

2 Jasper Johns: the First Seven Years of His Art

December 1961. Johns is exhibiting four gray paintings, recently finished. One of them is a sketch—encaustic and sculpmetal on paper; but it made its point so well that there seemed no need for elaborate execution (Fig. 2). The picture displays, on a square field, Johns's characteristic dense veil of graded gray strokes: paint that denotes nothing but painting. Hinged to the top of the square is a woodblock; and four raised letters on it which we see in a murky rectangular field, like a reflection in water, illegibly, upside down. But the block has left a fair imprint directly below, on the painting itself. It spells LIAR.

Does it mean anything?

It need not. It's a device for printing a useful word. Or just Painting with a bit of Dada provocation on top (but we are too sophisticated to be provoked by a four-letter word). Or is it an allegory about the hinge between life and art? For the woodblock, an object in actual space, is real, a piece out of life—hence illegible, topsy-turvy. Yet it is this that imprints itself on the painted field, where it is set right to become perfectly clear; such being the revelations of Art. Life's murky message is decoded by Art, and there it is, spelling

First published in *Metro*, Nos. 4/5, 1962, and, with revisions, by George Wittenborn, New York, 1963. In the present version the survey of previous critical literature (pp. 23-26) has been again somewhat revised and expanded. Otherwise the piece stands essentially as completed by the end of 1961, the terminus for all references to "recent" work. The discussion of Johns's *Target with Four Faces* (p. 54) is substantially the same as occurs in the foregoing article (pp. 12-14).

LIAR—the word cleared of every accretion of passion, a forgotten name plate that's been up since long before we moved in.

The word moves out into the room and hangs there like a frozen voice, waiting to thaw and settle. On whom? On what? Which side of the fence?

Does it mean anything?

To whom? To the schoolboy learning to read? To posterity? To the painter who made it? His friends? To the same painter who's moved on to make something else? To the critic who knows beforehand what "the needs of art" are and who can see that these needs will not be served by this sort of picture? To us who see an implacable presence and a gaping metaphor generated by crude literal means?

The elements of Johns's picture lie side by side like flint pebbles. Rubbed together they could spark a flame, and that is their meaning perhaps. But Johns does not claim to have ever heard of the invention of fire. He merely locates the pebbles.

A CRISIS

He had his first one-man show four years ago, exhibiting variations on the American flag (Figs. 3-6), and on targets, numbers, and letters. Also included were:

Book (1957), an actual book spread open, then overpainted in wax—red pages, yellow edges, blue binding—a paralyzed book in a boxed frame;

Newspaper (1957), encaustic and newsprint on canvas;

Canvas (1956), an all-gray painting in which a small canvas had been glued face down to a larger one (Fig. 7);

Drawer (1957), all-gray again, with the front panel of a plain two-knobbed drawer inserted just below center (Fig. 8).

The pictures aroused both enthusiasm and consternation, above all by their subjects. These were of such unprecedented "banality," it seemed nothing so humdrum had ever been seen before. Why had he chosen to paint subjects of such aggressive uninterest?

To be different?

The validity of this answer depends on its tone. When you hear it said with a shrug, explain to the speaker that he has made no point at all; we simply restate our question: "Why, if he wanted to be different, did he choose to be different in this particular manner?"

