O n a clear September morning, as I was walking to work in Brooklyn, New York, the cerulean blue sky was suddenly clouded by aeroplanes, smoke, ash, and the fluttering of thousands of tiny papers blowing in from lower Manhattan. In an instant it was a different world. The destruction of Sept 11, 2001, has had a deep impact on all New Yorkers, whether they lost someone or not. There was no subtlety to exploding buildings and falling bodies. How could the imagination compete with this surreal reality?

Art can be a refuge from reality, but it has to encompass reality before transcending it. It takes time to heal. Little by little art creeps back into the darkened world. Lately, I do not need to go to galleries to see art, I see it in the streets: in the home-made shrines to the dead and in the pictures of the missing posted on fences. However, the most provocative statement I see is the ubiquitous image of the American flag—the same red, white, and blue rectangle reproduced over and over, as if by Andy Warhol—on buildings, windows, cars, bicycles, t-shirts, even as inflatable baseball bats. The appearance of flags was at first a small shock to the senses—or should I say aftershock? In cosmopolitan New York City, an American flag was a rarity. Now that I have grown used to them, they are not so jarring—just another element contributing to the visual clutter of this dense city. If I choose to, I can view the flags as a beautiful abstraction—bold patterns of disparate stripes and stars—an asymmetrical, top-heavy rectangle of blue.

The flag has inspired artists throughout American history. From 18th-century folk artists to Jasper Johns, artists have appropriated its image for their own devices. There have been entire art exhibitions devoted to the flag’s use. It is an easy symbol to appropriate for all kinds of self-expression. Flags are symbols of identity. Their function is to identify, separate, and then unify that which they encompass. They are a double-edged sword, unifying and empowering the few, but sometimes at the expense of the many. There is something beautiful about them, flapping in the wind. When the flags of all of the nations are flying together, such as at the United Nations here in New York, it is a sight to behold. But there is something terrifying about them as well.

Do the flags on the streets have anything to do with art? Of course they mean different things to every person, ranging from hawkish patriotism to loving expressions of unity with one’s fellow men. This is the problem with symbols—it is impossible to discern an individual’s meaning with the use of a universal symbol. The context is everything. In times of peace, patriotic displays, especially by a superpower, can seem quaint or, at worst, isolationist. In times of war, patriotism is to be expected. The problem with the current time is its uncertainty. Will flying the flag lead to World War III? Does an emotional response preclude a rational response? We are told that we are at war, and yet the enemy is shadowy and does not have a nation. Flying the national flag doesn’t quite answer the call. One New York artist has suggested that we include an image of the earth on our flag—to promote the notion that national identity is no longer appropriate in the global times we live in. Strangely, I used to think of myself first as simply a person, a non-national, perhaps secondarily as American, if I thought about it at all. The attacks have forced a different identity on me and on others like me. When politics collide with art, art is invariably the loser.

An old Chinese saying states that in every disaster there is an opportunity. There is an opportunity now to live every day like our lives depended on it.

Fred Bendheim