

## Amsterdam University Press

---

Chapter Title: The Introvert's Protest: Handwriting the Constitution and the Performance of Politics

Chapter Author(s): Morgan O'Hara and Aidan McGarry

Book Title: The Aesthetics of Global Protest

Book Subtitle: Visual Culture and Communication

Book Editor(s): Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, Umut Korkut

Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvswx8bm.12>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



JSTOR

*Amsterdam University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*

## 6 The Introvert's Protest: Handwriting the Constitution and the Performance of Politics

*Interview with Morgan O'Hara by Aidan McGarry*

### Abstract

This interview explores the relationship between performance, art and protest, using the example of the project 'Handwriting the Constitution'. The chapter is an interview with the founder of this global artistic and performative project. It examines how protest is expressed in diverse ways and the importance of carving out public and private spaces for protest. Whilst protest is invariably seen as a dramatic event with people taking to the streets to demonstrate, this chapter challenges our understanding of how silent protest can be a powerful tool to express a political voice. It locates the act of protest in handwriting key document in quiet collective spaces.

**Keywords:** handwriting; performance, art, rights, protest, introvert

In January 2017, as the inauguration of Donald Trump neared, New York-based artist, Morgan O'Hara felt the need to protest. As a concerned artist, she had marched many times, but this particular moment seemed to call for something else. She wanted stay clear of the campaign's toxic excesses, and take action silently. On 5 January she woke up with the idea of copying the US Constitution by hand. While she often hand copies texts as part of her art practice, she hadn't thought much about the Constitution before. She only knew she wanted to do it, and to do it with others in a public space. On Inauguration Day she went to the New York Public Library with a small suitcase of pens, a few sharpies, paper, and copies of the Constitution. She brought old notebooks, half-used drawing pads and loose sheets to share with anyone that might show up. She began writing.

---

McGarry, A., I. Erhart, H. Eslen-Ziya, O. Jenzen, U. Korkut (eds), *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020  
DOI 10.5117/9789463724913\_CH06

To date she has organized over 85 sessions around the world. 'Handwriting the Constitution' has been taken up in many states in the United States, as well as in France, Italy, Israel, Germany, the Netherlands, Taiwan, Macau, Hong Kong, Poland, and Portugal. In each case, people handwrite their chosen documents written to protect human rights, which could be a constitution, a bill of rights or the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. On the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, Aidan McGarry also organized an 'Introvert's Protest' at the Netherland's Institute for Advanced Study in Amsterdam on 10 December 2018.

Morgan O'Hara is an artist. Her work can be found in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Gallery in Washington, DC, the British Museum and elsewhere. Aidan McGarry spoke with her about the 'Handwriting the Constitution' project, protest, and politics. Morgan's project is a creative, democratic and participatory exercise and she encourages others to organize their own sessions wherever they live. For more, see the project website: <https://www.handwritingtheconstitution.com/>.

**AMG: You describe your project 'Handwriting the Constitution' as an introvert's protest? What does this mean to you?**

MOH: Well, it is an example of protesting, which is silent and pretty much immobile, as opposed to the kinds of protests, which were happening at the time of Trump's inauguration, or have traditionally been done where people go out and march, chant slogans, or yell or wave banners. All of those are quite extrovert activities, which I have done in the past, but this situation got me to thinking about what an introvert could do. I thought this action had to be something quiet, something silent, but active. I don't know exactly where the idea came from but I woke up one day and it was in my head to handwrite the Constitution and it made me smile because an introvert can write something, can read something and it can still be an act of protest.

I soon realized I had to do it in a public place so I decided to do it at the Rose Reading Room at New York Public Library. It's quiet, it's peaceful, and everyone who is in there is concentrated. I felt I could do this private protest introspectively in a public place. I think it would have been performative whether I had done it with other people or not, just because it was an action I was doing and it had its own parameters. A friend of mine asked if she could publicize it on Facebook and initially I wasn't sure as I was concerned that it might change the quality or it could be distracting but I decided to

embrace it. So, I prepared extra materials in case more people turned up. At the first session, I was writing for an hour on my own, then two people I know turned up and then seven people I hadn't met before arrived. We were soon all handwriting the Constitution together.

**Do you think there is a performative quality to the writing or what purpose does the action of writing serve?**

The action is very important. Writing is very different from reading and typing. When you write something out it somehow gets into your head and your body in a more profound way. I think drawing serves the same function. I don't own handwriting and I don't own the Constitution. I just happened to put them together at a key moment. The combination of the two is very powerful. It's definitely performative even when I am there alone because when I am there I feel visible as I am the only one writing. In addition, it is my intention to do this publicly as a performance. It is a private action consciously made public.

When you hand copy the Constitution and you have to deal with the words, one by one, you can feel the different battles that were going on to create this document, the compromises, you can feel the polarization of things. It's a really good example of people with strong views hammering out something together. And I feel that is something we have lost now. Right now, people just want to find more people who think the same way they do and there isn't a debate. This is not the whole purpose of the United States and you get a feel for that when you write out these documents. The same is true for constitutions of countries around the world and international human rights standards, like the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

Doing this does not solve any of the problems that we have, I am very aware of that. But it does calm people down and when you are calmer, your decision-making process is better so that is why I am still doing it.

**And it is just the US Constitution?**

No. I am interested in handwriting any documents which have been written in defence of human rights. I have written out the UN Declaration of Human Rights in Taiwan when I was working there. It didn't make sense to write the US Constitution in that situation. Some of the participants in Taiwan chose to handwrite the Declaration, alternating paragraphs in both Chinese and English.

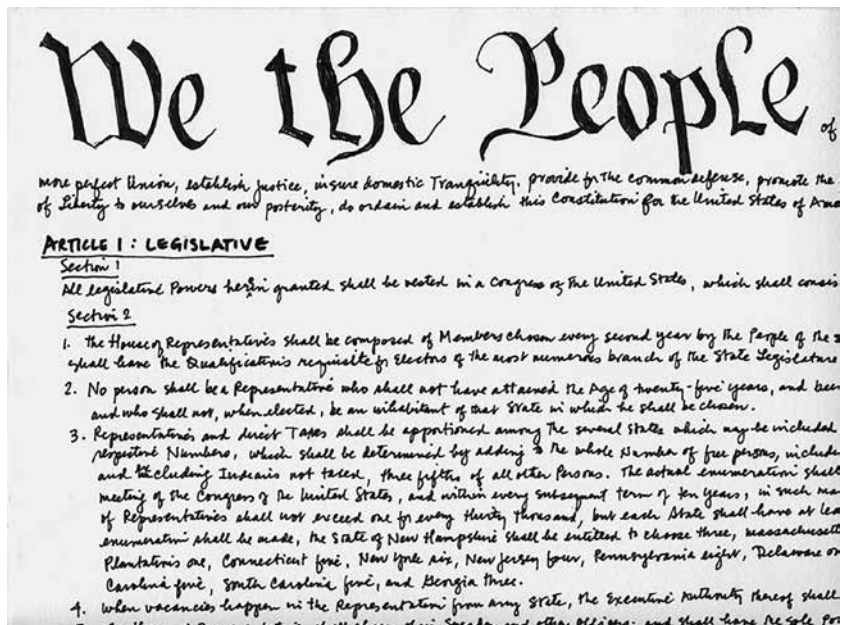


Figure 6.1. 'We the People'.

### How does it feel to engage in this collective process as an individual?

It's a very special thing when you are sitting around the table and 20 people are hand copying the same document. It's like you don't have to look at it but you can feel it. It's the feeling of having a good meal with friends; it's a nice feeling.

I had the pleasure of organizing a session in Amsterdam at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study. It was for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and we had 35 people writing out the document start to finish in English, Dutch, Spanish and Chinese. It was an amazing experience to have everyone sitting around performing the same action in quiet concentration, and afterwards many participants told me that they liked the activity because it was 'quiet dissent' and 'peaceful resistance'.

The best way to describe it is to call it introvert's activism. We need to keep inventing more ways to protest what we need to protest, in non-violent ways because the non-violent ways are the ones which are effective.

**In the testimonies of the participants I have read and listened to they talk about how handwriting the Constitution anchors them. How is this possible?**

I'm not sure how this works, but it definitely does. It has a calming effect. It's like reminding yourself that rights exist and that you have rights at a time when everything else is falling apart. It is the grounding; this is the earth on which we stand, the fact that we have these rights and they have been defended time and again through all these different documents. And when you are in a time of crisis, these documents remind you that you have a right to live in peace, to live unmolested, to live in harmony.

I am surprised that people immediately think it is art. I have not mentioned this when describing the project. I am an artist, so I suppose people think it is art. Actually, I don't care what it is called as long as we do it.

**That is what is so interesting about this project. Many people think of rights as an abstract ideal but all laws come alive when you invoke them or they are violated. So, they are dead letters on a page but there is something in this project when you write them out, they are being invoked, they are made to be alive, they are not just abstract words arranged on a document. Their meaning is much more significant. Do you think that the project is political?**

Yes. I have never identified myself as a political activist and I am surprised by the discussions I get into because of this. I have to learn a lot because people ask me questions about history and the documents. For me it has become an intellectual as well as a conscious and creative process.

**It would be interesting to see this project manifest in different places. There are places where rights are under attack, like in Hungary, Turkey, Russia, Poland, and increasingly in the USA. And there are places where the squeezing of rights is more latent. That's why it is interesting 'Handwriting the Constitution' is happening in Germany, as we think of Germany as a stable democracy but rights are constantly being squeezed and ignored. Therefore, it is good to have this, as a reminder of what you have and what you have a right to.**

There's a wonderful word in Italian when you have had enough of something, you say '*Basta!*' which is exactly as it sounds. Enough! I take this idea-word-feeling to indicate that we have had enough with these encroachments on our rights. There has been so much in US politics, which has been uncivilized and crude, not to mention illegal, and many worse things are happening in

many places around the world. Collectively, we need to remind ourselves of our dignity and our rights and insist that they be respected.

So, yes, 'Handwriting the Constitution' is political, yes, it's introspective and yes, it's performative. All three. It is also a silent action, which has the potential to be transformative. I hope that in 2019 and beyond more and more people will participate and will feel empowered through this simple action.

**If you have been inspired by Morgan's project here is some information about how to get involved either as a participant or an organizer.**

If want to learn more about the project, see the project website: <https://www.handwritingtheconstitution.com/>. The website has details of upcoming sessions where you can take part as a participant.

#### HOW TO SET UP YOUR OWN HANDWRITING SESSION

1. Email the details of your event to [handwritingtheconstitution@gmail.com](mailto:handwritingtheconstitution@gmail.com) (when, where, and which document you will be handwriting) and you will receive a personalized invitation as an optimized pdf. You may suggest a background colour.
2. Send this invitation to friends, colleagues, and anyone in your community you think might be interested.
3. Download copies of the constitution of your country, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or any other document protecting human rights and print copies for your group.
4. Bring pens and paper for your fellow handwriters.
5. When everyone is writing, stay with your own concentration and writing. Let people be.
6. When the session is finished, share photographs of your event online using the hashtag #handwritingtheconstitution and/or email the best ones to [handwritingtheconstitution@gmail.com](mailto:handwritingtheconstitution@gmail.com).

Questions may be directed to Morgan O'Hara at [handwritingtheconstitution@gmail.com](mailto:handwritingtheconstitution@gmail.com).

#### About the Authors

**Morgan O'Hara** is a New York-based artist. She is recipient of grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Gottlieb Foundation, the Leon Levy

Foundation, the David and Rosamond Putnam Travel Fund, and the Milton and Sally Avery Foundation. Her work is in the permanent collections of many institutions around the world including China, the United States, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic. She began the 'Handwriting the Constitution' project ([www.handwritingtheconstitution.com](http://www.handwritingtheconstitution.com)) in 2017.

**Aidan McGarry** is a Reader in International Politics at the Institute for Diplomacy and International Governance at Loughborough University, London. His research focuses on social movements, protest, political voice, and marginalized communities ([www.aidanmcgarry.com](http://www.aidanmcgarry.com)). He is the author of four books, including *Who Speaks for Roma?* (Continuum, 2010) and *Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Racism in Europe* (Zed, 2017). He was Principal Investigator of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project 'Aesthetics of Protest: Visual Culture and Communication in Turkey' ([www.aestheticsofprotest.com](http://www.aestheticsofprotest.com)) from 2016 to 2018. In 2018-2019 he is a EURIAS/Marie Curie Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Amsterdam, where is writing a book on political voice.



