of Vo’s favorite images: Theodore De Bry’s *The Discovery of America*, which serves as inspiration and meta-myth, since De Bry, never having traveled to the Americas himself, contrived the savage cannibalism of New World Indians from his imagination; and that of the blond Spanish captain Diego Salcedo’s being drowned in Puerto Rico’s Taino Indians’ attempt to prove he was an immortal golden god. Vo papered the gallery walls in gold-leafed Mexican beer boxes (Corona, Victoria, Pacifico, León, all of which have colonial connotations), with another flattened cardboard piece depicting Old Glory hanging from the rafters over logs suspended by chains, as well as the carefully dismembered parts of the aforementioned Catholic idols alongside a flotsam of



branches deconstructed and arranged by treasured Mexican church restorationist Manuel Serrano, who “was kind of scared,” according to Kuri, before “he saw how they were transforming it into something beautiful.”

“I had been in Spain, thinking of beer brands like León, which has the seal of the Spaniards, and Pacifico, which was made because they were trying to seduce people to think it was a quiet ocean to cross,” says Vo. “All this information existed within the idea of the beer brands, and it was obvious for me to want to work with them because it was so perverse.”

Vo put many more empirical perversions under the microscope in May when Public Art Fund installed more than 50 select pieces from his to-scale Statue of Liberty reproduction, *We the People*. Before it opened, a thief stole a 40-pound, \$6,000 sculpture of a chain that was on loan from his Paris dealer, Chantal Crousel, which has handled all of the production of the pieces since their 2011 debut at the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona. “I have some very nice images of New York’s Finest surrounding the other pieces,” Vo emailed after the incident. “So it turned out to be a very good photo op.”

Most artists wouldn’t revel in the notion of their work’s being stolen, but Vo is interested less in the glorification of his art than in people’s engagement with it. And what could be more engaging than having a disarticulated version of the Statue

Brooms for sale at the Elgarafi shop, Berlin, 2010.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Two installation views of “Log Dog” at Kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2013.





of Liberty—with Lady Liberty’s armpit (Vo’s favorite part) overlooking the icon itself from Brooklyn—while her chain was stolen right out from under the noses of the NYPD at City Hall?

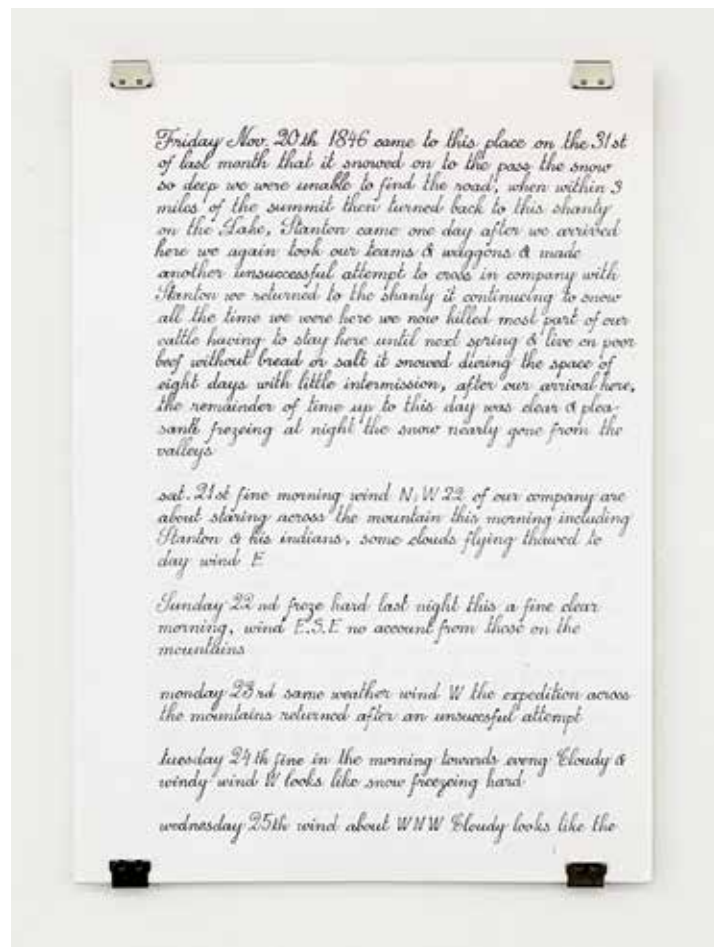
“I think the way that Danh tends to work is very open, and it’s not necessarily about pinpointing a way to view his work,” says Public Art Fund curator Andrea Hickey. “He’s drawn to the contradictions and ironies as well as the straightforward metaphorical connections between the works and the sites.”

For the uninitiated, Vo could come across as some aloof, globe-trotting mystic. He is often vague about his process, installation, and execution until the moment before his openings. At the same time, he is an extraordinary conduit, working with real people tied to the real histories of the sites he chooses. He is part orchestra conductor, part Gladwellian connector finding convergences between the world and the at times ugly (and beautiful) realities just beneath its surface. “The information is not hidden, but there are structures that don’t make these things visible; there are always structures that reduce common knowledge,” he says. “I really like situations where we don’t understand how things were constructed. There’s a lot of reasons why the world is shaped how it is today, but these things are not very visible.”

In many ways Vo is a miner, unearthing and polishing these “amazing histories” he speaks of—then directing them with a Kubrickian attention to detail—for reexamination through the welcoming, if critical, lens of the art world. A couple years ago, shortly after meeting Marian Goodman, who characterizes him as “a hunter and gatherer,” Vo learned that against the will of former defense secretary Robert McNamara’s sons, his

widow was selling 109 pieces of his ephemera in a heavily marketed Sotheby’s auction dubbed “The White House Years of Robert S. McNamara.” Vo persuaded Goodman to buy a pair of nailhead-trimmed Chippendale-style black leather and mahogany armchairs for \$146,000. “She called me from the auction and said, ‘I’m not so sure we should buy these chairs because they’re not going to last, the leather is very worn out.’ I was like, ‘Yeah, but Marian, that just means that the asses have rubbed the leather a lot.’ She was like, ‘Okay, we take them.’ And when we got them, they looked horrible, they were horrible chairs. In a moment of insanity, I sent the installation team an email and said, ‘Can you take the chairs apart?’ I just couldn’t look at them. So Marian came down that afternoon and she was like, ‘Is there any chance these chairs can be put together again?’”

Vo placed his portion of the McNamara collection—including the Esterbrook fountain pen used to sign the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a carbon copy of McNamara’s letter to President Kennedy detailing his conditions for accepting the defense secretary job, and an Ansel Adams landscape print McNamara had owned, which Vo purchased simply for its beauty—inside illuminated vitrines in the hallway of Goodman’s 57th Street space. A dimmed hallway glowed with the spotlight Vietnam relics. In the adjoining galleries displaying one of the aforementioned chairs and its savaged innards hung a Vietnamese carved ivory tusk depicting the god of longevity, antique animal traps, and a wall of gold-leafed Budweiser boxes. Goodman remembers it as “haunting. By the end, I was very moved by the chair that had nothing but the wooden frame bearing witness to all the devastation and waste of life that these men who sat in those two chairs heaped on the world,” she says. “Danh’s always making



FROM TOP: DANH VO; CATHY CARVER AND DANH VO

connections with the objects that he chooses, and he has this gift of opening new paths of connection.”

Vo opened up similar pathways in 2011, when he obtained three chandeliers from the ballroom of the Hotel Majestic and exhibited them in exactly disassembled layouts on the floors of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and again last year at the Musée d'Art Moderne. At MOMA, he also exhibited a drawing by his father, Phung Vo, of the letter written (and reproduced by Phung's hand) by Vénard to his own father the night before his 1861 execution in Vietnam for the crime of Christian proselytizing.

It was this work, and Vo's highly praised 2010 Artists Space exhibition “Autoerotic Asphyxiation” (featuring photos of Vietnamese men seemingly in loving embraces that were set behind embroidered organza veils), that caught Goodman's attention. “I lived through that period and was very taken with his idea of the chandelier as a witness to what was in some measure a fiasco and dreams dashed,” she says, adding, “The tenderness that was there in the work, it always seemed like this was an artist with a sense of ambivalence, and it always seemed to me the complexity of the work had the capacity to move people, to make people think.”

As is the case with many artists who were born under the oppression of a Communist regime, Vo began his journey as what most people would call a refugee, though he has taken umbrage to that label in previous interviews. “I don't really like the word *refugee* because it conjures up specific images we all have of someone in a crisis,” he told a reporter last fall. “And it doesn't allow a person to have a complicated identity. It implies a subjugated position, as we have come to understand the word through the media.”



LEFT:  
Chair frame from  
Lot 20. Two Kennedy  
Administration  
Cabinet Room Chairs,  
2013. Mahogany  
and metal,  
40½ x 26 x 25¼ in.

BELOW:  
*Gustav's Wing*, 2013.  
Papier-mâché,  
dimensions variable.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:  
Charles with his T-shirt  
bearing the motif from  
an 1839 painting of  
the torture of Jean-  
Charles Cornay  
(1809–37), a French  
martyr in Tonkin.

*Diary of Patrick Breen  
1846–47*, 2011. Ink on  
paper, writing by  
Phung Vo. 18 pages,  
each 8 x 11½ in.







“There’s a lot of misinformation about him,” says Zion, noting that while many people have reported that Vo was born in Saigon, that’s not the case. Born in Ba Ria as Võ Trung Kỳ Danh, at the bitter end of the Vietnam War, the artist fled with his family in 1979 in a boat for 100 “organized” by his father. The handcrafted vessel was intercepted by a Danish tanker and directed to a Singaporean island. His parents saw the tanker as an omen and a year later settled into a relatively quiet life in Copenhagen as the hardworking owners of burger joints, which Vo recalls as “trashy.”

“I barely remember my childhood. It was very quiet and nothing much to do. I was confused, I had no direction,” he says, taking a delicate pull on his cigarette while explaining how he worked as an occasional grill man and server at his parents’ establishments. “It was horrible.” Though his parents weren’t educated, they did save to send Vo to a private Catholic high school, which was “a weird thing because there were all these wealthy people and then there were all these crazy fanatic refugees that were Catholics,” says Vo, who went to church until



he was 18. “Nobody really thought I would become an artist, including myself. But I wanted to use that structure to travel a bit. I started to paint all these horrible monochrome abstractions, and then somebody thought that I had a good sense of color and form.” He was accepted into the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen after applying three times. “It was disastrous,” he says. “In the academy I knew very soon I was not going to use the rest of my life making crappy paintings. I gave all of them to the other students and they would use them as canvases.” It was there that Vo met Rirkrit Tiravanija, then a visiting professor. Tiravanija got him accepted into the Städelschule, where Vo ended up in a class taught by Op art master Tobias Rehberger, who would later build a refugee-boat installation, dubbed *American Traitor Bitch*, based on specifications from Phung Vo.

Rehberger recalls Vo as a “coquette” who “liked to party” and embraced the family camaraderie that carried over from class into weekly dinner gatherings. “That’s him, making up stories, mixing up real and make-up,” says Rehberger. “He’s playing all the time, and I think he thinks a lot about things. He’s definitely somebody who tries things out and sees what people think, and he might not have come up with the idea, but by putting it out there that’s how he comes up with ideas. He’s a bit of a hustler in a positive sense. He’s just trying to find funny, complicated stories.”

When Vo had difficulties buying the chandeliers from the Paris conference, he “called heaven and hell,” recalls Rehberger, who eventually put up half the money for the chandeliers out of his own pocket. “He’s super active trying to get something together, and then in the end it should look like it just came there and fell in place. But he’s super active. He likes to make it look very easy, but behind the scenes he’s dealing and wheeling. Socially he’s also very good.”

Griffin has also observed the use of social skills and interactions as a currency Vo employs to great advantage during installations. “I know someone who was involved with a show of his who said he was a very jaded individual, having worked in the art world for so long, and installing a show with Danh ended up being a completely rejuvenating experience,” says Griffin. “He can re-instill that belief in artmaking—not alchemical by any stretch of the imagination—but the spiritual aspect.”

While Vo gained a strong grasp of the art world hustle during his student days, his spiritual awakening transpired after graduation. After leaving the Städelschule, Vo moved to Berlin in the early aughts. Though he wasn’t showing (or making) much work, the rent was cheap and the creative community he’d found was inspiring new ideas in him for what art could be. For his first solo show, at Berlin’s now-shuttered Klosterfelde gallery, Vo presented the inner workings of a scam he’d perpetrated upon the Danish Art Council and his then boyfriend, Michael Elmgreen, who at the time was about to open *Prada Marfa* with his art partner Ingar Dragset. “I really wanted to join them. But I was broke and didn’t have the money to travel to the desert of Texas,” Vo has said of the incident. Using the duo’s names and signatures without their knowledge, Vo applied for money to send a photo team to the opening to make visual documentation of the event.

Under the assumption that the actual Elmgreen & Dragset were applying for the grant, the Art Council approved the application, and Vo flew to Marfa as the assistant to a photographer friend. Back at Klosterfelde, he presented a photo of the shop and another of him kissing Elmgreen under the Texan night sky, along with the documents that verified the deception. As he later said, “I wanted to be a hacker, a friendly hacker.”

At the Kitchen, Vo will hack into notions of labor, value, and artistic currency by flying in two Thai gold-pounders—the same



who make the leaf for his cardboard work. They will form the material live against granite slabs while Jamie Stewart and two percussionists perform a new work. Says Griffin, “One gets the sense that he likes to have things playing off each other because they’ll inspire other thoughts he might not have.”

If that’s the case, the Kitchen run may well influence Vo’s Jumex show, which may or may not tap into his investigations of cochineal, the carmine dye popularized in 15th-century textiles, which is extracted from a cactus-loving scale insect native to Central America and Oaxaca. “It was literally worth its weight in gold,” says Vo. “Normal people were not allowed to wear this color, so it was a currency in itself.” The dye also helps him understand Mexican history. “In the late 19th century, when they invented chemical red dye, the whole economy of Mexico went down.”

Vo’s ability to get deep inside a culture amazes Kuri: “He doesn’t go anywhere as a tourist anymore. He immediately understands culture and its layers, and then works himself into this mesh of things. He’s showing me many places in the city that I’ve never been before,” says Kuri, noting one particularly salient excursion he took with Vo to an eclectic house in Popotla, a funky district in the Miguel Hidalgo borough of Mexico City, which was designed by a mask-collecting anthropologist. “It’s in the north part of the town, this part that’s out of the way, where you wouldn’t go. He’s also been going to bullfights. I went with him one or two times.”

In fact, after our talk atop the Downtown Hotel, Vo was off to the plaza de toros for yet another bullfight. “I try to go every week I’m here,” he says. “I really think it’s interesting because in the Western world you have a very violent society, but you want to disguise it. I prefer it right in my face—because it’s more real.” Before heading to his room, Vo takes one last drag on his cigarette, pauses for a second, and concludes, “Human nature is so fucking perverse.” MP

Lot 65.  
(Kennedy,  
John F., *Thirty-  
fifth President*),  
2013. Shaped  
and welded  
metal rods,  
25 x 20 in.

OPPOSITE FROM TOP:  
Brass plaque  
from Lot 20.  
*Two Kennedy  
Administration  
Cabinet Room  
Chairs*, 2013.

Stuffing from  
Lot 20. *Two  
Kennedy  
Administration  
Cabinet Room  
Chairs*, 2013.  
Cotton, nails.