



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A Living Thing

**An exhibition and catalyst for dialogue that seeks common ground
by conceptual and social interventionist artist Mel Ziegler**

January 19 – April 1, 2017

Opening Reception: Friday, January 27, 7-9pm

San Francisco Art Institute's Walter and McBean Galleries present *A Living Thing* by conceptual and social interventionist artist Mel Ziegler. The project explores the production and experience of democracy, patriotism, and common ground and includes both an exhibition of Ziegler's installation work *Flag Exchange* and an ongoing series of activations and responses invited through an open call for ideas from SFAI students, faculty, and the public.

A Living Thing takes inspiration from the United States Flag Code that states: *The American flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing.*

In an act of sly and generous alchemy, Ziegler journeyed through all 50 United States between 2011 and 2016 and exchanged distressed American flags flying at civic and private locations—city halls, museums, post offices, hospitals, homes, and schools—for new flags. The 50 decayed flags form a single work, *Flag Exchange*, which spans the geography of our union and represents the spectrum of our allegiance.

In a process with parallels to the travels of a political candidate, Ziegler arrived in a state, searched for an appropriate flag, and then sought the flag's owner. These journeys evolved into a wide-ranging documentary project in which the gathering of flags became a compilation of doorstep conversations with flag owners from across the country.

“I began *Flag Exchange* more than five years ago when I traded my first flag at a barn in Tennessee,” said Ziegler. “My visits to city halls, factories, and homes evolved into a collection of not only weathered flags, but also stories full of rich detail from the original owners.”

According to Hesse McGraw, SFAI Vice President for Exhibitions and Public Programs, “*Flag Exchange* offers a powerful reminder that artists do new and vital things for our public life, even when nothing else works. Art finds the common ground that we've otherwise lost.”

The installation features one flag from each state, ranging in size from five-by-eight feet to 15-by-18 feet, and hanging from the ceiling of the gallery space. Each flag will have the name of the state where it was collected embroidered on its hoist edge. Ziegler's installation will hover above a large stage and tiered seating, creating a space evocative of a town hall or political rally in the gallery.

This space is the catalyst for *A Living Thing*, which seeks to create opportunities for common ground within our increasingly fractured civil discourse. Throughout its run, *A Living Thing* will offer a sanctuary to consider and discuss democracy, national identity, the power of iconography, and the nature of politics in this inaugural year through conversations, performances, debate, and acts of solidarity and resistance. During regular gallery hours, an open mic permanently installed in the space provides an opportunity for all visitors to express themselves.

SFAI curators are also soliciting ideas for responses and activations through an open call to students, artists, activists, citizens, residents, visitors, and others that wish to contribute to the life represented by the flag and will curate a series of regularly scheduled events. The open call begins January 11 and continues through the end of the exhibition. Interested individuals can submit ideas through the SFAI website. Scheduled events will be free and open to the public and will be posted at sfai.edu/alivingthing and through [#flagexchange](https://twitter.com/flagexchange).

Background: *Flag Exchange*

Flag Exchange formed the cornerstone of the The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College's recent exhibition *A More Perfect Union*, which foregrounded the museum as town square. During its installation at the Tang, *Flag Exchange* offered an open space to explore the elections and the current state of democracy through classes, lectures, dialogues, debates, performances, lunches, and more. *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*, which was curated by Hesse McGraw.

About Mel Ziegler

Mel Ziegler is widely known for his collaborative work with his late partner Kate Ericson beginning in the early 1980s. They pioneered the emergence of socially engaged practice

and community engagement as vital forms of contemporary art. Their works included *Camouflaged History*, where the duo painted a house in Charleston, South Carolina, in a U.S. Army camouflage pattern consisting of 72 municipally approved colors; and a 1991 Capp Street Project exhibition in which they wrote the name of every street in San Francisco on asphalt roof shingles, which first covered the Capp Street floor, and were then donated to a San Francisco homeowner in need of a new roof. *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. Ericson/Ziegler's work is held in the collections of SFMOMA; UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among many others.

In the broadest sense, Ziegler's solo practice 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. Ziegler has presented solo exhibitions at venues including Secession, Vienna; Artpace, San Antonio; and Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal. Ziegler is the founder and executive director of the nonprofit Sandhills Institute in Rushville, Nebraska, which is a catalyst for developing new models of artistic citizenship in America's heartland. Ziegler is the Chair of the Department of Art and the Paul E. Shwab Chair of Fine Arts at Vanderbilt University. He lives and works in Nashville, Tennessee. Ziegler is represented by Galerie Perrotin.

Exhibition Opening Reception

Friday, January 27, 2017, 7-9pm

FREE and Open to All

Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute, 800 Chestnut St., San Francisco, CA

About Walter and McBean Galleries

SFAI's Exhibitions and Public Programs provide direct access to artists and ideas that advance our culture. The Walter and McBean Galleries, established in 1969, present exhibitions at the forefront of contemporary art practice. The galleries serve as a laboratory for innovative and adventurous projects and commission new work from emerging and established artists.

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.

General Information

SFAI's Walter and McBean Galleries are open to the public Tuesday 11 AM – 7 PM and Wednesday – Saturday, 11 AM – 6 PM and are free to the public. For general information, the public may visit sfai.edu or call (415) 749-4563. SFAI is located at 800 Chestnut St., San Francisco, CA.

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