

# A Contingent Historical Thing

## *American Artists in a House Divided*

By **Keith Muchowski**

Review of *A House Divided: American Art since 1955*, by Anne Middleton Wagner (University of California Press, 2012)

**A**nne Middleton Wagner's *A House Divided: American Art since 1955* is a collection of a dozen essays about American art and artists. Eleven of the essays focus on individuals. Subjects include Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Maya Lin, African-American collage artist Kara Walker, and sculptor Dan Flavin, whose minimalist light installations have been displayed at in Germany's Rhine-Elbe Science Park, New York City's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, to name a few locations. The final piece is an analysis of performance and video artistry. Wagner is well-positioned to expound on contemporary art. She is the author of numerous books, including the well-received *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*. She is also the Henry Moore Foundation Research Coordinator at the Tate Museum, and the Class of 1936 Chair Emerita of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of California, Berkeley.

The pieces collected together in *A House Divided* were originally published as catalog essays over a period of years. According to the author:

Each study has its own goals and origins; each was shaped by a different climate, a different set of immediate conditions (from the affirmative action debate of the mid-1990s, for example, to the pursuit by the Bush regime of the Iraq war), to which it aimed to respond.

The book's repeated question is: What is it "to experience U.S. hegemony *from the inside*, as shaping the fundamental patterns of artistic production, to say nothing of the fabric of everyday life?"

The book begins with an analysis of Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1954-55), attempting to place that painting, and similar works by Johns and others, in the political context of both the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, especially the post-9/11 period. Wagner posits that "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." The second essay, and in this reviewer's opinion the strongest piece in the book, is an analysis of Andy Warhol's *Race Riot* series (early 1960s). In these works, the pop artist uses to great effect Charles Moore's iconographic images of the snarling dogs and club-wielding, Southern police officers unleashed on Civil Rights marchers to great effect. Wagner's thesis is that Warhol is fundamentally "a history painter." Warhol, of course, had always taken popular imagery from mass media and incorporated it into his work. Nowhere did he do this more powerfully than in his use of these photographs already so familiar to millions of Americans of that era through their publication in *Life* magazine. When Wagner juxtaposes Warhol's *Race Riots* next to Phillip Lindsay Mason's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1969) and even Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), she gives us nothing less than a new paradigm for interpreting the pop artist. The essays on Lin, Walker, and the other artists are equally illuminating, with their own insights and unique take on their subjects.

American art underwent an extraordinary transformation in the decades after the Second World War. This should not be surprising given that much of the world was still recovering from that catastrophic event. Wagner chronicles some of the changes in *A House Divided*. In her words, she "brought these essays together . . . to demonstrate how much it matters that contemporary [art] makers understand the artwork as a contingent historical thing." Curiously, the collection goes both too far and not far enough in examining mid- to late-twentieth century American art as "a contingent historical thing." Wagner is especially good when describing how her subjects engaged with America's role on the national and international scene. At the same time Wagner's focus is too narrow, perhaps because she was too busy responding to the "immediate conditions" pulled from the headlines of recent years. She might have done more to explain *how* the United States became the center of the art world at the mid-century point, and what these factors meant for the artists and their art. A short list of influences might include: the artistic brain drain that had taken place in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s and its immediate influence on American art and culture; the economic, physical, and moral collapse of Europe brought on by the Second World War and how this moved the center of the art world across the Atlantic; the role of Stalin's Terror and Mao's

Cultural Revolution in stifling any forms of expression not approved by the State for hundreds of millions of global citizens and its implications for the rest of the world.

Conversely, a historicist perspective is a necessary but insufficient paradigm for interpreting art in this, or any, era. Yes, artists, like everyone, are by definition products of their time, making assumptions about the world around them and acting (or in artists' cases, creating) accordingly. At the same time, people can also live and work under the most extraordinary circumstances blissfully unaware of events around them. This is why the historicist model of criticism is, at best, a partial lens through which to consider art. The latter decades of the twentieth century were exciting, tumultuous years for the American art scene and for American society in general. Anne Middleton Wagner captures a great deal of this tension and excitement in these pieces. Though the book does not quite offer the analysis of *American Art since 1955* promised by the subtitle, Anne Middleton Wagner will give readers much to think about in her interpretations of the artists about whom she writes in *A House Divided*. Those seeking a better understanding of contemporary American art, and the milieu in which certain elements of it were created, would do well to begin here.

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