Jasper Johns: A Crisis in Criticism

Andrea Alvarez

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Recommended Citation

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Jasper Johns: A Crisis in Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art & Art History from The College of William and Mary

by

Andrea Alvarez

Accepted for ________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

______________________________
Charles Palermo, Director

______________________________
Melanie Dawson

______________________________
Victoria Scott

______________________________
Alan Wallach

Williamsburg, VA
April 17, 2009
INTRODUCTION

The vast number of books and articles on his art supports the common view that Jasper Johns is one of the most important living American artists. After his first one-man show in the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1958, artists and critics reacted—often holding very different opinions—by writing their impressions of his oeuvre. It was, as Leo Steinberg called it, “a crisis in criticism.”¹ Some characterized Johns as a Neo-Dadaist, some as a Pop artist; some said that he worked in direct reaction to Abstract Expressionism. The fact that his work has elicited various readings, none of which can be categorically denied as false, is the source of the problem with critics who have attempted to pigeon-hole Jasper Johns’ art into a specific style, or “-ism”. In what follows, I will argue that the way Johns’ works open themselves up to interpretation so plainly and without immediate legibility is a product of his attitude towards art. This attitude is, in my opinion, a postmodernist one. He orients his works towards the human, leaving it desolate, as Steinberg said in “Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public,” of human presence, with only the viewer left to interpret or understand the work. I will consider various prominent writings on Johns, and consider some specific examples of his art in relation to these interpretations, but first it is important to understand more about the artist himself.

Jasper Johns was born in South Carolina in 1930. He lived with various family members throughout the course of his childhood, and eventually did a brief stint at the University of South Carolina. The artist then moved to New York to attend Parsons School of Design but was soon thereafter drafted into the United States Army. From 1951 to 1953, Johns spent time on base in South Carolina and Japan. He then moved back to New York City and worked with his friend and fellow artist Robert Rauschenberg on odd jobs and in the development of their art.

Johns and Rauschenberg, along with composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham became fast friends and confidants—creating a multilateral conversation about art, which transcended the differences among the artists’ mediums. These relationships affected the art of all four of the men, and are noticeable from time to time in the works they created. Johns even worked on some stage design for the performances by Cunningham.

Historians often associate Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg’s names with the advent of Pop Art because of the artists’ tendencies to employ found objects in creative ways. While this characterization can be debated—and is frequently rejected by Johns himself—the notion that they were a part of a reaction against Abstract Expressionism is unshakeable. In one quite literal act of defiance, Robert Rauschenberg created a work entitled *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, which came out of the idea that Rauschenberg—or anyone for that matter—could easily erase and do away with the expressive and heavy lines
created by Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning, thereby questioning the value placed on the marks de Kooning made on his works. As Branden Joseph wrote, “the transformation of the de Kooning into what Rauschenberg called a ‘monochrome no-image’ can be understood from a Bergsonian perspective as the evacuation of intentional imagery and individual expression (i.e., “art”) in favor of a receptivity to contingent visual sensations (i.e., “life”).

The removal of intentional imagery and individual expression makes it difficult to characterize Rauschenberg as a Pop artist, since Pop artists were selecting commoditized images and expressing relation to them. In this work, it has also been said that Rauschenberg was employing some Duchampian impulse. The act of erasing the drawing was an allegorical emptying of meaning much like what Duchamp did in some of his readymades. “Rauschenberg began by appropriating an existing work of art, although an original in this case rather than a reproduction. He then proceeded to reverse Duchamp’s addition of a graffiti-like mustache and goatee to Leonardo’s masterpiece [Mona Lisa] by erasing the de Kooning almost entirely.”

The addition or removal of content to a work is allegorical, and because this allegorization was typically eschewed by modernism, it ensured that Rauschenberg had set himself apart from the unmistakably modernist arena.

---


3 Joseph, 91.

4 As Craig Owens wrote in “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” modern art turned away from the use of allegory because it appropriated images and meanings, layered alternative meanings, and created parallel symbolic meanings. The modernists were not keen on these effects of allegory because they were striving for purity and clarity in their works,
Johns and Rauschenberg participated in acts of defiance like *Erased de Kooning Drawing* throughout their careers. Whether these actions were for the purpose of avoiding definition or simply because it was something they chose to do (an answer Johns would probably choose over the former), the artists successfully set themselves apart from the artists they were surrounded by in the New York art world.

My argument in this essay is based on various accounts of Jasper Johns’ art from the early 1960s until the present day. I have considered a selection of the most prominent writers and critics, and have set them against a few select works of art. My personal opinions on Johns were influenced primarily by the writings of Leo Steinberg, Jeffrey Weiss, and Harry Cooper, though I have not solely focused on these three in my analysis. I argue that the only thing one can know for certain about Jasper Johns is that his art is open to the viewer’s ideas. This flexibility and openness to interpretation has led me to characterize Johns as a postmodernist artist who creates works that can be seen in various lights. His works can be understood from a modernist perspective, from the perspective that his works react against Abstract Expressionism, from the perspective that calls him a Neo-Duchampian or a Neo-Dadaist, and more. The postmodern attitude that informs Johns’ works permits them to be understood in all of these different ways, and it was not Johns’ intention ever to make it clear whether he

which is lost when meanings are superimposed on each other. This concept is developed further in a later section of this essay.
considered himself a Modernist, a Postmodernist, a Neo-Dadaist, or anything in particular other than himself.

**Literature on Jasper Johns**

Johns’ 1958 one-man show at the Leo Castelli Gallery sold out almost completely. Important collectors such as James Thrall Soby, Nelson Rockefeller, and others purchased works; Alfred H. Barr Jr. bought *Target with Four Faces* (fig. 1) and other works for the Museum of Modern Art, Leo Castelli kept a *Target* for himself and Johns kept *White Flag* (fig. 2).\(^5\) The rest of the works went to other galleries, collectors, or private dealers. Even though the works sold quickly, they were not initially accepted for their theoretical or aesthetic value. The art world was puzzled by Johns’ oeuvre and was quick to write about it. Johns’ intention, his oeuvre’s meaning, and its larger implications were wholly unclear. The Greenbergian modernist tradition did not help much to clear up these confusions, so it was time for something new to emerge in order for viewers to reach an understanding of what Johns was doing.

In 1960, the leading modernist critic, Clement Greenberg, provided such a tool. He wrote the essay “Modernist Painting” in order for viewers to understand the things that were going on in the art world at the time, and this essay provided a dogma to which many visual artists subscribed. His opinionated writings ignited discussion and disagreement among artists and critics alike, and the

---

more this discourse went on, the more convoluted and complicated a historian’s picture of modernism became. Clement Greenberg’s theory of art combines the Kantian philosophy of self-criticism and a focus on formalism. Greenberg, despite his denials, effectively instructed artists to create works that were unique to their medium, pure and defined clearly within its bounds. The blurring of the lines between mediums was an aberration to Greenberg; the most beautiful and successful work happening when a work was acutely self-aware and self-reflexive. Modernist painting, on Greenberg’s account, is driven by the artist’s awareness of the flatness of the painting’s support – and quite often the tension between the denial and assertion of it. Although Greenberg would not have said this in such a dogmatic way, his writings gave the impression that he believed painting not oriented to the flatness of the picture plane was unsuccessful and not in keeping with the task of art in the modernist epoch. When an artist created works that were incompatible with the drift of modernism as Greenberg saw it, he wrote that the artist had stepped away from good art, or stepped into “badness.”

In “After Abstract Expressionism,” Greenberg characterized Willem de Kooning’s early Woman (fig. 3) pictures as examples of “homeless representation,” which he writes is “neither good nor bad, and maybe some of the best results of Abstract Expressionism in the past were got by flirting with representation.”

Homeless representation is a kind of painterliness, which is at once descriptive

---


and abstracted. The abstraction suggests representation, which is what makes it “homeless,” and not in keeping with plain abstraction or plain representation.\(^8\)

This passage implies that Greenberg was an advocate of de Kooning’s work in the way that it combined means of abstraction and representation, but as Greenberg goes on, one can see that he was only an advocate at the beginning of the artist’s career, and once it went in a direction Greenberg disliked, he faults the artist:

> Badness becomes endemic to a manner only when it hardens into mannerism. This is just what happened to “homeless representation” in the mid-1950’s in de Kooning’s art, in Guston’s, in the post-1954 art of Kline, and in that of their many imitators. It is on the basis therefore of its actual results that I find fault with “homeless representation,” not because of any parti pris; it’s because what were merely its logical contradictions have turned into artistic ones too.\(^9\)

Clement Greenberg was at the height of his power during the same period that Abstract Expressionism was—from about the late 1940s until around 1960. The style was greatly significant in New York because of how successful it was internationally—no American movement had had such positive reception throughout the world before Abstract Expressionism.\(^10\) In general, Abstract Expressionism demonstrated Greenberg’s theory of modernism well. Since it is a difficult style to pin down, Greenberg vacillated between high praise and harsh

---

\(^{8}\) This contradiction in terms may be unclear until one encounters a Woman painting. The figure is undoubtedly abstracted; the form of her body being constructed from abrupt and heavy brushstrokes, yet at the same time, the representation of a woman is undeniable.


\(^{10}\) Crichton, 36.
criticism of artists like de Willem de Kooning and Hans Hofmann, as evidenced by the above quotations. Greenberg defined the movement as painterly:

If the label “Abstract Expressionism” means anything, it means painterliness: loose, rapid handling, or the look of it; masses that blotted and fused instead of shapes that stayed distinct; large and conspicuous rhythms; broken color; uneven saturations or densities of paint, exhibited brush, knife, or finger marks—in short, a constellation of qualities like those defined by Wölfflin when he extracted his notion of the Malerische from Baroque art. As we can now see, the displacing of the quasi-geometrical as the dominant mode in New York abstract art after 1943 offers another instance of that cyclical alternation of painterly and non-painterly which has marked the evolution of Western art (at progressively shorter intervals after Manet) since the 16th century. Painterly abstraction tended to be less flat, or less taut in its flatness, than closed abstraction, and contained many more velleities toward illusion.¹¹

When Abstract Expressionists moved away from this flat painterliness and closer to the representation of depth, Greenberg deemed it “homeless” and in some extreme cases, approaching “badness.” Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, into the 1940s and 1950s, the Abstract Expressionist focus on paint and color gave way to trompe-l’œil illusion, not through perspectival approaches, but through tangible perceptions of depth. It was in the 1950s that abstraction either gave way to homeless representation or to the “literal three-dimensionality of piled-on paint.”¹² Jasper Johns’ art debuted at about this same moment, and Greenberg considered the formal qualities of his works as sufficient to understanding them. Greenberg wrote that, although there is a way in which Johns’ art played with

literary irony, the artist's truer concern must have been "the abiding interest of his art, as distinguished from its journalistic one, [that] lies largely in the area of the formal or plastic." In the following passage, Greenberg explains the formalist way he reads Johns' work, and how these formal qualities make it successful, while other qualities add nothing to the success of the work.

The original flatness of the canvas, with a few outlines stenciled on it, is shown as sufficing to represent adequately all that a picture by Johns really does represent. The paint surface itself, with its de Kooningesque play of lights and darks, is shown, on the other hand as being completely superfluous to this end. Everything that usually serves representation and illusion is left to serve nothing but itself, that is, abstraction; while everything that usually serves the abstract or decorative—flatness, bare outlines, all-over or symmetrical design—is put to the service of representation. And the more explicit this contradiction is made, the more effective in every sense the picture tends to be. [...] The effect of a Johns picture is also weakened, often, when it is done in bright colors instead of neutral ones like black and gray, for these, being the shading hues *par excellence* are just those that become the most exhibitedly and poignantly superfluous when applied to ineluctably flat images.

Greenberg seems to have valued some of Johns’ contribution to art, but he also characterized his work as an example of “homeless representation,” which referred to the way that Johns’ works waver between representing objects in real life and being abstractions of those objects attached to canvas.

Greenberg’s concrete and seemingly prescriptive formula for modernism created controversy among critics who believed there was much more to

---


modernism than formalism; that often an artist could be a modernist without subscribing to the rigid equation Greenberg provided. In 1968, critic Leo Steinberg wrote an essay titled “Other Criteria,” which delineated exactly that: other criteria for defining the modernist aesthetic. Steinberg questioned the growing belief that the only way to be a modernist painter was to follow Greenberg’s formalist theory. He read Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting” as an incomplete formula for defining a modernist painter. Steinberg wanted painters and critics to see other qualities shared among modern paintings beyond those highlighted by Greenberg, and to realize that many of these characteristics were not originally modernist creations, but can even be found in some Old Master paintings.

When, in “Modernist Painting,” Greenberg says that “the best art of the last seventy or eighty years approaches closer and closer to such consistency,” he is referring to the scientific consistency “that visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience.”¹⁵ The fact that one of the most recognized names in modern criticism acknowledged what he thought to be the “best” art of the time period is a plain and clear reason that artists began to work in such a way: because they wanted their art to be considered part of the “best” art of the period as well.

Steinberg sought to find an alternative way of looking at art that not only considered the context in which the work was made but also the reasons for its creation. The artist’s intention becomes vital to the understanding of a work, and since each artist is different and has different motives for creating each work of art, a viewer cannot approach a work with any preconceived notions. This approach allows every work to exist on its own terms and not be defined by its medium. Some critics use *a priori* knowledge to judge new paintings, but Steinberg offers a different way “to cope with the provocations of a novel art.” He suggests the critic should withhold his or her taste and criteria:

While he seeks to comprehend the objectives behind the new art produced, nothing is *a priori* excluded or judged irrelevant. Since he is not passing out grades, he suspends judgment until the work’s intention has come into focus and his response to it is—in the literal sense of the word—sym-pathetic; not necessarily to approve, but to feel along with it as with a thing that is like no other.

While this alternative sounds appealing, it seems to be lacking a clear definition of where the criteria for looking at a work of art come from. In one sense, it sounds as though the work proposes its own criteria; in another, the context determines the relevant criteria; and finally it seems possible that the artist’s intention determines the criteria for the work. Steinberg never offers a solution to this issue; perhaps he regards all three of these sources equally revealing and looks to all of them for determining criteria of a work, but this seems to hint at a

---

16 Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 63.

17 Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 63.
situation in which there is no fixed, determinate set of criteria, and therefore no fixed meaning.

Although Steinberg sees some merit in the formal analysis of a work of art, he really places himself in opposition to formalists in order to emphasize his unease with Greenberg’s theory. In “Other Criteria” he writes:

I find myself constantly in opposition to what is called formalism; not because I doubt the necessity of formal analysis, or the positive value of work done by serious formalist critics. But because I mistrust their certainties, their apparatus of quantification, their self-righteous indifference to that part of artistic utterance which their tools do not measure.¹⁸

By formalism, I take Steinberg to mean the kind of Greenbergian “a priori formalism” in which an idea exists before its “projection.”¹⁹ “Form, for Greenberg, had become an autonomous ingredient, and meaning a virus that could be dispensed with.”²⁰ This kind of formalism seems to be based on strong convictions about what formal qualities must appear in a work, which qualities should be avoided, and the degree to which an artist can apply these convictions but remain individual. These strict guidelines seem overly certain, closed to exceptions or new trends, and seem to desire that artistic personality be eliminated from art. We can understand Steinberg’s questioning of formalism in

¹⁸ Steinberg, 64
²⁰ Bois, xix.
this sense, and how he highlights the clear problem of over-certainty and the lack of consideration of context and inherent meaning.

I believe Steinberg’s dispute is with two facets of formalism. First, the formalist certainty, which relies simply on asserting the ability to judge what constitutes a formal quality, and more importantly, which ignores everything about the artistic utterance that formalist tools are not suited to discover. Secondly—and this part is related to the first—Steinberg dislikes the unhistorical approach of formalism. Context is irrelevant to a Greenbergian approach to a painting. When one sees a painting, regardless of who made it or when, one has just as much access to formal information as any Greenbergian formalist.

In short, Steinberg believes in the importance of knowing the intention or meaning of a work of art. Analysis of subject matter is vital to the process of assessing the meaning of a work, and we can see the importance Steinberg placed on content in what he wrote in 1962: “[d]espite a half-century of formalist indoctrination, it proved almost impossible to see the paintings for subject matter. […] Even those whose long-practiced art appreciation had educated them to ignore a picture’s subject as irrelevant to its quality talked and could talk about little else—though they tried.” Steinberg seems to have appreciated the way that Jasper Johns’ works forced people to talk about content instead of just formal qualities. In his 1960 essay, “Contemporary Art and the Plight of its Public,” he wrote of his first reactions to Johns’ art (which he first saw in 1958) and in this we

---

21 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 22.
see that Steinberg was not only looking at the formal qualities of the works exhibited, but he was also questioning what kind of meaning Johns meant for his viewers to extract from the works. Steinberg contemplated these works intensely, finding himself uncomfortable and distressed about his inability to figure them out. About the apparent desecration of the human faces in *Target with Four Faces*, Steinberg asked himself “Could any meaning be wrung from it?” He sought out meaning in the use of the dismembered faces and the bull’s-eye; he asked himself about the nature of a target, and the way “all of Jasper Johns’ pictures conveyed a sense of desolate waiting.” By desolate waiting, Steinberg means that the objects in Johns’ works are waiting for some action to be done to them, but the implication of human absence leaves the works in a dismal state of suspense. All of these contemplations indicate that merely looking at the lines on a work would be insufficient to gather the information Steinberg thought should be gathered from a work of art. The valuable information provided by an artist that could be used towards the understanding of a work of art is left out when the one does not question the reasons for a subject’s appearance.

Returning to Steinberg’s second objection to formalism, that context is as important to understanding a work of art as the formal qualities are, he shows us that he has considered the relationship between Johns’ work and the work that

---


came before it: “For what really depressed me was what I felt these works were able to do to all other art.” By this, I take Steinberg to mean that Johns became part of an older work’s context. The earlier works do not necessarily lose their dependence on their contexts, but instead Johns manages to incorporate himself into their context. It is clear in his essay, “Other Criteria,” that Steinberg valued context. In the opening pages of the essay, he stresses the importance of the relationship artists have to their teachers, and the relationship they have to other artists in their “group,” the way their art is received in their respective countries. All of these considerations show the potential external influences on a work of art, and it is clear that Steinberg deems these important in the understanding of an artist and his or her work.

To these objections, one might ask what it is that Steinberg prefers about uncertainty if he dislikes formalist certainty so much. I would respond that Steinberg does not necessarily like uncertainty, but rather he dislikes the certainty held by the formalists. He sees the formalists as missing some key pieces of information during their analysis. They look for certain formal qualities (line, color, etc.) and measure their meaning quantitatively.

---

24 Steinberg, “Contemporary Art and the Plight of it’s Public,” 12.


26 This is not to say that the formalists held up rulers to the works, but rather that the feeling that proportions among formal elements (lines, colors, shapes) belonged in some kind of balance and it was this balance (or unbalance) which provided a meaning for the works.
Steinberg wrote a critical assessment of Johns’ work in “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art.” He said Johns’ subjects “were of such unprecedented ‘banality,’ it seemed nothing so humdrum had ever been seen before.” He continues and asks, “Why had he chosen to paint subjects of such aggressive uninterest?” The phrase ‘aggressive uninterest’ is so telling of the way Johns presented his subjects. He was aggressive in that he presented his objects boldly. They are placed plainly and simply on a canvas, as they are, as we know them, and are confronted with their objecthood. These objects, however, are wholly uninteresting to us, as they are objects we encounter in our day-to-day lives (hangers, numbers, drawer faces). We are only particularly interested in them in this situation because we are encountering them within the walls of a gallery or the binding of an art text.

Steinberg believed that Johns succeeded in bringing subject matter back into the discussion of a painting, and that he brought it back “as the very condition of painting. […] a distinction between content and form is either not yet or no longer intelligible.” Steinberg attempts to understand the intentions behind Johns’ works by doing an in-depth study of the subjects of his paintings from the 1958 show. He elucidates eight traits shared by the subjects of these paintings:


1. Whether objects or signs, they are man-made things.
2. All are commonplaces of our environment.
3. All possess a ritual or conventional shape, not to be altered.
4. They are either whole entities or complete systems.
5. They tend to prescribe the picture’s shape and dimensions.
6. They are flat.
7. They tend to be non-hierarchic, permitting Johns to maintain a pictorial field of leveled equality, without points of stress or privilege.
8. They are associable with sufferance rather than action.\textsuperscript{29}

Taking each of these points one by one reveals much about both Steinberg and Johns. The fact that these objects are man-made was an advantage for Johns because they were objects that would be familiar to his viewers and he needn’t be concerned with what unfamiliarity could cause in the reception of his works. He also used man-made objects because they were makeable in reality, and therefore did not ask anything of illusionism. In his selection of commonplace objects, he set himself apart by presenting the commonplace as a painting, rather than the commonplace \textit{in} a painting.\textsuperscript{30} Steinberg believed that the use of these objects as paintings slowed their “normal rate of existence” and sets them

\textsuperscript{29} Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 26.

\textsuperscript{30} Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 28.
into a static realm free from human action or human choice. The source of the discomfort, according to Steinberg, is that the subjects imply human absence.31

Another important thing to note about Johns’ subjects is that he did not disrupt the conventional treatment of his subjects. As Johns said, he did not have to design them himself. It was freeing for him to not have to come up with the design, and allowed for a different kind of artistic innovation. His numbers were in their proper order and aligned from left to right, as were the alphabets. Johns’ did not intend to alter the conventional depiction of these subjects, but rather to convey a sort of reverence to their conventionality. This method allowed him to follow a conventional system of rules while still making his artistic personality known and also depicting things as they really are.32 “[Johns] is the realist for whom preformed subject matter is a condition of painting.”33

Johns managed to free himself from responsibility about his choices in his paintings by withholding any preference for one stylistic trait over another (i.e., one font for his stencils over another). Steinberg asked him questions in the effort to make the distinction between necessity and subjective preference. Johns simply did not recognize this distinction when the questions were posed, and he therefore supplied unsatisfying answers for the critic who sought to make clear the reasons for particular decisions.

31 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 28.
33 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 31.
There are two important exceptions for the fourth of Steinberg’s traits. Two Targets from 1955, Target with Four Faces and Target with Plaster Casts (fig. 4) have above the canvas fragmented pieces of the human body. In Target with Plaster Casts, Johns placed nine hinge-flapped boxes, which contain fragments of casts of parts of the human body painted in unnatural colors (i.e., an orange ear, a green penis). There are a variety of conclusions to be drawn from the faces and body fragments, but what Steinberg focuses on is that, although Johns wanted the targets to remain the subject of the paintings, he could not ask enough detachment from his viewers to make the morbid images of mutilation subordinate. He placed the casts above the subjects of his works in a move to make them temptations and to test the limit of the target as the subject of a painting. He conducted similar tests like this throughout his early career, changing his commonplace subjects slightly to see at what point they lost the qualities he so enjoyed in them. Steinberg deemed the two Target paintings unsuccessful. “Not that he failed to make a picture that works; but the attitude of detachment required to make it work on his stated terms is too special, too rare, and too pitilessly matter-of-fact to acquit the work of morbidity.”

In allowing his subjects to determine the dimensions of his works, Johns unified the subject and the form. In making variations on this trend, such as tightening the square in which the target lies from Target with Plaster Casts to Target with Four Faces or placing the American flag above a field of white as in

34 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 37.
*Flag Above White* (fig. 5), Johns created tension in the way we are to perceive the objects depicted. In the two *Targets*, the compressed target has more tension and is more confrontational. The *Flag Above White* is hard to read as a flag, and is therefore almost impossible to recognize as a flag.

That Johns’ subjects are flat is a function of his desire to paint things as they are. To Johns, painting a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional canvas is counterfeit. But this is what painting *is*, one might say. Johns would not agree. Painting can by made in that way (whether it is considered counterfeit or not is irrelevant), but painting can also be genuine and honest about its two dimensionality. Johns paints his subjects as they are: flat and comprehensible from all angles. He does not concern himself with creating an environment in the work (i.e., a landscape). When he does seek to depict a three-dimensional object, he does not paint it; instead, he inserts the object itself on the work, as he did in *4 The News* (fig. 6) and the 1955 *Targets*. Steinberg interprets this as a deliberate rejection of the modernist tenet of maintaining the integrity of the picture plane. While some may be tempted to read these works as doing just that (maintaining it), Steinberg believes that it is in rejection of this tenet that the artist acts. “Such is his sovereign disrespect for [the picture plane] that he lets his subjects take care of the matter.”

Johns’ subjects are without hierarchy, his colors do not dominate one another, and there are no dominating factors. The distinction between figure and

---

35 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 42.
ground is eliminated. With this, Johns escapes the possibility that it might seem he is pointing at a particular part of the painting as the main focus or most important aspect. The artwork as a whole is what Johns points us towards, and we are left to determine what parts we place value or emphasis on.

The final trait of Johns’ subjects: that they are associable with sufferance is related to the idea that Steinberg said Johns’ works are in a state of desolate waiting. All of the subjects are passive and appear in some way to be waiting to be acted on by a human presence. The objects wait for this action; the viewer feels a tension between wanting to act on the object (to open the drawer or to draw the shade) and wanting to escape the feeling of absence emanating from the works. In 1958, Johns introduced forces of action on this sufferance, or desolate waiting. *Device Circle* (fig. 7) and *Gray Painting with Ball* have evidence of forces that have acted upon the canvas. Steinberg sees this change as the embodiment of Johns’ reactions to life. He may have chosen certain subjects because they were what allowed him to be a painter.

After carefully analyzing Johns’ subjects, Steinberg considers the idea that Johns seems to be meditating on the nature of painting itself. The works created by Johns synthesized the elements of painting and were oriented toward the human posture by focusing on things familiar to humans. Steinberg believed

---

36 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 46.

37 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 47-8.

38 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 48.
that the paintings were successful in their treatment of the human condition, in that they force themselves upon their observers and ask to be acted upon and interpreted in whatever way the viewer may feel necessary. Steinberg believes that Johns’ early works are about human absence, but when he shared this opinion with the artist, Johns said that was not his intent because he wanted his paintings to be alone. Steinberg’s final statement about Johns’ works is that he “puts two flinty things in a picture and makes them work against one another so hard that the mind is sparked. Seeing them becomes thinking.”

Critic Michael Fried wrote New York Letter: Johns for Art International in 1963. In it, he compares Johns’ early works to his later works, and also considers and responds to the opinions of Clement Greenberg in After Abstract Expressionism. Fried opens with praise of the artist’s oeuvre, calling it “handsome, intelligent, and amusing.” He notes that although it is tempting to look at Johns’ works independently, it is very important to the understanding of his project to look at all of his works in context. The critic, at this point in his career still a proponent of Greenberg’s criticism, quotes a large chunk of the essay “After Abstract Expressionism”.

Although Fried is a fan of Greenberg’s work, he also offers up his personal opinion. In Fried’s eyes, the work of Jasper Johns seems to be less influenced

---

39 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 52.
40 Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 54.
by Willem de Kooning than it is by the work of Philip Guston and Jack Tworkov.\textsuperscript{42}

He bases this judgment on formal qualities found in the works such as the painterliness of the brushwork and the degree to which a Cubist space is evoked. He also mentions a contradiction in Johns’ work, which he believes Greenberg failed to see:

\begin{quote}
[... t]he character of his brushwork alone is sufficient to imply a Cubist space–an implication which the sign character of his organizing motifs is at pains to deny. An artist with Johns’ critical powers could not but be aware, sooner or later, that his putative solution was no solution of all, but rather a yoking of incompatibles. And it is from this moment of awareness on that he heightens the fundamental contradiction by reinforcing the plastic implications of his brushwork with value contrasts, thereby generating the contradiction that Greenberg has acutely characterized.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

This quote shows us two important items that merit discussion. The first is the tension between the tendency to see Johns as a Cubist and the sign character of his subjects. The second thing we should take from the quote is that Fried gave Johns much credit for the decisions made in his works. He claims that Johns must be aware of the inherent contradictions of his work, and that he seems to exploit these once he becomes aware of them. Fried goes on to claim that Johns did not work in a malicious manner towards Abstract Expressionism, but rather he worked in a sort of “loving sadness” towards the movement. Essentially, the way that Johns dealt with the problems he saw in Abstract Expressionism was to

\textsuperscript{42} Fried, 290.

\textsuperscript{43} Fried, 291.
show them off. Fried calls *Diver* (fig. 8), *Passage* (fig. 9), and *Out the Window* (fig. 10) “mechanical, ironic paradigm[s] of de Kooning’s dragging brush and smeared paint texture.”

Johns’ attitude concerning the other movements, which he is said to either emulate or react against, is a casual looking-back, paired with a kind of “phenomenological awareness.” His earlier explorations of the sign are more pleasing to Fried, in their conceptual abilities and phenomena. Later in his career, Johns’ awareness seems to be too much for Fried—the critic seems uninterested in the way that Johns works in relation to “a particular historical state of affairs,” and how his paintings were to be received. In his short letter to *Art International*, Fried expresses his opinion on Johns while keeping to the context of his work. He paints a picture of a Johns who reacts against his predecessors, but not in a negative or aggressive manner. The Johns that Fried describes has a reverence for the past, and acts in a way so as to be read in conjunction with that past.

In 1972, critic Max Kozloff approached Johns’ art in a matter-of-fact way, as if he had some special insider’s knowledge about the artist’s intention that he was privy to but others weren’t. The writing begins by making two strong claims about Johns. The first, that Johns is a skeptic, and the second, that he is an

---

44 Fried, 292.

45 Fried, 292-3.
artist who dislikes metaphor because it is imprecise.\textsuperscript{46} I disagree with both of these claims. Kozloff writes that Johns is a skeptic about painting’s ability to “allude,” but I believe that although Johns cast doubt upon certain conventions of painting, he was never skeptical about the paint’s ability to represent. The difference between what Kozloff said and what Johns actually did is that Johns chose to make works which did not allude, but he had to work hard towards this non-representational quality because he was always conscious of the way paint on canvas could allude to things outside of the canvas. In regard to the second claim, I consider, and Kozloff himself seems to agree with this later in his essay, Johns’ metaphors successful. He writes of Johns’ \textit{Flags} that “they understood how a variable relatedness of forms was itself a \textit{metaphor} [emphasis in original], as well as a result, of continuous decision in modern art, and also how it would be possible to liquidate that metaphor by making all relationships either equal or progressive in a set rule.”\textsuperscript{47} This quote brings to light another claim Kozloff makes about Johns, but this time it is one that I agree with. Kozloff acknowledges the contradictions ever present in Johns’ work. His paintings and sculptures are a tension of opposites, but Johns never subordinates one aspect of a work to another one. “[…] Johns forces us to read his art on an ‘either-or’ basis. He edges us off into a predicament whereby the plausibility of any one statement is destroyed by its antithesis—a new species of unity.”\textsuperscript{48} The tension


\textsuperscript{47} Kozloff, 13.

\textsuperscript{48} Kozloff, 11.
between a statement and its antithesis is unified into a single composition, and
the viewer is ‘edged off’ and left alone to figure out what remains to understand
about the statement. Kozloff also seems to believe that Johns takes deliberate
steps in his art, which is something important to understand when analyzing
Johns because if one thinks Johns’ art is created randomly, then each painting’s
internal structure becomes arbitrary and irrelevant. Kozloff seems to be
attempting to parallel Johns with landscape painters, writing, “...[H]is handling is
more attuned to the depiction of organic landscape, for example, foliage.”
I think placing Johns in relation to a landscape painter compromises one’s ability
to separate him from the artists who came before him, and Kozloff should be
reluctant to tie him so closely to such a traditional kind of painting.

After laying out some very concrete claims about Johns’ art in general,
Kozloff analyzes the effect Johns’ art had on the art world. He sets him up first
as the predecessor for Pop Art, saying it is difficult to imagine Warhol without
Johns first. He also places Johns as a precursor to Minimalism: “[Robert]
Morris owes to this kind of reversal the inspiration for his extremely Johnsian lead
bas-reliefs of the early sixties. And from Johns’ stubbornly thinglike ‘art-ordering’
derives Morris’ as well as Don Judd’s minimal (or literalist) sculpture of the mid-
decade, not to mention Carl Andre’s, Dan Flavin’s and Richard Serra’s most

49 Kozloff, 11.
50 Kozloff, 13.
important work a bit later. He continues in his attributions, mentioning Jim Dine, Claes Oldenberg, and Frank Stella. He names Johns the “instigator of the ironic genius of American art in the 1960s.”

Turning to the topic of Johns’ subjects, Kozloff makes certain assumptions about them. He writes, “Johns’ fundamental impulse is to conserve energy [...] for he rarely invents, and as much as possible he avoids the unfamiliar.” To say these things is misconstruing certain facts about Johns. Kozloff makes it sound as if Johns were being lazy in his selection of subject matter, and as if he selected his subjects simply because they were easily accessible, but that is not the case. Johns’ subjects have importance and are relevant to the overall scheme of his oeuvre; they are not arbitrary choices. Moreover, to say that Johns avoids the unfamiliar is a twisting of the truth. Yes, he does select subjects familiar to his public in order to make a certain point, but he certainly does not avoid invention or the unfamiliar. Many have looked admiringly at Johns’ work with encaustic because of its difficulty and obscurity, and he is in general known to never have shied away from using a new technique if it promised to fulfill the effect he desired.

As Kozloff continues he relates most of Johns’ works to either the themes of memory storage, mirror imaging, or symmetry. These are primarily

---

51 Kozloff, 13.
52 Kozloff, 14.
53 Kozloff, 15.
observations about the formal qualities found on the works; he does not do much
in the way of investigation of subject matter or content. Discussion of form is
much more prevalent in his writing, so it seems to me that Kozloff approached his
writing with the leanings typical of formal training.

In 1976, *October* critic Rosalind Krauss published “Jasper Johns: The
Functions of Irony,” which treated the ironic character of Johns’ subjects. She
begins by providing a refreshing way to look at Johns’ work, *The Critic Sees* (fig.
11). Most see the work as a literal jest at the way “a critic sees with his mouth,”
but she provides us with an alternative–one she developed after hearing a quote
from Johns: “One goes about one’s business and does what one has to do and
one’s energy runs out. And one isn’t looking throughout, but then one looks at it
[the painting] as an object. It’s no longer part of one’s life process. At that
moment, none of us [artists] being purely anything, you become involved with the
looking, judging, etc.” In this way, Johns is making the work not only about art
critics, but also about artists, museumgoers, etc. It is about the way a work is
perceived at the point it is “finished.” As Krauss puts it, “The very sign that a
work is ‘finished’ is that it can be addressed, verbally: by the artist as well as by
others. In quitting that realm of private engagement in which it was part of an
unspoken colloquy, the work ends up as ‘statement.’”

---


55 Krauss, 92.
Krauss reads “modernist ironies” into works such as *Drawer* (fig. 12) and *Shade* (fig. 13), as well as the *Flags* and *Targets*. To her mind, these works are about space in a painting; whether the space was compressed, made believable or unbelievable. She continues in her modernist reading: “the mundane object was used as an attack on the conventions of picture-making,” “the performance of irony,” “one finds oneself engaged by an overt relation to history – to the specific history of art, and particularly modernist art.”

One interesting thing to note about Krauss’ writing is that she utters the phrase “the closing-off of possibility” twice in reference to Johns’ work. The first time she refers to the gray paintings *Shade* and *Drawer*, “The modernist ironies were of course about the nature of the tomb. They were about the closing-off of the possibility of a believable space within a painting, or behind the picture’s surface.” The second, about *Scent* (fig. 14), “the result is turgid, labored, overpainted. It is a picture through which one feels the closing-off of possibility.” This feeling that Krauss seems to be getting from Johns’ works, works which were made just over a decade apart, should tell us something about the overarching theme of Johns’ work during this period. What Krauss seems to be getting at is that she feels the works of art are shut away from the world they inhabit; they are in a world of their own, wherein the questions of depth, space,

---

56 Krauss, 92.
57 Krauss, 94-96.
58 Krauss, 92.
59 Krauss, 98.
and surface are irrelevant. Meaning is not gained from these questions except in that they are superfluous and are treated as such by the artist.\textsuperscript{60} The meaning is instead gained from the work’s being “finished,” and therefore its preparedness to be addressed by the artist and others. Once a work is “finished,” it makes the work an occasion for one to look, judge, and comment.

Finally, Krauss relates Johns to history painting. She does not do this in a way that trivializes Johns’ subjects, but she does make it seem as though Johns were trying in some way to make a statement about the works that came before his and the way we see them. They “evoke several moments–and monuments–central to the development of modern art,” and it is because of this evocation that Johns is often considered to be responding to the styles that were “central to the development of modern art.”\textsuperscript{61} One example of how Johns’ works recall past styles is Johns’ crosshatch paintings of the 1970s. According to Krauss, they recall Cubism (see Picasso’s \textit{Demoiselles d’Avignon} [fig. 15]), Impressionism (see Monet’s \textit{Springtime} [fig. 16]), and Abstract Expressionism (see Pollock’s \textit{Autumn Rhythm} [fig. 17]). Rather than drawing on these styles so as to apply them in new ways or to restate them in Johns’ terms, it seems to Krauss that Johns has called on these traces of the past in order to “convey a deep

\textsuperscript{60} On this subject, Krauss sounds a bit like Craig Owens, the postmodern editor of \textit{Art in America}. The observation that Johns’ works shut down reference is much like the way allegory can empty an object of its referent. Craig Owens and Postmodernism will be addressed in a consequent section.

\textsuperscript{61} Krauss, 98.
skepticism about the *significance* imputed to the historical process."\(^{62}\) Johns, in Krauss’ eyes, was calling the conventions of art history into question when he employed traces of the past in his innovative works. In this sense, at least, Krauss’ reading of Johns’ work is a very modernist one.

Michael Crichton’s introduction to the exhibition catalog for the Whitney Museum of Art in 1977, *Jasper Johns*, is a three-part essay dedicated to revealing the character, the work, and the reception of the artist. The first part, “Impressions of the Artist,” is littered with quotes by and about Johns, which paint a picture of his personality as an introspective, kind of mysterious man who is seemingly “waiting to be found out.”\(^{63}\)

In the section entitled “A Brief History of the Work,” Crichton writes about his impressions of Johns’ work. About his early flag paintings (fig. 18), one of the questions often asked is whether the American flag can really be seen as “art.” Crichton supplies his reader with an unsatisfying answer: “That became a problem for the viewer, alone. Johns is gone; he has already made the painting, he has already presented the problem. The viewer is left to resolve it as best he can.”\(^{64}\) Johns’ works call upon the observer and require his or her interpretation, action. They cause anxiety in their viewers because one feels as though one should move around a work, move closer or further away from a work, turn a

---

\(^{62}\) Krauss, 98.

\(^{63}\) Crichton, 15.

\(^{64}\) Crichton, 31.
knob, etc. Johns’ viewers seem to play an important role in Johns’ works in Crichton’s view.  

Crichton recounts the relationship between Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Critics have often related Johns’ art and Rauschenberg’s art in theoretical terms, not as much in formal terms. According to Crichton, what these two artists share lies in their ideologies, in their views on art, and in their views of what it takes to be a painter.

Turning to some of Johns’ works, Crichton assesses the nature of the attached objects in works like Canvas (fig. 19), Book (fig. 20), and Drawer. These works cause one to doubt the meaning of a painting’s surface, “in a disturbing way,” according to the critic. They do this in the way they are painted; they play with the flatness of the canvas in that the appended objects are also flat, so the flatness of a painting’s surface ends up feeling like it has the same value as the subjects. Many of the conclusions Crichton draws from the analyses of paintings are about the painting as a “physical object.” He goes into the reasons Johns selected some of his subjects, and also why he elected to make certain variations on his motifs throughout his career. It seems that Crichton

---

65 Crichton, 32.
66 Crichton, 33.
67 Johns met the composer John Cage through Rauschenberg and the choreographer Merce Cunningham through Cage. These four men influenced each other’s art and lives, and there are ways to draw out the influences they had on each other when looking at their productions. Crichton and various others see the four as members of a sort of intellectual fraternity.
68 Crichton, 32-34.
respects the decisions made by Johns in his works. He says that in creation of *Gray Alphabets* (fig. 21) the maker must have been someone who cared about the letters beyond their conventional meaning. Crichton postulated that Johns made certain variations on his *Flags* were because he was “discovering the limits of his self-imposed working arena, and he was already beginning to move beyond those limits.” Crichton continues with this thought, “It is worth examining how he went about it, for his behavior in the face of a problem tells us a great deal about Johns’ method, and his art. There is his statement that ‘I wanted to add something.’ The expression is typical. He doesn’t say he wants to make a break, or to do something else. Rather he wishes to build logically—to add to what is already there. His approach is fundamentally conservative.” On his selection of repeated motifs, Crichton notes, “By selecting a previous composition, he visually emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the decision.” All of these observations are imbued with a sort of reverence toward the artist’s method. Crichton seems to be satisfied with the apparent logic and impersonality of the choices made in the works. Johns’ logic frees him of being tied down to the idea of “personal preference;” he acts in accordance with rules he set for himself at the beginning of his endeavor. The simplicity with which these decisions are made is the source of confusion for many critics. Crichton’s almost blind acceptance of the fact that Johns is following rules and logic set out for him allows for his unassuming satisfaction with artworks. “Seen in one perspective,

---

69 Crichton, 35.
Johns' method is simply his way of expressing a universal creative need—the need to say what your work will not be, what it will not involve, what limits your creation will exist within.” Crichton continues in this manner throughout the rest of his analysis, with respect towards the apparent logic and uncompromising integrity he sees in Johns’ works.

In the first edition of this year’s *October*, Harry Cooper wrote a compelling article that traces the uncertain to-and-fro suggested by most of Johns’ works. The content oriented essay chronicles the way tensions present in Johns’ work travel from *Device Circle* and *Target with Four Faces* to *Tennyson* (fig. 22) and *Portrait–Viola Farber*. The sensitive critic notes the way all of Johns’ works can be said to look backwards and forwards at the same time. By this, it is meant that there are traces of the works that came before it and the works that will come in the future present in each work. The artists’ oeuvre can be seen as a continuum, throughout which explorations of tensions and contradictions can be traced.

Cooper nods to Jeffrey Weiss’ *Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting*, the exhibition catalog for a 2007 show at the National Gallery of Art, and claims that one aspect of Johns’ art is overlooked by Weiss: the words. Tackling first the words “device” and “circle” in *Device Circle*, Cooper explores a variety of

---


72 Cooper, 50.
possibilities for the manner Johns intended his stenciled ciphers to be understood. After offering a variety of meanings for the word “device” and the word “circle,” Cooper turns to the way the two words interact with each other. The words can either gain meaning by proximity or by semantics, but it is unclear which of these to be sure of. That we are faced with this choice is one way Johns combined his concerns with convention and intention into one. It is also unclear if one of the words is an adjective, or if they are to be considered as separate nouns. If one were an adjective, it would seem at first that “device” modifies “circle,” but a phrase “device (circle)” written on the back of the canvas nullifies the certainty of this first impression. Cooper accepts that the two words can alternate parts of speech (device as a noun and circle as adjective, or vice-versa), and thus “[n]either gets to be the noun all the time.” Just as Johns’ subjects aren’t hierarchical (as Steinberg posited), neither are his stenciled words.

Cooper continues his analysis of the words, considering their ability to act as a caption for the device, their status as the title of the painting, and the way they have the capability to turn the object into a picture. From this, he moves to the Target paintings, which lack words but appear to have a space in which words could exist. Cooper considers the tension between the square canvas and the round target, the legibility of the concentric circles in later Targets, the

\[\text{Cooper, } 53.\]
Target’s relationship to Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (fig. 23), as well as Device Circle’s relationship to it.\(^74\)

From discussion of the surface quality of *Device Circle*, Cooper moves to *False Start*, and continues in this pattern through many more of Johns’ works. The aspects of the works Cooper looks at are content-related and also formal. He examines the relationship between form and content, and he considers the way a Johns painting addresses a human.

One work that Cooper deals with which addresses a human is *Diver*. The handprints and footprints on the canvas remain there “as if in memory of the body that had worked the device.”\(^75\) The “device” Cooper is referencing was the wood upon the canvases of Johns’ *Device* and *Device Circle*, but in this case the device has become the human who has left his or her mark behind. The human is implied in *Device* and *Device Circle* because it appears as though there must have been a human acting on the work at some point, but *Diver* has removed the mechanical remnants of the device and is a depiction only of the human aspect of Johns’ devices.

The choices made by Johns are depicted as deliberate and meaningful; they are relevant to the artist’s early oeuvre, and Cooper seems to enjoy the way they can be traced in a continuous way. Cooper’s essay concludes with a

\(^{74}\) Cooper, 54-58.

\(^{75}\) Cooper, 62.
discussion of *Portrait–Viola Farber, Gray Painting with Ball, and Tennyson*. Although he stops writing, it seems as though much more ink could be spilled in the tracing of themes and motifs throughout Johns’ career.

Cooper relishes “the irresistible logic of Johns’ work”\(^{76}\) and the facilitated uncertainty of it. Dual functions are always present in the works and certainty about the function we should be concerned with seems unattainable. The closing paragraphs of the essay ask, “[d]oes the painting address us or vice versa?” To provide an answer, Cooper creates a metaphor between Johns’ paintings and a drum: “A drum works both ways: its skin receives a blow and sends it along. It may convert a physical blow into sound waves, or, as with an eardrum, it may convert the blow of sound waves into other impulses. An eardrum is a transformer at the threshold of the brain: so is a canvas by Johns.”\(^{78}\)

All of these critics came away from Jasper Johns’ works with different opinions. The personal backgrounds with which they approached his work with affected this, and it is clear that the qualities they wanted to see in his works were easily discoverable. A person approaching a Johns looking to find meaning in the formal qualities has the opportunity to; one looking for meaning in the subject matter has the opportunity to do so; in Johns’ works meaning seems pliable to what one seeks to find. The essays and letters I have discussed have certain

---

\(^{76}\) Cooper, 63.

\(^{77}\) Cooper, 73.

\(^{78}\) Cooper, 76.
notions in common. Many of them seem to converge on their interpretation of the
desolate waiting of Johns’ works; both Cooper and Steinberg imply this directly.
Cooper addresses the sufferance that Steinberg describes when he posed the
question of whether a painting addresses us at the end of his essay. Krauss also
poses a similar question in her analysis of *The Critic Sees*. The point at which
Crichton tells his readers that they are alone in their experience of Johns’ *Flags*
resonates a bit with Krauss’ “finished” work as well as Steinberg’s “sufferance”
and “desolation.”

An important point of convergence among these critics is the manner in
which Steinberg does not completely dismiss everything Greenberg wrote. There
are points in his essays that recall Greenbergian principles, such as when he
describes Johns as meditating on the nature of painting. When Steinberg
mentions that Johns disrespects the picture plane, he emphasizes the
importance of the Greenbergian principle of the integrity of the picture plane.
Krauss has a similar moment, when she is mentioning “modernist ironies,” and
reminds us of the Greenbergian respect for the picture plane (one of the
conventions of picture-making). Crichton and Cooper have similar nods to
Greenberg in their essays. They each mention the logic behind Johns’ work and
his intent to stick close to this logic.

The question at this point may be that despite the meaning everyone can
find in Johns’ work, what meaning did Johns’ intend it to have? The question of
artistic intention is interesting when approaching Johns. It is evident in the
majority of literature on Johns’ art that this question is at the heart of many people’s views on Johns. The sole exception would perhaps be Greenberg, because he does not concern himself with the reasons an artist chooses to employ formal qualities; rather, he concerns himself with whether or not they use them. Having explored many writers’ views on Johns and his intention, it would be negligent to pay no heed to manner in which Johns presented himself.

**INTERVIEWS AND EXPRESSION**

Authorial or artistic intention has had a tense relationship to expression. Some artistic careers are focused on conveying an artist’s intentions, and through this clarity, an artist’s message becomes available. Expression is an act that can come through various actions, but one of them is by making a statement. Some artists make statements that are expressive of certain emotions or states of mind, but statements can also be made which express little to no information. If an artist goes out of his or her way to “make a statement,” their work sometimes feels propagandistic and fraudulent. These kinds of works are deliberate and can make the viewer feel as though they should come away from the work with a new or moralized outlook on something.

Other careers, however, show a preference for clouding authorial or artistic intention, often favoring subtleties and vague hints, which typically become points of both internal and external argument (within a viewer and among viewers). Ever since Jasper Johns started creating art, he was conscious
of how his art and interviews revealed or hid his intention. Johns has frustrated many an interviewer by avoiding direct references to what he intended in creating his works. He rarely accepted full responsibility for his decisions, oftentimes giving credit for creative decisions to a stencil manufacturer or to “grace.”

Although Johns works hard in his interviews to avoid crediting himself, it’s hard to imagine ways in which an artist can truly free his or her works of artistic intention, and it is therefore almost always visible in some way. It may not be visible in an immediate way, but the simple fact that a work is created and looks one certain way and not another certain way has some sort of meaning to it. Johns has been known to say that he does not desire his art to be expressive in the way that an artist imbues an impressionistic work with some mood or emotion. Johns’ early works are never self-referential or autobiographical, and in most of his interviews he is sure to make this point clear.

In a June 1965 interview for the BBC, David Sylvester asks Johns: “Is what you are doing in working on [a painting] investigating the possibilities of the different ways in which the elements you began with can be seen and not seen and half seen?” Johns replies:

That is certainly part. But I wouldn’t say that is it, but it certainly is part of it. My idea is this, I think. You do something in painting and you see it. Now the idea of “thing” or “it” can be subjected to great alterations, so that we look in a certain direction and we see the one thing, we look in another way and we see another thing. So

---

79 Leo Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 32.

that what we call “thing” becomes very elusive and very flexible, and it involves the arrangement of elements before us, and it also involves the way we focus, what we are willing to accept as being there. In the process of working on a painting, all of these things interest me. I tend, while setting one thing up, to move away from it to another possibility within the painting, I believe. At least that would be an ambition of mine; whether it is an accomplishment I don’t know. And the process of my working involves this indirect, unanchored way of looking at what I am doing.\(^{81}\)

Despite the instances where Johns’ intention appears to be clear, he was constantly rejecting all claims of ownership over the decisions made in his works. He said he cut the faces for *Target with Four Faces* the way he did because “they wouldn’t have fitted into the boxes if [he]’d left them whole.”\(^{82}\) When talking to Steinberg about why his stencils are always in the same typeface, Johns left the responsibility of the decision on the manufacturer:

**Leo Steinberg:** You nearly always use this same type. Any particular reason?

**Jasper Johns:** That’s how the stencils come.

**LS:** But if you preferred another typeface, would you think it improper to cut your own stencils?

**JJ:** Of course not.

**LS:** Then you really do like these best?

**JJ:** Yes.

**LS:** Do you use these letter types because you like them or because that’s how the stencils come?

**JJ:** But that’s what I like about them, that they come that way.\(^{83}\)

---


\(^{82}\) Leo Steinberg, 32.

\(^{83}\) Leo Steinberg, 32.
Similarly, in an interview with Michael Crichton in 1973, Crichton asked, “Why did you make that change?” after the artist made a seemingly arbitrary decision to alter his depiction of a spoon’s handle. Johns responded, “Because I did.”

Crichton persists, “But what did you see?”

**JJ:** I saw that it should be changed  
**MC:** Well, if you changed it, what was wrong with it before?  
**JJ:** Nothing. I tend to think one thing is as good as another.  
**MC:** Then why change it?  
**JJ:** [a sigh accompanied with a long pause] Well, I may change it again.  
**MC:** Why?  
**JJ:** Well, I won’t know until I do it.\(^8^4\)

Johns evades questions like Steinberg and Crichton’s in many of his interviews. Crichton characterizes this kind of conversation, typical of those with Johns, as a “Johnsian conversation.”\(^8^5\) Johns’ desire seems to have been to never allow a viewer to infer a specific reason for the way his works turn out. He is much more interested in what a viewer sees in his art, yet has said that he does not care if a critic likes or dislikes his art, because it is he himself who truly knows his work. While this may seem on the surface to be a contradiction, it is actually a definitive characteristic of Johns’ as an artist. Although he is interested in what one may see in his art, this does not stand to mean that he takes his or her input and alters his production. There seems to be no correct answer about what one should see in Johns’ art, so it must be interesting, or perhaps even entertaining,

\(^8^5\) Crichton, 14.
for him to hear what is inferred from it. The fact that Johns is uninterested in what critics have to say, most likely stems from his desire to truly know his own work. He is not concerned with whether a critic truly knows his work because he does not worry about informing anyone but himself. Critics often write in a manner that is to be instructive of what is “good” and what is “bad,” but Johns has never been one to concern himself with how his art compares to other artists’ art. To hear a critic compare his art to another artists’ is of no interest to Johns, who has no use for such a comparison. His works of art are for himself, and although what some may have to say about his work entertains him, he typically does not allow outside input to affect his works. This claim insists on Johns’ authorial intention, though he may not have meant it in that way. It sounds as though—if he is truly working in order for himself to gain knowledge about his paintings—his intentions are clear. His intention would be, at least in some sense, to reveal information about his subjects, for himself.

Johns finds the things people write about his works interesting and illuminating, but he does not feel affected by these opinions unless offered by a select few—most obviously his close friends Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage. When, in the same interview referenced previously, Billy Klüver asked Johns about how he feels when people say “stupid things” about his paintings, Johns replies:

If someone came to you and said they can’t drink out of a teacup, they have to drink out of a glass with the stem on it, that’s their business. You may have a thought about it, but it doesn’t have
anything to do with teacups, or your thought about them. Hearing someone say something about a painting of mine that I don’t agree with doesn’t mean that I judge the painting badly, or nicely. That’s a human relationship one has been dealing with. One very rarely has people, or I very rarely have people, who say things about what I do that influence my actions. There are a couple who do that. But otherwise one would be constantly altering everything, thinking that there was some kind of audience that should be pleased, and there isn’t.

Klüver continues: “But its not like you could bring a person into the room and make you alter your actions.”

[Johns:] “Yes it is. I’m talking about specific people. There are about two people that I know who can say things about my work that I respond to as thought I were talking about my work and react to it. But there aren’t any more than that; just about two. Occasionally one knows someone that has ideas that one values and in that way, or one feels that someone is familiar with what one does enough and has the removal from it that one seldom has in time. Or just a remark may carry a certain meaning.”

Johns believes that, although an artist can start out with a plan or an idea, there are always factors that change the original plan, often preventing the artist from knowing how the work will end up or how the work got to its final state. He strives to make this lack of knowledge the only thing we can know for sure. When an interviewer was asking him about the final result of his “crosshatch” paintings of the 1970s, Johns said, “I don’t know that I set out to do that, but it’s what I ended up doing.”

---


87 Welish, 49.
When Johns was discussing why he decided to use encaustic for his *Flags* instead of the oil he usually used, he said, “Encaustic was a solution to a problem. I was painting with oil paint and it didn’t dry rapidly enough for me, and I wanted to put another brush stroke on it and I’d read about encaustic so that’s what I used.” At the end of that interview, the interviewer asked Johns what the etching he was currently working on was for, and he said: “It is for itself.” This short statement says much about what Johns sees in art. He wants the etching’s reason for being is simply to be. But, one cannot accept that. An etching, or any work of art for that matter, must be on some level meant. It must have some degree of meaning and reason for existing. The fact that it was created it gives it an inherent meaning in that it was purposefully brought into existence, and there must be at some point in the process a reason that its existence was desired. This meaning may be hard to find, but it is inherently present in the work.

The artist’s recurring rejection of credit for the decisions made in his paintings leave us with uncertainty about anything in his paintings. It is almost as though the certainty reached in creation of his works is only meant for him, while the uncertainty is meant for his viewers. In response to this one could argue that since he learns about his works just by making them and considering the results, we’re in every bit as good a position as he is to understand them. I would counter that the knowledge one could gain from actually being the maker of the

works is more far-reaching than that which can be gained simply from looking at them. It is as if to say that the cobbler who makes hundreds of shoes and knows what makes them function in the way that they do has an equal amount of knowledge about shoes as someone who just wears shoes day in and day out. The cobbler has a deeper understanding of what makes the shoe function in the way that it does. Perhaps a better example is that of a mechanic. The mechanic is fully aware of the way the car works and the how and why each of the parts. A car owner or a car enthusiast can look at a car, look at its motor, and still cannot quite appreciate the way a car works without having studied the mechanics of a car.

Johns works simultaneously in two veins: the first being that he repeats processes and motifs in order to find out something out about them, and the second is that he works to obscure the reasons behind the choices he makes. This obscurity creates the questioning and discussions that are prevalent in the writings on Johns’ works. These two drives in Johns’ career seem contradictory, but are also undeniable.

Johns repeats motifs over and over again, fixating on them and developing them in slightly different ways each time, as if to test their limits and to learn about them. He also combines them with other motifs, as if for the purpose of reaching some degree of certainty about these subjects. If Johns can apply the action of a device in all of the ways possible, then at some point he must arrive at a certain conclusion about the nature of a device. Using the device as a
metaphor for the action of painting, he then can arrive at some certain knowledge about painting itself. Johns repeatedly works with numbers, not in order to inform the outside world about the nature of these things, but to learn of their nature for himself. His painting, *Numbers in Color* (1958-9) is a study in which Johns arranged the numbers 0 – 9 in their traditional order, and repeated them in a left-to-right, top-to-bottom composition, in the conventional way in which a page is read. He created many works in this same way, some in gray, one in silver, and he then varied the composition a bit and superimposed the numbers on top of each other on the same quadrangular space. This repetition and slight variation seems to be an exploration of both the form of the figures, and also the nature of the convention in which we would normally read a series of numbers or letters. The way Johns goes about his experiment serves, more than anything else, to show that the things he experiments with (devices, numbers) are empty, and possess no connection to the world of life and meaning.

In sum, we can appreciate the information gained by looking at Johns’ work, but we don’t gain nearly as much information by looking as he does in the making. The only concrete things one can ascertain about Johns’ intentions are, first, that he works to find out about his subjects for himself, and second, that he has some desire to create works that stand apart from that of other artists. In this second aspiration, at least, we can say Johns has been hugely successful. No artist has been able to create such dissent among critics and artists, and this
dissent arose from the public’s inability or unpreparedness to process such a different kind of art.

**Works**

This section will consider four works from Johns’ early to middle career, and consider their importance in two senses. This first sense is the way the works fit together into Johns’ oeuvre and into the picture he painted of himself in his interviews. The second sense will consider the characterizations and “isms” placed on Johns, and how these works fit in to these categories. There are four motifs present in Johns’ work: the target, the device, stenciled lettering, and the trace of the body.\(^\text{89}\) I will consider four paintings which best embody these motifs.

Johns’ work *Target with Four Faces* (1955) was, according to the artist, painted after *Target with Plaster Casts*. The works look back to Johns’ *Flags* series, in two ways. First, the subjects are emblematic and immediately recognizable entities for most people. Secondly, both works are created with the uniquely Johnsian technique: encaustic.

There are, however, significant differences between the *Flags* and *Targets*. The most immediate difference is that for the *Flags*, the frame of the canvas was the same shape as the object as we know it. This is not the case for

---

Targets. These paintings are on square canvases, but the subjects themselves are round. This creates a tension between the depicted subject and the frame of the canvas, which stands in contrast to the unity between the two in Flags. If Johns had used a round canvas for his Targets, he would have gotten caught up in emulating past artists who used shaped canvases, but he would never do this because he would not have wanted his works to be related to anyone but himself.

The later Target has a few minor differences to its predecessor, and these changes bring to light a few questions about the decisions Johns made and the reasons for these decisions. Target with Four Faces sits within a tighter frame than does Target with Plaster Casts. This pressurization of subject, accompanied with the change from multiple body parts to four faces, causes the work to assert itself more upon its viewers than does Target with Plaster Casts. This, in turn, creates a tension between asserting the object and neutralizing the picture plane.

Turning to the wooden box above the canvas, we notice that Johns changed the casts from colorful casts of distinct body parts, to four nearly identical plaster faces, all painted in the same shade of orange which appears uncomfortably near to a flesh color. Although the faces at first seem identical, it is later apparent that the lips are pursed at different points of slightly opening. Johns was careful to not place these in order (in what would become a comic-strip like progression) from open to closed or vice-versa. Had he done this, the work would have a narrative underpinning which Johns always strove to avoid.
Their having been severed just below the eyes dehumanizes the faces. According to Johns, however, the way the faces were cut was a function of necessity rather than motive. Johns would like us to believe that the only reason they are cut off in that way is because “they wouldn’t have fitted into the boxes” otherwise.\textsuperscript{90} Despite Johns’ desire to remove an underlying reason from the severance, it is very challenging for a viewer to separate him or herself from the brutality of the depiction. The viewer is so drawn to the brutality that they almost require an underlying reason for it to have happened.

A forward facing, half present face repeated four times cannot help but confront the viewer. As the viewer internalizes the banality of the target, he or she must also internalize the dehumanization of the face. Johns may have been playing with some sort of juxtaposition of conflicting interests, and there are some critics who have been less than satisfied with the way that the two parts of this piece work together.

It may also be interesting to note that the piece of wood above the faces that serves as a door for the four boxes is all one piece. In \textit{Target with Plaster Casts}, Johns made each compartment separate, with its own individual door flap. The change from individual doors for the different body parts to a single door for the representations of a single body part is interesting. One wonders if Johns wanted his viewer to have an all-or-nothing experience with the faces because it causes a much stronger confrontation. The nine separate compartments in

\textsuperscript{90} Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 32.
Target with Plaster Casts are much less associable with the human position because they are in unnatural colors. The fact that they are not repeated is also helpful for this separation. Placing the body parts in compartments with separate doors makes them less confrontational. If one were seriously uncomfortable with the purple foot, he or she would be able to close just that door and not lose the effect of the entire work.91

Another interesting consideration about Target with Four Faces (and, in fact all of Johns’ works in encaustic) is that the newspaper he used is occasionally legible below the layers of wax. One wonders if the words are meant to be available to us, or if the thin layer of wax was unintentional and there is no meaning behind the visible words and figures. In Target with Four Faces, there are two interesting things showing through. At the top right corner, the words “History and Biography” are visible. Johns’ encaustic technique, selection of subject matter, and use of primary colors became calling cards for his art. One could perhaps understand the words “history” and “biography” to be a subtitle of sorts for the work. Target with Four Faces contains features that define Johns as an artist. If one were to ask an art historian a question like “Who is the artist that depicted commonplace subject matter using encaustic and primary colors?” the historian would most likely reply, “Jasper Johns.” The work can also be read as an important feature of the history of Johns’ oeuvre. Because his works look

91 It is interesting to note, however, that Johns did not approve of such an action. Before an exhibition at the Jewish Museum, he was asked if they could close the compartment containing the green penis and he told them no.
backwards and forwards at the same time, each work can be seen as a history of the works that came before and after it.

At the bottom left of the work, there is a faint figure of a human. With the dehumanization subject already at work in the four compartments above the target, one cannot help but wonder what a faint figure of a human is doing at the bottom of the work. Does this small figure serve to bring the work back into a humanizing realm, or does its size and obscurity emphasize the dehumanized feature of the work? The viewer is left to decide this for him or herself. Or, alternatively, perhaps the viewer should not have concerned him or herself with the collaged pieces of newsprint below the wax. It is unclear whether we are to read these. Perhaps Johns used whatever pieces of newspaper he had lying around, simply as a means to create the effect he desired from his encaustic technique, not concerning himself with what was written on them. It is hard to say for sure that this was a truly random result, because the two visible aspects discussed here seem to have a strong relevance to the work. One may wonder what criteria are relevant to deciding whether to read the newspaper. It is unclear whether it depends on Johns' intention, because on the one hand he may have intended for the paper to be read; but on the other hand, it is visible regardless of Johns’ intention so it provides visual data that we may or may not choose to process.

The final aspect of Target with Four Faces of importance for this discussion is that the method used for creating these nearly perfect concentric
circles must have been to trace a line from a central pinpoint and move around it at a constant distance. If one looks closely enough at the very center of his targets, it is evident that Johns used some sort of compass-like device in creation of his targets. This fact is the most important way that Johns transitioned from creating targets to creating devices. His action in creating Targets anticipates the action depicted on the surface of Johns’ Device series.

Johns’ 1962 work Device (fig. 24) is a predominantly monochromatic study of the device circle he first created in 1959. It is a 101.6-centimeter by 76.2-centimeter canvas vertically bisected by a mostly unpainted piece of two-inch by four-inch lumber. On either side of this divider Johns has placed a device, each of which has apparently already performed its function by drawing a semicircle in the paint. The treatment of paint is similar on both sides at first glance, but upon further inspection, there are a variety of slight differences, each of which raises unanswered questions. On the right semi-circle, the device has smeared paint by its action, and the misplaced paint has dripped downwards and extends below the edge of the circle. The resultant drips have been left to dry apparently having been created by gravity, without the artist’s interference.

The left semi-circle, on the other hand, lacks these drips. The drips, which seem to be missing from the semi-circle, suggest that at some point there was a human presence that wiped the drips clean after the action of the device. On this side there is also a greenish arc painted right along the edge of the semi-circle

92 Weiss, 265.
that must have been painted after the action of the device. Moreover, there are places where brushstrokes from the surrounding area are overlapping the semi-circle created by the device on the left, which can only have been made after the device’s action.

The mere fact that the work of art is titled “device” implies the painting’s relation—of automaticity or objectivity—between the agent and the work. The differences between the halves of the canvas then undermine this relation by introducing room for expressive choices. It is in the space between the device’s self-sufficiency and this creative expression that agency is hinted at. The implied presence of an agent creates a problem for the viewer, because Johns isn’t present in the gallery actively moving the device arms. At the same time, though, there is a sense in which the device is set up to make a connection between the action of making a mark on a painting and the permanence of the resulting mark. The viewer is at once reminded that there was once an agent acting upon the canvas, but also that there is no one there anymore and the work exists now in a condition that is free from human presence. The fact that identical devices have produced evidently different halves of the canvas proves this previous presence, because if one notices the differences between the left and right semi-circles, one sees that there must have been an external factor that justifies their dissimilarity. “Where is this agent now, though?” the viewer might ask. They are put in a position before the work which poses the question of whether they are existing within the space of the work (in which case the work would not be
completely free from human presence, and the human would feel pressure or anxiety about whether they should be the agent acting on the device) or if they are outside of the work’s space (in which case the viewer would feel alienated from the work.)

At the bottom center of the painting, a grey square is painted partially on the canvas and partially on the two-by-four bisecting the canvas. Viewed from the left, this square clearly emphasizes the three-dimensionality of the work. Viewed from the front, it seems to flatten the work into a two-dimensional plane. As we move around the work, we become aware of the illusionistic quality it can have but are also reminded that the work is an art object. The unmodulated geometric square draws attention to itself in contrast to the tonal gradations and organic lines of the rest of the painting. The result is the square’s identification with the surface of the canvas, in its two-dimensionality and its geometric similarity.

The unmodulated paint on the top right half of the canvas eliminates the potential for seeing figure and ground relations throughout the rest of the work. The lack of tonal variations in one area flattens out the entire work and calls the painting back into a two-dimensional realm. This phenomenon, paired with Johns’ tendency to leave the bottom edge of a canvas unpainted, reminds the viewer that he or she is looking at paint applied to canvas, which in turns calls attention to the painting’s support. When Johns inserts these reminders of materiality, we also think about the way in which materials are manipulated.
Manipulation of materials is a theme in Johns’ works: the tension between presence and absence of an agent. Another theme brought to light by the materiality is the constant cue towards experiencing the works as having physical reality in our world. These themes in Johns’ works are echoes of the modernist movement, which certainly influenced Johns’ career. In an interview with Billy Klüver conducted in March 1963, Johns touches on this hypothesis:

My use of objects comes out of, originally, thinking of the painting as an object and considering the materialistic aspect of painting: seeing that painting was paint on canvas, and then by extension seeing that it occupied a space and sat on the wall, and all that, and then if those elements seemed to be necessary to what I was doing.\(^93\)

This quote brings the distinction Michael Fried drew between the literal and depicted shape of a work of art to mind. Just before 1960, a new mode of pictorial structure emerged. It was based on the shape of the support and was less concerned with its flatness. A couple artists who were at the fore of this development were Frank Stella and Louis Noland.\(^94\) This new focus encouraged the transition into an art which valued literal shape more than depicted shape. Literal shape is the shape of the picture itself: the canvas and any objects appended to it. Depicted shape is the shape that may or may not be alluded to within the frame of the work.

\(^93\) Klüver, 88.

In terms of Johns’ above quote, we can see that he was concerning himself with the literal shape of the work and the space it occupied. According to Fried, literalist art (or, alternatively “minimalist art”) “aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood [such as what seems to happen with representational art], but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.” Johns’ paintings are great examples of this objecthood projection, because it is difficult to separate the emblematic subjects he chooses to depict on canvas from their physical presence as everyday objects.

Occasionally throughout his device paintings, Johns names colors on the canvas painted with stencils. In Device, this can be found on both the two-by-four wood piece bisecting the canvas (“gray”) and on the bottom right half of the canvas where he stenciled “DEVICE” twice, once in large letters and again in smaller letters juxtaposed onto the latter. This motif, of stenciling letters (and later, numbers) on canvas eventually gave rise to a series of its own. Coupled with the emphatic brushstrokes seen in many Device paintings and – to a lesser degree – in some Target paintings, the stenciled letters give rise to a new series of paintings that tell us more about Johns’ view on art.

The stencils and colors in False Start (fig. 25) seem to have exploded onto the canvas. Johns covers the canvas with “M” and “W”-shaped brushstrokes in, much like he does in various other paintings. The M-W brushwork covering the

---

majority of *Device* has become the center of attention in *False Start*. This painting predominantly consists of primary colors, accompanied by the occasional orange, white, or gray. These colors recall the vibrant colors Johns used for quite some time at the beginning of his *Flags* and *Targets* series. As usual, the series begins in color and later turns monochromatic as he continues his investigations into the nature of his subjects (*Jubilee* [fig. 26] is a monochrome pair to *False Start*).

The wide and distinct brushstrokes are complimented by the stenciled naming of colors, in an often-unrepresentative way. For example, the word “blue” may be stenciled in the color orange, etc. The words also may be placed upon a field of color that they do name, or other times they are placed on a color that they do not name. These facts, along with the fact that the words are sometimes upside down, diagonal, or written vertically make the words into objects. This effect is furthered when words are superimposed upon each other (as in *Device*) or when words are mirror images of each other (*Field Painting* [fig. 27]).

One may wonder why Johns did not always stencil names of colors in their conventional colors, but there could be any variety of answers to this question. Firstly, Johns was never one to follow conventions, so his desire for individuality stands as a simple explanation for why he did not always “correctly” represent colors.\(^{96}\) Furthermore, one could say that he was attempting to separate the

---

\(^{96}\) I use “correctly” here in the sense that one may feel at first be tempted to say that it is correct for the word “red” to be stenciled in a red hue.
ciphers from the words they represent. Treating them as objects, their conventional meanings can be stripped away. It is also revealing to consider the possibility that the procedure employed here reveals the conventionality of language much better than playing by the rules would.

The bottom of *False Start* is also unpainted, just as it is in *Device* and many others of Johns’ paintings. It this way, it looks backwards and forwards to all of Johns’ works that are unpainted at the bottom edge, and there are many. *False Start* also looks back in its use of stenciled words, in its use of vibrant colors, M-W brushstrokes, and in its ‘misuse’ of the conventional names of colors.

The painting *Diver* can be seen as a continuation of the work Johns did in *Device* with the metaphor for the tracing of a line. In *Device*, the mechanism used to trace a line was left attached to the canvas. In *Diver*, on the other hand, the device was not left attached, but it left its mark. The human presence is delineated in the paint, just as the line by the device is delineated in *Device*. The “arms” of each half of the work move in concentric motion, maintained immobile at one point and moving outwards in a 180-degree arc. This motion is very similar to the one that created *Device* and all the other works in that series. It is also probably very similar to half of the motion used in creating the concentric circles of the *Targets*. 
When looking at Johns’ paintings, one can ask a gamut of questions, none of which Johns ever really answers. Why, for example, did he wipe clean the drips after the action of the device on the right half of Device, while letting the drips on the left half of the work remain? What did Johns intend when he painted the grey square at the bottom of Device, which is partially on the piece of wood and partially on the canvas? Is the colorful paint in M-W strokes on False Start colorful and energetic because of a break with a certain painterly tradition or is it a nod to that tradition? What is the meaning of the clearly visible handprints at the extensions of the mechanisms in Diver?

Even if one were to propose answers to these questions, there is always the objection that perhaps Johns’ work resulted in this way by an act of deliberate non-choosing. Perhaps he worked at random, without thought about the choices he was making and the effects he was having upon the work. His friend John Cage had been composing music in this way for almost twenty years – his prepared piano technique was well known by 1960. Prepared piano is a method that enables a pianist to change the tones and timbres of keys on a piano by placing objects on the strings. The objects, ranging from nuts and bolts on top of the strings to pieces of rubber entwined through the strings or wrapped around multiple strings, create different changes in the notes. Sometimes the sound is dull, other times the tone is higher, but the item of importance here is that neither the composer nor the pianist has any idea how the notes are going to be changed prior to the performance.
The idea that Johns used a similarly random process is, however, a fantastical opinion. The repetition of techniques and motifs shows us that Johns was aware of the things he was placing on canvas, and that he was making conscious choices about the way in which he placed them. Nothing can be done truly at random while the agent is consciously acting. Johns actively explores the nature of his subjects until they are no longer simply the objects they once were, but they have become tools for representation, abstracted and deconstructed, appropriated and allegorized.

**JOHNS AND POST-MODERNISM**

According to some theorists, the break between modernism and postmodernism lies in the way the two use images. Late modernist art, according to Michael Fried in *Art and Objecthood*, is not theatrical. It is pictorial and defeats the tendency to become an object. Minimal art, or as he calls it, literal art, is theatrical and as such is “at war with modernist painting.” “The success, even the survival, of the arts,” Fried writes, “has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater.” He also claims that “art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater” and most poignantly that “the concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theater.” 97 It is as if Fried filled the space between

---

Greenberg’s clearly delineated arts with theater, and it was in this space that what Greenberg called “bad” art was created.

Now, this utter rejection of theatricality is what has come to be definitive of late modernist art, and a break between the former movement and post-modernism can be found in post-modernism’s return to theatricality. There are other theorists who mark the break in other ways. Douglas Crimp agrees that the break is in the return to theatricality; Rosalind Krauss believes the signal is an expanded field of art, and Craig Owens believes it is an allegorical or deconstructive impulse in art. 98

The postmodern editor of Art in America and contributor to journals such as October and Skyline, Craig Owens, wrote about the postmodern turn towards allegory in terms of the appropriation of images and conventions. His two-part essay, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” was published in the spring and summer 1980 issues of October. The article’s characterization of allegory can be applied to Jasper Johns’ works, and gives us a postmodern approach to looking at his art.

Owens recounts the history of allegorical expression—specifically in terms of modernism’s rejection of the allegory as a valid means to creating art. Modern artists seem to have wholly rejected the appropriation of images for a variety of reasons, perhaps the most basic being the desire to achieve Greenbergian purity

in their works. If an artist drew from some other medium and appropriated the image or the idea, it would be tied to that source inextricably, and would therefore not have the property of having drawn from only one medium and having stayed within the bounds of that medium.

Craig Owens claims that allegory has the “capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear.”\(^99\) All art criticism is based upon the allegorical, because critics and commentators alike are focused upon the reinterpretation of primary texts. It is true that the idea of allegory developed a negative connotation for quite some time in the modern period, but if one is a believer in Owens’ characterization of allegory and relates this characterization to an artist like Jasper Johns, they will see that allegory not only has a positive impact on modern times, but it has also become an inextricable part of art and art criticism.

In order to determine whether Owens’ interpretation of allegory holds true for Jasper Johns’ art, we must first fully examine what Owens believes to be essential to making something an allegory. Allegory, according to Owens, “occurs whenever one text is doubled by another,” “[a]llegorical imagery is appropriated imagery.”\(^100\) Allegory has an affinity for ruin, for decay.\(^101\) “The

---


\(^100\) Owens, 204-5.

\(^101\) Owens, 206.
allegorical work is synthetic; it crosses aesthetic boundaries.” The appropriation of image and text is one of the primary methods of creating a parallel symbolic meaning. This additional meaning is sometimes clear, but is often vague and up for interpretation. Owens opposes allegory to the “symbol”: sign and meaning are one in a symbol; the difference between symbol and allegory is that with allegory, meanings are either layered on top of each other or else they empty each other of meaning so as to act as two separate forces on the interpretation of the allegory. The addition of this further meaning, according to Owens, is the reason that allegory is condemned. When the new meaning is implemented, the original meaning is clouded or completely obscured, which has the possibility of being seen as a negative factor. For an artist to take something with a pre-established meaning and give it a new meaning seems too cryptic, hermetic, and inaccessible to those viewers who don’t already know what the purpose of the new meaning is. An untrained viewer would not understand the reason for the allegory if they did not know the reason for there being an allegorical meaning in the first place.

Visual artists have been creating allegorical imagery for centuries, but it is in the recent centuries that allegory became a “bad word.” The allegorical expression of a non-allegorical meaning is a way by which artists can explore their subject and determine its importance in their lives and in the lives of their

---

102 Owens, 209.

103 Owens, 205.
contemporaries. This however, seems a postmodernist view. Modernism, on the other hand, strives for “pure art,” which Owens aligns with the symbol. The addition of a new meaning onto something that already had its own meaning creates extra layers of content, which is incompatible with pure modernist sensibilities. The modernists created works that eliminated any references to anything outside of themselves, and thus the additional meaning got by allegory would be deemed superfluous. Additionally, because allegory asks a viewer to consider outside knowledge in order to grasp its meaning, the viewer would be required to draw upon information not contained within the frame of the painting (or space of the sculpture, etc.). To require such external information is not the aim of modernism; rather, it is quite the opposite. Modernists make artworks that can be understood as unique entities, independent from others.

Art critics have always searched for signs and underlying meanings in the objects and techniques used by artists. The study of semiotics and iconography are examples of methods art historians have taken in their approach to art. In Dutch painting, an artist could not paint a skull without the work being considered a vanitas painting. Awareness of this critical trend is important to note because now we must ask the question of whether an artist intended for something to be read as an allegorical symbol, or if the artist meant nothing in particular by the symbol inserted into the work, or even further removed from tradition, if the artist meant to mock the allegorical impulse which has inhabited the art world for centuries.
Modernism was driven to combine outer expression and means of expression into one. This is categorically incompatible with the use of allegory, because in allegories, the means of expression are borrowed and the artist applies an outer expression, which is typically different from the original one. The revival of allegory, evident in the trends of appropriation and site specificity, challenged formalist aesthetics. “The revival of allegory marked a reversal of hierarchy, dominant from Romanticism onwards. Treated as a lesser mode of representation—indeed, as re-presentation—allegory had been unfavorably contrasted with the symbol’s ability to present.” According to Gail Day in “Allegory: Between Deconstruction and Dialectics,” Owens focuses on the distinction between symbol and allegory, and refigures allegory to fit under the ideology of the symbol.104

While art critics have known to search for double meanings and cryptic symbols, an untrained viewer is often left perplexed and disillusioned when experiencing an allegorical work. The desire to make art available to the masses (both physically and intellectually) is the main reason that allegory came to be unappreciated. So often the images appropriated by artists are emptied of their significance, removed from their contexts, and lowered from their status as meaningful symbols, that artists employing allegories can be characterized as satirical and cynical.

Many artistic styles that became popular during the post-Second World War period were popular because they were easily accessible and they treated subjects that were familiar to the common person. Someone walking into an exhibition of Pop Art does not need a degree in Art History to understand that Marilyn Monroe and Campbell’s soup cans are iconic images. Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* worked because they are not filled with difficult meaning; rather, they’re emptied of it.

With modernism’s critical demotion of allegory from what was to be considered “high” or “important” art, some artists began to explore the ways in which appropriation of images and text could be executed–some desiring to stay within the bounds of common acceptance, and some choosing to step outside of those bounds. Jasper Johns created works that appropriated complete objects. Those objects either became the work of art itself or were parts of a whole, but with either of these choices, the allegorical nature was irrefutable. Johns appropriated objects normally used in everyday life and applied them to canvas, creating art objects with deeper meanings than that of their everyday use.

Johns’ appended objects are imbued with a meaning deeper than the one they have when they are simply found objects in our world. When they are attached to a canvas and declared art objects, these ordinary objects gain a cultural and theoretical significance. Just exactly what this significance is depends on the viewer, however. Because Johns has not supplied a definitive meaning for these appended objects (or for the art work as a whole, for that
matter), any meaning one chooses to ascribe to the object becomes valid. Since the meaning of the art object is therefore dependent on the viewer, who is a part of the work’s environment, the work gains its meaning from its environment. Works which are site-specific, and in this case I am referring to not a physical site, but rather an ideological one, are post-modern in that they absorb their meaning from their environment, and when they are removed from that environment they either lose that meaning or gain a new one.

There are other senses in which Johns’ works can be called postmodern. That he chose to treat conventional subjects, and these subjects have the power to bring you into the environment of the artworks is a function of Johns’ choices. The selected objects are so close to our personal life—a drawer is something we come into contact with every day, without thinking of it—and so when these personal items are separated from their normal location and placed upon a canvas, they result in a drawing in of their viewers to a level of uncomfortable nearness.

The visible index in many of Johns’ works, especially his works in encaustic, is a postmodern trait. Many time in Johns’ work we are led to believe that the painting is about painting; that the fact that we can see the mark made by an agent is the whole story. The paintings Device and Diver are perfect examples of this trend. It is quite easy to understand both of these as allegories of painting, in that they bear the marks made upon their surfaces by certain agents (whether these be a ruler appended to a canvas or a human hand).
A final item concerning the postmodernism of Johns’ oeuvre is based upon the way all of Johns’ works look both backwards and forwards at the same time. That they do this, that they have traces of what came before them and what will come after them, gives each artwork an underlying layer of context through which the works gain meaning. The works can be said to gain meaning from the works that are “around” them. This is similar to the concept of a work gaining it’s meaning from its environment, except in this sense it is a work’s temporal environment.

CONCLUSION

While the critical writings I discussed in the first section of this essay seem compelling, art historians and critics are still at odds about what one should read into Jasper Johns’ works. A modernist can read Johns’ work as modernist. Here modernist means, in the Greenbergian sense, that the work asserts the autonomy of the picture as separate from different kinds of art, and that the formal qualities upheld by formalists are upheld in it. A Postmodernist can appreciate Johns’ oeuvre for the qualities it shares with postmodern work. Some of these are: object or text appropriation, allegorical underpinnings, and becoming an object in the environment of its viewer and asking to be in some way interacted with.

All of these and more examples enable one to call Jasper Johns a postmodernist, but, as I have made clear, there are also many ways to call Johns
a modernist, a Neo-Dadaist, and more. What I would like to argue is that it is not
Johns’ paintings that can be fit into an “-ism.” Rather, I believe that Johns is a
postmodernist because of the attitude with which he approached art. He
provided his viewers a space in which they could impose their own interpretations
onto something that he has (usually) emptied of conventional meaning. It is in
this empty space wherein meaning once existed that anyone can put their own
interpretation, and there is no one around—remember, it is desolate—to tell them
that they are incorrect. Even when Johns is given the opportunity to set the facts
straight about his works, when an interviewer is dying to hear something
concrete, he is reluctant to do so.

Johns approached art with a postmodern attitude. In this way, he created
works that can be categorized in almost every possible genre. As long as one
has an explanation for their beliefs, they cannot be discredited. Since his works
do not have a firm hold on any particular “-ism,” Johns allows them—and we
should take a lesson from him and do the same—to travel anywhere along the
continuum of art history.
Figure 1. Jasper Johns, *Target with Four Faces*, 1955. Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, 33 9/16 x 26 x 3 in.
Figure 2. Jasper Johns, *White Flag*, 1955. Encaustic and collage on canvas.

Figure 3. Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, 1950-2. Oil on canvas.
Figure 4. Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955. Encaustic and collage on canvas with painted plaster casts, 51 x 44 x 3 7/16 in.
Figure 5. Jasper Johns, *Flag Above White*, 1955. Encaustic and collage on canvas.

Figure 6. Jasper Johns, *4 The News*, 1962. Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects.
Figure 7. Jasper Johns, *Device Circle*, 1959. Encaustic and collage on canvas with object.
Figure 8. Jasper Johns, *Diver*, 1962-3. Charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on paper mounted on canvas (two panels), 86 ½ x 71 ¾ in.
Figure 9. Jasper Johns, *Passage*, 1962. Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects.

Figure 10. Jasper Johns, *Out the Window*, 1959. Encaustic and collage on canvas.

Figure 12. Jasper Johns, *Drawer*, 1957. Encaustic on canvas with objects.
Figure 13. Jasper Johns, *Shade*, 1959. Encaustic on canvas with objects.

Figure 14. Jasper Johns, *Scent*, 1973-4. Oil and encaustic on canvas.
Figure 15. Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907. Oil on canvas.

Figure 16. Claude Monet, *Springtime*, 1886. Oil on canvas.

Figure 17. Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30*, 1950. Oil on canvas.

Figure 19. Jasper Johns, *Canvas*, 1956. Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects.

Figure 22. Jasper Johns, *Tennyson*, 1958. Encaustic and collage on canvas.

Figure 23. René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images (La Trahison des images)*, 1929. Oil on canvas.
Figure 24. Jasper Johns, *Device*, 1962. Oil on canvas with objects.
Figure 25. Jasper Johns, *False Start*, 1959. Oil on canvas.
Figure 26. Jasper Johns, *Jubilee*, 1959. Oil and collage on canvas.

Figure 27. Jasper Johns, *Field Painting*, 1963-4. Oil on canvas with objects.