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Jonathan Horowitz, Three Rainbow American Flags for Jasper in the Style of the Artist's Boyfriend, 2005, Glitter and oil on linen, 31 x 45 3/4 x 5 inches, © the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London, Photo: Ellen Page Wilson

Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars?

Flags and Art from Johns to the Present by KK KOZIK

Were you to pass through the New England town of Sharon, Connecticut, this past Fourth of July, you would unwittingly have braved frontiers of cultural discourse. Peering from the Clocktower at the southern end of the Green, you would have perceived a phalanx of flagpoles lining Main Street, raised by the veterans of American Legion Post 126 as they do every patriotic holiday. Exiting the Green at the north, you would encounter Sharon Center School, the local elementary, whose foyer is graced by a signed poster from Sharon's most famous resident: *Flag* (1954) by Jasper Johns.

Between these antipodes, two contemporary art outposts on the Green dug deeper into flags. Standard Space featured a group show called "MESS," while ICEHOUSE Project Space, which I run, riffed on the town flags by lining its own sidewalk and driveway with artist flags from Grand Flag, a Brooklyn project. Around the country, outrage roiled around BLM and Confederate flags and monuments. Studying the two shows, I pondered: How do these representations of flags toggle between critical and affirmative? Do we all have the same relationship to the American flag?

Art history has many flags: Uccello … Hartley … Hassam. In the postwar lexicon, however, *Flag* (1954) is granddaddy of them all. Such is its pre-eminence that each later iteration seems to descend from it as much as from the Stars and Stripes themselves. The Johns retrospective at the Whitney and Philadelphia Museum of Art

Continued on Page 6

WHOSE BROAD STRIPES AND BRIGHT STARS?

continued from page 1

opens Oct. 28, days before the national elections. It is timely to examine this legacy and the consequences that have resulted.

Johns has been sphinx-like on the genesis of *Flag*, sharing little other than stories about dreaming of painting a flag and about being told he was a namesake of William Jasper, a Revolutionary War hero who rescued a flag downed at Fort Moultrie. To the central conundrum — is it a flag or is it a painting of a flag? — Johns has replied, "Both." When Johns said he was drawn to "what the mind already knows," he joined the lineage of Duchamp's readymades and Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1928) ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe"), a painting Johns had seen earlier in 1954 at Sidney Janis Gallery. In adhering to the specs of the American flag, Johns created a challenging hybrid of an image and an object.

Sterling Ruby, VAMPIRE 47, 2011, fabric and fiberfill, 84 x 45 x 4 inches

But despite this verisimilitude, *Flag*'s vibe was ambiguous. When Leo Castelli showed it, MoMA director Alfred Barr wanted to purchase it for the museum but was concerned lest it not be acceptably patriotic. Barr persuaded architect Philip Johnson to buy it in his stead; when Barr retired in 1968, Johnson donated it to MoMA.

"Both" may also be the answer to the piece's secondary paradox — was Johns for or against the flag? The infamous, nationally televised McCarthy hearings were still in progress in 1954, and undergoing an inquisition about patriotism, such as Rockwell Kent had endured a year earlier, could not have been an attractive prospect. Johns had served his country in the Army, but concomitant to the Red Scare was the Lavender Scare, a panic parallel to the anti-communist campaign that led to the investigation and exposure of suspected homosexuals. No wonder Johns stated, "To me, self-description is a calamity." Even the use in his piece of newspaper, barely legible through encaustic, seems to gesture away from speaking his truth. Did Jasper Johns mean to be subversive? A 1965 interview with David Sylvester, watchable on YouTube, implies … perhaps. Johns laughs as he refers to an aunt who had been his teacher. "My Aunt Gladys … wrote me a letter saying she was so proud of me because she had worked so hard to instill some respect for the American flag in her students ... and she was so glad that the mark had been left on me."

As *Flag* entered the permanent MoMA collection, aftershocks in the art world reverberated anew. Johns would ultimately create more than 40 flag pieces, but now Faith Ringgold staked her own claim on the image. If maybe Johns couldn't afford to be revelatory about his work, Ringgold felt she couldn't afford not to be. In a 2018 lecture in Berlin she recalled while discussing her flag work that "[t]he '60s was rough. … Most artists were not paying attention. ...They were painting beautiful paintings abstractly … but they were not telling the story of what was going on in America, and I thought I wanted to be that person. For that, I paid a terrific price. .... They put me out and tried to keep me out, but I persisted."

Black Light Series #10: Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger (1969) was a response to the flag-planting of the Apollo 11 moon landing — where Neil Armstrong utters, "One giant leap for mankind." Ringgold, like many, was angered because, as Prince would sing years later, "a sister killed her baby 'cause she couldn't afford to feed it, yet we're sending people to the moon." In *her* flag, Ringgold editorializes. Woven among gray stars is the slightly

Natalie Baxter, But People Will Think You're Making a Trump Flag, 2020, fabric, sequins, polyester fill, fringe, 14 x 24 inches

darker word DIE. Irregular stripes when viewed sideways spell the eponymous racial epithet, underscoring that the national harmony the flag symbolizes is spurious.

A year later, she co-organized the "People's Flag Show" at Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square. Featuring 100 works, the exhibition protested so-called flag-desecration laws. Its premise was scribed on its poster: "The American people are the only people / Who can interpret the American flag / A flag which does not belong to the people / To do with as they see fit · Should be burned and forgotten · Artists, workers, / Students, women, third world peoples · You are oppressed · What does the flag mean to you?"

The *Times*'s Grace Glueck listed among the art included in the show a penis-shaped flag and a flag cake. Speakers included Abbie Hoffman, an unidentified Black Panther and Steven Radich, a gallerist convicted in 1967 after showing an artist who made extensive use of the flag, whose case was due to be heard by the Supreme Court later that year. Within days, the three organizers had been arrested and charged by the U.S. Attorney's office with desecration of the flag. The ACLU provided them with counsel, and on appeal the charges were dropped. With time, and harkening back to the handwork of Betsy Ross, Ringgold turned to quilting. In pieces such as *Flag Story Quilt* (1985), *Freedom of Speech* (1990) and The *Flag Is Bleeding #2* (1997), the American flag remained.

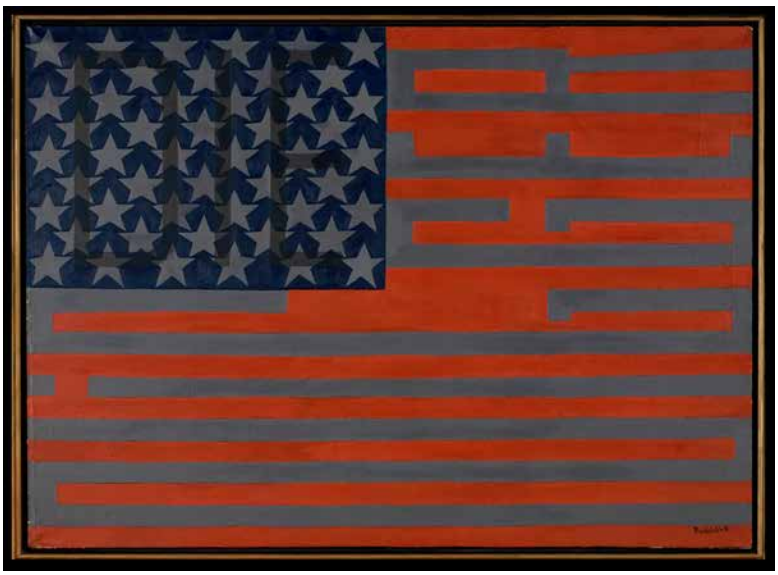
This summer, Ringgold joined 192 other artists commissioned to create flags to bedeck the Rockefeller Center skating rink. Many artists were selected through crowd-sourcing, though the group also included Jeff Koons, Marina Abramovic and KAWS. As agitprop the flags disappointed: their corporate tameness skirted weightier issues that much flag-based art examines.

Since Judson, one idea artists have tackled consistently is whether the American flag signifies different things to different people. In reaction to the 2018 Johns show at the Broad in L.A., artist Jonathan Horowitz revealed his ambivalence toward the flag, tweeting an image of his own version of Johns's *Three Flags* (1958) and writing: "My version of *Three Flags* is like #JasperJohns drag, where I cast myself as Johns and my partner Rob Pruitt as #Robert Rauschenberg. The work is about mitigating a feeling of alienation from the American flag as a symbol — a feeling that I imagine many gay people in 1958 shared."

Dread Scott and David Hammons also challenged monolithic understandings of the flag. Scott's *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* (1989), an installation that

positioned the American flag in a way that encouraged viewers to step on it, spurred outrage and led to a Supreme Court case and landmark First Amendment legislation defending freedom of expression. That for many, including African-Americans, the flag symbolizes oppression instead of freedom is a topic Scott returned to in a recent TED talk.

Hammons's *African-American Flag* (1990) likewise subverts the flag, reconfiguring it in the colors of Marcus Garvey's Pan-African flag. Created for "Black USA" at Amsterdam's Museum Overholland, Hammons's piece flew in the museum's courtyard, a stone's throw from the United States Consulate — a symbolic intersection of art and the real world that recalls his earlier street art.



Faith Ringgold, Black Light Series #10: Flag For The Moon: Die Nigger, 1969, oil on canvas, 36 x 18 inches, © 2020 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries

Hammons in 1986: "The only thing that's really going on is in the street. ... It isn't happening in these galleries. Doing things in the street is more powerful than art I think. ... I don't know what the fuck art is about now. Like Malcolm X said, it's like Novocain. It used to wake you up but now it puts you to sleep. I think art now is putting people to sleep. There's so much of it around in this town that it doesn't mean anything ... the people aren't really looking at art, they're looking at each other's clothes and each other's haircuts."

On Flag Day 2017, Creative Time took to the skies with a series of flags aimed, as Hammons put it, "to wake you up." "Pledges of Allegiance" was a public-art "response to the current political climate" structured so that identical copies of flags by 16 artists, including Yoko Ono, Nari Ward and Marilyn Minter, flew sequentially at locations around the country, including the University of Kansas's Spencer Museum. For 15 months the museum had flown the flags without incident, but once Josephine Mechseper's *Untitled* (Flag 2), an American flag printed with a black stain, had been run up the flagpole, the ugly head of censorship was raised in the name of patriotism. *Fox News* among others condemned the piece. Conservative Kansan politician Kris Kobach, stated to the *AP*, "The fact that they call it art does not make it any less of a desecration of our flag." To Creative Time this illustrated "the same divisions in our country that the series has confronted head-on," but the university moved the flag inside the museum, where it joined an unrelated show containing a piece it manifested sisterhood with, Ringgold's *Flag Story Quilt*.

Other projects flying flags in public space include Stndrd Exhibitions in Granite City, Illinois, and Grand Flag, James Esber's flagpole soapbox on the roof of his building in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. These were the flags shown in Sharon. The vexillography on display at Stndrd ranges from deconstructed flags to full-on messaging flags. One of these, Kirsten Hassenfeld's *Long May She Wave*, was originally flown at Grand Flag. Articulated in motifs reminiscent of "women's work" such as ric-rac and calico, it promotes "stewardship of the natural world and respect and love for all people."

Artists who have contributed to Grand Flag include David Humphrey, Lee Boroson, Katro Storm and Jane Fine. Each addressed an issue in their flags from equality to environmentalism. The current flag is Bob Seng's *Exit Trump*, which is plain in its aim. Of Grand Flag, Esber says, "It's given me a way to connect with my neighbors, most of whom do not go to galleries often. The challenge has been to get people's attention long enough that their minds can pluck the flag from the urban landscape and make sense of it. Ideally it breaks them out of their digital trance and gets them to think about their place in the world. Flags have a long history of signaling ideas, but they are an anachronism in the world of social media. The fact that Grand Flag is best experienced off-line is exactly what makes it disruptive." In October, the flags will fly again at Basilica Hudson in upstate New York.

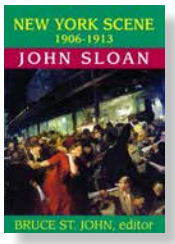
Hassenfeld, coincidentally, was also represented at Standard Space in MESS (Marker Emblem Symbol Signal) with *Nature Force Flag* (2020) made from plastic bags. She describes her work as impelled by "the direct emotion that drives us to shout from the rooftops/get out in the street with our signs," something curator Adam Eck-

strom captured in this show of work aimed to "make change … and educate ourselves out of this MESS." Other work exhibited was a flag by Mel Chin with its field of stars split and pushed to each side, suggesting a divided nation, and a soft-sculpture "bloated flag " by Natalie Baxter. Dread Scott contributed a silhouette of the Capitol building drawn with the ashes of an American flag; it referred to the flag's presence by its absence.

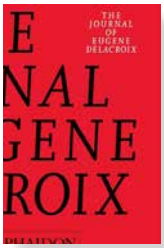
James Esber, We the Purple, 2020, flying in Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Across the Green at ICEHOUSE, Justin Amrhein's *Peaceful Protest* did the same. Divided into blue and red, the flag is anchored by a central drawing of Colin Kaepernick kneeling. By not standing for the "Star-Spangled Banner," Kaepernick has voicied his disconnect with a flag many see as emptied of ideals. Rather than a symbol of liberty and justice for all, it has become the trademark of late capitalism's brand. Basquiat, Kruger, Sterling Ruby, Matt Magee, Danh Vo, Sean Scully, like the artists above, have all queried the flag, maybe aiming through criticality to restore gravitas to the emblem of America. This may be the real legacy of *Flag* (1954). Johns never tried to sell anyone on a fixed ideology; *Flag*'s ambiguity makes you think for yourself. Turns out Aunt Gladys's efforts to nurture in him respect for the flag worked, just not in the way she had in mind. For Johns and for all these artists, respect is evinced in steady commitment to examining values and disseminating ideas. Freedom of expression means exactly that.

BOOK REVIEW By Peter Cusack



John Sloan's New York Scene
By John Sloan, Edited by Bruce St. John
Harper and Row, 1965



The Journal of Eugene Delacroix
By Eugène Delacroix, Edited by Hubert Wellington
Phaidon Press, 1995

Sheltering in Time

The days tick by. One farce leads into another. We wait for a vaccine. We shelter in place. The new world, ever so slowly, becomes familiar. What we left behind gains more and more distance and we struggle with a general dulling effect. Keeping this in mind, I have found it helpful to shelter in the minutiae of the daily lives and rhythms of other artists, from other times, through reading their journals. How did they do it? For it is our turn. And so I suggest revisiting the journals of John Sloan and Eugene Delacroix.

Sloan's and Delacroix's journals differ greatly. Each artist has a writing style that matches their paintings. John Sloan's style is very simple and matter of fact. Much happens — it rains, he works, telegrams arrive, he golfs, attends night court and fills the stove with wood. Any commentary on daily life is stoic and impersonal. Rarely does he discuss anything emotional or philosophical, but the details he does illustrate build an energetic and optimistic story of his struggle to become an artist as well as New York City's search for its modern identity.

Delacroix's writing style is robust and sophisticated. His journal includes profound investigations on art theory and creativity. He writes often of his hero Rubens and Michelangelo, Plato. This is an incredibly learned man. Page after page, the reader can delight in treatises on music, the sublime, the nature of talent, and happiness. As in his painted work, Eugene Delacroix writes with both elegance and force. His intellect demands both. For him, Paris has no creative boundaries. It affords him the riches of history, art and music, ideas, of worldly connoisseurship.