Remnants of the War on Trees:
Danh Vo and the McNamara Wood

Throughout his career, Danish artist Danh Vo has repurposed objects of historical significance in a practice that scholars often relate to his family's forced uprooting. Fleeing Vietnam in 1975, they left their belongings behind. Appropriating, dismantling, and reassembling found objects, Vo invokes this loss and troubles easy assumptions about identity and memory. For example, in 2012 Vo bought two mahogany office chairs that had once belonged to Robert McNamara, the US Secretary of Defense from 1961-68. These chairs had been gifted to McNamara by Jackie Kennedy just eight days after John Kennedy was assassinated. In his installation, *Two Kennedy Administration Cabinet Room Chairs*, Vo dismantled the McNamara chairs and put their remains on display; scattering stuffing on the floor and nailing limp leather to the walls, Vo destroyed them in a pointed act of artistic retribution.

In 2016, Craig McNamara, Robert McNamara's son, visited the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to see what Vo had made with his father's chairs. Touched by the work, he contacted Vo and the two men began corresponding. Vo visited Craig and his family in Northern California, where they own and operate Sierra Orchards, an organic walnut farm. The two men grew close during long walks and shared meals. Eventually, Craig gave Vo 20 acres of walnut trees. These trees were felled, planed, treated and shipped to Vo's studio in northern Germany—a massive and expensive undertaking—and have provided material for Vo's work in recent years.

In this paper, I consider the significance of the McNamara wood in relation to the US military's deforestation of South Vietnam. Over the course of almost a decade, the US destroyed an estimated 5 million acres of forest in what the radical Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett referred to at the time as a "war against trees." The extensive use of herbicides in South Vietnam, intended to destroy both tree cover and food, was recommended to Kennedy by Robert McNamara; it is not hard to imagine that they discussed the program while sitting in the mahogany chairs that Vo later ruined. The walnut trees in question here—first as they grew at Sierra Orchards and now as they lie planed and stacked in Vo's studio—invoke ecocide in a way that is indirect and suggestive, inviting us to think further about wood as a particular kind of war remnant.

Bio

Franny Nudelman is a Professor in the English Department and the Institute for the Study of Literature, Art and Culture at Carleton University in Ottawa. Her scholarship and teaching explore cultural responses to social crises, with a particular focus on the documentary record of war and war resistance. She is the author of *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and co-editor with Sara Blair and Joseph Entin of *Remaking Reality: U.S. Documentary Culture After 1945* (UNC Press, 2018). Most recently, she published a book entitled, *Fighting Sleep: The War for the Mind and the US Military* (Verso Books, 2019), and her writing on sleep, trauma, and war resistance has appeared in *Literary Hub*, *Process: a blog for american history*, and *BBC Science Focus*. She is currently working on a book about art and ecocide.