

FEDERAL HALL NATIONAL MEMORIAL

A Living Thing *Mel Ziegler: Flag Exchange* **#FlagExchange #FederalHall**

The American flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing.

– United States Flag Code

THE EXHIBITION

Between 2011 and 2016 artist Mel Ziegler journeyed through all 50 states and replaced distressed American flags flying at civic and private locations — city halls, post offices, hospitals, homes, and schools — with new flags. These 50 tattered flags form a powerful artwork, *Flag Exchange*, which spans the geography of our union, and represents the spectrum of our allegiance.

The American flag offers a perfect mirror for all of us. For citizens and others alike, it is the shining beacon of hope and resilience of the United States. It also transcends national borders as a symbol of opportunity and unnamable possibility. At the same time, for many throughout our world, this flag is a nationalist and contemptible signal of imperialism. As with the most charged and enduring symbols, it is simultaneously revered, cherished, feared, and despised — it is worth dying for.

Meaning accrues over time, and layers on to places and objects such that they might symbolize something larger than themselves. Federal Hall National Memorial is perhaps the most singular site from which our nation and democracy emerged — here the First Amendment was enacted; George Washington was inaugurated; and our first, and most productive Congress, invented the instruments of American government from the 4500-word Constitution, which made no mention of democracy.

Ideologies aside, Americans agree on this: political vitriol and legislative gridlock have delivered us to a fragile moment in our democracy. Where better to imagine new and more inclusive paths forward than *Federal Hall*? No other historic site offers as much potential as an authentic vehicle to enlighten, explore and evaluate the nation's past and future. No other hallowed place has provided so powerful a platform demonstrating that debate defends democracy.

It is easy to forget that Francis Scott Key's lyrics to The Star-Spangled Banner are as much declaration as question. At the end of the first verse, he asks:

Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

The idea, and truth, of the flag's life contains, as our own lives do: ups and downs, moments to be proud of, and instances where we fall short of our own values. For a nation and its symbol to live, it must remain open to new ideas, people, and times. As so many have said, the American Flag symbolizes the ongoing experiment of this country, and folds together all of its failings, soaring successes, and intoxicating complexity.

This may be best summarized in Johnny Cash's 1974 song *Ragged Old Flag*, a jingoistic ode to a battle-scarred, but proudly-flying flag:

She's been through the fire before, and I believe she can take a whole lot more.

While introducing that song in a live performance, Cash said, "I thank God for all the freedoms we've got in this country. I cherish them. Even the rights to burn the flag, you know, I'm proud of those rights." As the crowd began to boo, Cash continued, "But I'll tell you what. We've also got a right to bear arms and if you burn my flag, I'll shoot you." Of course, Cash didn't always play it up to his audience — among the songs he played for President Richard Nixon at the White House in 1972 were the anti-Vietnam War ballad *What*

is Truth and *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, which chronicled the United States' original sin of genocide of American Indians.

In the United States Supreme Court's 1989 protection of the First Amendment right to burn the flag, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, "It is poignant but fundamental that the flag protects those who hold it in contempt." Kennedy's opinion outlines the core complexity of the flag and America — out of many, we are one. In the one, there are many.

An irony of the American flag is that it is intended to be burnt — the code states: "The flag, when it is in such condition that it is no longer a fitting emblem for display, should be destroyed in a dignified way, preferably by burning." The Boy Scouts and others ceremonially execute this tradition, and yet, the flags in this exhibition were found flying, tattered, some proudly, and others forgotten at sites throughout our nation.

Mel Ziegler's work began with a remarkably simple act — he saw a flag on a barn in Tennessee that had worn through — its white stripes had disintegrated and the husk of the remaining flag hung limp on the barn. After driving past the flag many times, Ziegler returned one day with a new flag of the same size and approached the adjacent house. Without yet knowing this would become an artwork that would take him on an epic journey throughout the America over the following six years, Ziegler had a conversation with a stranger and exchanged their ragged flag for a new one.

Following the Democratic and Republican conventions of July 2016, the presidential candidates raced across the nation to campaign, fundraise, and speak with voters. Yet their travels were confined to states with seemingly the greatest potential electoral impact. Neither candidate nor their teams visited 26 different states between their convention and the election.

In a historical moment where the American experience is deeply splintered across so many lines — race, class, geography, individual rights, and identity, to name a few, the ability to engage those unlike us, or more powerfully to recognize what we hold in common, is an ascendant gift. Gamesmanship and partisanship often appear to have climbed over the back of common purpose in our democracy.

In his travels, which began in 2011, and sped up in 2016 at the invitation of the Tang Museum at Skidmore, Ziegler found tattered flags flying throughout the country, alongside

core decency and shared aspiration amongst their owners. In conversations that veered from deeply personal stories of loss to questions of Ziegler's political motives to expressions of gratefulness for this simple act of consideration to moments of embarrassment for flying a ragged flag, the owners offered up their flags to this artwork. The same flag that still flew at Fort McHenry in Baltimore, was the first to plant on the moon, Ziegler exchanged with the parent of an active-duty military service member in Ohio, at a Post Office in Alaska, a Texas barbecue joint, a McDonald's in New York, an asphalt plant in Oregon, a car dealership in Hawaii, at the home of a fellow Kansas City Art Institute alum in California, a Native American casino in Montana, and a U.S. Army recruiting office in Alabama.

Ziegler's account of each state gives texture and warmth to the exchanges. Even in the lone case where he didn't seek permission, a moving experience of personal impact unfolded:

"There are very few flags that I exchanged without permission. One such flag was outside a defunct museum [in Nebraska] and it was extremely weathered. While I was replacing it with a new one there was someone across the street in a pick-up truck that was staring at me the whole time. And I thought that I was going to get in trouble because he might think that I was stealing it, which in essence I was though I was replacing it with a new one. After I raised the new flag, the man in the truck approached and to my surprise he thanked me over and over again, saying that he was a Veteran and he always felt offended by the flag that was up, and that he was thankful for my gesture, and overwhelmed by what had happened, he thanked me one more time. I felt so bad about taking the flag that I later contacted the museum and they too were very happy I replaced it and didn't have a problem with how I had done it."

Artists are often the normal ones among us. The tools Ziegler brought to this project — rigor, daring, and pragmatism — are things we might consider uniquely American tools, and are precisely the assets that appear missing from our public life. Whereas the current political and partisan climate of the United States can feel like a funhouse mirror that reflects a distorted, extreme image of our shared values, *Flag Exchange* in Federal Hall models the spirit in which we may continue to seek a more perfect union. Here, at the inaugural site of our democracy, Ziegler's work offers a hopeful and direct image of these United States of America, one that is grounded in conversation with people unlike ourselves, coursing with empathy for their perspectives, and reveals the subtle yet powerfully

disarming gift of creativity. Ziegler's act of sly and generous alchemy is a potent reminder that artists do new and vital things for our public life, by finding the common ground that we have otherwise lost.

–Hesse McGraw,
exhibition curator and
Principal, el dorado

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A Living Thing: Flag Exchange is curated by Hesse McGraw, principal, el dorado; and organized by the National Parks of New York Harbor Conservancy with Visual Arts Advisor Bonnie Levinson; Federal Hall National Memorial; and San Francisco Art Institute.

About *Flag Exchange*

Flag Exchange was first shown at Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska as an in-progress work in Ziegler's 2013 exhibition *An American Conversation*. *Flag Exchange* formed the cornerstone of the The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College's 2016 exhibition *A More Perfect Union*, which foregrounded the museum as town square by opening space to explore the elections and the current state of democracy through classes, lectures, dialogues, debates, performances, lunches, and more.

In early 2017, *Flag Exchange* was presented at San Francisco Art Institute's Walter and McBean Galleries, as the catalyst for the exhibition *A Living Thing*, which sought to create space for common ground within our increasingly fractured civil discourse. Throughout its run, *A Living Thing* offered a sanctuary for conversations, performances, debate, and acts of solidarity and resistance — through an open mic during all gallery hours, and an open call to students, artists, activists, citizens, residents, visitors, and others that wished to contribute to the life represented by the flag.

About the Artist

Mel Ziegler is widely known for his collaborative work with his late partner Kate Ericson — beginning in the early 1980s Ericson Ziegler were integral to the emergence of socially engaged practice and community engagement as vital forms of contemporary art. In the broadest sense, Ziegler's work asserts the value of rural identities and aesthetics and locates authentic spaces within the increasingly fragmented American experience. For Ziegler, the American landscape is a place of deep distress and profound optimism, yet his work finds new possibilities through monumentalizing and honoring the everyday.

America Starts Here, the Ericson Ziegler retrospective, was co-organized by The Tang Teaching Museum and List Visual Arts Center at MIT and toured the country. Ziegler has presented solo exhibitions at venues including Secession, Vienna; Artpace, San Antonio; and Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal. Ericson Ziegler's work is held in the collections of SFMOMA, UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among many others. Ziegler is Paul E. Shwab Chair in Fine Arts, Professor of Art and Chair of the Department of Art at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee. He is the founder of the Sandhills Institute in Rushville, Nebraska, which is a catalyst for developing new models of artistic citizenship in America's heartland. Ziegler is represented by Galerie Perrotin.

About the Curator

Hesse McGraw is a curator and writer and Principal at el dorado, an architecture, urban design, and curatorial practice based in Kansas City, Missouri. McGraw was previously Vice President for Exhibitions and Public Programs at San Francisco Art Institute, which presented the exhibition *A Living Thing* in spring 2017.

About Federal Hall National Memorial

Federal Hall stands at the birthplace of American Government. It is where George Washington took the oath of office as the first President and where the first U.S. Congress amended the Constitution with the Bill of Rights and invented a system of governance that still guides the country.

The current building was conceived as the architectural embodiment of the nation's founding ideals. It was erected in the mid-19th century as a U.S. Custom House and later

U.S. Sub-Treasury, after the original Federal Hall was demolished. It is one of the nation's finest examples of Greek Revival public architecture — its design inspired by the Parthenon of ancient Athens and the Pantheon of republican Rome.

Federal Hall was designated a National Historic Site in 1939 and then a National Memorial 16 years later, to commemorate the historic events that happened at the site. Today, stewardship of the building and the site's important history is entrusted to the National Park Service.

About the National Parks of New York Harbor Conservancy

Founded in 2005, the Harbor Conservancy is the primary nonprofit partner of the National Park Service's sites on New York Harbor, including Federal Hall National Memorial. The Harbor Conservancy works to restore and activate treasured monuments, conserve historic collections, and connect communities to opportunities for exploration and recreation in treasured natural habitats and landscapes.

About San Francisco Art Institute

Founded in 1871, SFAI is one of the country's oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher education in the practice and study of contemporary art. As a diverse community of working artists and scholars, SFAI provides students with a rigorous education in the arts and preparation for a life in the arts through an immersive studio environment, an integrated liberal arts and art history curriculum, and critical engagement with the world. Committed to educating artists who will shape the future of art, culture, and society, SFAI fosters creativity and original thinking in an open, experimental, and interdisciplinary context.

Further Reading and References

Marshall, Tim. *A Flag Worth Dying For: The Power and Politics of National Symbols*. New York: Scribner, 2016.

Teachout, Woden. *Capture The Flag: A Political History of American Patriotism*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.