Espace Sculpture

On Determination: Josh Thorpe's *Ambivalent Flag*

Josh THORPE's Ambivalent Flag, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, Autumn 2010

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Number 98, Winter 2011–2012

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/65534ac

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Cite this review

Court, D. (2011). Review of [On Determination: Josh Thorpe's *Ambivalent Flag* / *Josh THORPE's Ambivalent Flag,* Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, Autumn 2010]. *Espace Sculpture*, (98), 43–43.

On Determination: Josh THORPE's *Ambivalent Flag*

David COURT

Josh Thorpe's *Ambivalent Flag* is a custom-made flag—black on one side, white on the other—commissioned by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in the autumn of 2010 for a flagpole outside the entrance to the gallery, across from a sports field on the campus of the University of Toronto. Like much of Thorpe's work, it is an obstinately simple gesture: a pared-down play with the affective and meaningful potential of colour within the representational space of the flagpole.

Josh THORPE, *Ambivalent Flag*, 2010. Nylon Fabric. 1 x 1,6 m. Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto. Photo : courtesy the artist.

Thorpe's flag occupies this place of representation without purpose, creating a kind of weak confusion where conventionally there is a strong and determined signal. It is not a persuasive form. It doesn't have much allure. There is almost nothing to it without the multiple and relative meanings that it attracts — anarchy, peace, life, death, light, dark, and so on—but these don't quite seem to take hold, seeming too specific, too much. There are just the two sides. One could say 'opposing sides.'

This bluntness, this presentation of what could be thought of as two polar figures or regions of the void, opens a field of speculation, extending away from the work in the direction of the threshold of black and white, the line of opposition. To begin with, one could ask, "What does this flag signal? Who or what does it 'stand for'?" It could be noted that it stands on multiple grounds—the territory of the city, the university, the art gallery. Somewhere in the midst of all this there is the idea of the commons: the space that is neither mine nor yours, but ours; a shared space that tentatively emerges through or *as* dissensus and disruption, as Jacques Ranciere and others have put forward. Here, I also think of Carl Schmitt and his conception of the distinction between 'friend' and 'enemy' as the defining moment of politics. I think of Nietzsche's claim that one's friend should be one's 'best enemy,' suggesting a kind of necessary openness to the difficulty of being bound in a relation of imposition and accountability; an intimate tension that raises the stakes of life (and here I should note that Thorpe is a close friend).

Turning back to the work, what if it is claimed that the flag stands for itself? Or, to twist this question a little, that it stands for art? This would be a two-sided claim: 1) that art *wars*, which is to say that it engages in conflict, constantly making and unmaking territories and borders, making a sovereign claim for itself as a claim for a future world; and 2) that art *negotiates a truce*, referring to arts' 'right of asylum,' as Robert Filliou, Fluxus artist-philosopher has stated it; its holding a space for the dis-placed or un-disciplined, a space where conflict (methodological or ideological, for example) is resolved into an amorphous permissivity.

At its most basic, Thorpe's flag simply does what any flag does: it sets up a determined figure/ground relationship. Except what is figured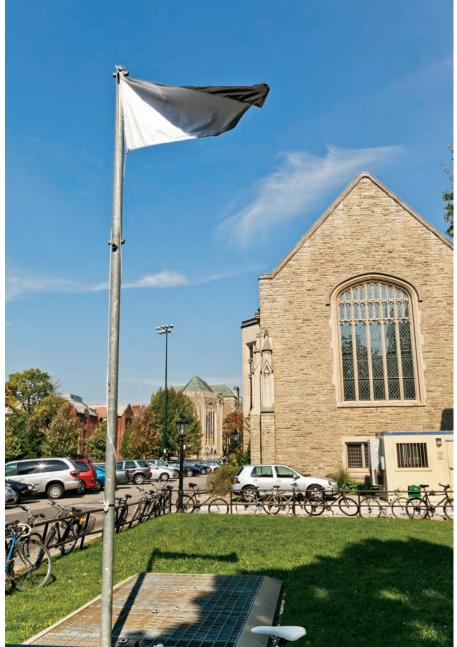 here is nothing other than the ground upon which determination takes place. Perhaps what is presented in the stance of the work is not only ambivalence, but an indifference to decision, determination, dialectics or synthesis. Not *either/or*, but *both/and*—indetermination or indecision; not only towards the choice, but the choice of the choice. It is in this ambivalent relationship to the absolute-ness of the choice that the political and ethical stakes of the work might be revealed or glimpsed.

Thinking through this self-determined ambivalence of Thorpe's flag leads me in the direction of an apparent obstacle: insofar as it is available for speculation along political or ethical lines, it is on the basis of thinking through or with indeterminacy, as the ground for thought. The decision to think through this work involves a step into the field of an irresolute problem. In this way, Thorpe's flag is both a friend and an enemy, a reserve or eruption of demands and questioning, foregrounding the stakes of thought as it proceeds along this problematic trajectory. ←

Josh THORPE's Ambivalent Flag
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto
Autumn 2010

David COURT is a Canadian artist and writer living in New York. He has written reviews and catalogue texts for publications in Canada, China and the US, most recently for *C Magazine* and *Art Papers*. He has recently been involved as a contributor for the publication *Gordon Lebredt: Nonworks 1975-2008*, co-published by the Center for Contemporary Canadian Art and Plug In Editions in 2011, and Gareth Long's ongoing publication project *Who Invented The Desk?* Court holds a master's degree in Visual Studies from the University of Toronto (2009) and a BFA from NSCAD University (2006).

NOTE

1. For further on this line of thought, see Reza Negarestani's "Differential Cruelty" in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol.14.3 (2009): 69-85.