

Emmelines

Mr. Nobody

Group Material, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Barbara Kruger, David Wells

June 6 – July 25, 2026

Origin of Mr. Nobody

They had a teacher — the only one, as Brecht says, from whom they ever learned anything, although he taught them nothing. Namely, he was the enemy [Feind]. And Feind was also his name. Through him, the class developed the skills one needs later in life when facing one's adversaries. This man, moreover, regularly confused his "oi" and "i" sounds as he spoke, giving rise to the mocking saying: "The ancient Germans inscribed their signs in white poines." In this manner of speaking, Keiner [nobody] — for "Nobody" *Οὐτις* is originally the name of Brecht's thinker — became Keuner. Strangely enough, this name sounds very much like the Greek koine — and this is only fitting, since thinking is the common tongue.

Walter Benjamin, "Herkunft von Herrn Keuner" [Origin of Mr. Nobody], GS VII.2, 655 (trans. Emmelines)¹

The question of Democracy Poll is one that compares the individual with the society that makes her/him. How do we produce our beliefs and fears? How are these emotions translated into institutions and governments? Who benefits from the maintenance of fear?

FREEDOM > POWER > PATRIOTISM > CONTROL > NATIONALISM > FEAR
> XENOPHOBIA > RACISM > CONSERVATISM > "FREEDOM"
(freedom to freedom)

Excerpt from Group Material, "Rough Notes for Democracy Poll Press," 1990

Group Material (1979–1996) was an artist group based in New York City. During the period *Subculture* was conceived and realized (1982–83), the group comprised Doug Ashford (member 1981–1996), Julie Ault (founding member 1979–1996), Tim Rollins (founding member 1979–1987), and Mundy McLaughlin (member 1980–1986); during the period *Democracy Poll/Demokratische Erhebung* was conceived and realized (1989–1990), the group comprised Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres (member 1987–1994), and Karen Ramspacher (member 1989–1992).

Before joining the group, Felix Gonzalez-Torres participated in the projects *Subculture* (1983), *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central America* (1984), *MASS* (1985), and *The Castle* (1987).

Barbara Kruger participated in *It's A Gender Show!* (1981), *Subculture* (1983), *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central America* (1984), *Americana* (1985), *MASS* (1985), *Arts and Leisure* (1986), *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)* (1987), *The Castle* (1987), *Constitution* (1987), *Inserts* (1988), *Democracy: Cultural Participation* (1988), *Democracy: AIDS and Democracy: A Case Study* (1988), and *AIDS Timeline (New York City 1991)* (1991).

David Wells participated in *Subculture* (1983) and *Timeline: A Chronicle of U.S. Intervention in Central America* (1984).

Mr. Nobody is realized in collaboration with Okey Dokey Konrad Fischer and Turquoise in New York, where Barbara Kruger's posters from *Subculture* may be visited via the Canal St. "E" and Grand St. "B"/"D" lines, respectively; and Kaiserwache in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, where posters from *Democracy Poll/Demokratische Erhebung* are on view on the facade.

¹ Herkunft von Herrn Keuner

Sie hatten einen Lehrer, den einzigen, wie Brecht sagt, bei dem sie etwas gelernt haben, obwohl er ihnen garnichts beibrachte. Er war nämlich der Feind. Und so hieß er auch. An ihm entwickelte die Klasse die Künste, die man später im Leben gegen die Widersacher so nötig braucht. Dieser Mann also vertauschte in der Aussprache regelmäßig die »eu-« und »ei-« Laute. Über ihn lief der Spottsatz um »Die alten Germanen meusselten ihre Zeuchen in Steuneuchen.« Nach dieser Redeweise wurde Keiner — denn »Keiner« οὐτις ist bei Brecht ursprünglich der Name des Denkenden — zu Keuner. Dieser Name klingt nun merkwürdigerweise sehr an das griechische koin[ē] an — und das ist ja auch in der Ordnung, denn das Denken ist das Gemeinsame.