

The New York Times

The Constitution, By Hand

By MORGAN O'HARA JUNE 30, 2017



Morgan O'Hara

In January, as the inauguration of Donald Trump neared, I felt the need to protest. As a concerned artist, I had marched many times, but this moment seemed to call for something else. I wanted to stay clear of the campaign's toxic excesses, and take action silently.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/30/opinion/sunday/the-constitution-by-hand.html>

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On Jan. 5 I woke up with the idea of copying the Constitution by hand. While I often hand-copy texts as part of my art practice, I hadn't thought much about the Constitution before. I only knew I wanted to do it, and to do it with others in a public space.

I love the openness and beauty of the Rose Main Reading Room at the New York Public Library. On Inauguration Day I went to the library with a small suitcase of pens, a few Sharpies, papers and copies of the Constitution. I brought old notebooks, half-used drawing pads and loose sheets to share with anyone who might show up. I began writing.



Participants write the constitution at the New York Public Library's Rose Reading Room.
Marianne Barcellona for The New York Times

Soon, others joined me: a friend, then another friend, then people I didn't know at all who saw the work in progress. That first session drew eight or nine people, writing carefully, studying,

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reflecting on the document intended to protect our basic rights. We have held sessions every month since, with different people each time, and I will continue.

Hand copying a document can produce an intimate connection to the text and its meaning. The handwriter may discover things about this document that they never knew, a passage that challenges or moves them. They may even leave with a deeper connection to the founders and the country, or even a sense of encouragement.

I began this project motivated by psychological necessity. I now see it as a social art practice. My hope is that it will become a movement of sorts, with sessions throughout the country. It is important for us to become more intensely aware of our rights as citizens of the United States, so that as the current government tries to take them away, we will see what is happening in time to act.

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, the British Museum and elsewhere.

Photographs by Marianne Barcellona for The New York Times; text passages photographed by Jeanette May for The New York Times

Reflections from those who participated are below.

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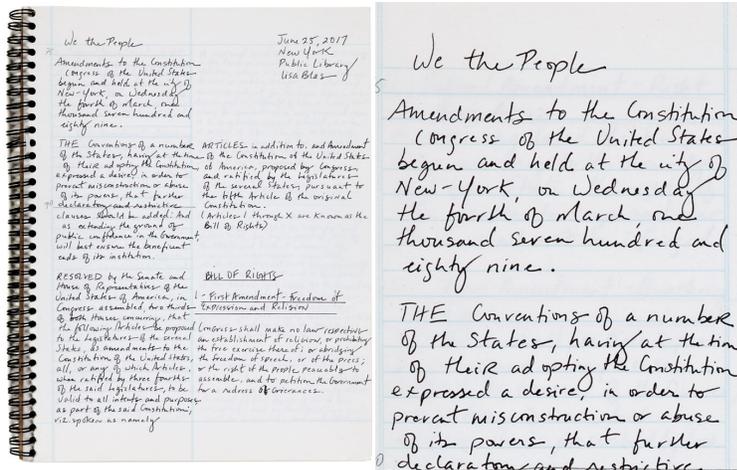
Lisa Bias



Lisa Bias, artist

SEVERAL HOURS into handwriting the Amendments to the Constitution, I had yet to reach the 19th Amendment, ensuring women's suffrage rights.

The first 10 amendments were ratified in 1789; the 19th, in 1920. In 2017, it is painful to realize that the majority of elected officials at the higher branches of government are still men.



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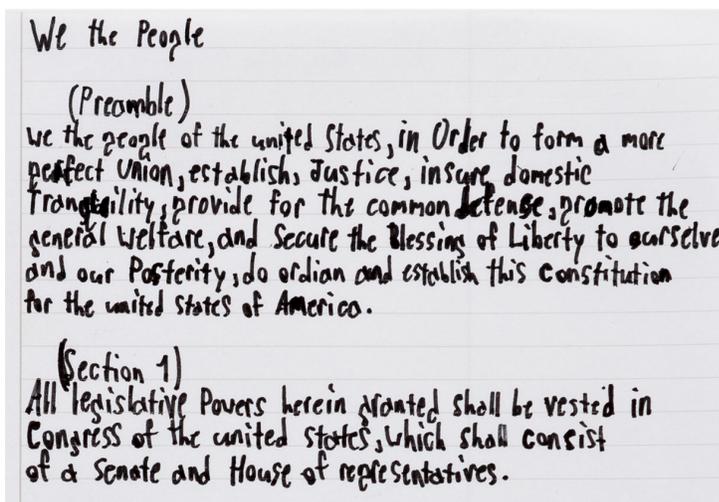
Michelangelo Jiseok Gherardi



Michelangelo Jiseok Gherardi, student

AT FIRST IT MAY SEEM like time has slowed down and you might have to stay for hours just to finish copying the Constitution, but over time, as you are reading it, you realize you probably learned most of the Constitution because you wrote it down.

Even if you have not finished writing it you should know it well.



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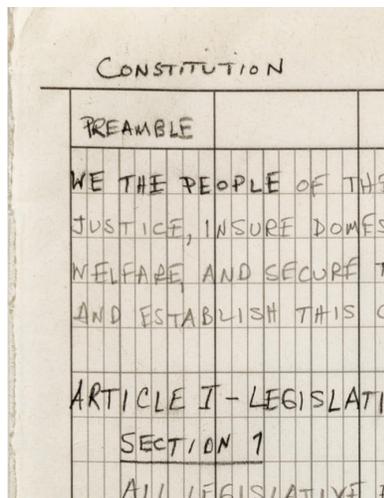
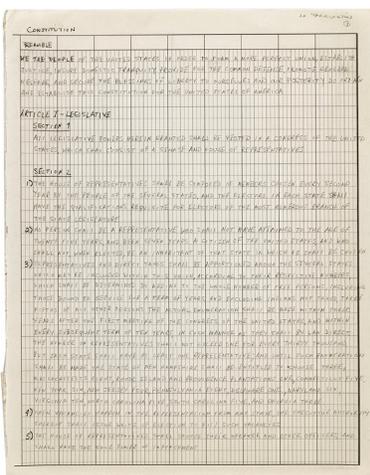
Jo Yarrington



Jo Yarrington, artist and professor

FOR ME, the weight of this act, this politics of self-awareness, arose from the choosing of ledger paper as a writing surface.

It forced me to consider each letter as I formed it within the square and then each word that came from the accumulation of letters and then the meaning that arose as words connected. It made it seem personal, real.



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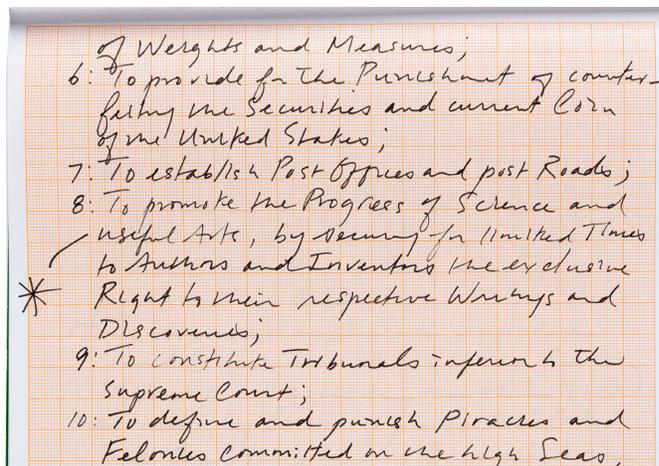
SoHyun Bae



SoHyun Bae, artist

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE DRAWING IN ORDER TO SEE. Likewise, there is nothing like writing in order to understand.

Writing the Constitution made me realize that it is vast and thorough, full of specifics. If we could simply abide by the law, we have the potential to undo the wrong, take steps to correct mistakes that have been made.



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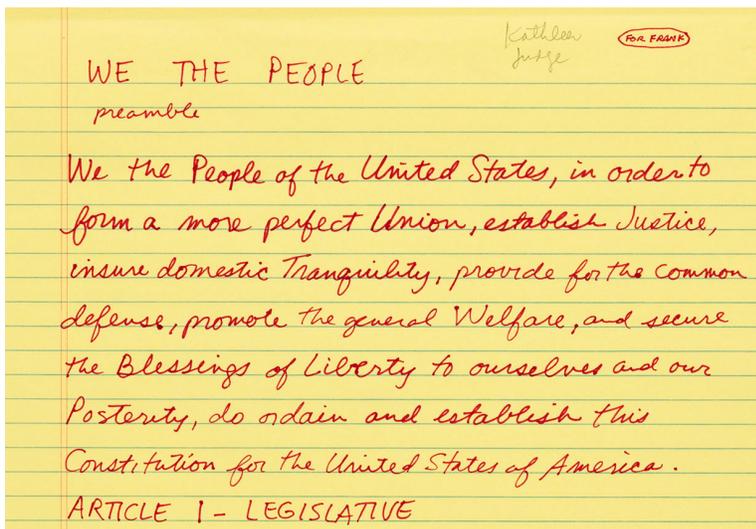
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Kathleen Judge



Kathleen Judge, artist

WRITING EACH WORD OUT BY HAND allowed me to start to truly understand the document. Article 1 was disturbing to read — phrases like “free persons,” “those bound to service,” “excluding Indians” and “three fifths”— and, of course, the fact that women had no voice in this document. This is the reality of an ugly part of our country's history. I will continue to copy the document on my own.



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Linda Stillman



Linda Stillman, artist

I WAS STILL IN SHOCK over the election and the inauguration of Donald Trump. I had been searching for ways to channel my varied emotions: disappointment, grief and dread, among others.

Sitting with Morgan copying the preamble to the Constitution, I felt in touch with the core values of our country and was able to shut out the noise of the Trump presidency. I was especially struck by the phrase “insure domestic Tranquility.” For the first time I was able to feel more tranquil about the state of affairs by reaffirming the core values of our country through hand writing them.

