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Sea Change: Jasper Johns and the Oeuvre as Context

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Unlike his predecessors, the coherence of Johns's oeuvre is rooted in contextual discourse rather than an evocative style. This study addresses three issues pertaining to the work of Jasper Johns: a deliberate splitting of his private from public self; his rhetoric of inherent incoherence as it pertains to the relational aspects of his body of work and private life; and his oeuvre as a concrete albeit organic context. Parts one and two address tools utilized by Johns in his attempt to construct a discursive oeuvre: his rhetoric of inherent incoherence, recurrent iconography, and his insistence on separating his personal life from the work presented. The third section concludes this study with a direct discussion of Johns's discursive oeuvre. Johns insists that above all his works are representative of "busy" vision, that is, a field of vision in which everything is connected through unknowable threads. His discursive oeuvre provides a site for fleeting glimpses of those threads.

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INTRODUCTION

This study addresses three issues pertaining to the work of Jasper Johns: a deliberate splitting of his private from public self; his rhetoric of inherent incoherence as it pertains to the relational aspects of his body of work and private life; and his oeuvre as a concrete albeit organic context. I do not presume that any particular meaning is obtainable but rather my aim is to identify the aspects of Johns's project that have aided in the construction of an organic oeuvre, one that consistently recognizes its whole as beyond the sum of its individual parts, and one that threatens traditional concepts of artist as auteur with humor and an affirmation of the artist's (and our own) humanity. Parts one and two address tools Johns uses in his attempt to construct a discursive oeuvre: his rhetoric of inherent incoherence, recurrent iconography, and his insistence on separating his personal life from the work presented. The third section concludes this study with a direct discussion of Johns's discursive oeuvre.

At its core, my discussion of these issues is an effort to isolate Johns's construction of a cohesive oeuvre which both empowers individual works with a mysterious meaning while making them

dependent on the entire body. Johns's work never fails to bring critics to three deceptively simple and daunting questions: What is it? What does it do? How has it been achieved? In the mid-fifties when his imagery was relatively limited and formal analysis was in vogue, critics focused primarily on the individual works; but even with his first show in 1954 Johns's imagery began to overlap and belong to a context – a context that continues to expand and complicate any discussion of it. Even at 79, Johns continues to create paintings, prints, and assemblages while his work is collected and curated into increasingly coherent collections. The curator's tendency to combine thematically similar works has the effect of removing surprise and energy from the individual pieces albeit simultaneously highlighting nuanced details of the works themselves for the viewer who seeks to find them.

In the history of painting, Johns appears to be tangential or at best a link between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art of the 1960s whose artistic project would later resemble more of the conceptual art of the 1970s and postmodern incarnations. He belongs to no specific movement and has from the beginning worked from within a club of his own; the only concrete coupling made by critics would be with Robert

Rauschenberg. Before a decade of working side-by-side could pass, Rauschenberg would part ways with Johns and move into works that challenged canvas painting while activating the space and experience of the viewer with that canvas. Whereas Rauschenberg's work of the sixties reflected disdain for Johns's heavy-handed attack on the limits of emotional expression upon the canvas, Johns would continue to explore the iconography originating in the early years of his career as a kind of exercise to which imbues the work of art with historical and immediate temporal experience. In this way, the individual works become connected not only to the artist but rather to his entire body of work, the individual viewing and experiencing the work, the historical moment of its creation, and the contemporary moment of its viewer. That is to say, Johns has manipulated the oeuvre to his own liking by both destroying most of the works which preceded his first solo show, by constructing a mythology around the origins of his first flag, and further through manipulating all of his works into a ostensibly independent site of discourse.

These attributes are common to most works of art but Johns, through his insistent repetition of iconography, draws attention to the aspect of a *whole*; that is, a body of work which highlights the viewer's

inability to ever completely know its individual parts or the whole itself. This body of work denies both straightforward representation and expression and has the effect of empowering banal symbols of everyday life that are meant to be quickly consumed with a reminder of their nebulous position (and hence the viewer's nebulous position) in a mysterious world.

Johns's influence on modern and postmodern artistic practice is undeniable and yet he has attempted to maintain a distance in the periphery of art history, in solitude and with his own project at the fore. The study that follows addresses that project directly. Because Johns tends to hold onto so many of his works and with his ever-growing body of work, it is increasingly difficult to grasp the oeuvre as a whole – which, in effect, may point to what I will contend is a major aspect of his artistic project. With so many works out of the public sight and with works that cannot be separated from the entirety of the oeuvre, Johns is able to maintain its mystery. It is both my hope and fear that upon his death the entirety of his oeuvre will be revealed and that critics will have a renewed interest in his complete body of work. This study preempts this potential release with considerations of the project prior to revelations gained by

the oeuvre's eventual release. If we are to imbue works of art with irrevocable value, the site in which they are situated must never be closed. I contend that Johns achieves this open system at the service of mystery; and he achieves this mystery through strict control of privacy, allegory, and rhetoric.

In the beginning of his career Johns confronted and separated himself from the Abstract Expressionist reliance upon emotive painterly *tâche* with acutely critical and humorous works like *Painting with Two Balls* (1960), *Painted Bronze (Ale Cans)* is no exception to that sort of attack. Johns's sculpture begins to construct and draw attention to a memory imprint heightened through the re-construction of his growing storehouse of painted and sculpted imagery in the medium of print. The culmination of this constructed distance (and, furthermore, one of Johns's most poignant and clear expressions of that distance) is revealed with his *Ale Cans* lithograph. It wasn't until I saw this print that a new mystery of art was revealed. Up until that point it was the open complexities of music, which inspired my imagination.

ALE CANS

Memories of my creative life begin with music; listening, making, talking, and writing about music consumed my youth. Pop music, folk music, rock n' roll, glam rock, rock, and eventually post-punk and garage rock. I made the decision to study fine art at the end of that youth based on an argument that music should remain sacred, untouched by critical analysis. A song, unlike a picture on the wall, is an ephemeral organic construction often made by multiple creators, with limitless subjective meanings, that is (ideally) always involved in a complex discourse involving the listener, singer (if any), sound, the song's philology, album artwork, the musicians' performative selves and the lifeworld beyond – these were the distinctions that I made before deciding to debase the art object in favor of preserving the song. Up until my Spring of 2003, I believed that art was limited to decoration, and that at best could evoke a coveted creative spirit while at worst provide a landmark for the annals of history.

That Spring came after three long years as a frustrated and semi-successful printmaking undergraduate. It would be a Johns lithograph of two Balantine ale cans which eventually would shake me out of a

debilitating existential crisis; a crisis that threatened to crush my tenuous commitment to developing a legitimate artistic project. Before this would happen however, and progressively over the course of my studies and technical training, the idea of creating a fine art object for consumption in the world became increasingly moot; as a medium, printmaking technically supports and encourages limitless expressive experiments and the subsequent reproduction of those experiments but my question remained: to what end? With no limitations what does one *do*?

Upon arriving at art school I had already begun to question the romantic idea that a painted representation could translate and transmit my inner life and so conceptual art seemed the most likely landing ground; however soon upon landing there it became very clear that my conceptual works were not going to move beyond the page and that I had no interest in performing and promoting myself in an art world that seemed oversaturated and decades cold. As future art stars, we were groomed to be professionals and encouraged to regularly produce work that was both provocative and sellable by distracted artist/instructors who were seemingly still struggling to find a voice within their fields. I saw a handful of classmates thriving in this environment while I spent months

and then years at my studio desk working through potential pieces. A few of them were eventually realized as performance or installation works they all seemed like a grand rehearsal for a dying game. However as an upper-classman at Rhode Island School of Design it was expected that you would not only save that game but rise to the top of it.

Johns's print of his ale can sculpture created an epiphany the moment I saw it; a sudden and immediate release of tension followed my vision. Finally, the formal printed form had a purpose; his body of work solidified into a whole and I could see the construction of an oeuvre in discourse with itself and the world beyond. The effect was cerebral and non-emotional; but I did not yet understand why the effect was so profound. In front of me was simply a stylized lithograph that draws attention to its own medium through a washy black background and thick white borders on the paper, a painted representation of his bronze sculpture of two ale cans that were originally sculpted to both resemble the model and reveal the artist's hand in its construction.

The original sculpture from 1960¹ was already familiar to me but I later learned that the origin had its own mythology: on repeated occasions Johns has said that he made the sculpture in response to a comment made by Willem de Kooning in which he claimed that Johns's dealer, Leo Castelli, could sell anything, even two cans of beer. However, it is this single lithograph which reveals Johns's project: a deceptively simple oeuvre of common iconographies expressing not the artist's emotional life but rather the impossibility of pure perception, a fleeting beauty of life found in and heightened by imperfections, and an insistence that the only knowable truth may be the impossibility of that truth.

While it is not my intention to develop similarities between experiences of Johns's constructed oeuvre and music, my own interest in his body of work begins with the potential imaginative space provided by both. I contend that the lack of concrete visual representation inherent to music is similar to the open visual system that Johns continues to construct. This openness relies on the audience to process limited visual clues that suggest but are not explicitly owned by the artist himself. I see now that it was the relationship between self-reflection and absence of

¹ *Painted Bronze (Ale Cans)*, 1960, painted bronze, 14 x 20.3 x 12.1, Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

explicit content inherent to most musical works and Johns's oeuvre that drew me first to the *Ale Cans* lithograph and is that which continues to inspire my confidence in the creative power of the visual object.

I. RHETORIC OF INCOHERENCE

“It is what you see. Do you mean what’s it based on? I’m not going to tell you.”²

“Sometimes I see it and then paint it. Other times I paint it and then see it. Both are impure situations, and I prefer neither.”³

Illustrations of his irony, circular reasoning and refusal to clearly respond to direct inquiry allow critics attempting to appropriate, dismiss, or celebrate the work of Jasper Johns to brush over a somewhat subtle yet obvious dimension of Johns’s work in favor of frustrated albeit sweeping finales. What I will argue, however, is that his effort to not “tell”⁴ is itself integral to Johns’s body of work. It is his rhetoric of inherent incoherence

² From Barbaralee Diamonstein Spielvogel, *Inside the Art World: Conversations with Barbaralee Diamonstein* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), pp. 114-120 and compiled by Kirk Varnedoe ed. Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews. Museum of Modern

³ *ibid.*

⁴ When an interviewer questioned Johns regarding his choice to not reveal particular references in a recent batch of works, he replied: “Because I got tired of people talking about things that I didn’t think they could see in my work – from some of the Grunewald tracings. It interested me that people would discuss something that I didn’t believe they could see until after they were told to see it. And then I thought, What would they have seen if they hadn’t been told about these things, because the same painting is there. And when I decided to work with this new configuration, I decided I wasn’t going to say what it was or where it had come from. One of the things that interested me was that I knew that I couldn’t see it without seeing it, seeing that, because I knew, and I knew that someone else wouldn’t know and wouldn’t see, and I wondered what the difference was in the way we would see it. And, of course, I’ll never know.” Varnedoe 260

combined with a performed publicly private persona are tools that help Johns form a solution to inadequately translating personal feelings and emotive states onto the canvas through the pure expression of brushstroke and color. He breaks from the performed psychological touch of the Abstract Expressionists because of this professed “failure”⁵ and finds a path on which to perform a sincere *unauthenticity* in painting; in doing so creates a body of work that can be read as a text independent of that feeling person behind his own skin. However, this does not connect his work to pure abstraction directly but rather delivers work enmeshed with audience-reflected surfaces, while excluding attempts for the sublime through physical experience of color and *tâche* with the painted canvas only to replace that content with a dense and mysterious iconography. He assumes the position of artist as maker/mediator/critic⁶.

⁵ This “failure” is perhaps suspect in itself. Evidence does not permit any conclusions but I would like to consider this an intellectual decision to break from a project of expression.

⁶ In her essay, “Jasper Johns: The Functions of Irony,” Rosalind Krauss addresses Johns’s distance: “Johns allows the epithet ‘critic’ to include himself. Or at least that part of himself no longer immersed in the process of working -- that aspect of the artist who is left with the products of his labor, only.[...] In quitting the realm of private engagement in which it was party of an unspoken colloquy, the work ends up as ‘statement’. The permanence of the finished work is then a signal for the death of the creative act through which it was formed. And this sense that the resolution, even if ‘successful’ inevitably brings failure, stems from a far more interesting level of irony than the one about the ‘blindness’ of the critic. It is a type of irony often called Romantic, in that it expressed the

Interviews with Johns provide concrete insight into what I contend is an easily overlooked albeit significant aspect of his oeuvre⁷. This discussion of the work of Jasper Johns will attempt to temporarily dismantle the effect of his rhetoric of inherent incoherence in order to understand his body of work not only as a self-conscious project based on artist-invention and reinvention/rethinking of the artist as auteur. The first part of this argument focuses a close reading and direct reflection on his artist's statement from 1959⁸ in relation to his publicly available body of work. Following this analysis of the way in which Johns's seemingly ambiguous discussion of his works actually supports a mode of coherence. His personal disinterest in clarity should not be interpreted as a belief the importance of such a convoluted response. Johns uses this lack of clarity, or ambiguity, as a tool to promote interdependence of space and the objects within it – including the viewer. According to Johns, his work should projects signs that, once explicitly defined or discussed by the

deep skepticism of 19th Century artists about the Classical canons of form, their sense that authenticity derived only from the speculative or imaginative act, and the inevitable fact that this was itself transitory."

⁷ Perhaps significantly overlooked for once aware one should probably try to forget. I owe a great debt to Fred Orton and his book, Figuring Jasper Johns, for its help solidifying crucial elements and simultaneously complicating my curiosity regarding Johns's project.

artist, would lose their potential for unlimited association in the viewer. In order to maintain the mystery of the oeuvre's incoherence, Johns creates works that intentionally block the viewer from the comforting knowledge of "getting it." Johns's rhetoric maintains an interest⁹ in his work for if he were explicit in his discussions of them the curtain would be pulled back to reveal that there was nothing to know to begin with – but while Johns would not fully dismiss this interpretation he would insist that looking is itself a worthy occupation and that above all else his works promote this.

Discussion of his first viewable series of works demonstrating the beginning of Johns's double *détournement* (external and internal) dominates this discussion as integral elements of the constructed oeuvre. These early paintings present an origin of what will become the reflection

⁹ "Johns slows our reading of the image by emphasizing detail and texture. The rich surfaces, complex layering, and repetition of the same images in different contexts suggest the overlapping of a continuous narrative. Johns's *passeiste* involvement with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism suggest that his role in American art is analogous to that of William Faulkner in literature. The two southerners were able to breathe new life into traditional forms (easel painting, the novel), thought to be nearing exhaustion, by emphasizing detail, texture, and complex interrelationships over long durations, thus slowing down the passage of time until it could be palpably experienced. Johns's attitude toward time was substantially different from that of the New York school artists, who prized spontaneity above all." Rose 49

and embodiment of his entire project. In short, it is easier to start at the beginning before his works become convoluted with iconography.

“Generally I am opposed to painting which is concerned with conceptions of simplicity.

Everything looks very busy to me.”¹⁰

In 1959, four years after producing his first flag, Johns releases an artist’s statement that provides the clearest expression of his consideration and approach to image-making. When discussed alongside the works themselves, this statement provides the most important primary document for the project at hand:

Three academic ideas which have been of interest to me are what a teacher of mine (speaking of Cézanne and Cubism) called “the rotating point of view” (Larry Rivers recently pointed to a black rectangle, two or three feet away from where he had been looking in a painting, and said “...like there’s something happening over there, too.”); Marcel Duchamp’s suggestion “to reach the Impossibility of sufficient visual memory to transfer from one like object to another the memory imprint”; and Leonardo’s idea (Therefore, O painter, do not surround your bodies with lines...) that the boundary of a body is neither a part of the enclosed body nor a part of the surrounding atmosphere.¹¹

He begins the statement with, “*Sometimes I see it and then I paint it.*”

Already this ambiguity “*Sometimes*” undermines our conception of the

¹⁰ Varnedoe 22

¹¹ Miller 22

definitive artist's statement – just as he will later undermine our conception of the simplicity of his paintings. To this he adds: "*Other times I paint it and then see it.*" With this Johns tells us that his process from conception to image is not based on a regular system – except in its faithful flexibility between these poles. The first stanza concludes with his insistence that "*both are impure situations*" and he "*prefers neither.*" From this line – the most curious third of these first lines – we might infer that in the first "situation," Johns relies on his vision to inspire/dictate what will appear on his canvas and in the second his imagination or subconscious seems to dominate while Johns splits himself from the process and only "*see[s] it*" once the image is complete. The "*it*" remains unclear. In the end, he "*prefer[s] neither.*" Because he offers only these two possibilities, we could assume that painting is not for a Johns a preferable or pleasurable process and also that he persists with this methodic duality without any conscious preference. In his selection of the imagination versus vision it is his subconscious (imagination, even) that decides the picture's fate – for Johns's himself has no rational preference. This ambiguity leaves his options clear of formal rule and provides that he depict images regardless of their origin, and to appropriate and associate

freely. He assimilates based on experience and imagination and, preferring neither, in his mind they are equal.

“At every point in nature there is something to see. My work contains similar possibilities for the changing focus of the eye.”

National flags might be products of nature – but the form itself is political, expressing stability and independence¹². It is in fact not related to what one might call Nature – or divine creation. A flag is, in fact, the antithesis of nature. Loaded, as it were, with political motivation and formal man-made ideas. Yet, like that divine Nature of the Romantics, Johns contends that his *“work contains similar possibilities for the changing focus of the eye.”*

Given some distance, Johns’s early work appears primarily iconographic. We see a flag - the American Flag, or targets, numbers, a map of the continental United States, stenciled letters, specific and various

¹² “By painting the flag Johns brings it down from the sky – the ordinary special background for our experience of looking at it – and locates it there in front of us in the museum, at eye level. None of the familiar experiences is possible if the flag is located in this eye-level space. As a rigid painting it is not soft, flowing in the breeze as a flag usually is. He lets us look at it, perhaps we should say stare at it, since it is a cold look instead of the reverence or respect of normal civic occasions. This normal civic occurrence of the flag designs our access to it as a society. Part of that access is a highly specific act of looking: looking up,, standing silent, with patriotic respect. Here in the painting is is this social access that is effaced far more than the simple image.” Fisher 321

everyday overlooked items. Upon closer inspection of his canvases, however, we notice layers. The surprising awareness of these layers in his encaustic paintings, like *flag*, and their further realization mysterious elements of his encaustic collage physically shift the viewer's focus. Once curiosity is sparked by slight irregularity of their surfaces, the viewer naturally approaches the canvases to further inspect the painter's inconsistency. This manipulation of intentional messiness is all over Johns's paintings and prints – though the latter tend to be slicker than his handmade works. The viewer is denied the simple iconographic subject of the painting; he must also – on his own – attempt a personal assimilation of everything that is presented in the picture and space surrounding: including the people and other objects all interacting there with it.

Johns goes on to isolate three “*academic ideas*” that somehow inform that work he makes. The first comes out of Cezanne and Cubism: “*the rotating point of view.*” This is an extreme version of the various foci, in 1959, that the viewer has the opportunity to experience in his work. To “*rotate a point of view*” Johns would have to do even more with his imagery – or perhaps very little depending on the circumstance. For *Flag*, a new

point of view was recreated in dirty white paint in his painting *White Flag*, also from 1955. This re-creation of the image rotated the viewer's perception not only of the American Flag but also of Johns's first painting depicting it. The original coloring of *Flag* persuades the viewer of its status as the original; from a distance its similarity to the popular conception of the American Flag enforces this belief in its authenticity. As viewers of his multiple flags we are deceived by its coloring and apparent similarities to its source. Once placed amongst other flags of varying coloration and scale, the viewer's conception of the "original" begins to fade and in that dissipation any secure memory of the authentic source becomes convoluted.¹³

Johns's take on the "rotating point of view" spreads to the entire gallery space in the first case and, further, to his works that include recurrent iconography. This new instantiation of perspective denies convincing perceptual depth on the picture plane as a tool for *trompe l'oeil*. Instead, Johns "rotates" his viewers' point of view to encourage their investigation of the medium (paint, encaustic) and ephemera of mass

¹³ It should be said that even outside of its original context – that is, within Johns's first show – this ambiguity remains. Johns affirms this with his reuse of flag (and other) iconography within subsequent paintings and prints.

culture (newspaper, assembly line products) that day-to-day cannot help but fail to inform or enrich our understanding of the onslaught of banal mass iconography.

Johns's second "*academic idea*" derives from Marcel Duchamp.¹⁴ "*To reach the Impossibility of sufficient visual memory to transfer from one like object to another the memory imprint.*" The effect of Johns's entire project would be limited if it were summarized by this statement alone. However, Duchamp's concept of the *memory imprint* adds a cohesive quality to what could otherwise appear to be a career of personal quotation and self-promotion. By invoking this *memory imprint* Johns allows himself to explore easy iconography at the service of the impossible. His iconographic references are confusing to the viewer who wants to remember and better understand what he is seeing based on what he has seen but the treatment of subject matter is confusing to the memory as each work possesses layers of activity built around its deceptively simple subject.

¹⁴ "When asked why he had quit painting, 'Duchamp had told the interviewer that it was 'because of dealers and money and various reasons. Largely moralistic reasons. And then he looked up and said, 'But you know, it wasn't like that. It's like you break a leg – you didn't mean to do it.' What Johns loved about this, I think, was Duchamp's denial of conscious intention as a ruling principle. It coincided with his own feeling that an artist does what he is helpless not to do." Tomkins 18

Admittedly, his system has provided a recognizable surface to his products for sale and Johns remains the highest paid living artist. In addition to the economic benefits of his self-branding, Johns's project of interdependence is acutely focused on an experimental enforcement of Duchamp's concept of the *memory imprint* inherent to object association and appropriation. The limits of the viewer's memory are revealed through Johns's manifestation of redundant iconography. When $x(f)$, $y(f)$, and $z(f)$ are presented together (where f represents the original referent) the viewer begins to forget the referent and, further, the details belonging to each altered instance of the referent. In a mass mediated culture, the referent disappears and ultimately it is the absence of the original referent that becomes Johns's subject.

Throughout his prolific career Johns will appropriate objects at will, set them with other objects, and then appropriate his own combinations of objects only to place them with other objects or object combinations. We begin to see this system of repetition particularly in his works of the mid-sixties following his sculptmetal/bronze sculptures and increased abstraction of the iconography first depicted in the mid-fifties. *Field Painting*, 1964, combines stenciled lettering, a few sculptmetal/bronze

pieces, and the warm palette and brushstrokes of his painting, *Map*, from 1961. *Field Painting* contains a variety of new appropriations of his own imagery and provides a loaded example of one of his first instances of a heightened distance from the memory imprint. This heightened distance will only increase as his iconography expands and his career as a relentless working artist endures.

Finally, Johns surprises us again in his statement by quoting Leonardo da Vinci and aligning himself with that of a historical genius *célèbre*: “*Therefore, O painter, do not surround your bodies with lines...*” His association with Leonardo relates to physical boundaries, namely that this mediation between things, this expression of difference is neither a part of “*what is enclosed*” nor “*part of the surrounding atmosphere.*” It is something else altogether – independent of the objects separated and yet defined by them. Near the end of his statement Johns personally rejects the notion of “simplicity” in painting and insists that his work deals with the creation of new associations independent from the artist’s emotional personal expression. Johns’s paintings act as mediator between his appropriation and assimilation while the artist created through his personal mythologizing uses his ambiguity to reject supposed simplicity of banal

object combination. Johns concludes his statement professing that from his point of view *"everything looks very busy."* Simplicity is the antithesis of his project that, as we have discovered from a close reading of his statement, promotes the creative associations and rotating points of view directed but not dictated by his mediation. In the end, the seeming lack of coherence, or ambiguity, is his most effective tool to investigate interdependence and the increasingly heightened mediatization of experience.

Regardless of Johns's motivations, in order to really grasp his larger project, one must understand Johns presents us with two versions of Jasper Johns, namely the artist(persona) and the man(maker) who consciously organizes and edits himself from the publicly presented version. What is distinctively Johnsian in his insistence is this iconography that is completely separate of the feelings and emotions of the man, Jasper Johns. In interviews his rhetoric of inherent incoherence – that is, his insistence that the iconography and paintings themselves should be read as a text all to themselves which *"suggest things which are, rather than in judgments"* and have an inherent ontology owing to their imitation and quoting of themselves – tends to lead the interviewer on the path to find

out how he makes what he makes rather than towards his motivation and theory behind the making¹⁵. Questions of this sort are those that receive answers contributing to Johns's reputation of being "difficult to access"¹⁶ and yet unexpected answers are there if we want to find them. Johns's obtuse interview style – while frustrating at times for the critic in search of a meaning that is not to be had – simply reinforces the performed mystery of his oeuvre. In response to a question from David Sylvester, Johns replies that he is "not interested in any particular mood. Mentally [his] preference would be the mood of keeping your eyes open and looking, without any focusing, without any constricted viewpoint."¹⁷

Imitation, repetition, and cadence pull his body of work inwards onto itself because of Johns's insistence on their interdependence as opposed to connections with the man(maker)'s artist(persona). This cohesion does not connect with Johns the maker's personal feeling and so he presents them publicly in interviews as inherently incoherent from his

¹⁵ In fact, interviewers love to ask him about his involvement with printmaking and its processes. This aspect of his work supports our conversation of inherent incoherence if only if the objectness of a print and its relationship to multiplicity and history of imitation.

¹⁶ Varnedoe 15

¹⁷ Varnedoe 15

life as a man(maker). That is, his work does not cohere to his life – the two are incoherent, they don't stick and yet preoccupations with this disconnect and his particularly terse way of presenting it tend to dominate any discussion of his work. He is frequently quoted with this affirmation of incoherence:

I have attempted to develop my thinking in such a way that the work I've done is not me – not to confuse my feelings with what I produce. I didn't want my work to be an expression of my feelings. Abstract Expressionism was so lively – my personal identity and painting were more or less the same, and I tried to operate the same way. But I found that I couldn't do anything that would be identical with my feelings. So I worked in such a way that I could say that it's not me. That accounts for the separation.¹⁸

Johns achieves a kind of ironic authenticity from appropriated objects and imagery. We expect an artist's work to be authentic: either authentic to the artist or authentic in its connection with the artist. However Johns, and Pop artists generally, present the viewer with several challenges one of which is the question of the painting's object-hood. The viewer asks, is his *Flag* actually a flag? Is the unopened can full of fluid or are they solid forms? These questions invite the viewer to reconsider the objects presented phenomenologically; indeed, Johns's flag is authentic in

¹⁸Raynor, Vivian. "Jasper Johns 'I Have Attempted to Develop My Thinking in Such a Way that the Work I've Done is Not Me.'" *Artnews* 72 (March 1973): 20-22

itself since optical foolery is never his aim and indeed upon close inspection the viewer will realize that his painting manner is never precise. *Painted Bronze (Ballantine Ale)* of 1960 demonstrates this imprecision with their painted letters which from a distance may appear to resemble a printed label but upon closer examination we find that it is not a real pair of ale cans but in fact a bronze cast with enamel paint.

Flag's thick encaustic along with collaged elements of newspaper and paint do not attempt to convince the viewer that they are looking at a sheet of cloth that should be displayed with prominence. Instead, we see a declaration of independence from that which came before, namely, Abstract Expressionism. The wax of the encaustic literally stops his brushstroke dead in its path and preserves the activity – embalms it, if you will. He transmits no translation of his physical expression to the viewer and with that creates an object that cannot be read as anything but a text unto itself. Indeed, we keep looking at his work because of the mystery that cannot be covered by the umbrella of Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art.

Johns combines useful elements of both movements, namely the artist's performance of his works as inseparable from the works

themselves along with popular mass imagery, and adds those elements to an interdependent crew of iconography, objects and their existence as objects separate from his emotive world. Along with this declaration of independence we also find interdependence as the first *Flag* is exhibited with several other flags. Each is treated in a slightly different manner (white flag, traditionally colored flag, black flag, etc.) and so Johns has created a unique text for each, rife with relation and interdependence but completely detached from the artist's emotional expression.

The effect of this ambiguous interdependence is a sense of Johns's seemingly crackable code – but the critic who attempts to employ such a method is doomed for failure for there is no explicit crack nor code to be discovered¹⁹. Calvin Tomkins's, in his 2008 book, The Lives of Artists, addresses Johns's seemingly codified construction:

This might suggest that the artist is indeed playing games with his viewers, but to think that, you would have to believe in the kind of intentional working process that he has always made clear he does not follow. For Johns, as for most of the great modern artists, a picture is not a statement, nor does it emerge from a preconceived plan. Every

¹⁹ "His current drawings and paintings seem increasingly based on a code that demands to be broken but to which he alone holds the key.' But why should Johns be denied the use of unexplained images? The mysterious, unidentifiable shape near the center of Matisse's *The Moroccans* does not keep it from being considered one of the greatest pictures in the Museum of Modern Art." Kimmelman 1

brushstroke, even the first, is a response to something that has occurred before, on the canvas or in the artists mind or memory, and will influence what happens next. Johns would like viewers to construct their own meanings from his pictures.²⁰

Johns's insistence upon not having an "intentional working process" should not be confused with the fact that Johns has obviously constructing an oeuvre as discursive space. Indeed, Johns's rhetoric of inherent incoherence through these interviews is insistent that his work depends upon no explicit meaning but he remains as auteur of this growing field of mystery. In fact, Johns has no sense of an endpoint - he does not set out to make an oeuvre with concrete meaning only interchangeable variables. Because he has no endpoint, the project itself remains mysterious and interesting for Johns himself. Certainly if the interest were gone he would choose another path rather than the one he has consistently developed through various media for the last fifty years. In addition to pleasure from creation, Johns has been supported generously by collectors, an important fact that, as he has said, has allowed him to be "more obstinate."²¹

²⁰ Tomkins 170

²¹ "That is not to say that he doesn't appreciate his success. 'I've been very fortunate to have a large enough number of people interested in my work over a long time,' he said to

II. DOUBLE JOHNS

“Even if one were to define style as the manner of our appearing, this by no means necessarily entails an opposition between a style that one assumes and one’s “true” being. In fact, such a disjunction is extremely rare. In almost every case, our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face.”²²

“Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself; it is a voluntary obliteration of the self that does not require representation in books because it takes place in the everyday existence of the writer. Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of its author.”²³

If Johns has a style it can only be called a cold and depersonalized style, a soul-less style that rejects all Romantic notions of artist as emotive creator²⁴. It is this lack of personal style serving to intensify the viewer’s inability to identify with the artist himself via Johns’s projection of a negative self. 1985-1986, when Johns attempts his autobiographical

me. ‘The generous reception it’s had has allowed me to be much more’ – a pause- ‘free in my decisions. More obstinate. I feel I have benefited from the kind attention I’ve had, rather than being hampered by it [...] ‘In fact, I think I’ve been treated so well that I’m overly comfortable.’” Tomkins 174

²² Sontag 18

²³ Foucault 117

²⁴ “...the writing of our day has freed itself from the necessity of ‘expression’; it only refers to itself, yet it is not restricted to the confines of interiority. On the contrary, we recognize it in its exterior deployment. This reversal transforms writing into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier. Moreover, it implies an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates. Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. Thus, the essential basis of this writing is not the exalted emotions related to the act of composition of the insertion of a subject into language. Rather, it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears.” Foucault 124

Seasons paintings and later in 1990 with the prints edition of the same name, the viewer is once again confronted by a negative self and the artist's lack of style despite the deceptively autobiographical nature of the works. Signifiers of various past paintings and biographical details appear as the relatively brightly colored subject matter of the series, obscuring of what should be the subject of the painting – the shadowy figure of the artist himself. Even in an autobiographical work, Johns performs his absence²⁵. He is both there and not there as depicted by his *Seasons* portraits resembling a homicide chalk outline more than a living being.

The Johns that is presented is a Johns which is not there – a non-presence which is present in all of the works; what *is* there are remnants of his past works, relics of Johns's actual biographical past that with various levels of difficulty can be connected to proper referents, and just another

²⁵ While Foucault speaks specifically of the novel in this case, he will go on to say that his author-function theory should not be limited to creators of literature but could perhaps with further analysis be applied to all creative types, including painters. "It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a "second self" whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the "author-function" arises out of their scission – in the division and distance of the two." Foucault 129.

slick surface for the promotion of his context as true content: the canned ages of man. It is Johns's shadow, being both absent and ubiquitous, which seals any semblance of personality or style away from the viewer's perception. In the absence of style, what remains for the viewer is context and treatment of media in a system that he leaves open with potential fodder for the viewer's projection of his/her own associations, personality, and style. Jasper Johns is present seemingly in name only. His methodology leaves us with this and a body of work that anticipates acknowledgment of his construction of it as a work unto itself. This conclusion might be a possibility if the viewer can get over his/her lingering Romantic notions to survive the fatigue and boredom which ensues with comprehensive examination of his oeuvre.

Responding to Rauschenberg's December 2007 show of 1954 – 1964's combines: 'My first thought was that it was wonderful,' Johns said.

Next thought was that the unfortunate thing about those early works is that they take on a quality of being relics. Originally, they were fresh, immediate, not precious – things apt to be overlooked, picked up here and there, like a minute ago. Maybe that's not important; maybe all work goes through this kind of thing.²⁶

²⁶ Tomkins 184

In his attempt to produce a soul-less and mysterious oeuvre, Johns must negate his own persona, perpetuate a peripheral discourse of incoherence, and maintain a discursive²⁷ field of iconographic referents. With this negation of his voice²⁸ within the context of oeuvre as site, Johns attempts to sustain the viewer's subjective experience. With Rauschenberg's death Johns appears to have doubts concerning the ability of a body of work to maintain its provocative potential. It should be noted that Rauschenberg always promoted the compression of art and life - life including that of the artist in conjunction with viewers of his work – in a

²⁷ An elaborated discussion of Johns's "discursive field" occurs in the third section of this study, *Oeuvre as Context*. I use the term "discursive" to describe Johns's oeuvre of interrelated symbols. Because Johns is able to separate himself from expressivity through those symbols via his rhetoric of inherent incoherence and embrace of the author-function (as opposed to supposing a direct emotional connection to his art objects), the oeuvre becomes an independent site of discourse. While the painter's name is connected to these works, that name, "Jasper Johns," becomes a symbol itself. Johns highlights this symbolic disconnect repeatedly through the stenciling (rather than hand-signing) of his own name. In "What is an Author," Foucault describes the author as symbol: "[...] an author's name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement, or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others. A name also establishes different forms of relationships among texts...the fact that a number of texts were attached to a single name implies that relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization were established among them." Foucault 123

²⁸ "What is left as always is the performative voice: Johns creating, patiently, this scenario of negation. For the pictures are extremely beautiful; and they convey an extraordinary sense of the autonomy of the visual. The autonomy of the voice is the ironist's last source of value." Krauss 98-99

way that Johns never embraces. Rauschenberg's own autobiographical piece, *Autobiography* (1967), is a perfect example of this as he uses his own biographical sketch, physical measurements, and x-ray of his own body to create a compressed visual experience of himself in a three-part life-sized triptych. Rauschenberg's *Autobiography* is crafted and articulated for the viewer's experience of it while Johns's autobiographical *Seasons* is metaphorical and his body is in shadow. The potential success of Johns's mysterious opacity lay in his negation of himself that encourages the viewer's subjective experience of his works; Johns's diverse collection of paintings, assemblages, sculptures, drawings, and prints reside and communicate from within their oeuvre as relational field. Regardless of a final reveal upon his death, Johns's oeuvre may maintain its immediacy and relevance simply due to this construction of a mysterious oeuvre as an open site.

In his early work, Johns's paintings allowed for a more limited exploration of vision than that which would be presented following the introduction of lithography to his oeuvre in the 1960s. This medium would inject a high dose of experimentation into his method and elaboration of vision within his growing body of work. Tatyana

Grossman, a founder of United Limited Artist Editions, became a close friend who encouraged Johns and other artists and poets of the time to visit and collaborate at her studio on Long Island. If at first Johns was burdened by transporting the cumbersome lithography stones, advancements in aluminum plate lithography (a much lighter and easily transportable matrix) freed him of that burden so Johns was free to work and rework plates on his own schedule and from his own studio.²⁹

Traditionally painters have used prints to provide copies of their works for mass consumption – both for exposure and to create additional income. When lithography was first introduced near the turn of the twentieth century the medium allowed for a more painterly and direct approach to the painter’s prior tradition of employing engravers to recreate their works on metal plates for the etching press. Rather than translating the painter’s mark abstractly in lines, crosshatch, and tones (as was necessary with the etching process), with lithography one can create a product with greater resemblance to the painting it seeks to imitate. On a

²⁹ Prints would become so enmeshed in Johns’s oeuvre that he would eventually employ John Lund full time as his personal master printer; as of 2009 Lund was still employed by Johns – indication that printmaking has become integral to Johns’s working method and his oeuvre.

lithographic stone, the artist or technician is able to use fluids closely resembling the viscosity of paint that, once processed and printed, translate the painters brushstrokes onto the paper being printed³⁰. Johns takes advantage of the replication of these brushstroke in the same way that he ironically uses the Abstract Expressionist painter's *tâche* – that is to say, ironically and for his own means. Like the frozen brushstroke of the encaustically painted mark, fluids used to make a mark in lithography can similarly freeze the painted mark and even allow for editing which is impossible with paint on a canvas. In an interview from 1965 Johns speaks of this new technique:

In terms of images, lithography is a different way of presenting an image. Once the image is established on the plate, then you still have the possibility of altering it by how it's printed, on what paper, in what colors, with what pressure. You could take one stone and print it in twenty different ways, if you wanted to, and get completely different effects.³¹

Just as he parodies the tradition of representative and emotive painting with his painterly assemblage works, Johns exploits lithography for his own means. Instead of embracing lithography's ability to recreate

³⁰ Conte crayons are also a popular resist for the lithographic stone; once the stone has been processed the resulting print retains mark of the artist's *tâche*, the looseness or tightness of his stroke, and the pressure that he used to apply it.

³¹ Johns quoted in Varnadoe 125

painterly representations he employs the technique to explore various permutations of the iconography he had already begun to develop in paint. While editions of his prints certainly provided lucrative benefits for Johns, he seems to use lithography for experimentation rather than for personal gain.

When discussing the medium Johns expounds upon the benefits of unlimited reworking of an image to the extent that he is not bound by the permanence of a mark on a canvas and can even layer individual printing plates on top of one another to create a single image. As with his assemblage, paintings and drawings, Johns keeps himself busy working through multiple prints at a time – a process made possible by the advent of aluminum plate lithography and collaborations with printing studios and his own master printer, John Lund. With the support of collaborating technicians, Johns is free to focus exploring the visual dimensions of his work:

Usually someone is working at printing one of the prints and at the same time I'm working on another stone. That's the way I try to work at any rate. In the map lithograph, I was in South Carolina and I asked Tanya [of ULAE] to send me some aluminum plates. I had never worked on plates, I had always worked on stones before. I made one drawing of the map. In printing it, I decided I didn't like it very much, and remembered an idea of John Cage's that if something wasn't very pleasant once, then you should repeat it and perhaps it would become more interesting; then if that wasn't interesting, repeat it again. I repeated the map drawing twice, and I found it less interesting than once. So then I made another stone, and overprinted these two prints. You never know

exactly what a print is going to look like until it's printed, and then there is the possibility of changing; you can print it in any color, and generally I think in terms of black and white.³²

Notably, Johns never mentions the end result in this quotation (and will not as the interview continues) for it is the process of exploring various permutations of images that is of utmost importance to him. Lithography enhances Johns's ability to work on his "busy" vision and the collaboration and process involved in the medium allows for a greater distance and power of manipulation than advanced painting. John's personal touch is also adulterated in the printing process. The aura of expressive marks disappear tenfold when the piece created is neither unique (due to replication through editions) nor unique as a painted relic with the artist's direct *tâche*. The resulting paper image from the lithographic process belongs to both the artist *and* the technician(s) responsible for processing and printing Johns's marked matrix³³. He

³² Varnedoe 125

³³ "I suppose painting and printing contribute to each other in largely unnoticed ways. That the print is the reverse of the image drawn on the stone must impress even novice printmakers. In the shop, one is always conscious of these mirror images, and this awareness has influenced my paintings in which images are sometimes mirrored or deliberately reversed. The procedures of painting and printing are different, part of the life of any painting being in the weight of the paint, its unique thickness of thinness. Printmaking is more indirect and more social. Painting is an isolated activity for me, but printmaking involves and requires the presence of other people to accomplish the work. You want them to be pleased with what they are doing, so there are needs of economy."

employs a team of “someone’s” who deal with the production while he develops new images and is for the most part absent from the creation of the end product bearing his signature.

Results of his printmaking process may suggest traces of a Johnsian painterly style; in so much that they resemble, use the same iconography, and sometimes, as with his *Ale Cans* lithograph, attempt to recreate a previous work; but it is the artist’s personal touch which is sacrificed by lithography and other printmaking methods he will eventually employ. Lithography supports Johns’s construction of a discursive oeuvre due to the ease of play when making images on the printing matrix³⁴ and the personal distance collaborative process provides; the result of this freedom has the effect of obscuring traces of the artist’s presence. Because Johns’s emotive life is slightly removed from the aesthetic object, the

Johns quoted in Varnedoe (1997) from “Jasper Johns,” pp. 40 – 47 in Tate: The Art Magazine no.1, London: 1993

³⁴ “This is how Johns often works. He makes a painting, and afterward (rarely before) he may make any number of drawings and/or graphic works in which different aspects of the painting are added to, omitted, or altered. Prints are as important to his working process as drawings; they allow him to explore the endless possibilities he is able to find in any visual motif. ‘I prefer work that appears to come out of a changing focus,’ he said in a 1964 interview, ‘not just one relationship or even a number of them but constantly changing and shifting relationships to things in terms of focus.’ This sense of a shifting focus is one of the elements he responds to in the work of Cezanne, whose ‘synesthetic quality,’ as he once remarked, ‘makes looking equivalent to touching.’” Tomkins 180

audience is left to focus more on his/her response to the imagery presented, the imagery's relationship to other those in other works, and the process involved in making these works. He seems to do everything in his power via interviews and selected iconography to direct the viewer away from questioning the artist's intention or explicit meaning; and yet, those questions remain. Johns has always insisted that the works "are not [him]" and with the addition of printmaking (and indirect stenciling, appending found items, employing surrogate *tâche*-makers like the rulers, arms, and sticks from the *Device* works) Johns's private persona is able to achieve significant obfuscation. The viewer is accosted by the recurrence imagery in various media and is left to focus on its treatment and their own reception.

To better understand Johns's man(maker)/artist(persona) split and how it relates to his oeuvre as context, Lionel Trilling's lecture on *Sincerity and Authenticity* lends a useful discussion of self-expression and the auteur. Trilling identifies schizophrenia and madness as "the state of imagination through which the individual escapes his bondage to social institutions and to the democratic form of reason which is established in

science and, indeed, in language itself³⁵." We perhaps expect autobiography from an artist or at least clues of that autobiography because it is trusted. Johns does not let us assume that his iconography relates to anything but the images that came before and after and the world that we all inhabit. Johns's hand is only revealed in his selection and conscious manifestation of iconography. Trilling notes that autobiography forces the author's³⁶ authenticity upon the viewer with the

³⁵ I wanted to be an artist since I was a child, but didn't see any evidence that I was one. I realized that, if I were to be an artist, I had to be myself. It was a revelation. I tried to eliminate aspects that resembled other people's work and to establish what I was and could think and do. My concern was to use marks that anyone could make. I was interested in their literalness – marks that are perceived as nonexpressive and do not tell you about something larger, yet are connected to what is real. And the perception of 'thingness' – if something is made of something else, what do you see? The one something or the other something, or a relationship between the two? I was pursuing my own education in this realm. I later came to believe there are no literal qualities to anything – everything is unstable." Varmedoe 258

³⁶ Literary criticism that I utilize – like that of Trilling and Foucault – offer the theoretical tools for the discussion of Johns's oeuvre as context and his methodology. At times these theorists use the term "author" and in order to mesh their theories with my own, I will adapt the term in reference to Johns as well. At the end of "What is an Author," Foucault speaks of the limitations of discussing the author-function only in relation to literary works and justifies our application of it here: "I am aware that until now I have kept my subject within unjustifiable limits; I should also have spoken of the 'author-function' in painting, music, technical fields, and so forth. Admitting that my analysis is restricted to the domain of discourse, it seems that I have given the term 'author' an excessively narrow meaning. I have discussed the author only in the limited sense of a person to whom the production of a text, a book, or a work can be legitimately attributed. However, it is obvious that even within the realm of discourse a person can be the author of much more than a book – of a theory, for instance, of a tradition or a discipline within which new books and authors can proliferate. For convenience, we could say that such authors occupy a 'transdiscursive' position." Foucault 131

“conclusion that the writer cannot in any respect be false to any man because he has been true to himself, as he was and is,” but Johns does not permit this kind of autobiography. We expect that he is deceiving us because we are unable to collapse the man(maker) with what has been made. However, it is in his privacy (and perhaps, self-deception) that Johns is truly authentic and by resisting, nay refusing, “his impulse to reveal his self, to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted,” Johns is able to “[stand] outside or above his own personality.” Due to the vastness of his oeuvre and widespread acclaim, the viewer assumes that the painter alone secures the secret to his oeuvre. He uses this performed objectivity to produce a body of work that appears sincere – that is, the audience will ideally just look and wonder at its mysteries without any interference from the collapse of the man(maker) with his imagination and intellect.

Trilling continues, “It does not confirm our characteristic modern intuition...of the interplay and resolution of contradictions. [...] A work of art informed by so claustral a view might well distress our minds, might well give rise to anxiety. And not least because we understand it to be saying that even the reality of the reader himself is not, as he might wish

to think, what it may become, but ineluctably what it is now. [...] But when its first uneasiness has been accommodated, it can be seen to have in it a curious power of comfort." While Austen's work is concerned with pragmatism, it is her sincerity and integrity to her project that is in the end "a curious power of comfort." Similarly, with Johns, his effort is sincere. Even when it seems to deceive us with imitation of real objects, Johns reveals his part in its production. Johns is in fact sincere in his pseudo-deception if only because he appears to not deceive himself.

Along with his interview rhetoric and displaced authorship via printmaking, this performed sincerity of production works as one of Johns's solutions to self-expression. He can express his intellect and imagination in his work while separating his feeling from it – a methodology which will help perpetuate the mysteries of its coherence. John's doubleness (through this self-splitting) supports his insistence upon a lack of knowing and thus the impossibility of knowing concrete truth in the world.

III. OEUVRE AS CONTEXT

“There is a kind of ...hesitation, or feedback, in my work that would give it the sense of heaviness rather than lightness. It doesn't just move forward gracefully [...but] I think anyone would prefer to move ahead in a cheerful way, without hesitation. One would like to have a life that caused no confusion [...] the basic question here is whether you think life is a wonderful condition, or not. I don't particularly.”³⁷

Unlike his predecessors, the coherence of Johns's oeuvre is rooted in contextual discourse rather than an evocative style; Johns aims to project an absent personality. He denies the viewer access to his private persona by providing no personality upon his canvas. Works from an artist's oeuvre are recognizable based on a particular manner of painting – a certain touch to the canvas, the way colors are put together, the way the faces of figures are formed, through the depiction of particular historical and religious, etc. – and while some of these formal tools are certainly available for critics of Johns, his style (if we can even call it that) relates more to the absence of a style. His oeuvre seems to belong to a “Jasper Johns” in name alone not spirit for his audience is left with no evidence of the artist aside from the manipulation and presentation of common iconographies and an ironic treatment of various media. Even his choice

³⁷ Johns quoted in Tomkins 117

of subject matter and color palette are generic as he presents everyday symbols and mostly primary prefabricated colors.

To support his construction of an open system, Johns creates both a constructed private public persona and rhetoric of inherent incoherence around the work itself – a body of work in which the viewer discovers the toils of a mind aiming not for resolve but process. Johns has continued to construct his discursive oeuvre in such a way that his body of work remains an open system.

The act of reading an artist's body of work as context seems at first particularly historical and anti-theoretical as though it feeds into assumptions regarding a Romantic artistic style; with this study however I will conclude that Johns's construction of his oeuvre becomes not only an organic parody of and bridge between his Abstract Expressionist cousins and the postmodernisms to follow but – perhaps more importantly – a successful to the problem of reinvigorating the art object with creative potential. I assume a conscious auteur with the ability to coherently construct a readable style and direct the viewer through his convoluted

system referents³⁸; while simultaneously suggesting that the artist's privileging of method versus content explicitly conveyed. As a precursor to the wave of conceptual art in the late nineteen sixties and early seventies, Johns begins his knowable body of work³⁹ by employing a method of iconographic recurrence; he will state that this is a way of exploring the act of vision itself but his personal exploration of vision creates a recognizably discursive oeuvre from the offset. The individual works include common imagery that for their viewers is always inseparable from the world from which they are drawn; while in tandem with Johns's growing oeuvre, the works are never resolved for in their third position that can be understood as the combination of these two contexts: the real world and Johns's oeuvre.

³⁸ I contend that Johns is a conscious author of his text but will not perpetuate the assumption that he has consciously attempted to create a particular meaning from that construction. What is important is the effect of that open system on viewers – namely the insistence that the auteur should direct but not dictate such an effect.

³⁹ Speaking of Johns's work prior to his first solo show: "Most of the work Johns had done up to this point no longer exists; he destroyed it in 1954. Some years ago, Johns told me that his work before then 'was mainly negative, concerned with not doing anything that had been done before,' but last summer he said he couldn't remember what it was like." Tomkins 176 One wonders how and when Johns decided to destroy all of his work prior to his Flag painting of 1953 since the work he describes as "not doing anything that had been done before" relates to the confrontational spirit of his early work and permeates the spirit of his entire oeuvre.

In addition to his works' "curious comfort," acknowledgment and temporary dismantling of his rhetoric provides an opportunity to glimpse at an overlooked dimension of Johns's body of work and that this rhetoric, while potentially distracting, actually allows the viewer to trust his works in a way that might seem counterintuitive. The entire oeuvre creates a context within which individual works must be read – it is a text that elaborates and enriches while challenging the notion of a clean gestalt by pointing to the impossibility of concrete and pure understanding or knowing.

With his work, Johns promotes the idea that the mind reflects not with true understanding but instantaneous and incomplete bursts of memory. One cannot help but make abstract assumptions but in his work Johns reminds us that we should not take this assumption for granted lest we slip on the seemingly bristled ground beneath us. It is impossible for a mind to wrap itself around Johns's oeuvre completely for the oeuvre itself is not yet complete – but this is not unique to Johns's body of work. What *is* unique is his handling of the oeuvre; that is, it is Johns's deliberate manipulation and management of his viewable body of work that helps

the oeuvre maintain its opacity. Upon his death⁴⁰ (if his entire oeuvre is released to the public) historians will either discover/create an internal structure for Johns's oeuvre or perhaps the curtain pulled-back will reveal otherwise – that his newly transparent construction was in fact always a sincere performance of *inauthenticity*.

As a mixed media site, Johns's oeuvre has not spread to time based works such as film, video, dance, or kinetic sculpture but his works often suggest time and movement – as in the swinging gesture found in paintings like *Device Circle* (1959), *Fool's House* (1961-62), and *Good Time Charlie* (1961). However, the works do not allow for the viewer's disengagement since they do not move on their own and as such require

⁴⁰ "Assuming that we are dealing with an author, is everything he wrote and said, everything he left behind, to be included in his work? This problem is both theoretical and practical...where do we draw the line? Certainly, everything must be published, but can we agree on what 'everything' means? We will, of course, include everything that [the artist] himself published, along with the drafts of his works, his plans for aphorisms, his marginal notations and corrections. But what if, in a notebook filled with aphorisms, we find a reference, a reminder of an appointment, an address, or a laundry bill, should this be included in his works? Why not? These practical considerations are endless once we consider how a work can be extracted from the millions of traces left by an individual after his death. Plainly, we lack a theory to encompass the questions generated by a work and the empirical activity of those who naively undertake the publication of the complete works of an author often suffers from the absence of this framework...Such questions only begin to suggest the range of our difficulties, and, if some have found it convenient to bypass the individuality of the writer or his status as an author to concentrate on a work, they have failed to appreciate the equally problematic nature of the word 'work' and the unity it designates." Foucault 119

the viewer's active participation as translator of the painter's past activity on the canvas. As with his recurrent iconography, the suggestion of time is another theme that runs throughout Johns's cohesive body of work. Johns's paintings with kinetic gestures point to the activity of making a painting but parody expression-bound *tâche* of the Abstract Expressionist and action painters because of his inclusion of objects such as a broom, ruler, arm cast, and stick (rather than an expressive self) making the gesture of a past mark depicted on his canvas. The painter himself is thus separated from such a gesture and is situated as the objective director rather than emotive force behind them.

His expansion to mixed media aided in the development of that site as his oeuvre includes not only drawings, painting, sculpture, and, from the 1960s forward, prints. To address this aspect of his oeuvre I utilize his *Target with Plaster Casts* from 1955 as a paradigmatic example of his mixed media assemblage and will then move into a discussion of how the addition of printmaking to the oeuvre adds an additional dimension to the field. An early and compressed example of this multimedia work is evident in a work like *Target with Plaster Casts*; the painting (if one can call it that) confronts the viewer with encaustic collage of a target in primary

colors (with the target's bands visually separated with hard seemingly molded edges), casts of various body parts set within interactive boxes⁴¹ which are for the most part painted in decidedly non-primary colors (purple, light blue, orange, pink, and black make an appearance), and the confusing construction of a seemingly modernist flat painting acting simultaneously as a solid object due to the canvas's wooden bottom lip and boxed apparatus atop. In this single early work Johns has already confused the boundaries between media and, significantly, how the viewer should respond to the work.

What meaning should be drawn from the assemblage? The painting provides little in the way of explication. If when viewing the work one assumes that the boxed casts at the top could be closed, then they are for the viewer both open and closed at the same time; the viewer must consider them both hidden and revealed. If the target itself suggests a sort of shooting gallery, why do the only objects available for the shooter's aim sit above the marked target? The coloring of the target itself is deceptive for the red color – the hottest and most vibrant of the

⁴¹ Ironically, these boxes are not truly interactive for as we know Johns's paintings as treated by museums must not be touched and the work is usually displayed with the box flaps static and open.

composition – also sits outside the proposed focal point; blue happens to be the color of the actual target point and the viewer may be distracted from that point by the pulsing complementary yellow coloring the adjacent ring. In this painting Johns appears to encourage the viewer to recognize everything but the primary subject of the painting: the target.

Johns manipulation of vision in *Target With Plaster Casts* can be interpreted as his effective early effort to distract the viewer from the literal subject of his painting – a project which will only become more obvious as he encourages the viewer to be bored by his iconography through their overwhelming recurrence in his body of work. In fact, the viewer is already accustomed to most of his subject matter as they feed primarily from signs, symbols, and the banal vision of daily life: flags, targets, numbers, household items, shoes, body parts. The viewer will never be surprised by the subjects that Johns chooses but rather is seduced by his treatment of them within the boundaries of his matrices and beyond as members of the collective oeuvre. After 1955, the painted target from *Target with Plaster Casts* (like the hidden/disclosed plaster casts which sit above that canvas) is both absorbed and independent from the works using the target sign that follow. Johns utilizes recurrent

iconography so frequently that the viewer cannot escape their repetition and the painted icon is never free from its conversation with other canvases⁴².

The reader will note that Johns never attempts to fool the viewer into believing that what he has painted is naturalistic – even at his most naturalistic, Johns reminds the viewer that upon close inspection even works which resemble the real world project various reflections, absorptions, and communications of the world around and within – including the viewer himself. While Johns’s oeuvre exists as a discursive site, free from expressivity of its author, its “intrinsic and internal relationships”⁴³ are not completely free from external referents. Because Johns’s work includes everyday forms, symbols, and (not to be forgotten) recurrent iconography from canvas to print and sculpture alike, he allows the viewer’s immediate experience and memory of them as a part of the work itself. As such, the system remains open and organically formed.

⁴² If the viewer happens to miss the recurrent iconography due to viewing only a single work or a few disparate works which do not happen to overlap, he will still recognize the banality of the imagery presented – Johns shows us no new subject matter but rather a creative treatment of the visual world.

⁴³ “...and further that criticism should concern itself with the structures of a work, its architectonic forms, which are studied for their intrinsic and internal relationships.” Foucault 118

His project highlights the impossibility of examining of the work of art as an independent form as the power inherent to his discursive oeuvre is Johns's maintenance of its mystery – which he perpetuates through the suggestion of interrelation and preconceived internal structure. Even if one were to index and the entire oeuvre in order to reveal internal structures, the popular forms and viewer(s) would have to be included as part of that structure – an addition which would open the oeuvre to the outside world thus deeming the analysis moot.

Through his disconnect as expressive author of these works the viewer is able to participate and take ownership in the pieces viewed. As Johns (the man) is absorbed by the symbol “Jasper Johns,” the viewer finds it challenging (if not impossible) to identify the artist's personality and style. In fact, the artist cannot be identified because he has removed all explicit emotive traces – an absence which opens the oeuvre to the viewer's projection of his/her experience of it. Johns insists that above all his works are representative of vision, “busy” vision, a field of vision in which everything is connected through unknowable threads. His discursive oeuvre provides a site for fleeting glimpses of those threads.

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