

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

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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;

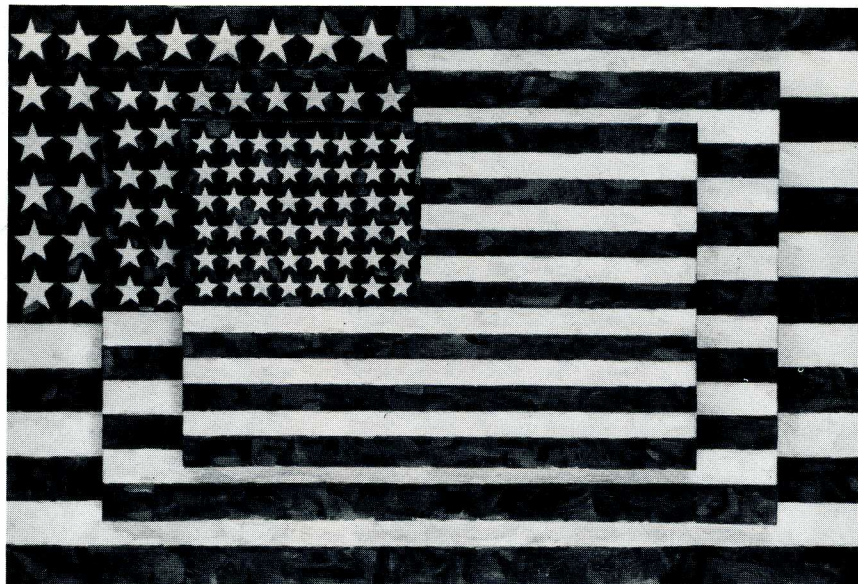
Canvas (1956), an all-gray painting in which a small canvas had been glued face down to a larger one (Fig. 7);

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?"

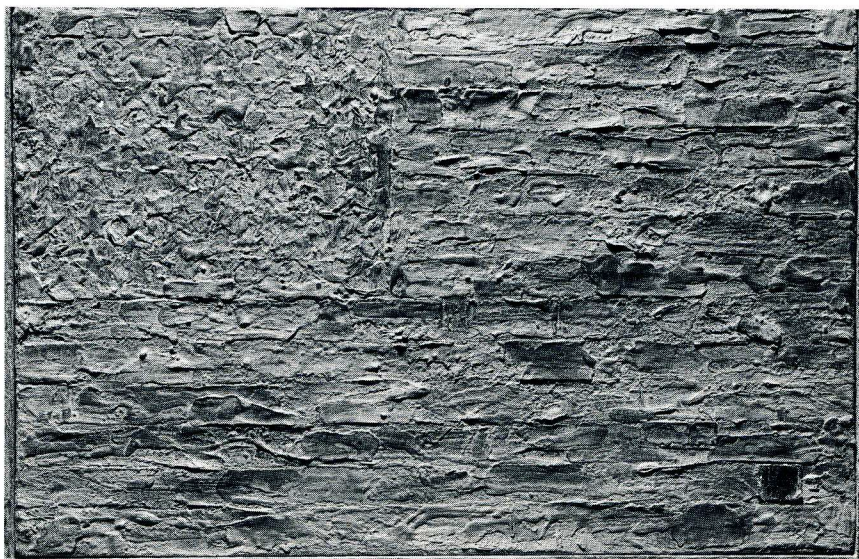


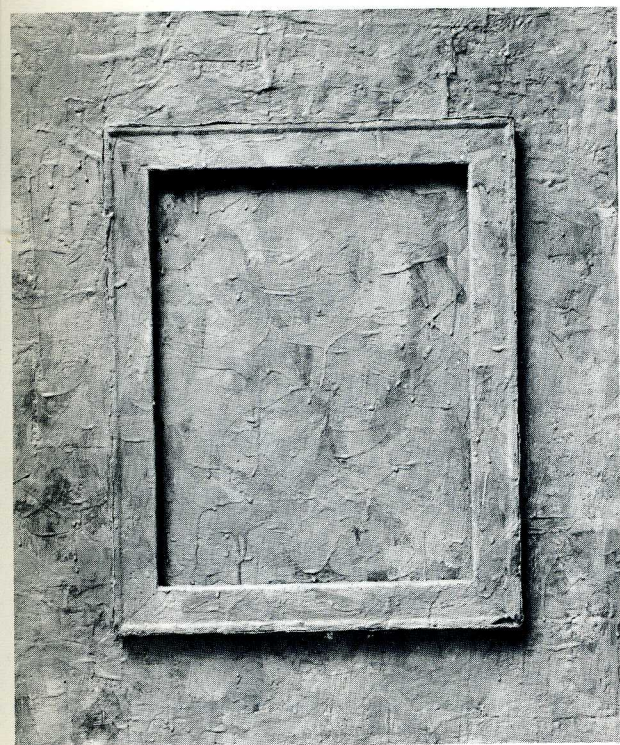
5. Johns,
Three Flags, 1958

But that same answer, returned in good will, can describe a crucial moment in a young artist's passage. For becoming a painter is like groping one's way out of a cluttered room in the dark. Beginning to walk, he tumbles over another man's couch, changes course to collide with someone's commode, then butts against a work table that can't be disturbed. Everything has its use and its user, and no need of him. When Johns was discharged from the army in 1952 and settled down in New York (he was no longer "going to be a painter," the time having come to start being one), he began to make small abstract collages from paper scraps. Being told that they looked like those of Kurt Schwitters, he went to look at Schwitters' collages and found that they did look like his own. He was trespassing, and he veered away—to be different.

The subject matter he displayed in January 1958 was different

6. Johns,
Flag, 1960





7. Johns, *The Canvas*, 1956

8. Johns, *The Drawer*, 1957

enough to precipitate a crisis in criticism. Despite a half-century of formalist indoctrination, it proved almost impossible to see the paintings for subject matter. It seemed to be the most interesting point about Johns that he managed somehow to discover uninteresting things to paint. An impasse for everyone. 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. “He is a calligraphic artist of considerable stylishness,” wrote Stuart Preston in the *New York Times*, (February 12, 1961), “and as for his gimmicks, you can take them or leave them.”

More easily said than done; for the “gimmicks” kept gnawing away. Like all important original statements, they unbalanced the *status quo* and demanded an instant review of received notions. Since Johns's pictures showed essentially Abstract Expressionist brushwork and surface, differing from those earlier pictures only in the variable of subject matter, they seemed to accuse the strokes and drips of the de Kooning school of being after all only a subject matter of a different kind; which threatened the whole foundation of Abstract Expressionist theory. And it was the painters who resented it most.

I have elsewhere described my own sense of bewildered alarm at the first sight of these pictures (cf. p. 12f.). If I now review the response of the art world as recorded in print, it is because the situation of those four years, 1958-1961, reveals something of the essential nature of art. A work of art does not come like a penny postcard with its value stamped upon it; for all its objectness, it comes primarily as a challenge to the life of the imagination, and "correct" ways of thinking or feeling about it simply do not exist. The grooves in which thoughts and feelings will eventually run have to be excavated before anything but bewilderment or resentment is felt at all. For a long time the direction of flow remains uncertain, dammed up, or runs out all over, until, after many trial cuts by venturesome critics, certain channels are formed. In the end, that wide river which we may call the appreciation of Johns—though it will still be diverted this way and that—becomes navigable to all.

Most people—especially those who belittle a critic's work—do not know, or pretend not to know, how real the problem is. They wait it out until the channels are safely cut, then come out and enjoy the smooth sailing, saying, *who needs a critic?*

It is in the character of the critic to say no more in his best moments than what everyone in the following season repeats; he is the generator of the cliché.

The first critical reflex at the appearance of something new is usually an attempt to conserve psychic energy by assuring oneself that nothing really new has occurred. *Art News*, bold enough to fly Johns's *Target with Four Faces* (Fig. 13) on its January 1958 cover, labeled it "neo-Dada," and the word untied every tongue. Whoever had been at a loss what to say about Johns could thenceforth recite whatever was remembered of Dada.¹

Once the Dada topic had been set up, it became itself the target of criticism. "Johns tries to use the cliché, but in the opposite way of the Dadas," wrote Tom Hess.² ". . . It is to be his key to the absolute. The motive is not to attack nor amuse, but to emulate Jackson Pollock and 'paint the subconscious.' The attempt is to achieve this through an art of Absolute Banality."

Hilton Kramer explained how Johns really wasn't like Dada, and not anywhere near as serious: ". . . a kind of Grandma Moses version of Dada. But . . . Dada sought to repudiate and criticize bourgeois values, whereas Johns, like Rauschenberg, aims to please and confirm the decadent periphery of bourgeois taste."³ And John Can-

aday in the *New York Times Magazine*,⁴ referring to exhibits by Rauschenberg and Johns:

Suddenly it (Dada) is with us again and going strong. . . . At least one stuffed goat with a rubber tire around its middle has been offered for esthetic appraisal—and for sale, a far from incidental consideration. You may also buy, just now, a real wire coat hanger on a wooden peg projecting from a color-dabbed panel, if this appeals to you as something you would like to have around the house or if you think its value as an investment is likely to increase. . . . Old-time Dada could—and did, as it intended—provoke to fury. The imitators today only tease and titillate. . . .

Harold Rosenberg, endowed with a keen political sense, assumed, like Kramer and Canaday, that Johns's selection of subjects was entirely audience directed; but he arrived at the opposite judgment. The subjects were not meant to delight bourgeois taste, but to needle it. Rosenberg understood Johns's work as a derision of philistine values: "Obviously such works are intended as provocations. Instead of concentrating on art, its problems and its needs, the artist speaks to the audience about itself. . . . Johns sticks right up against the gallery goer's nose the emblem he adores."⁵

Critics who looked more searchingly into the works themselves also arrived at opposite conclusions concerning the role of the subject. Fairfield Porter (he and Robert Rosenblum were the first writers to acclaim Johns's work) thought that the paintings had to do with a way of seeing. "He looks for the first time, like a child, at things that have no meaning to the child, yet, or necessarily."⁶ Objection: *Johns's unerring fidelity to the correct shape and order of numbers is surely uncharacteristic of one who knows not the meaning of what he transcribes.*

John B. Myers, calling Johns "the Surrealist of naming things," wrote: "Like a small child who holds up an egg, having discovered such an object for the first time in a hidden nest, and cries 'Egg!'—so Johns has made clear what things are. . . ."⁷ Objection: *What child holds his breath crying "Egg!" for a year—the time it took Johns to complete his Gray Alphabet of 1956?*

Rosenblum wrote: "Johns first astonishes the spectator and then obliges him to examine for the first time the visual qualities of a humdrum object he had never before paused to look at."⁸ Objection: *If Johns worked with any spectator in mind, is it likely that he addressed himself by preference to those who never pause to look at such things as letters? Compare Rosenblum's own earlier comment:⁹*

“ . . . The letters and numbers look as though they were uncovered in the office of a printer who so loved their shapes and mysterious symbolism that he could not commit them to everyday use.”

According to the three writers just cited, Johns's intent in choosing a subject was either to *see it*, to *name it*, or to *show it*. But they agree that a Johns painting renders an overlooked subject suddenly recognized.

Others found the exact opposite—that Johns chose his subjects to make them disappear altogether. “Johns likes to paint objects so familiar that the spectator can cease to think about them and concentrate on the poetic qualities of the picture itself.”¹⁰ Objection: *It used to be said of Velázquez' unlovely models that they were designed “to force the public to focus its attention on the art of painting and to give less importance to its subjects” (Ortega y Gasset). May I point out that in their alleged roles as promoters of formalist art appreciation both Johns and Velázquez are failures? Velázquez because the sorry stare of his court dwarfs and idiots remains as unforgettable as his calligraphy; and Johns, because similarly not one of his subjects ever succeeded in getting itself overlooked. On the contrary.*

We thus have a critical situation in which some believe that the subjects were chosen to make them more visible, others, that they were chosen to become altogether invisible. It is the sort of discrepancy that becomes a heuristic event. It sends you back to the paintings with a more potent question: What in the work, you ask, invites such contrariness? It then turns out that the work is such as to vindicate both groups of critics. For Johns's pictures are situations wherein the subjects are constantly found and lost, submerged and recovered.¹¹ He regains that perpetual oscillation which characterized our looking at pre-abstract art. But whereas, in traditional art, the oscillation was between the painted surface and the subject in depth, Johns succeeds in making the pendulum swing within the flatland of post-Abstract Expressionist art. Yet the habit of dissociating “pure painting” from content is so ingrained that almost no critic wanted to see both together.¹²

Finally, a few critics struck a more open course by examining Johns's subject matter, not with respect to any anticipated spectator reaction, but for its functioning within the picture itself. Donald Judd noticed “a curious polarity and alliance of the materiality of objects and what is usually classed as the more essential qualities of paint and color. . . . ‘Congruency’ is a relevant description.”¹³ Ben

Heller observed that "the subjects limit and describe Johns's space" (see note 10). Shortly thereafter, William Rubin suggested that the "enigma" of Johns's works stemmed "from the paradoxical oneness of the picture as painting and image. Such a peculiar ambiguity," he continued, "cannot be achieved with just any subject. . . . All Johns's favorite subjects share an emblematic or 'sign' character. . . . Thus the paradox lies in Johns's reversal of the usual process of representation, by which a three-dimensional form from the real world is represented as a two-dimensional illusion. Johns gives his two-dimensional signs greater substance, weight, and texture than they had in reality; in other words, he turns them into objects."¹⁴

Johns has built himself a personal idiom in which object and emblem, picture and subject, converge indivisibly. Subject matter is back, not as filler or adulteration, nor in some sort of partnership, but as the very condition of painting. The means and the meaning, the visible and the known, are so much one and the same, that a distinction between content and form is either not yet or no longer intelligible.

This amazing result is largely a function of his original subjects. I want to keep questioning these subjects for their common character, to see how they work for him in his paintings. If I can get some of these questions answered, I may no longer need to ask what Johns's intentions were in choosing to paint flags, targets, numbers, etc.

THE SUBJECTS

The subjects which Jasper Johns chose to paint up to 1958, the year of his first public showing, have these points in common:

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-hierarchical, 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.



9. Johns,
Gray Numbers, 1958

I discuss each of these eight in turn.

1. *That Johns's subjects are man-made objects or signs* is apparent. The fact that they are man-made assures him that they are makable. And this is the liberating discovery for the painter whose mind is both literal and contemporary: the man-made alone can be made, whereas whatever else the environment has to show is only

imitable by make-believe. The position of modern anti-illusionism finds here its logical resting place. The street and the sky—they can only be *simulated* on canvas; but a flag, a target, a 5—these can be *made*, and the completed painting will represent no more than what it actually is. For no likeness or image of a 5 is paintable, only the thing itself.

A crucial problem of twentieth-century art—how to make the painting a firsthand reality—resolves itself when the subject matter shifts from nature to culture.

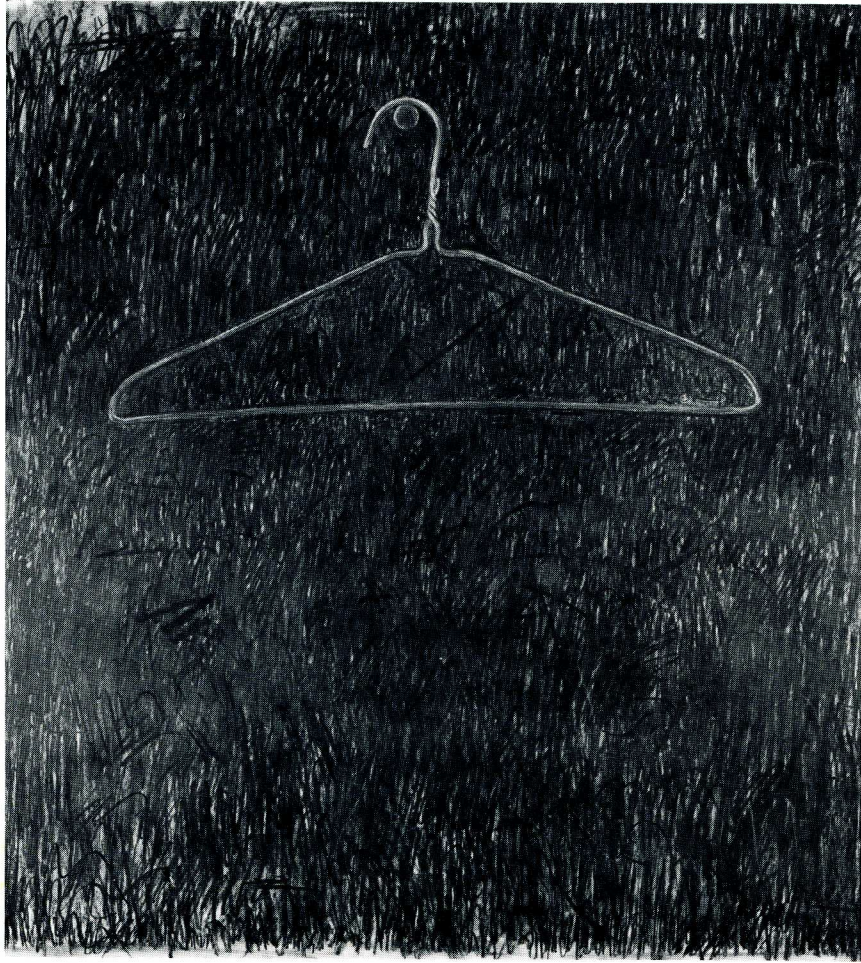
2. *The subjects are commonplaces of our environment.* So worded, Johns's preference would place him with Caravaggio, Courbet, or the American Ashcan School painters, all artists who chose lowly themes. But Johns doesn't give us the commonplace *in* a painting (transfigured by light, composition, and style), but the commonplace *as* a painting. This is different.

The choice of the commonplace does not necessarily follow from the decision to paint only man-made things: he might have chosen to paint the ground plan of the Taj Mahal. What he does choose is always a Universal: his *Coat Hanger*, for instance (Fig. 10). It is not made of wood, which would have placed it at a particular level of cost and quality; nor of some shiny plastic which would grade it on a scale of modernity. His wire hanger is of the kind nobody buys or selects. It comes free of charge from the cleaner; an object that enters everyman's house and is discarded at every back door. Similarly, his *Book, Newspaper, Hook* (1958) and flags: despite their concreteness, they are as impartial, as classless and universal as the primary numbers are, or the alphabet. His subjects are indeed commonplace, but no more "banal" than nickels and dimes.

Why did he choose them?

A woman wrote to me in June 1960: "When I saw Jasper Johns's paintings I wondered why he wasted those beautiful Chardin-like whites and greys on flags and numbers." It was the classic feminine disapproval—the familiar "I-don't-know-what-he-sees-in-her!"—of a man's love that seems misdirected. And yet so far only Rosenblum has remarked that there is a factor of love in the way Johns works with his subjects.

But love is a busy word. Perhaps the sniper who has picked his quarry from a line of uniformed enemy soldiers does the same thing. It is a matter of getting the object in focus, until it is not even one of its kind, but absolutely alone. Changing the object by a change of

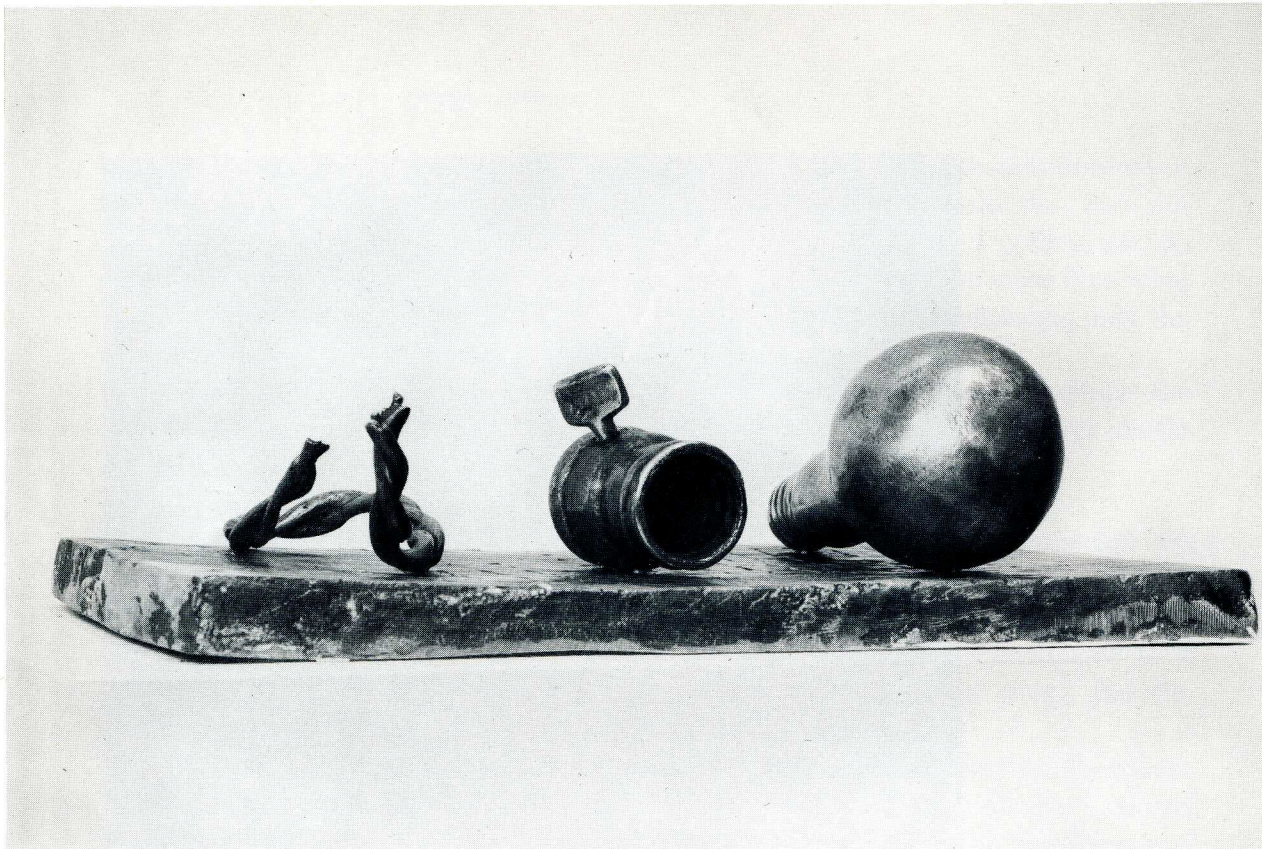


10. Johns,
Coat Hanger, 1958

attitude, the only way you can change it without violation.

Pierre Restany wrote recently¹⁵ that Johns's essential gesture as a painter is to bestow uniqueness on the commonplace.

What happens when we see a commonplace painted by Jasper Johns? I do not believe that we experience a revelation about the design of a flag or target. Nor that we lose the subject in the delight of pure painting. But in observing these standardized things we sense an unfamiliar deceleration of their normal rate of existence. The flag stiffens, is slowly hand-painted, and—as the end stage of a process that began with the arrest of its flutter—cast in bronze (Fig. 6). The Stars and Stripes forever.



11. Johns, *Bronze*, 1960-61

All of them are slowed down. As they were not mass-produced in the outpouring of industry, so they no longer submit to the mechanical gestures of human users—the flipping of pages, the saluting of flags, opening of a drawer, computing of numbers, etc. What we see when we face a Johns commonplace is the possibility of a changed attitude; better still, the possibility of an object's lone self-existence without any human attitude whatsoever surrounding it. What Johns loves in his objects is that they are nobody's preference; not even his own. By a strange paradox, these handmade, uniquely made commonplace things are relieved of man's shadow.

If his works are disturbing at all, perhaps it is because they insinuate our absence, not from a scene of romantic desolation, nor from a universe of abstract energies, but from our own place.

3. *A Johns subject possesses a respected ritual or conventional shape.* It is never enough to say that he paints numbers; add that he paints them in proper order (i.e. not in childlike, or ignorant, or esthetic disregard of their meaning). Add that his alphabets run as prescribed, and that a ruler used in his paintings is always left whole

and straight, i.e. not creatively rearranged. Picabia in 1918 had incorporated a tape measure in a picture called *Les Centimètres*; but the tape had been broken and stuck down in pieces. The Cubists used to make it a practice to disrespect the true count of things: put three strings on a guitar, four or six lines on a stave of sheet music. Such departures from given facts signaled their transfiguration; they symbolized their enlistment in art. Byzantine architects sometimes ornamented a church facade with fragments of antique inscriptions, some of them upside down. The inversion, whether wilful or ignorant, was an index of alienation from the antique literary tradition. And twentieth-century art has continually made use of common objects, including numbers and clusters of letters, but modified, or freely fragmented, and in surprised combinations.

In Jasper Johns, the conventional meaning is never mocked. No attitude of anger, irony, or estheticism alters the shapes he transcribes. Nothing recalls the waywardness, the irreverence, or the untidiness of most original Dada productions. In all his subjects, Johns recognizes a prestructured form which he accepts much as artists formerly accepted the anatomy of the body. This had its practical side. "Using the design of the American flag took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it," he once said. (Which reminds one that the best storytellers, such as Homer and Shakespeare, did not, like O. Henry or Somerset Maugham, invent their own plots.) "So I went on to similar things like the targets," Johns continued, "—things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels." It is as though Johns had decided to draw on both modes of non-representational painting—Geometric Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism—though their common tendency is to exclude one another. His way of realizing his subjects permits him to submit to an impersonal discipline of ruled lines, while still responding to every painterly impulse. And Johns succeeded in uniting these two disparate ways of art with yet a third, which is normally antithetical to them both; the most literal realism. It's the way things are that is the proper subject for art.

When you ask Johns why he did this or that in a painting, he answers so as to clear himself of responsibility. A given decision was made for him by the way things are, or was suggested by an accident he never invited.

Regarding the four casts of faces he placed in four oblong boxes over one of the targets (Fig. 13):

Q: *Why did you cut them off just under the eyes?*

A: *They wouldn't have fitted into the boxes if I'd left them whole.*

He was asked why his bronze sculpture of an electric bulb was broken up into bulb, socket, and cord (Fig. 11):

A: *Because, when the parts came back from the foundry, the bulb wouldn't screw into the socket.*

Q: *Could you have had it done over?*

A: *I could have.*

Q: *Then you liked it in fragments and you chose to leave it that way?*

A: *Of course.*

The distinction I try to make between necessity and subjective preference seems unintelligible to Johns. I asked him about the type of numbers and letters he uses—coarse, standardized, unartistic—the type you associate with packing cases and grocery signs.

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

A: *That's how the stencils come.*

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

A: *Of course not.*

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

A: *Yes.*

This answer is so self-evident that I wonder why I asked the question at all; ah yes—because Johns would not see the obvious distinction between free choice and external necessity. Let me try again:

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

A: *But that's what I like about them, that they come that way.*

Does this mean that it is Johns's choice to prefer given conditions—the shape of commercial stencils, inaccurate workmanship at the foundry, boxes too low to contain plaster masks, etc.? that he so wills what occurs that what comes from without becomes indistinguishable from what he chooses? The theoretic distinction I tried to impose had been fetched from elsewhere; hence its irrelevance.

I had tried to distinguish between designed lettering subject to expressive inflection, i.e. letters that exist in the world of art, and



12. Johns,
Painted Bronze, 1960

those functional letters that come in mass-produced stencils to spell THIS END UP on a crate. Proceeding by rote from this distinction between life and art, I asked whether the painter entertained an esthetic preference for these crude stenciled forms. Johns answers that he will not recognize the distinction. He knows that letters of more striking design do exist or can be made to exist. But they would be Art. And what he likes about those stencils is that they are Art not quite yet. He is the realist for whom preformed subject matter is a condition of painting.

4. *Johns's subjects are whole entities or complete systems.* Either a single thing in its entirety, a figure 5, a target, a shade; or a gamut, a span of possibilities, a full set. The first commonplace object which Johns saw as a picture, potentially, was the US flag, whose stripes stand for the sum of the original colonies and whose stars make up the full count of states; America then and now. When Johns made bronze sculptures out of two cans of ale (Fig. 12), one of them, weighing less and pierced at the top, was designated as empty, the other as full; one (with the Ballantine sign at the top) was Confederate, the other Yankee.

His numbers, when not single ciphers, run zero to nine (Fig. 9); his alphabets, from A to Z. His *Book* and his *Newspaper* are double spread; his roller *Shade* is unfurled (Fig. 20); his *Thermometer* paintings calibrate the full scale; and his various circle paintings describe complete revolutions. His latest large work (1961, about 10 feet wide) is the United States map coast-to-coast (Fig. 19). All things, whether objects or signs or series, are shown, like Egyptian shoulders, in their longest extension. And the implication here, as in Egyptian art, is the unfixed point of view.

As his objects are seen from no particular angle, so there is no intellectual position from which a significant fragment might have been singled out. No partiality. The completeness of his systems or entities implies the artist's refusal to advertise his subjective location.

It is the same with his color. When he is not painting monochromatically, his colors present a schematic abstract of the whole spectrum: Red, Yellow, Blue; or, for greater richness and with a slight turn of the wheel, the intermediate complementaries: Orange, Green, Purple.

But there are the two *Targets* of 1955 (painted when Johns was twenty-five), of which Nicolas Calas once wrote, "Oneness is killed either by repetition or by fragmentation."¹⁶ One of these (Fig. 13) displays four truncated life casts of a face painted orange; the other (Fig. 14) is surmounted by nine boxes whose hinged flaps can be opened and shut, and which contain anatomical fragments in plaster: a near-white face segment, a near-black animal bone, a four-fingered hand painted red, a yellow heel, orange ear, green penis, purple foot and empty blue box. (I should ask Johns why the breast fragment is pink. I did once ask why he had inserted these plaster

casts, and his answer was, naturally, that some of the casts happened to be around in the studio.)

The fact that these anatomical parts are not whole, that only so much of them is inserted as will fit in each box, that they are clipped to size like bits of collage, indicates that the human body is not the ostensible subject. The subject remains the bull's-eye in its wholeness, for which the anatomical fragments provide the emphatic foil.

Apparently the artist wanted to know (or so he says) whether he could use life-cast fragments of body and remain as indifferent to reading their message as he was to the lineage in the newspaper fragments pasted on the canvas below. Could our habit of sentimentalizing the human, even when obviously duplicated in painted plaster—could this pathetic instinct in us be deadened at sight so as to free alternative attitudes? He was tracking a dangerous possibility to its limits; and I think he miscalculated. 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. When affective human elements are conspicuously used, and yet not used as subjects, their subjugation becomes a subject that's got out of control. At any rate, no similar fracturing of known wholes has occurred since in Johns's work.¹⁷

5. Since they tend to constitute the whole subject of a particular work, *Johns's objects, systems, or signs predetermine the picture's shape and dimensions*. The picture is not contained by an external frame, but is retained from within. Apollinaire had seen this coming in 1913 when he predicted a greater role in modern art for the real object, which he called the picture's "internal frame."

In Johns's work, the "internal frame" rules absolutely wherever the image depicted—flag, target, alphabet, book, canvas, or shade—remains self-sufficient. Where a physical object is included within a larger canvas it serves at least to diminish the margin of choice; the arbitrariness of where the picture ends is reduced. Thus, in *Coat Hanger* (Fig. 10) and *Drawer* (Fig. 8), the lateral span is pre-fixed; in others, e.g. *Thermometer*, the height. In *Gray Painting with a Ball* (1958; Fig. 15) the upright dimension is given by a gash in the canvas, pried and held open by an intruding ball.

In a picture of the following year (Fig. 16) the subject was to have been a circle. Johns pivoted a flat stick to trace it, then, when



15. Johns,
Gray Painting with a Ball,
1958

the tracing was done, saw that it would be false to remove it. The circle alone would have been an abstraction on canvas; with the compass stick left in evidence, the picture became an object again: a device for circle-making. Subject, title, and form suddenly coincided. The circle and the words *DEVICE CIRCLE* stenciled across the bottom determine, as if by necessity, the structure and shape of the work.

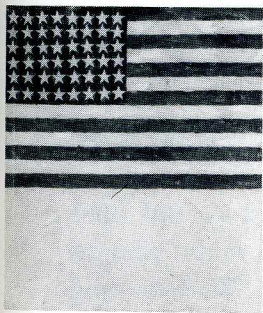
One of Johns's most beautiful works is the picture called *Tennyson* (1958; Fig. 17), conceived in homage to the poet who had written "The Lotos-Eaters." The poet's name—for once not stenciled but in Roman capitals—runs across the bottom, setting out the width and even, one feels, the scale of the work. The rest of his large picture (185.7 cm. high) begins in two tall upright panels on separate stretchers whose junction still shows at the top. Then the painter takes a great length of canvas and lays it over the original diptych as a folded sheet. For some reason I imagine that one can still feel the pace of these simple performances; slow, somber gestures as of an unknown, funereal rite. The canted sides of the sheet introduce the illusion of a tall upright stele. And then the gray brushwork overlays the entire field with an allover falling of grays;



16. Johns,
Device Circle, 1959

and darker grays in the pressed density of the letters that spell Tennyson's name.

The important step in this picture was the decision to use no given reality beyond that of the poet's name, but to create, out of invented material geometries, a system equally ineluctable. The physical fashioning of this picture—the separation of the two panels and the folded tapering overlay—these in relation to the paint activity now furnish the preconditions of material necessity. A fiction, of course, since these acts of cutting and pasting were free decisions. But their wilfulness operated against another kind of material resistance and bespeaks action earlier in time. At the moment of painting, the system of three visible strata and four fields of canvas was as surely ordained as was, in previous paintings, the design of the American flag.



But what of the arbitrary variations Johns has played on the Stars and Stripes? The *Flag Above White*, for example, (1954; Fig. 18), is a picture in which the flag's horizontal design sits incongruously in a tall canvas. It seems to me that the uncanniness of the picture derives precisely from this, that a known rule of logic and precedent is here visibly broken. When the flag ceases to be all there is; when its perfect anatomy enters into any kind of combination—it becomes fabulous: a modern realist's counterpart to the chimeras of antique realism.

The *Flag Above White*: Does the flag rest on a white plinth? Impossible since the white of the plinth and that of the stripes is identical; you can taste it.

Is the picture unfinished, as if in expectation of more of those horizontal red stripes? Such finishing might be good for the picture, but it would ruin the flag.

But then, is the lower white an excess to be pared away? This might be good for the flag, but it would cut up the picture which is visibly indivisible.

In transgressing the design of the American flag, the picture demonstrates its own impossibility.

6. *Johns's subjects are flat.* Under an enormous literal representation of an unmistakable pipe Magritte wrote *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. And to the puzzled spectator who mistakes the image for the reality, he would have said—*Try to smoke it.*

Johns's images do not seek this immunity of the unreal. You can't smoke Magritte's painted pipe, but you could throw a dart at a Johns target, or use his painted alphabets for testing myopia. If you don't put his targets and letters to use, is it perhaps because you regard them as art? But that's your decision. You are free to spare his targets, or anyone's targets; for, as noted above, Johns renders visible the possibility of an alternative attitude. The point is, however, that it is an alternative; that the posture of aiming at a Johns target is no less sane than was genuflection before an icon. Because the subject in Johns's art has regained real presence.

In his home-grown morality, which makes it unethical to turn things away from themselves, a painting must be what it represents. Paint is paint, and numbers are numbers, and you can have a painted number in which each term is only itself. You can also have objects with paint on them. What you cannot have is a painted landscape, where the landscape is counterfeit and the paint is disguised.

Was it, I wonder, a painful decision, that paint was to be no longer a medium of transformation? Probably not; for the painter it must have been merely the taking of the next step. But once taken, it placed him at a point outside the crowded room, whence one suddenly saw how Franz Kline bundles with Watteau and Giotto. For they were all artists who use paint and surface to suggest existences other than surface and paint.

The degree of non-figurative abstraction has nothing to do with it. Existences other than those of paint are implied when Kline's imminent blacks block out the openness of a white space; when pure color patches are allowed to locate themselves at varying distances from the picture plane; when painted canvas permits the illusion that form and space, figure and ground are not of one stuff. Johns eliminates this residue of double dealing in modern painting. Since his picture plane is to be flat, nothing is paintable without make-believe but what is flat by nature. And if for some reason he wants something 3-D, let the artist insert the thing, or a cast of it.

Does all this mean that Johns is a respecter of what used to be called "the integrity of the picture plane?" On the contrary. Such is his sovereign disrespect for it that he lets his subjects take care of the matter.

Have you noticed how his paint is laid on? The brushstrokes



19. Johns, *Map*, 1962

don't blend; each dab is a short shape, distinct in tone from its neighbor. This is the way Cézanne used to paint, in broken planes composed of adjacent values; imparting pictorial flatness to things which the mind knows to be atmospheric and spatial. Johns, with that same type of brushwork that hovers midway between opaque canvas and spatial illusion, does the reverse: allowing an atmospheric suggestion to things which the mind knows to be flat. In fact, he relies on his subject matter to find and retain the picture plane for him, leaving him free to work, as he put it, *on other levels*.

Not for a generation has subject matter been of such radical formal importance as in his *Map* (1961; Fig. 19).¹⁸ In reading maps, we are used to seeing blue waters against earth-colored landmasses. But Johns's picture disperses Blue, Yellow, Red, and some new derivatives in even quantities all over the map. If this were a quilt of pure color relations, the blues that now ride most of Texas and Iowa would sink unfathomably. Johns counts on our knowledge that this is a map to maintain surface tension against the natural spatial pressures of colors; just as Poussin, clothing a girl's skiey thigh in the

foreground in blue, relies on our understanding of foregrounds and thighs to hold the recessive color in place.

Is it not now apparent how far from arbitrary, how far from the spirit of Dada, or from any desire to provoke some uncaring bourgeois, Johns is in the choice of his themes?

Look at the flag again, the first of his found subjects and, in its natural state, almost a preformed Johnsian system. The red and white stripes do not—as in a normal striped pattern—form a figure-ground hierarchy. They are, in their familiar symbolic role, wholly equivalent. In other words, the alternation of red and white stripes in the American flag is much flatter than similar stripes on a T-shirt would be. As for the stars on blue ground: here, as in all situations that threaten a figure-ground differential, Johns employs all his techniques as a painter to cancel the difference:

The ceaseless overlap-interlace of figure and ground; a paint surface like knitting or basketry. Not a shallow space but the quickened density of a film.

An M-W brushstroke that looks and functions like the corrugated staples carpenters use.

The unpainted lower edge of most of his canvasses.

The drip, familiar mark of New York School painting, defining the canvas ground as rain streamers define the transparent window pane.

Collage fragments, newspaper or a patch of fresh canvas, to recall the painting to its materiality wherever color or tone values overreach into illusory space.

I keep looking at his black-and-white painting called *Shade* (Fig. 20). But for a narrow margin all around, its entire surface is taken up by an actual window shade—the cheap kind; Johns had to fortify it to keep it flat. It's been pulled down as if for the night, and obviously for the last time. Over all the visible surface, shade and ground canvas together, spreads the paint itself, paint unusually atmospheric and permissive of depth. It makes a nocturnal space with bursts in it of white lights that radiate from suspended points, like bursting and falling fireworks misted over.

An abstracted nightscape? You stare at and into a field whose darkness is absolute, whose whites brighten nothing, but make darkness visible, as Milton said of infernal shade.



20. Johns,
Shade, 1959

Or a scene of nightfall: far lights flaring and fading move into focus and out, like rainy lights passed on a road. Are we out inside the night or indoors? A window, with its cheap shade pulled down, is within reach, shutting me out, keeping me in? Look again. On a canvas shade lowered against the outside we are given to see outdoor darkness; like the hollow shade our closed eyes project upon lowered lids. Alberti compared the perspective diaphanes of the

Renaissance to open windows. Johns's *Shade* compares the adia-
phane of his canvas to a window whose shade is down.

7. *Johns's subjects are non-hierarchical.* When Johns paints in color his effort is to maintain each of his colors in a state of all-over dispersion and in similar quantities. There is to be no predominance.

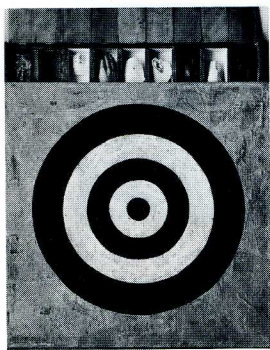
When he paints figures, such as numbers or letters, the negative spaces are given just enough occasional overlap to cancel any hier-
archic distinction between figure and ground.

The objects he incorporates in his pictures are those that are equally uninteresting to tramp and tycoon.

Instruments of differentiation—a ruler or a thermometer attached to the canvas—may interrupt the paint surface, but they cannot alter its character, whose homogeneity overrules their calibrations.

Within Johns's pictorial fields, all the members abide in a state of democratic equality. No part swells at the expense of another. Every part of the image tends toward the picture plane as water tends to sea level. The paint surface, waved and incised but leveled and leveling like the surface of water; and one imagines that any part could replace any other at any point.

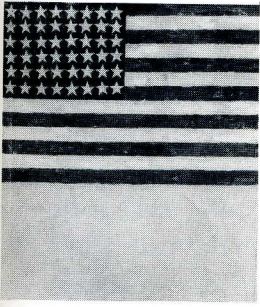
In other words, no one is pointing at anything in particular, perhaps because no one's around.



21.

What of the Targets, however? As objects of use they are designed to feature one center; systems of total convergence upon a privileged point. But Johns's treatment of targets neutralizes their native emphasis, chiefly by the strong decentralized red in the spandrels. And it must have been partly to offset the look of centralization that Johns topped two of his targets with boxed anatomical casts (Fig. 21). They form an aimless procession to and fro on a shelved horizontal, and invite the vertical up-and-down motion of raising and closing the flaps. One good reason for their inclusion was surely the determination to bring this most centralizing of all possible forms down to a state of homogeneous de-emphasis. Hence also his target paintings that are all-green and all-white. Johns unfocuses even the target so that, being seen not with a marksman's eye, it is seen with an alternative attitude.

It is characteristic of Johns that having by certain means achieved a certain desired appearance, he goes on to see whether he may not



18.

get the same result by the opposite means: whether he can make a target look as decentralized as a flag; whether he can make the upright *Flag Above White* (Fig. 18) look as indivisible as a flag alone; and, in his two Targets with plaster casts, whether the effect of randomness, procured by anatomical fragments from all over the body, can be attained also by a fourfold repetition of the same single face; and whether male privates in plaster may be made to seem as indifferently public as the cast of a heel; and whether, having aroused the spectator's sense of participation by means of hinged flaps which he can open at will, the spectator may not be stirred to the same sense of participation by means of a drawer which remains shut.

Moral: Nothing in art is so true that its opposite cannot be made even truer.

8. *Johns's subjects are associable with sufferance rather than action.* All objects are passive and Johns's pictures are objects. But objects get themselves associated with specific actions and, accordingly, with degrees of doing and suffering. Everyone knows what it means when a warlike king identifies himself with a hammer, or a Michelangelo with an anvil. Johns's symbolism may not be so explicit, but to ignore the variable of symbolic pressure in his iconography is either negligent or doctrinaire. For the objects he chooses show a distinct preference for letting things happen. A flag has nothing to do but be recognized; a target is aimed at; a book is opened, letters and numbers are shuffled, shades are pulled, drawers are filled and closed. Even the *Hook* Johns once drew puts out no prehensile claw, but curls up on itself.

Along with his manner of painting, his subjects tend to create areas of uneventful persistence; the subjects themselves yielding patterns of continuity that stay inert against the erosive activity of the paint.

It seems to hold for the early work. Then, by 1958, Johns introduced elements of assertive action into his pictures, which thereafter became readable as polarities of doing and suffering. Things that acted and things acted upon appeared in conjunction. In the *Gray Painting with Ball* (1958, Fig. 15) the ball works as a forceful intrusion, a foreign body in the gashed canvas. The compass arm that remained behind in *Device Circle* (1959, Fig. 16) is an efficient agent that makes its mark wherever it touches. Such changes deserve to be noticed; they indicate how Johns's repertory of objects grows responsive to life.

His subject matter is the sensitive vehicle of his intentions as person and painter. It is not there by default, nor to provoke honest Babbitts into a rage of incomprehension. His themes were not chosen to educate our blunt sensibilities, nor indeed for any reason having to do with you and me. Johns chose his subjects because they were the ones that best let him live his painter's life. That is to say, they alone would convey him and his hand—in the way they both wished to be traveling—from edge to edge of the day's canvas.

WHAT IS A PAINTING?

You don't just ask; you advance a hypothesis. The question is, What is a Picture? or What sort of presence is the Picture Plane? And the hypothesis takes the form of a painting.

It is part of the fascination of Johns's work that many of his inventions are interpretable as meditations on the nature of painting, pursued as if in dialogue with a questioner of ideal innocence and congenital blindness.

A picture, you see, is a piece of cotton duck nailed to a stretcher.

Like this? says the blindman, holding it up with its face to the wall. Then Johns makes a picture of that kind of picture to see whether it will make a picture (Fig. 7).

Or: A picture is what a painter puts whatever he has into.

You mean like a drawer?

Not quite; remember it's flat.

Like the front of a drawer?

The thought takes form as a picture (Fig. 22)—and let's not ask whether this is what the artist had thought while he made it. It's what the picture gives you to think that counts.

But if pictures are flat, says the blindman, why do they always speak of things IN pictures?

Why, what's wrong with it?

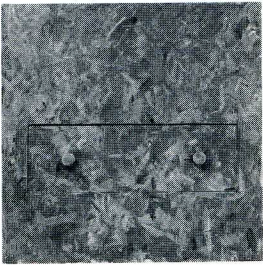
Things ON pictures, it should be; like things on trays or on walls.

That's right.

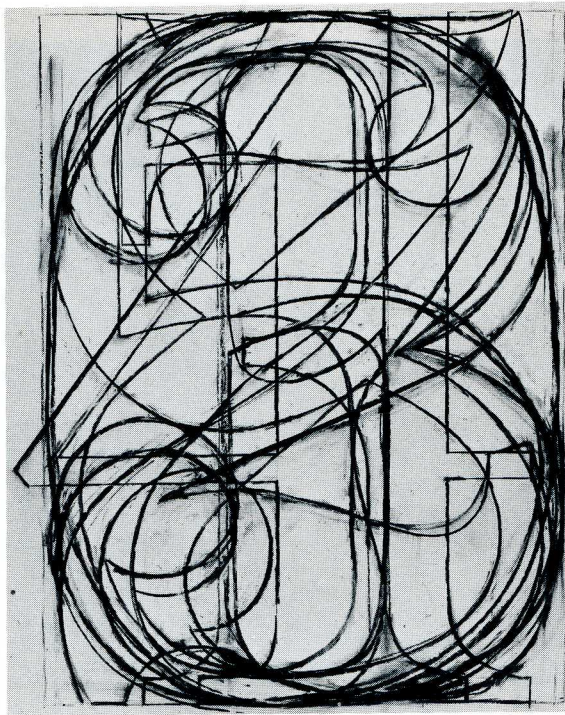
Well then, when something is IN a picture, where is it? In a fold of the canvas? Behind it, a concealed music box?

Johns painted just such a picture in 1955, calling it *Tango*; canvases with secret folds are the subject of *Tennyson* and of two pictures (1960 and 1961) called *Disappearance*.

What would happen if you dropped one of Cézanne's apples into



22.



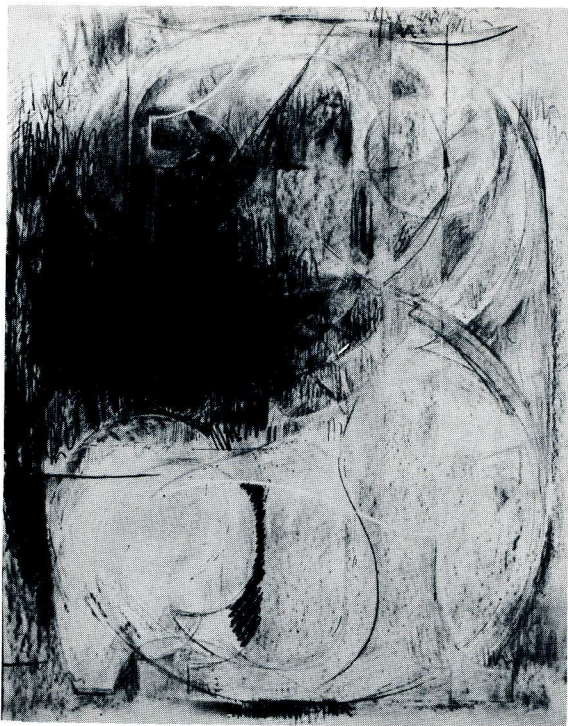
24. Johns,
o Through 9, 1960

a Still Life by Renoir? Would the weight of it sink it right through the table? Would the table itself pulverize like disturbed dust or down from a torn pillow? Yet this is the standard anomaly of conceiving an alien solid quartered upon a pictorial field. The blindman refused to believe that it could be done.

Show me, he said; and Johns painted *Gray Painting with Ball*.

He has worked valiantly to keep him informed, this blindman who believes nothing that cannot be touched. *Green Target* was a special donation; a target in Braille, so to speak.

And the logic of it is overwhelming. If a painting is truly an object—repeat: if that which is painted is truly an object—then that which is painted cannot be a purely optic phenomenon. It must have a visible tangibility. And in that case any painting can be rehearsed with either its visual or its tactual modality played up or played down. A Johns painting may be flattened into a drawing, or relieved in sculpmetal and bronze. A drawing (which Johns usually makes *after* a painting) abstracts from the picture its visibility. Green targets, flags bleached or brazen, all effaced tricolor emblems reduced to texture alone, approach pure palpability.



25. Johns,
o Through 9, 1961

Among Johns's December 1961 paintings, and in the same group with *LIAR* (Fig. 2), is a larger picture called *NO* (Fig. 23). Its painted field is made up of soft mottled grays. Fastened to a hook near the top is a long straggling wire hung loose and free. From its lower end dangle two letters, an N and an O, cut out of aluminum foil and casting a vagrant shadow. The shadow writes *no* near a place that's already big with the same message—the word *no* raised on the canvas in sculpmetal relief.

Both this picture and *LIAR* seem to me to write a new role for the picture plane: not a window, nor an uprighted tray, nor yet an object with active projections into actual space; but a surface observed during impregnation, observed as it receives a message or imprint from real space.

Johns has painted and drawn a series of pictures (Figs. 24 and 25) which he called *Zero Through Nine*. Not “zero to nine,” like the white painting of the previous year; but *through*—to intimate that succession had given way to transparency and superposition. As if the progression of cardinal numbers had suddenly become faintly

improper for implying a prearranged pecking order. It accords well with his moral position that Johns should have hit on the idea of annulling the seniority rule among numbers. Now all ten ciphers, drawn to one scale, are superimposed in one place.

But "superimposed" is the wrong word; it suggests stratification. And the point about these numbers is that they exist in simultaneity in the same single stratum.

But "same" too is the wrong word. The same river cannot be stepped into twice, and just so, no cipher here steps into the same situation, since each entering form alters it for the next, while changing the place for all previous tenants.

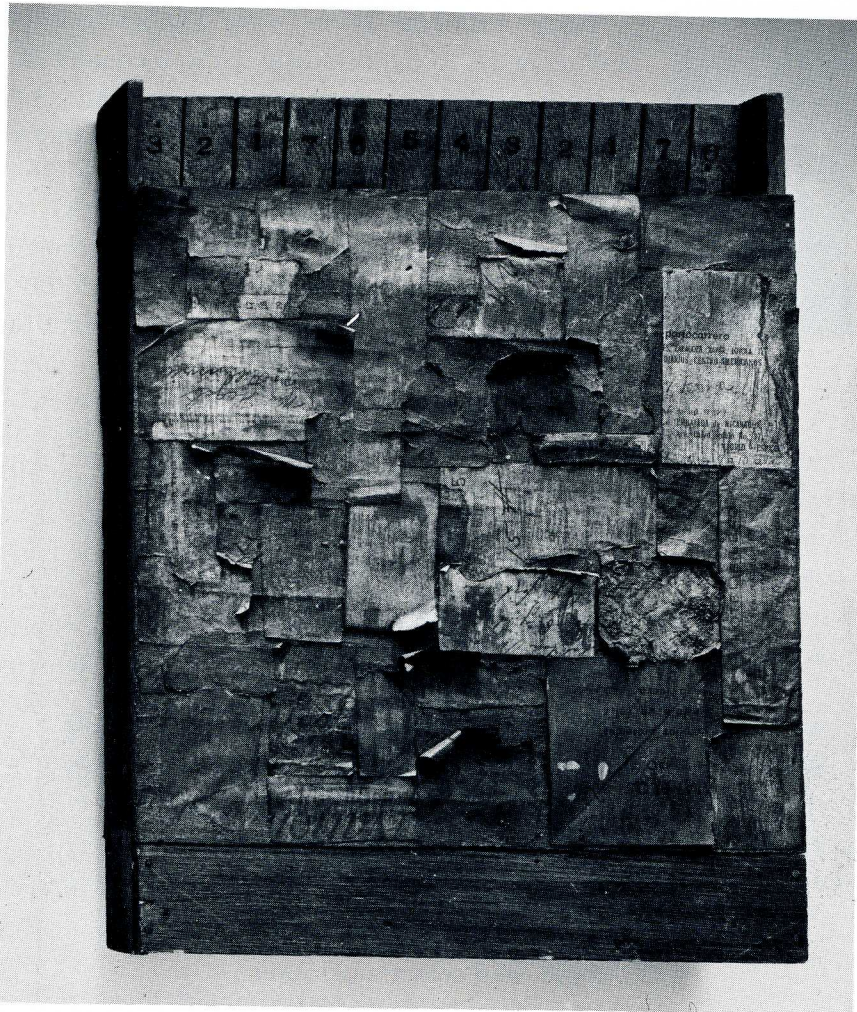
What sort of a place is this that can hold ten simultaneous presences in solution? Is it anything like that scholastic pinhead that supports untold numbers of angels? Or a movie screen with a memory? . . . Some years ago Johns was asked at a party what he would do if he were not a painter. He said he would run a lending collection of paintings to tour the country by air. The distributing aircraft, he said, would be labeled: "The Picture Plane."

HOW IMPROPER IS IT TO FIND POETIC, METAPHORICAL,
OR EMOTIONAL CONTENT IN JOHNS'S WORK?

I remember how, in 1957, my initial dismay over Johns's work was overcome by the pictures themselves. A suspicion of their destructive or unserious intention was dissipated not only by their commanding presence and workmanlike quality, but by something that impressed me as the intensity of their solitude. And this despite their deadpan materiality, and despite the artist's assurance that emotional content was neither overtly nor implicitly present. When I said to him recently that his early works seemed to me to be "about human absence," he replied that this would mean their failure for him; for it would imply that he had "been there," whereas he wants his pictures to be objects alone.

Well then I think he fails; not as a painter, but as theorist. For the assumption of a realism of absolute impersonality always does fail—if taken literally. That assumption is itself a way of feeling; it is the ascetic passion which sustains the drive of a youthful Velázquez, or a Courbet, while they shake the emotional slop from themselves and their models.

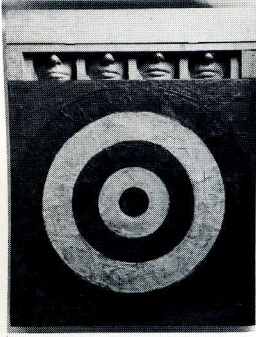
Johns's earliest surviving picture—he destroyed many—has a romantic melancholy about it, even a hint of self-pity. It is the lovely



26. Johns,
Construction with a Piano,
1954

small *Construction with a Piano* (1954; Fig. 26). Compared with such a piece, the symbolism of his 1961 paintings—*LIAR*, *NO*, *Good Time Charley*, *In Memory of My Feelings*—is both more overt and more impenetrable. The painter past thirty dares to be frankly autobiographical because his sense of self is objectified, and because he feels secure in the strength of his idiom.

Between that early muted lament and these latest tough-minded personal symbols lie the paintings I have chiefly discussed, works that were to have been of the most uncompromising impersonal objectivity.



27.

Target with Four Faces (1955, Fig. 27) was to have been just that and no more. And it is indeed without content, if content implies the artist in attendance pumping it in. But that's not what's implied at all. The content in Johns's work gives the impression of being self-generated—so potent are his juxtapositions. Here in this work the rigid stare of the bull's-eye is surmounted by four eyeless life casts of one face. Suppose the juxtaposition performed without expressive purpose. Then, within the world-frame of this picture, the values that would make a face seem more articulate than a target are not being held anymore. And this is neither a logical inference nor a sentimental projection. It is something one sees.

But the things one knows also come in. Thus the target appears in its known true colors; but the face is orange all over. The target is whole; but the face is cut down. The target, of which one tends to have many, is single; the face, of which one has one alone, has been multiplied. In common experience, targets are known at a distance; a target so close that it cannot be missed is deprived of its functional identity—as is a face on a shelf four times repeated. So then, if target and facial casts had no correlative meaning when the artist first put them together, the life they now lead in his picture gives them a common constraint. They seem to have traded their respective holdings in space. For the target that belongs out there at a distance has acquired absolute hereness. And the human face, which is experienced as here, has been dismissed to *up there*. As if the subjective space consciousness that gives meaning to the words “here” and “there” had ceased operation.

And then I saw that all of Johns's early pictures, in the passivity of their subjects and their slow lasting through time, imply a perpetual waiting—like the canvas face-to-the-wall that waits to be turned, or the empty coat hanger. But it is a waiting for nothing, since the objects, as Johns presents them, acknowledge no living presence; they are tokens of human absence from a man-made environment. Only man's chattels remain, overgrown by paint as by indifferent vegetation. Familiar objects, but Johns has anticipated their dereliction.

And is this finally what the picture means?

No, not that at all. Who would need pictures if they were that translatable? What I am saying is that Johns 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.