

Masses still huddle, and Lady Liberty still inspires

A massive curl of bright copper, roughly the size of six people standing shoulder to shoulder, gleams in a corner of a gallery at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It is a work in the museum's permanent collection — part of a new installation called “A Slow Succession With Many Interruptions,” but it is not the exhibition that we will consider here. Let us look closely, instead, at this single, deceptively simple work.

The sculpture was made by Chinese craftsmen, who hammered it out at the direction of the artist Danh Vo. The quintessential immigrant, Vo was born in 1975 on an island in Vietnam reserved for refugees after the fall of Saigon. His family escaped from Vietnam on a hand-made boat that was intercepted by a Danish ship.

Granted asylum in Denmark as a child, he became a citizen of that country, studied in Copenhagen and in Frankfurt, and now lives primarily in Berlin.

“We the People (detail)” (2011-13), a work by Danh Vo in the exhibition “A Slow Succession With Many Interruptions”: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays; Thursdays 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Through April 2. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and under free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

His highly successful career has led to inclusion of his work in museum exhibitions and collections throughout the world.

The internationally scattered aspects of his life and career help to explain the work, which the artist has titled “We the People (detail).” Produced in 2011-13, it is part of a series of such “details,” exact replicas of different parts of a sculpture publicly announced precisely 100 years before his birth: “Liberty Enlightening the World” — the Statue of Liberty.

Various described in articles about the project (there have been many) as consisting

of about 250, 300 or 400 elements, the total series could theoretically be assembled into a full-scale reproduction of Liberty. But an essential aspect of this work of conceptual art is that the elements are distributed around the world. Toes here, an eye and cheek there, a fold of her robe in a San Francisco museum.

The original was a 19th century symbol of partnership between two nations, France and the United States. Each left a deep scar on the people of the man who created the 21st century work.

Liberty in pieces: an idea torn apart, or a potential not yet realized?

A symbol of unity built of diversity, of welcome to huddled masses, now strewn across the globe.

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Don Ross / San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Danh Vo's hammered copper “We the People (detail)” (2011-13) is a work in a series replicating parts of the Statue of Liberty.