

Us & Them, Now & Then

Reconstituting Group Material

It's hard to make good art about flags—especially, to risk an exceptionalism, the American one. This owing to the flag's sometimes brutal metonymy: the flag *is* America. Don't burn America. America, don't run. To wave the flag can be ironic in context, but the flag itself is never ironic; to disrespect the flag is to risk offending generations of proud, if thin-skinned, patriots.

But the American flag is also, maybe, an effective in for artists looking to take on that selfsame country through their art. The bold, graphic flag offers a formalist interface rich with mutual significance. *Reconstitution*, curated at LAXART by Catherine Taft and Hamza Walker, wasn't about the American flag, it was about the United States Constitution, and yet it couldn't resist a couple of flag pieces. On a shelf on the title wall was Sonya Clark's *Unraveled* (2015), consisting of three piles of thread—red, white, and blue. Clark's deconstruction of American patriotism turned another turn once you read the wall label and learned that these are the remains of a Confederate battle flag, Old Glory's discredited double. In the video *Flag and its Shadow* (2004), by Van McElwee, an American flag waves at full mast; the shot is mirrored along the vertical, so that one flag becomes two. The left side of the frame appears in natural color and the right with the colors inverted: one positive,

one negative, two opposites, tied to the same pole.

In 1987, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution, Group Material (GM) mounted a show at the Temple University Gallery in Philadelphia.¹ Called *Constitution*, the show offered to reframe this country's founding document as an ongoing, living structure constantly and contradictorily adapted by the plurality for which it claims to speak. In particular, the work on display took up so-called identity politics to mark the truly diverse makeup of the citizenry; a wall relief by John Ahearn joined a quartet of sepia portraits by Edward Curtis and a quilt by Faith Ringgold.

Reconstitution translated the GM exhibition forward 30 years; the show hinged on the continuity of then and now, us and them, Reagan and Trump. As with GM's 1987 show, the LAXART curators hung works on top of walls printed with the words of the preamble and first articles—only in 2017 the text appeared in Persian. Where the U.S. Constitution is increasingly misread in the service of regressive nationalism, the LAXART show countered with a nod to Los Angeles's large Persian community.

In the GM spirit, Walker and Taft's show drew connections across national, linguistic, and historical limits—sometimes quite literally. In *U.S. Customs Demand to Know* (2016–ongoing), Gelare Khoshgozaran mails packages from Tehran to the United States and displays the stamped and taped boxes lit from within by LEDs. Lawrence Weiner's vinyl wall text, *An Object Tossed from One Country to Another* (1969/2017), suggests everything from cruise missiles to bales of marijuana.

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These crossings were mirrored in the exhibition design. The GM-style hang departed from white-walled modernist autonomy, abandoning the standard 60-inch center at which most paintings are hung, and stacking works four high on top of Persian script. Fine art hobnobbed with kitsch and craft; media ranged from drawings to textiles to a 16mm projection to a clothing line. This polyvalent installation put art's critical dexterity into play; like GM's best efforts, *Reconstitution* cut formal escapism with political engagement, yet cut political didactics with sex appeal.

Against one wall was a shop door framing a photo by Kathryn Andrews (*Santa Door IV [Pilgrim's Booty]*, 2014): a model in t-shirt and underwear holds a pineapple, as if in a softcore American Apparel ad. If one considers the colonial significance of the tropical pineapple, the piece turns acid. On the other side of the gallery, an untitled Rachel Harrison drawing (2011) still bore an actual bullet hole from when an enraged former museum guard shot it, among other works, before committing suicide. Where else, but in America—where two flags, two constitutions, aren't us-and-them opposites but a whole mess of unity?

"What did this show mean 30 years ago," ask the curators, "and what could it mean today?" Put another way, what made Group Material special? To start with the obvious, they were a group. GM approached exhibition making as a collective effort, even a democratic one. Consequently, the themes of their exhibitions are better described as *issues*—from the HIV/AIDS crisis (*AIDS Timeline*, 1989/90) to democracy itself (*Democracy*, 1988/89, *Democracy Wall*, 1989/90). From the beginning, GM treated each project as a statement of purpose. Their

fourth show, *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)* (1981), was an open platform for the gallery's neighbors to exhibit their household art collections alongside work by GM's members—and, implicitly, for those with more than an art-discursive interest in the subject to join in a critique of gentrification. GM exhibited a particular, collective concern for not just the art world, but the world. "Our project is clear," they wrote. "We invite everyone to question the entire culture we have taken for granted."²

Muslim ban? Women's March? Is topicality the endgame of political art? Christine Wang's paintings, *Untitled 7* and *Untitled 8* (2017), incorporate echoes of current events via Facebook dialogues; one work reads, in part, "is there space to wonder about pink pussy hats?" To rephrase: is art the space to wonder about pink pussy hats? *Reconstitution* joins a string of group shows post-November 9th in addressing the explicitly political question of what-do-we-do-now. Many of these exhibitions have looked to history for some guidance. But Walker and Taft's *Reconstitution* is remarkable in that it doesn't just look back to the '80s or to Reagan but back to a group working then who had a strategy for moving forward.

Taft and Walker's exhibition, above all, raised the question: what is important about a reiteration of GM's diagrammatic style of exhibition making? This style is, above all, how GM reconstituted our most patinaed symbols by finding in them the fragile, shining interface between art and not-art, between culture and activism. Danh Vo's *We the People* (2011), included in *Reconstitution*, is a wavy copper section of a full-size Statue of Liberty replica. The work is only ever displayed in sections. Like the flags, the piece participates in a metonymy wherein the symbol seems

1. By this time, Group Material (GM) consisted of Dough Ashford, Julie Ault, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

2. See the brochure printed to accompany the first GM exhibition at their Lower East Side space in October 1980, reprinted in Julie Ault, ed., *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010), 21-23.

to constitute the unique attributes of a nation and its citizens—the ideals that grow into compromise.

GM had a plan: an idea to operate politically within the art world, without being concerned with making political art. Yet GM operated *as* and *within* the art world, a flawed but liberal system with raw and outdated parameters. The tattered American flag or the Constitution blown up on the walls aren't taken for artworks, but works in progress. And alongside these grand sentiments, the odd aesthetic outgrowths of America's political culture speak just as loudly: for *Constitution*, a sober, black bench designed by Thomas Jefferson; for the *Reconstitution*, a plastic shopping bag printed with the text, blue and red on white: "President Nixon. Now more than ever."

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Group Material, *Constitution* (1987). Temple University Gallery, Philadelphia. Image courtesy of Group Material, New York. Photos: Gregory Benson.

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Group Material, *Constitution* (1987). Temple University Gallery, Philadelphia. Image courtesy of Group Material, New York. Photos: Gregory Benson.

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Reconstitution (2017) (installation view). Image courtesy of LAXART.

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Reconstitution (2017) (installation view). Image courtesy of LAXART.



