According to What

With America at war and midterm elections at hand, art historian Anne M. Wagner reframes Jasper Johns's *Flag*, 1954–55.

If there is one thing that the past five years have taught us, it is that as both sign and image, the United States flag has staying power. It is not neutral. It provokes. Its display both transcends and summons party politics; it invokes the violence of history but still claims to survive the worst that history can do. Hence, to represent the flag is to convey the ambiguous powers of the nation-state. What the flag means is not obvious—it depends on how and where it appears. Does the Stars and Stripes mock its subjects? Veil them? Erase them? The flag did all this and more in *The Americans*, the famous suite of photographs taken by Robert Frank in 1955–56. These are the images in which, as Jack Kerouac wrote three years later, the “EVERYTHING-ness” of America is made visible—an everythinness based on difference, as Frank well knew.¹

To image the flag is inevitably to open the question that lies at the core of this essay: What is the individual's ongoing relation to, or belonging within, the national culture she may serve or criticize, but which has also helped shape her life and thought? This is the question embodied by Jasper Johns's *Flag*. It has never been more relevant than now.

Why study *Flag*? I have made the choice carefully—I guess that's the best word—though polemically also comes to mind. The decision does not arise from any absence of earlier studies or from any long-standing allegiance to Johns as an artist, but because I think his flags give access to exactly those issues that any citizen ought to have on her mind. As so often, the key questions engage politics while also defining an art form, painting. They do so directly, as Johns's first *Flag*, laboriously manufactured in 1954–55, aimed to declare. To be even more specific, I am concerned with the coming together, within a single image, of politics and painting: *Flag* provides an immediate and local instantiation of both terms. It also volatilizes the question of art's role within what we often too blandly term “context”; At issue is the national and political culture to which art belongs.

Much of my account depends on getting in place at least a barebones description of this object—how it looks and was made. The process was elaborate. By now it has been carefully inventoried by others, especially Fred Orton, whose findings I rely on but can now expand.² Here is what Johns did: Using a bedsheet as backing and pencil marks as guidelines, he built up the familiar pattern using small pieces of cloth and newsprint he had torn or cut into bits. We know from a photograph taken by Robert Rauschenberg that at least within the field of stars, the process obscured an initial layer of drawing: sub-Cubist geometries that at one point, whether accidentally or otherwise, came together to suggest the cheek, jaw, and mouth of a glamorous female face—the sort of visage de Kooning saw as epitomizing the seductions of Woman. Yet all this was soon enough covered by bits of fabric or paper that were dangerously dipped in hot wax—blue, white, or red—and pressed into place within the penciled scaffolding of lines. Rauschenberg's photo records the tins and tubs of Johns's homemade apparatus, as well as the requisite wax; the process seems so makeshift that Johns's comment in the mid-1960s that “it's in sort of bad shape; it tends to fall to pieces” makes perfect sense.³ Sometimes the printed snippets were obscured by the wax or the layering, but at many places they can still be read by the naked eye—ads, cartoons, headlines. The familiar press repertoire is sampled with each utterly ordinary fragment: real estate promotions; the help-wanteds; stock reports; mentions, yes, of the Middle East and the State Department; advice from a "Famous Hollywood Figure Telling You How to Reduce"—with
all this speaking to and of the texture of everyday life; Kerouac's “everythingness” in metonymic form. There is even a recipe, not for apple pie, granted, but for applesauce, which, when comfortable normality is to be signaled, can certainly serve as second-best. The result of all this is that time and place seem both present and muted, each scrap has its own message, yet also stands in for its origin elsewhere, at another quite ordinary moment and site.

It bears repeating that not all of this is easily or directly legible. We should note too that when the bits do stay legible, this happens even though the waxy coating means they lie beneath the actual surface of the image. And even though the snippets are physically layered, thus insistently sensual, they are also handled as oddly disembodied and conformist bits of color. They stick to the drawn guidelines like dogs come to heel. In fact, just as a fabric flag is stitched together from separate pieces, Johns likewise fabricated red and white stripes, the stars, and their blue canton each as separable elements—with this procedure too loyally insisting on the “flagness” or “flaglike”ness of what he meant his painting to be. The wax, newsprint, and bedsheets say otherwise: Though new to Johns, their origins lie deep within avant-garde painting and making, from Cubism on. Which is to suggest that the many visible touches of brush and palette knife evidence process, just as the submerged paper snippets are what in another context—whether Cubism or dada, for example—would of course be called collage. This term seems to fit no better than “painting” does, even though the surface is still repeatedly marked and inflected by both brush and knife. Each touch, whether direct or delicate (Johns’s surfaces were promptly credited with “sensuous presence”), is preserved, even memorialized, in a quasi-funereal wax: Its main advantage to Johns, so he said, was that, though starting out molten and dripping, it dries fast and hard.

In what I have said so far lies much of what has interested other critics in Flag. This is a surface that is dispersed but unified, patiently—and rather inventively—handmade, although fitting a fixed pattern borrowed for the job. The advantage of the flag, said Johns, was that it offered a design that could be easily measured and transferred; the claim is part of his general refusal of the semblance of invention or originality, not least as these were conveyed, so conventional wisdom has it, by the Abstract Expressionist trademark, a spontaneous stroke of the brush. It surely bears insisting that Flag was not painted in the wake of Abstract Expressionism but directly in its midst. And Flag is certainly a refusal of invention for convention—this is clear. Yet Johns’s declaration, which underscores the utter providedness, even the randomness, of his choice of this image, still is not all that convincing. For one thing, it runs oddly counter to the artist’s other claim about arriving at this motif: namely, that painting it was a random idea, which came to him in a dream. This is a story that places Flag’s beginnings in Johns’s unconscious, that far-from-random repository, and thus puts the flag there too. Is there something personal in Flag? For now, simply note that this whole string of contradictions, as it runs from the look of the painting back to its origin story, leads to what seems to be the greatest contradiction of all. On this most critics dwell. There is built into the work a tension between its presence as an image and its role as a sign. A dilemma results: “Is it a flag or is it a painting?” Alan R. Solomon was the first to put the question, as far back as 1964. The answer having been considered undecidable then and since, Flag is seen as both a flag and a painting, and there the matter stands. Flag, so Fred Orton concluded in Figuring Jasper Johns, “works in the space of difference… Neither positive nor negative, but both positive and negative, Flag cannot be resolved.”

But what happens now, more than a decade after the publication of Orton’s landmark book? Should we retreat to safer ground? Perhaps ask, Is this a modernist painting or a postmodern one? After all, invention and individuality do cede to a sign that could hardly look less original: The postmodernists get this right. Yet Johns’s borrowings have never undermined the general confidence in his originality. If the standard question—flag or painting?—points efficiently to the unsteadiness of Flag’s double identity, that unsteadiness was never so consequential as to give rise to mistakes. Certainly the artist’s first critics seemed to know exactly what to do when
face-to-face with the work. The rules are clear inside the art world’s galleries, as Robert Rosenblum grasped at once in responding to the painter’s first solo show. “Johns,” declared Rosenblum, “is dedicated to images which outside picture galleries evoke nonesthetic reactions. There is the American flag, which one respects or salutes; targets, which one aims at and hopes to hit; numbers, which one counts with; and letters, which one uses to make words to be read. To see these commonplaces faithfully reproduced in sizes from large to small is disconcerting enough, but not so bewildering as the visual and intellectual impact they carry.” And so, with Rosenblum’s immediate understanding of Flag as a painting—with its ability to generate “visual and intellectual impact” from nonesthetic sources—the critical game begins. It places viewers inside a picture gallery, where aesthetic rules apply. No counting, reading, reverence, or violence, please; no respect, no salutes. What occurs instead is the first mention of the “sensuous presence” of John’s paintings, with their “elegant craftsmanship” and “finely nuanced” surfaces. John’s artistic reputation starts here, as Rosenblum resonates to the “added poignancy of a beloved, handmade transcription of unloved, machine-made images.” This is not the last time a critic will say there is love in the look of John’s paintings. Nor is this surprising, given the waxen warmth of their much-touched surfaces. Rosenblum knows what he is looking at and how to respond.

By now, however, many art critics have become accustomed to thinking of the arts as locked in a life-or-death struggle with at least some constitutive aspects of itself. For John’s flag of which the flag of Flag has come to stand—the system of the commodity and its objects, technology and rationalization, and all that follows from them. In a recent contribution to contemporary aesthetics, the literary critic J. M. Bernstein spells out the oppressive list: “the abstractions of exchange value, technique, means-ends rationality, functionality, structural domination.” For Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, this same list is more or less the text of John’s paintings in the ’50s. It is both what they enact and what they are about. “John’s painting,” he insists, “committed itself (in the way one is ‘committed’ to an institution) to the tautological rigor of mapping the canvas”—via a matrix or template—which hermetically enacted the order of total administration in which any hope for the renaturalization of gesture, chroma, and composition had been lost altogether.”

Most readers of this magazine can doubtless look at Flag and grasp what Buchloh means by the “hermetic enactment of total administration.” His phrase names a visual performance, a literal and constitutive visual effect: Painting and image are physically coextensive, sign and surface are one—with their unity miming the totalization of power itself. The question of the picture’s hope or hopelessness about the future of an individualized or personalized painting (what Buchloh terms the “renaturalization of gesture” and so on) is a different matter; for note that what Buchloh sees as irretrievably lost in John’s painting is precisely what Rosenblum thinks he has found. Buchloh’s renaturalization is Rosenblum’s poignancy; where the former speaks of gesture, chroma, and composition as utterly artificial, the latter finds “elegant craftsmanship” and painterly nuance—terms which suggest that, Buchloh notwithstanding, “renaturalization” was going on space.

Yet Buchloh says something else in these dour remarks. His parenthetical phrase is ticking: It might as well be a bomb. “John’s painting,” he declared oddly and perhaps unconsiously, “committed itself (in the way one is ‘committed’ to an institution),” and then follows his claims about “tautological rigor,” “the order of total administration,” and the rest. How is one committed to an institution? Which institution is in question: painting, the asylum, or the nation-state? In which does the lunacy lie? Does painting offer refuge or the straitjacket? Is one’s commitment madness? Is it involuntary? What is so provocative about Buchloh’s phrase is the conflation it makes between painting and person, between Flag and Johns. The former actively accomplishes what the latter passively engages; we are left wondering about the intentions of paintings and painters, and how to tell them apart.

Here is what should be done with Buchloh’s parenthesis: It needs a new position, right at center stage. There it performs some of the passions and worries that John’s Flag ought to provoke. We have gotten the key question wrong. What matters is not whether it is a flag or a painting, but why the two—the symbol and the practice—have been so intimately married, till death do them part. These are the proper questions: Why turn the American flag into a painting? And, vice versa, Why turn a painting into an American flag? Not only does this rephrasing ask for an explanation, it also insists that John’s flag, as a painting, takes a posture toward the nation: It presents itself as the very emblem of a national school. As a flag, however, it never ceases to be the system of the commodity and its objects, technology and rationalization, and all that follows from them. In a recent contribution to contemporary aesthetics, the literary critic J. M. Bernstein spells out the oppressive list: “the abstractions of exchange value, technique, means-ends rationality, functionality, structural domination.”

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White with Collage. Here encaustic again transforms snippets of newsprint into stars and stripes. Now, though, two elements are added: the white field or ground that supports the flag, and the found strip of ID photographs of an unknown white man visible within the stripes along the right edge. Unlike Flag’s half-buried snippets, its presence is overt. So much seems obvious: As Johns said of the strip, “That’s a very deliberate kind of thing clearly left to be shown, not automatically used, but used consciously.” If we ask what Johns was consciously using—
what is represented by the field and the photographs—the answer, as so often with Johns, takes almost shockingly literal form: whiteness and male identity. We might even take the unknown man in the photo strip as a figure of the citizen, its quasi-ideal.

The other 1955 painting is the colossal White Flag; it is double flag: on the inside or outside? This means that what it inscribed horizontally, the familiar canton would appear, against centuries-old custom, on the right. Again, I think we can take the measure of Johns's experiment by insisting on the literal implications of what, in representation, he has tried to do: to provide a viewer with a different position—an inverse position—from which to contemplate the national sign.

Why turn the American flag into a painting? Why turn a painting into an American flag? To ask the question this way breathes new life into the old flag-versus-painting debate. Here are the rudiments of an answer to both. Johns's utter giving over of his painting to a national symbol is as declarative as it is equivocal, a literalizing restatement of what was a current critical claim. If you want "American-type painting," well, here it is: decisively testing its status as painting, certainly, able to be looked upon with enjoyment, maybe, but also declaring the conceptual limits—what is simultaneously parochial and aggressive—built into the very concept of a national American art. Those limits have less to do with technology and its rationalizations than they do with the complex and irrational affect that accompanies—that still accompanies—this ultimate American sign. Johns's painting not only acknowledges the hegemonic position of American painting in the mid-'50s, but more to the point, it also acknowledges American hegemony itself in some wider and more crucially affective way. Hegemony, remember, is a dualism: It requires both force and consent.

Force and consent: These two words were chosen by Perry Anderson, then editor of New Left Review, as the title of his 2002 essay examining current US policy in light of international objectives in place since World War II. There Anderson reminds us that "it is essential to bear in mind the formal figure of any hegemony, which necessarily always conjugates a particular power with a general task of coordination." I do not pretend that my own small inquiry into Flag and the flag—Anderson's "formal figure of hegemony"—answers to the scale of his analysis, but I do want my effort to stay true to his essay's main force. Which is to grasp how American hegemony works, the peculiar, shifting, often toxic balance between the particular and the general, between ideological invitation and brutal bringing-into-line. And, as Antonio Gramsci's initial propositions concerning hegemony sought to demonstrate, it operates both nationally and locally, deep within the fabric of everyday life. Hegemony, Gramsci writes, defines the state's role in enlisting the allegiance of its citizens: "how each single individual [will] succeed in incorporating himself into the collective many, and how educative pressure will be applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into 'freedom.'"

What I'm suggesting is not so much that Flag references the operations of hegemony as that it condenses and enacts them: It makes them its own, as a constitutive aspect of the view of painting—of

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American-type painting—that it defines. In fact I think Flag might best be described as a realist work. I have already, I hope, suggested why.

What Flag quite pragmatically thus imports into the sphere of our discussions is the need ourselves to attend to dualities of meaning with more political realism. When we speak, for example, of "the order of total administration" or of "the abstractions of exchange value" or "structural domination," we erase a whole register of the exercise and legitimation of power, not least locally, within the body of the nation itself: That process operates through persuasion, loyalty, allegiance, belonging; its signs are visceral and ubiquitous—"unflagging," we might say; the responses it solicits or mandates saturate the texture of the ordinary, just the way Johns’s hot and dangerous colors soaked into the snippets of newsprint they so carefully affix. What is most instructive about Flag—what in the end makes it a realist work—is its terrifying, inevitable ambivalence in the face of the kinds of commitment demanded by the United States. Robert Rosenblum was right to find Johns’s imagery bewildering: never more so, I wager, than in the present moment, when the flag, if ever more tattered and threadbare, is still dominant, still flies so high. It still provides the scrim through which its supporters, and maybe even its detractors, continue to see the world. The long-ago themes of The Americans do not go away. Their relevance will remain, moreover, not only for the years still left to the Bush administration, but on beyond. What this will mean, both globally and locally, has yet to come fully into view. But one thing is certain: Both the flag and the national mind-set will continue to find their figurations at the hands of artists who, like Johns, recognize the fatal power and persuasiveness of Americanism as a mode of representation and perception—as a form of political speech. With this in mind, consider one final flag image: a work by Hans Haacke made public in time for the presidential election of November 2004. Titled Star Gazing, the photograph portrays, in a conventional portrait format, a T-shirted young man—an ordinary citizen—whose head is shrouded in, and erased by, the flag. The hood brings the torturer’s work back home. Once again the victim’s utter isolation and his blindness are the point. Although he is a victim, however, he is also a citizen— heir to John Heartfield’s cabbagehead, the reader of bourgeois papers, but also the offspring of John’s hidden man. We are not used to thinking of Johns as an activist artist. Nor do we necessarily expect from Haacke, as we do from Johns, meditations on the ontological or perceptual status of the arts. But even granted these differences—and there are many more I have not articulated—it is easy to see that both are concerned with the impact of nationalism, with the implications of the persuasions and forces to which, all too willingly, both persons and paintings are ready to give themselves up.

All that is missing from this essay is its final question. Once again, Why study Flag? I have done so because I am a US citizen; because the United States, backed by its allies, is once again engaged in murderous warfare; and because, as Johns implicitly acknowledges, actions carried out in the name of the nation raise the issue of the citizen’s ambiguous belonging to the state. If those ambiguities are structured into US hegemony—woven into its double logic, the logic of force and consent—has the time not come to examine again, with microscopic precision, one’s own belonging within that overarching logic and what it conceals? What are its materials? How deeply do they lie buried? According to what allegiances are they deployed? As I write these questions, I am confident that these were also Johns’s questions while he was fabricating Flag. Of course, he would never say as much. Instead, he says, speaking specifically of making Flag, "Perhaps some of the words went into my mind: I was not conscious of it."14 My point precisely: This is the lesson of Flag. □

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