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A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

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CHECKLIST

Brad Kayal, American
Job Creators, 2012, screenprint on French paper
Purchased through the Contemporary Art Fund; 2012.38.6

George Maciunas, American, 1931–1978
U.S.A. Surpasses All Genocide Records, 1970, offset lithograph
Gift of the Friedman family, courtesy of Billie Maciunas; GM.986.80.167

Sonia Landy Sheridan, American, born 1925
Edith and the Flag, 1963, collage of colored magazine pages
Gift of the artist; MIS.2004.84.5

Unknown, American
Reproduction of the United States 50 star flag, cloth
Middle Grants Bi-Centennial Committee; 162.1.18984

Unknown, American
Woman's Theatrical/Pageant Costume, 1918, large-brimmed hat covered with a silk American flag; crown circled with gold metallic cord with tassel, lined with white silk
Gift of Professor Harry Schultz, Class of 1937; 2000.33.33999

White Swan, Apsalooke (Crow), 1851–1904
Untitled (White Swan Riding through Gunfire), about 1890, graphite and colored pencil on wove canvas paper
Partial gift of Mark Lansburgh, Class of 1949, and partial purchase through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund and the Offices of the President and Provost of Dartmouth College; 2007.65.93

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George Maciunas, *U.S.A. Surpasses All Genocide Records*, 1970, offset lithograph.
Gift of the Friedman family, courtesy of Billie Maciunas; GM.986.80.167.

WHAT'S IN A FLAG?

Artists' Intentions and the Meaning of the Stars and Stripes



Brad Kayal, *Job Creators*, 2012, screenprint on French paper. Purchased through the Contemporary Art Fund; 2012.38.6.

Since its creation over two centuries ago, the American flag has become one of the world's best-recognized national standards. Call it what you will—Old Glory, the Stars and Stripes, the Star-Spangled Banner—it crops up constantly as a pin on the lapels of American politicians, a design on an endless array of apparel, and a motif on an innumerable host of knickknacks and paraphernalia. Familiarity with this national symbol extends far beyond the borders of the United States, and its global significance makes it a lightning rod for controversy as well as a beacon of pride and hope (and commercialism). Unsurprisingly, therefore, many American artists have employed the flag in their visual work.

This observation by no means implies that the American flag holds the same significance or conveys the same meaning in each work in which it is featured. Artists have used the flag to praise and to criticize, to make a specific point all on its own or to elucidate an aspect of some larger narrative. At times, viewers might miss the deeper significance of an artist's use of the American flag; they might also project meaning onto the flag that is not actually intended by the artist. Other times, the artist's intentions are perfectly clear. And in any case, the flag remains a symbol to be reckoned with.

In this installation, the hat from a woman's theatrical costume, dating from approximately 1918, presents the most straightforward and conventional use of the American flag among these six works of art. A woman wore this costume in a pageant or parade celebrating Armistice Day and the American victory in World War I. Its explicitly patriotic sentiment most clearly mirrors the function of official American flags.

On the other hand, a reproduction of that official American flag hangs alongside Fluxus founder George Maciunas's *U.S.A. Surpasses All Genocide Records*, a scathing indictment of U.S. foreign (and domestic) policy. Maciunas turns the flag's stars into skull and crossbones, and the blood-red stripes spell out the crimes of history's worst war criminals, from the thirteenth century's Kublai Khan to Hitler and his Holocaust. But the grand finale to these devastating figures is comprised of the United States of America's offenses, including the atrocities committed against Native Americans and the people of South Vietnam (Maciunas completed his flag in 1970). Here, the flag indicts both the American government that perpetrated such crimes and the public who remained silent or indifferent in the face of them. The flag turns into the canvas on which Maciunas paints the country's guilt, and its status as a national symbol poignantly expresses Maciunas's convictions regarding the country's national shame.

When Brad Kayal sent his 2011 print, *Job Creators*, to the Occuprint movement's website, which is dedicated to connecting the poster art of the international Occupy movement to a wider audience, Occuprint found him a printer in San Francisco to produce it. The poster deals with the signature Occupy issues of social and economic inequality, and Kayal describes it as his "personal disagreement" with "certain political groups [who] were defending 'job creators,' a euphemism for the wealthy class and corporations, as something to be protected and even revered." In this work, the flag stands for all Americans and the ideals that the country embodies, while Mr. Monopoly represents wealthy corporations and individuals. Kayal observes that "a dancing position normally seems like a harmless display of frivolity, but when placed on top of the flag, it becomes sinister," thanks to the "shocking" juxtaposition. Like *Genocide Records*, *Job Creators* uses the flag to deliver sharp criticism, but here it represents the common man, trampled by a class of Americans that is elevated above the rest simply by income. The flag and the people it represents are done a great injustice by those who "put their love for capitalism over love for country." The flag's eye-catching colors draw the viewer's eye to the plight of the American people when subjected to the machinations of unscrupulous corporations and individuals.

White Swan's ledger drawing *Untitled (White Swan Riding through Gunfire)* might subvert certain viewers' expectations about how an American flag might appear in a work of art created by a Native American artist. Instead of serving as a political statement regarding the injustices perpetrated upon Native American nations and individuals at the hands of an expansionist United States government and citizenry, the flag here contributes to a narrative about White Swan's service as a scout for General Custer's ill-fated Seventh Cavalry Regiment. Rather than speaking to the

"Cowboys versus Indians" storyline that informs many Americans' understanding of the U.S. conquest of the West, White Swan's drawing touches on the themes of war between rival Native American nations that resulted in the alignment of the Crow nation with Custer's forces. This work invites the viewer to take a deeper look at all of the underlying assumptions one might bring to a work of art.

Sonia Landy Sheridan's *Edith and the Flag* speaks to the insecurity and paranoia of the American middle class. This collage comes from Sheridan's *American High Gothic* series, which transplants Grant Wood's iconic farmer and his wife into the city. There, according to the artist, they have become "middle class and overweight." The flag draped over Edith's arm, Sheridan points out, extends beyond the false patriotism of the middle class: "The flag was used, throughout history, [by] despots and politicians and ordinary people [who] 'wrap themselves in the flag' as [a] means of protection from the 'mob.' Now politicians use the flag pin on the lapel." The artist here targets those people who refuse to rise to the challenges of true patriotism by contributing "to the general welfare and enlightenment of society" and instead simply name themselves great Americans and leave it at that. In this collage, then, the flag stands for empty patriotism.

Most viewers of this installation will recognize the American flag readily and bring with them, as well, a set of underlying assumptions about what it represents in the context in which it is displayed. As these works show, sometimes these assumptions will encompass at least part of the given artist's intention, but other times a work containing the flag requires a second look, more reflection, and more information. Some of these artists, intentionally or not, challenge viewers' assumptions about such a recognizable symbol. The more aware we are of the possibilities, the richer our experience of these works will be.

Caroline Liegey '13, Levinson Intern



Sonia Landy Sheridan, *Edith and the Flag*, 1963, collage of colored magazine pages. Gift of the artist; MIS.2004.84.5.