

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.

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 is not only ambivalence, but a reference to decision, determination, dialectics or synthesis. But not *both/and*—indeterminate indecision; not only too choice, but the choice of choice. It is in this ambivalent relationship that the absolute-ness of the political and ethical work might be revealed.

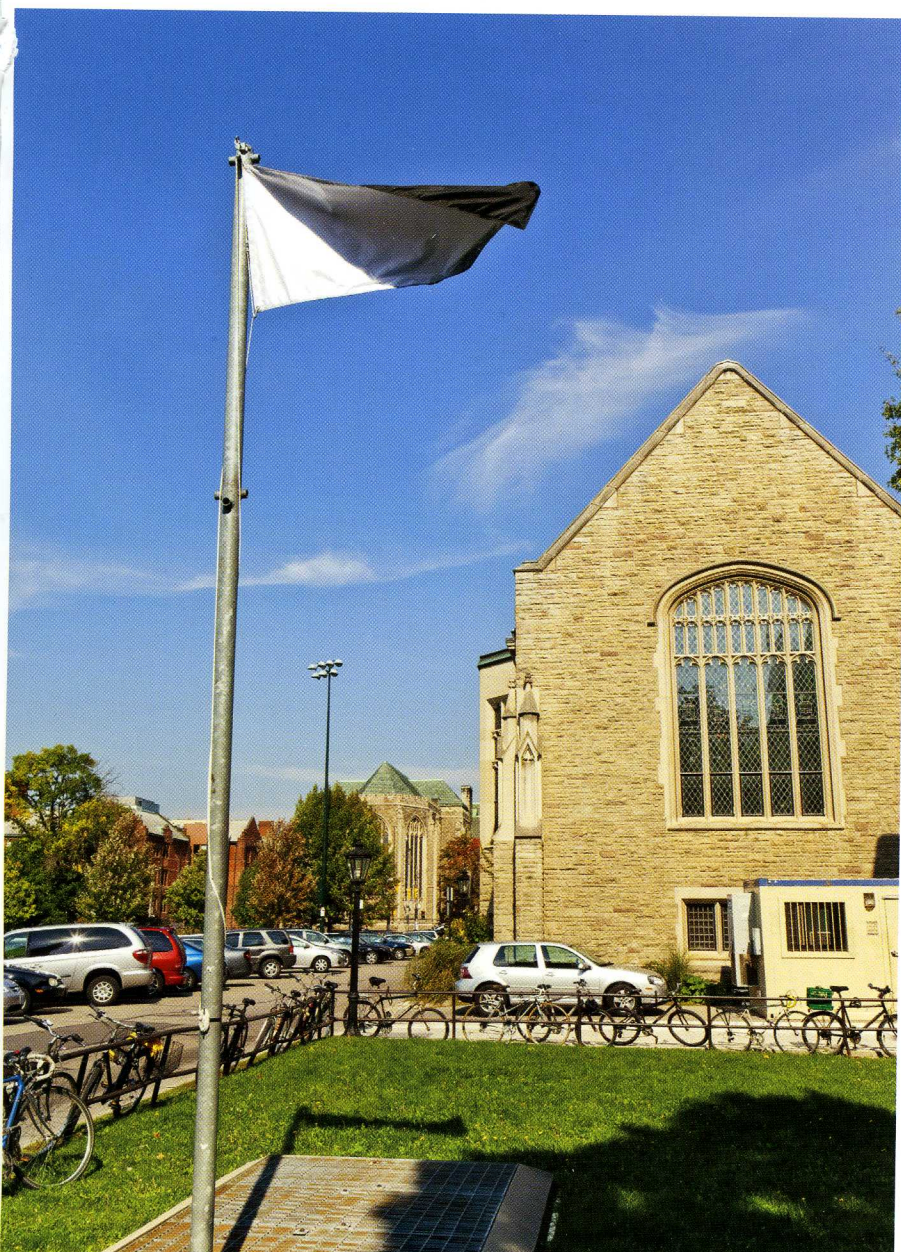
Thinking through this named ambivalence of 1 leads me in the direction of an apparent obstacle: insoluble or unavailable for speculation or ethical lines, it is of thinking through or v. minacy, as the ground figure. The decision to think that work involves a step into an irresolute problem. In Thorpe's flag is both a friend, a reserve or enemy, demands and questioning grounding the stakes of proceeds along this project trajectory. ◀

Josh THORPE's *Ambivalent Flag*,
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NOTE

1. For further on this line of thought, see Negarestani's "Difference," *Angelaki: Journal of the Humanities*, Vol.14.3 (2007).



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