PRESSBOOK

Mel ZIEGLER

KATE ERICSON & MEL ZIEGLER

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It's a Grand Old Flag, But One Artist Wants to Take Yours Down and Put It in a Museum

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Mel Ziegler: with his exhibition "Mel Ziegler: A Living Thing – Flag Exchange" at Federal Hall. Courtesy of Guillaume Ziccarelli.

The flags are ragged, their edges fraying, alluding to a long and difficult life spent exposed to the elements. There are 50 of them, hanging from the domed ceiling of New York's Federal Hall, and artist Mel Ziegler has collected them from across the nation, giving their former owners crisp new replacements in exchange. Ziegler, who often travels throughout rural America for his work, began the project in 2011, when he noticed a tattered flag hanging in Tennessee, its white stripes almost entirely disintegrated. "I just thought it was so poignant that I had to have it," he told Artnet News during a visit to the show.

“Mel Ziegler: A Living Thing – Flag Exchange” at Federal Hall. Courtesy of Guillaume Ziccarelli.

The artist didn’t know it then, but that first flag (not included in the current display) was the start of a major endeavor that would eventually see him travel to all 50 states.

After the first flag, Ziegler began spotting others that were ready for retirement, then approaching their owners and offering them a new one. There was no particular project in mind at first, but by the time he had flags from about 15 states, he realized that he wanted a full set.

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“I just started carrying flags of all different sizes,” Ziegler recalled of the process, which he concluded last year, ahead of the presidential election. “I was like a flag salesman.”

The exhibition, “Mel Ziegler: A Living Thing – Flag Exchange,” takes its name from the United States Flag Code, which states that “the American flag represents a living country and is itself considered a living thing.”
Perhaps that’s why the flags take on such an emotional quality here, hanging in delicate shreds in one of the country’s most historic buildings. Built in 1842, Federal Hall sits on the site of the country’s first US capitol building under the Constitution, the spot where George Washington was inaugurated in 1789.

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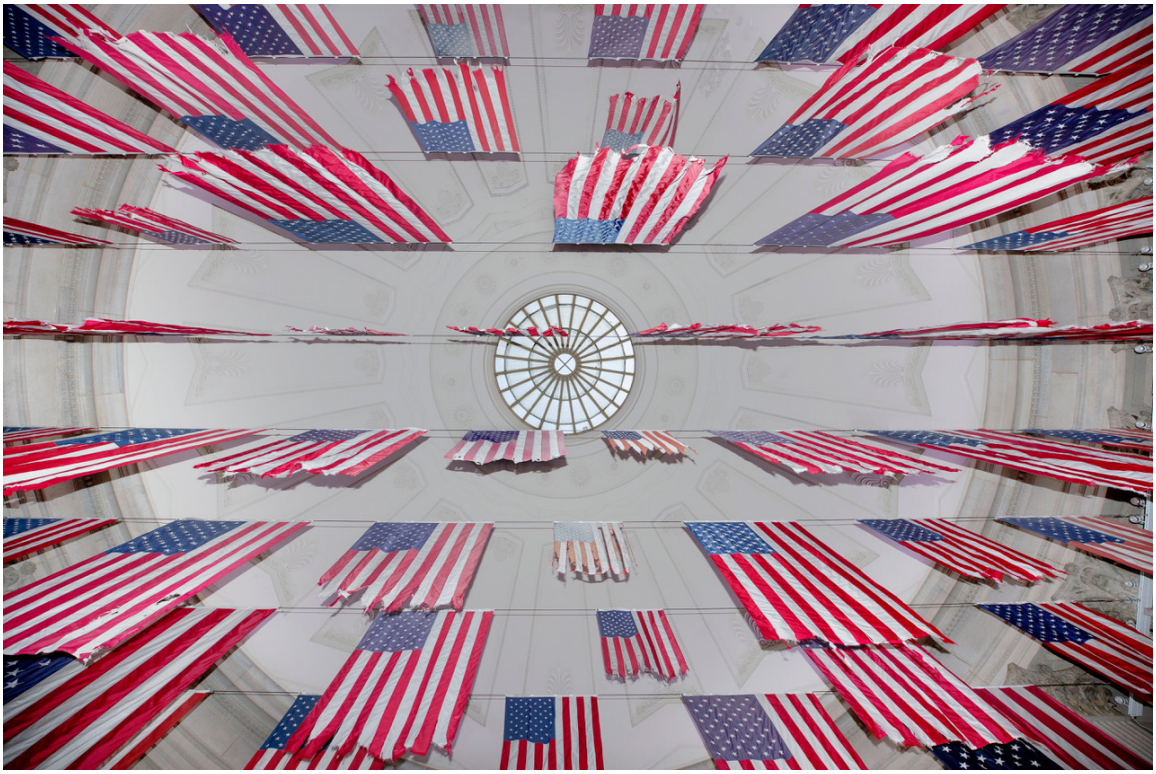
After smaller-scale outings at the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, in Salt Lake City, and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, in Nebraska, this is the project’s third time being exhibited in full. Compared to the previous venues—the San Francisco Art Institute and the Tang Teaching Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York—Ziegler appreciates Federal Hall’s “relationship to our democracy and its origins,” noting that the piece “becomes really photogenic because the architecture is so great.”

Ziegler is careful to note that the project is not meant as an expression of patriotism or nationalism. “I’m trying to be neutral,” he insisted. “I was curious about the fact that we as a country fly the flag so much.”



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Each flag hangs in the same condition as when it was last flown, unaltered save for the name of its state of origin, embroidered by the artist on the border, and each one tells its own story. Ziegler’s New York flag comes from a McDonald’s, fulfilling a bit of a secondary quest for the artist, who had noticed that the fast food restaurant always flies the flag, but that they were almost always in good shape.

The biggest flag in the show is from Utah, and measures a mammoth 15 feet long. It was flying outside a music store, whose owner had been trying unsuccessfully to get a nearby flag manufacturer to repair it by cutting off the frayed portion and sewing a clean edge. (If you ever spot a flag that seems a bit too short, that’s probably because it’s been repaired too many times.)

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Unprepared for such a massive flag specimen, Ziegler went straight to the manufacturer and arranged to buy a replacement. “They were so into the project,” he said, “they actually gave me 30 percent off any flags I wanted to buy.” Among those who were flying damaged flags, reactions were more mixed. Some got angry or defensive, while others were happy to accept a new one. Tattered flags could also be a source of embarrassment. Ziegler knocked on one woman’s door to propose his trade, only to have her burst into tears. Her daughters both served in the military, and she was ashamed not to be able to afford a new flag to fly in their honor.

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One particularly emotional interaction came from a woman and her son, whose flag was so far gone that the shreds had gotten tangled around the flagpole. The son was reluctant to part ways with the remnants, asking his mother if she really intended to give the flag away. “‘I think it’s time,’ she said,” Ziegler recalled. It had been the last flag the family’s father had ever hung before his death, and “Flag Exchange” became an important part of their grieving process. (The artist didn’t include it in the show, because it was too damaged.)

Talking to flag owners across the country, Ziegler has noticed trends—certain areas, like Massachusetts, seem to fly more flags than others, he said, and the most damaged specimens are often found by the oceans or on the high plains, where the wind is the strongest. It’s also no good looking on or just after the Fourth of July, as everyone makes sure to get new flags for the occasion.

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“I’ve become a flag expert,” said Ziegler, noting certain details, such as that they are produced in different materials. Cotton is the most expensive, but because of its heavier weight, it doesn’t fly quite as nicely as a nylon or polyester version. At this point, Ziegler has a collection some 150 flags, and he has no plans to stop any time soon. He even envisions a larger project with some 1,000 specimens. “It’s kind of become an obsession,” he admitted. “When I’m in a hurry and I see one, or I don’t have the flags with me, I get really upset!”

“Mel Ziegler: A Living Thing – Flag Exchange” is on view at Federal Hall, 26 Wall Street, August 31–November 10, 2017.