



Mel Ziegler
Flag Exchange

March 13–October 12, 2020

I don't necessarily make art objects. Rather, I curate and juxtapose things that have intrinsic meaning. These "things" that I find are right in front of us. They are what I look for in what I call my "inquisitive travels." The countless back roads, small towns, and urban centers, the bars, the diners I visit and the people I meet during my travels . . . this is my true studio.

—Mel Ziegler

The idea for *Flag Exchange* arose from an observation made by Mel Ziegler while taking road trips across the United States: everywhere he traveled, the American flag was on display, in front of schools, homes, restaurants, and car dealerships, as well as at construction sites, in parks, or simply alongside the road. Not all these flags were pristine; some, in fact, were in distressed and even terrible condition, leading Ziegler to wonder if their owners might be willing to trade theirs for fresh new flags of the same size as the damaged ones. He had previously collected a few such flags, intrigued by the thought that these public expressions of patriotism—a belief system in which the flag is held to be inviolable—were kept on view by people who perhaps couldn't afford a new one, but in many cases hadn't noticed or cared whether theirs had gotten increasingly shabby (fig. 1).

Early in the project, Ziegler realized that a grouping of flags from every state in the union

would allow him to tap more deeply into the complexities of national self-definition, using the flags as prompts for reflection. From 2011 to 2016, he visited all fifty states, bringing with him a suitcase full of new American flags. When he saw a flag hanging outdoors that was faded, weathered, or frayed, he would offer to replace it with a new one, refreshing people's displays while having conversations with them about subjects ranging from politics to his own artistic practice. Ziegler documented these interactions, noting that in some cases the recipients were appreciative, or embarrassed about the deterioration of their flags, but in other instances indignant or skeptical of his intentions, occasionally even declining the exchange. For Ziegler, who is internationally known for work that has since the 1980s embraced social and community engagement to amplify the voices of people across the cultural spectrum, these conversations became as revealing as the tattered artifacts themselves.



Fig. 1

More than a physical installation, *Flag Exchange* takes the social value of such private, face-to-face encounters into a more public arena, encouraging real-time discussions of the flag as a symbol of national identity and ideals. In presentations of *Flag Exchange* around the United States, rows of flags from every state, each with the state's name embroidered onto it, have been suspended from the ceiling of a large room or gallery. The dense spatial layering has been visually powerful, as the inherent beauty of the flags' patterns is intensified through repetition and the irregularity of the damaged cloth.

These installations have often been placed behind or around a stage or podium that served as a site for readings, musical performances, and political discussions. In these installations, and now at the Frist Art Museum, the designation of the gallery as a safe place for the civil exchange of views, contravening the anonymity and

combativeness that is today endemic to social media, is reinforced. Significantly, this installation occurs in an election year in which political divisions seem to many observers to be more intensely partisan than ever before. The moment is not lost on the artist: "Six years ago" (he wrote in 2017), "I could have never known what the political climate in the United States might be like today. It seems rather significant and pertinent that this project should help develop open, unpartisan dialogue at a moment when it seems to be needed most."

Flag Exchange extends Ziegler's longstanding interest in exploring forces that have made the trajectories of American history and ideals often appear to be misaligned. In the 1980s and 1990s, he and his first wife Kate Ericson (1955–1995) created community-based performances, mixed-media works, and installations that examined the social structures underlying a nation riven by inequities of

race and class, as well as by geographical sectionalism. The latter is of particular interest to Ziegler. Having been raised in the agricultural community of Campbelltown, Pennsylvania, Ziegler—a farmer as well as an artist—rejects assumptions that rural Americans are backward or disengaged from contemporary life. In their collaborations, he and Ericson strove to create experiences that would be equally transformative for audiences and communities across rural, small town, and urban America.

The American flag occasionally appeared in this early work as a mirror of social complexity. In *Peas, Carrots, Potatoes* (1994; [fig. 2](#)), Ziegler and Ericson reconstituted the flag as a set of metaphors in the guise of 364 jars of baby food, arranged to form the Stars and Stripes. Each jar contains vegetables, a reminder that agriculture has been an essential aspect of national identity from the earliest times. Today, after twenty-five

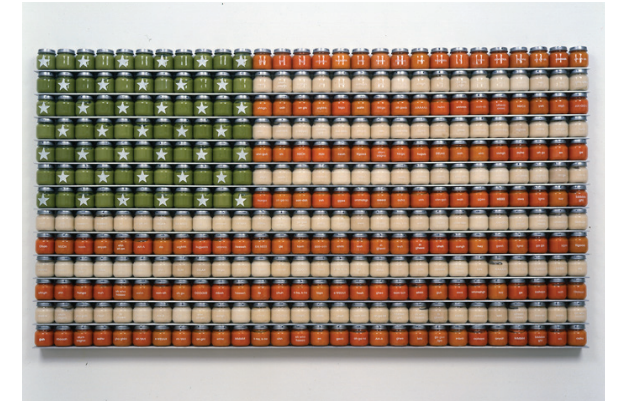


Fig. 2

years, the mashed vegetables are beginning to deteriorate and solidify into dark lumps, signifying the inevitable decay of organic matter, but also hinting that the American experiment itself must be examined and refreshed by every generation, or it may shrivel and harden to the point of unrecognizability. Sandblasted onto each jar is the phonetic spelling of a baby sound as described by new

parents—"ygoo," "ummahgh," "a WEEQAH." This gently humorous text establishes a point of universal connectedness, moving the flag from an abstract symbol of national multivalence to an adorable expression of a biological/social imperative: nourishing children is critical to the future of this country, as it is for every other place on earth.

Flag Exchange continues this remarkable and generous journey into the psychic terrain of a nation of interwoven individuals. But it is not without ambiguity or edge. Just as the baby food is now the fossilized remains of once wholesome nutrition, the installation may imply that the flags have themselves been reduced from living symbols to mere artifacts, reminders that the sentiments they represent are not themselves inevitable or immortal. But it may also be that the installation affirms the durability of these very sentiments, marking the capacity of the national experiment to be sustained through the triumphs and

shortcomings of America's own history. The replacement of old flags with new reinforces the notion that national ideals will continue to be perpetuated through the country's ups and downs. One can think of Francis Scott Key's tribute to the tattered flag flying over Fort McHenry as a paean to endurance through conflict (fig. 3). The flag is not just a thing but an idea.

Flag Exchange may be perceived by some as a critique of American values (even if the damage to the flags was done by the sun, rain, and wind and not the artist). It is important to note that during the process of choosing the flags for this exhibition, Ziegler was sensitive to the U.S. Flag Code regarding display of the flag when it has been damaged.¹ He has noted that some of his most engaging interactions yielded some of the most ruined flags, but he chose to exclude the ones in such poor shape that exhibiting them could be considered disrespectful. He requires each



Fig. 3

presenting institution, including the Frist Art Museum, to handle the flags in accordance with the code, particularly insisting on their not being allowed to touch the floor.

This exercise of a transcendent civic responsibility stands in stark contrast to the frequent use of the flag as a partisan weapon, in which a false dichotomy between flag-huggers and flag-burners is perpetuated as a means of affirming one's own patriotism while

questioning that of the opposition. In the end, the heat generated by such conflict is lowered (if only by a little) by the openness and vulnerability of an artist who invites viewers to find common ground in the meaning of the flag and the promise of the nation.

Mark Scala
Chief Curator

Notes

All quotes by Mel Ziegler are from his artist's statement for the exhibition *Flag Exchange*, presented at Federal Hall, New York, in 2017.

1. See United States Code, Title 4, Chapter 1: "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" (legion.org/documents/legion/pdf/flagcode_07.pdf). This leaves the definition of "fitness for display" open to interpretation and, in the judgment of the artist, the flags he chose to exhibit are indeed appropriate to display, as their previous owners may have also felt.

About the Artist

Mel Ziegler (born 1956) earned his BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and his MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. He has had exhibitions at such venues as Artpace, San Antonio; the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha; the Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal; Secession, Vienna; and the Tang Museum at Skidmore College. He has been a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard School of Design and a Visual Arts Fellow with Creative Capital and has received grants from the Joan Mitchell Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Ziegler's work is held in many collections, including those of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery; the Des Moines Art Center; the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the San

Diego Museum of Art; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Today, Ziegler lives in Nashville, with a farm in rural Tennessee and a ranch in the panhandle of Nebraska. Currently, he is the Paul E. Shwab Chair of Fine Art at Vanderbilt University. Ziegler spends much of his time in rural Rushville, Nebraska, where he is the founder and executive director of the Sandhills Institute, a grassroots organization dedicated to civically engaged art, in part by connecting local ranchers and farmers with artists around the world.

Illustrations

Cover: Exhibition view of *A Living Thing: Flag Exchange*, curated by Hesse McGraw, at Federal Hall, New York, 2017. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli

Figure 1: Florida. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Mel Ziegler

Figure 2: Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler. *Peas, Carrots, Potatoes*, 1994. 364 glass jars, metal, baby food, 30 1/4 x 58 1/4 x 2 1/4 in. Courtesy of Perrotin

Figure 3: Mary Young Pickersgill, flagmaker. *Star-Spangled Banner*, 1813. Fabric, 30 x 42 ft. Image courtesy of the Division of Political and Military History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

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