

Jasper Johns *An Allegory of Painting, 1955 – 1965*



National Gallery of Art, Washington | January 28 – April 29, 2007

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1 *Target with Four Faces*, 1955

THIS EXHIBITION CONCERNS THE FIRST decade of the work of Jasper Johns (b. 1930). It is not, however, a survey of Johns' work during the period between 1955 and 1965. Indeed, the exhibition is partly motivated by the fact that Johns' career is so familiar that the character of the work has been obscured by our habits of seeing and thinking about it as a whole. The deep significance of Johns' art suggests that an effort at de-familiarization might be useful.

Within Johns' first decade of work lies an explicit narrative concerning the fate of painting after the post–World War II rise and apotheosis of large-scale abstraction in the hands of New York School artists, such as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, and the ostensible demise of figuration. This “narrative” is plotted by cues within the work. Specifically, it takes the form of an unfolding relationship of four particular motifs: the target; the “device” (the pivoted slat used to scrape paint); the stenciled naming of colors; and the cast or imprint of the body.

It would be false to claim that Johns' representation of this development is self-conscious and programmatic. Nonetheless, the relationship of motifs remains quite clear: over the course of ten years the four motifs appear alone or together in various combinations to the exclusion of almost all other familiar Johnsian images (such as the flag and the number). The target, a banded image drawn with a compass, is replaced by the compass itself, which is left attached to the canvas, where it is used to inscribe or scrape a circle; the mechanical device is joined in a number of works to the stenciled names of colors—RED, YELLOW, BLUE; the imprint of the body appears in works that incorporate the device and the name; and by 1962, the artist's hand-print is attached to the device, creating the flattened image of an extended arm.

Each of the four motifs manifests or stands for a quasi-mechanical procedure: rotation (target); appending an object (“device”) and scraping paint; stenciling language (naming of colors); imprinting the body. Together these procedures constitute an inventory of operations for art-making through which Johns can be said to have evaded conventions of both abstraction and figuration, while engaging elements of each. For example, a Johns target painting is a depiction of an actual target that is, for all practical purposes, utterly interchangeable with the real thing; yet, the concentric bands of the target also create a kind of abstract geometric image (it would be impossible to say this of a number or a flag, which can never be divorced from their status as a sign). Further, stenciled words signify color through language, naming but not necessarily employing the color itself, so that RED may be colored yellow, and ORANGE white. The scrape of the device across the canvas leaves behind an abstract form that merely manifests the action of a tool. Similarly, the imprint or cast of a body part is a form of representation but does not qualify as a depiction since it is produced—as with a palm print—directly by a mechanical application of the thing it represents.

Of course, during this period, Johns also painted with brushes and drew with graphite, charcoal, and pastel, among other conventional tools and media. Yet here, in the context of the other procedures, painting and drawing themselves become physical operations only, as if the methodical depositing of a medium in short strokes on canvas or paper were an end in itself rather than a means for conjuring pictorial illusion or invoking states of mind. As if to heighten this quality of his technique, during the middle to late fifties, Johns’ paintings were partly built up with collage—



2 *White Target*, 1957



3 *Device Circle*, 1959

many small fragments of newsprint and other papers pasted down during the production (one might almost say the construction) of the paint surface. Further, the paint itself was often mixed with encaustic, a waxlike medium that stiffens the paint such that the autonomous identity of each brushstroke is preserved. Collage and encaustic also serve to emphasize the object-quality of the painted canvas—its role, for Johns, not just as a support for a medium but also as a material thing. And when, in 1959, Johns began to change his brushwork, introducing spiky bundles of longer strokes (resembling the gestural character of abstract expressionist painting), he referred to the new manner in mechanical terms as “brushmarking,” a literal record of the movement of his arm.

Throughout the period, Johns spoke of his art in strictly empirical terms. His fixation on technical procedures portrayed the work of art almost as a kind of utilitarian object, as if the function of a painting or drawing were, first and foremost, to describe itself. From this approach, he sought to draw meaning primarily from the material condition of the work—from its materials and its means. In this exhibition, the four motifs and the operations they embody constitute a type of internal logic through which, as we will see, Johns narrated a philosophy of art. And with the introduction of the imprint of the artist’s own face and hands, we find Johns reinventing figuration as a manifestation of mechanical process alone, reimagining a place for the body in pictorial art.

JOHNS INTRODUCED THE FOUR MOTIFS into his work in a roughly chronological fashion. Yet the occurrence of two or more of them in single works and the appearance of closely related works in sequences or series that span more than a single year prohibit installing this exhibition according to a strict chronology. Instead, interpretation and therefore the structure of the installation are governed by this principle of pairs or groups.

Two constructions from 1955, *Target with Plaster Casts* (no. 1) and *Target with Four Faces* (fig. 1), incorporate—in shooting-gallery fashion—an upper register of painted plaster casts of faces and isolated parts of the body. The very number of Target works between 1955 and 1960 demonstrates a kind of fixation, reflecting a state of attention that is, indeed, signified by the target as an object or sign: one of extreme focus, perhaps to the point of trancelike distraction. What is a target if not an instrument of seeing (one that implicates risk or threat)? Almost from the beginning, however, Johns subverted the function of the target by abandoning a high contrast between yellow and blue bands for monochromatic Target images executed in white (fig. 2), gray, or green. Using a single color renders the motif of the target almost invisible, even as its application—produced in paint with encaustic and collage—thickens our impression of the painting as a heavy slab. Defined now through the topography of the concentric bands alone, the target is transformed from an instrument of seeing into a surface that primarily solicits sensation through touch.

Johns introduced the mechanical device in 1959, in the painting *Device Circle* (fig. 3). The wooden slat is attached at one end to the center of the canvas, from which



4 *False Start*, 1959



5 *Out the Window*, 1959

it pivots to incise a circle in the paint surface. This is the kind of tool Johns used to plot or delineate the perfect circles of the target's bands; now the tool itself and its abstract application have been substituted for the target image. In *Device Circle*, the slat was fitted with a point of some kind, perhaps a nail, so that the scrape was localized at one end of the rotating slat; subsequently, Johns used the entire surface of the device—generally a stretcher bar or a ruler—to scrape broad areas of paint. *Device Circle* also introduces another change in Johns' technique: the introduction of long brushstrokes and an even distribution of red, yellow, and blue, among other colors, across the canvas.

The exhibition represents in full the two directions initiated by *Device Circle*. One long sequence of paintings, including *False Start* (fig. 4) and *Jubilee* (no. 34), shows Johns pursuing the new brushwork ("brushmarking") in large all-over compositions, while drawings in charcoal and pastel that follow these works (nos. 31, 35) can almost be described as copies (contradicting the spontaneous appearance of the paintings). During this time Johns also began to inscribe his work with the stenciled words RED, YELLOW, and BLUE. Dispersed throughout *False Start* and *Jubilee*, these names of colors are given greater prominence in a group of other works, including *Out the Window* (fig. 5) and *By the Sea* (no. 40), that are divided into three or four horizontal bands. Each band is emblazoned with a stenciled color-name. But the jagged brushwork and the closeness in value among colors contribute to a merging of figure and ground, thereby undermining the legibility of the words. Among other ironies in both

sequences of work, the color-name is only rarely rendered in the color it signifies; word becomes image, an ambiguity that typifies Johns' work throughout this period.

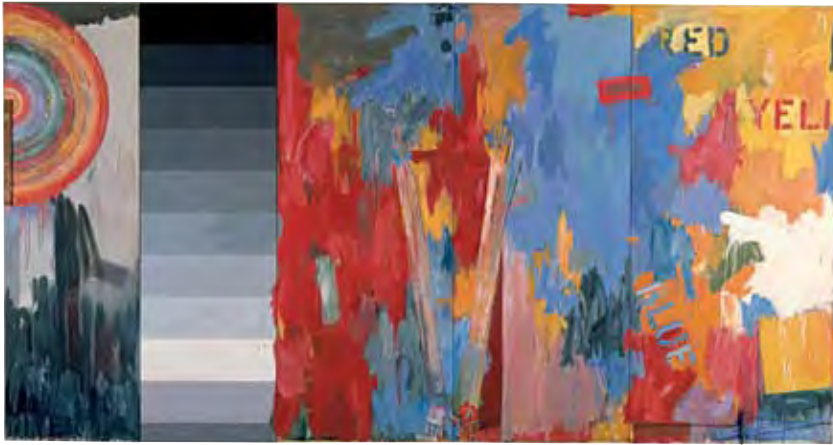
The other strain of work initiated by *Device Circle* shows Johns deploying the mechanical device. Paintings such as *Device* incorporate two slats that were used to scrape through monochromatic fields of gray paint (fig. 6). The arms of the device in this case are cut from a yardstick, and *measure* as well as *scrape*. This new mechanical function further suggests that, rather than depicting or representing something outside the work, the painting has become a self-sustaining object, one that can be measured for "actual size" (the notion of the actual versus representational character of the work of art would become important to the practice of conceptual art, which emerged during the mid-1960s). The object-quality of *Device* is further declared by the strip of wood that divides the work in half; this appendage resembles a stretcher



6 *Device*, 1962



7 *Study for "Skin" I*, 1962



8 *Diver*, 1962

bar—part of the construction of a stretched canvas that is usually visible only from the back.

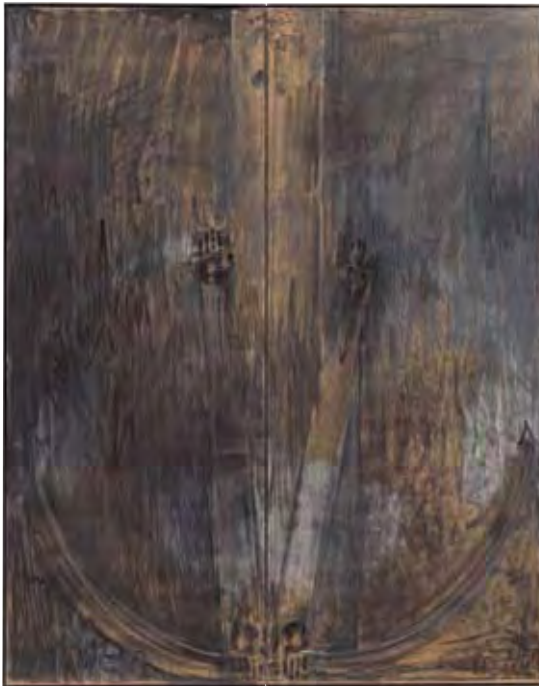
In 1962, Johns added the fourth motif, the imprint of the body, in the form of his own palm print and, more startlingly, printed images of his own face. The technique was used in a series of drawings produced in preparation for a never-realized work called *Skin*. The drawings, each called *Study for "Skin"* (nos. 56–59), were produced in two stages: first, the artist applied baby oil to his head and hands, which he then pressed onto sheets of paper tacked to a wall; the imprinted image was revealed by strokes of charcoal subsequently applied with repetitive, mechanical motions of the arm (fig. 7). The image that resulted shows a flattened representation of the entire volume of the artist's head (which he "rolled" across the sheet, like a cylinder seal). Through this procedure of imprint or direct trace, the body is preserved as a corporeal entity, yet made coextensive with the flatness of the sheet.

At this time, Johns also applied the imprint of the body as well as the naming of colors to works displaying the scraping device. *Periscope (Hart Crane)*, a RED-YELLOW-BLUE painting with a device scrape, replaces the device as attached object with a palm print at the end of a painted slatlike form; the implication is that the artist's own arm is a device—a mechanical tool (cover). (This work has been taken to refer to the American poet Hart Crane's suicide by drowning in 1932.) Several paintings and works on paper take up this image, including the large painting *Diver*, which is, in fact, a compendium of all four motifs (fig. 8). Here Johns has developed a way to recover figuration, reintroducing the figure through the technique of the imprint, thereby making room for the body—the extension of the arm—according to its actual size. Such works retain their literal nature, produced as they are, strictly through simple mechanical means; yet they also manage to conjure an unfamiliar form of expressive power.

Through 1965, Johns continued to make works incorporating the device or scrape, the stenciled colors, and the imprint (along with mechanical brushmarking) in various combinations. He sometimes applied a stenciled letter or word backwards, emphasizing the nature of the stencil and the image it produces as a reversible object,



9 *No*, 1964



10 *Diver*, 1962–1963

and of language as a series of mechanical signs. Two drawings called *No* (nos. 84, 85) display the stenciled word *NO* beneath the image of a ruler, which scrapes down the sheet (according to the annotation “scrape” and the directional arrow, both written in Johns’ hand) as if to obliterate the word (fig. 9). *No* is also the title of a painting from 1961 (no. 47) in which the letters *N* and *O* are cut from metal and suspended from a stiff wire; the word also appears imprinted in the paint surface. This negation resonates throughout Johns’ work of the period, a reference to the limitations of art and language as systems of meaning—limitations that are in part the very theme of his work.

Several large, spare works might, however, be said to establish far-reaching potential for the self-imposed constraints of Johns' processes and techniques. The drawing *Diver* (begun before the painting by that name but finished later) is large enough to contain the full extension of both arms, which are represented as devices that sweep through the shallow field of charcoal and pastel (fig. 10). *Diver* contains the imprints of the artist's hands (in the center and bottom) and feet (at the top center) as well as directional arrows; it is the diagrammatic representation of movements of the body, presumably during the act of diving, but ultimately through pictorial space and time. As an image, it also distantly invokes the Crucifixion, the archetypal Western image of the constrained body.

In the painting *Voice*, a taut wire reaches like an arm across the canvas to which a slat is affixed. The scrape of the device courses through a field of gray paint in a broad arc (we recall the image of the banded target, signifying sight and touch) that descends on the stenciled word VOICE (fig. 11). The device and its scraped ellipse represent time and space in a wholly abstract, yet empirical, fashion—that is, the time it took to move the device, and the physical trace the device inscribed onto the surface of the work. This is done in the context of yet another dimension, that of sound, abstractly identified by the stenciled object-word. In a painting, “voice”—which is not language per se but the *medium* of speech—can be named but never heard. In this regard, the power of *Voice* lies in the way both the capacity and the limitations of the medium of painting are physically demonstrated through the mechanics of producing the work. Indeed, as a proposition, describing what painting can and cannot be—in both literal and allegorical terms—occupies all the works in this exhibition and underscores the significance of the narrative they represent, from target to trace.



11 *Voice*, 1964–1967

Lectures

East Building Auditorium

February 11, 2:00 pm

Introducing Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965, Jeffrey Weiss, curator and head of the department of modern and contemporary art, National Gallery of Art

11:00 am

Jasper Johns in Context Series

Sally Shelburne and David Gariff, staff lecturers

March 6

Setting the Stage: American Painting in the 1940s

March 13

The Market Heats Up: Abstract Expressionists, Critics, and Dealers

March 20

Young Rebels: Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly

March 27

Purposeless Play: Jasper Johns, Collaboration, and the Non-Art of Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham

Symposium

Jasper Johns: The First Decade

April 28, 11:00 am–5:00 pm

East Building Auditorium

Speakers for illustrated lectures include Harry Cooper, David Joselit, Richard Meyer, and Joachim Pissarro. A panel discussion will follow.

Gallery Talks

East Building Art Information Desk

Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965 (50 mins.), January 31, February 4, 6, 8, 14, 24 at 1:00 pm; February 25, 26, 27 at 12:00 noon, David Gariff or Diane Arkin, staff lecturers

Jasper Johns in Context (60 mins.), February 1, 13, 15, 28 at 1:00 pm, Sally Shelburne, staff lecturer

Concerts

Evenings

Sundays, 6:30 pm

February 18, East Building Auditorium
Mark Kaplan, violinist; Yael Weiss, pianist
Music by Carter, Feigin, and Sessions

February 25, East Building Auditorium
Alan Feinberg, pianist
Music by Beiderbecke, Cage, Feldman, Ives, and Nancarrow

March 4, West Building, West Garden Court
The Contemporary Music Forum
Music by Cage and other composers

Afternoons

1:30 and 3:30 pm, East Building Mezzanine
Featuring music by John Cage

March 17, The Edge Ensemble

March 24, The Auros Group for New Music

Workshops

High School Studio

February 14, 16, 20, 28, March 6, 12, 26, 30,
April 12, 16, 24, 26

10:00 am–12:30 pm

Focusing on Johns' paintings and his relationships with other artists, this workshop includes close observation and discussion of Johns' early artwork (from the exhibition) and related works in the Gallery's twentieth-century collection. A hands-on studio activity follows.

Limit: 30 students. To register, visit www.nga.gov/education/hsprog.htm#workshop.

Teachers

March 17 (March 24, if repeated)

10:00 am–3:00 pm

Explore the Johns exhibition and the insights it offers into his philosophy about art and creating art.

Fee: \$20. For information, call 202.842.6796.

Film Program

March 10, 2:00 pm
East Building Auditorium

A program of documentary films from the 1960s focuses on Johns in his New York milieu and his collaborations with Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Robert Rauschenberg, including *Crises* (1960) and *Walkaround Time* (1968), and experimental films by Stan Brakhage, Alfred Leslie, and Alan Schneider.

Exhibition of Interest

States and Variations: Prints by Jasper Johns
March 11 – September 3
East Building Upper Level

On the Web

<http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/johnsinfo.htm>

The Web feature investigates the motifs in Johns' work, allowing visitors to delve into images and learn about his process during this prolific decade.

Catalogue

Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955 – 1965, by Jeffrey Weiss, with John Elderfield, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Robert Morris, and Kathryn A. Tuma. Produced by the National Gallery of Art and published in association with Yale University Press. Softcover \$40, hardcover \$60, 296 pages, 170 color plates, 80 halftones.

General Information

Hours: Monday – Saturday 10:00 am – 5:00 pm, Sunday 11:00 am – 6:00 pm. Gallery Web site: www.nga.gov. For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at the Art Information Desks, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

Brochure written by Jeffrey Weiss and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office. Copyright © 2007 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

It is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Illustrated Figures

All works of art by Jasper Johns are © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Exhibition and catalogue numbers appear in parentheses.

Cover *Periscope* (*Hart Crane*), 1963, oil on canvas, Collection of the artist; Photo Courtesy National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (no. 67)

1 *Target with Four Faces*, 1955, encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, 1958; Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY (no. 3)

2 *White Target*, 1957, encaustic on canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase; Photo © 1998 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (no. 8)

3 *Device Circle*, 1959, encaustic and collage on canvas with object, Andrew and Denise Saul (no. 28)

4 *False Start*, 1959, oil on canvas, Kenneth and Anne Griffin (no. 30)

5 *Out the Window*, 1959, encaustic and collage on canvas, Collection of David Geffen, Los Angeles (no. 38)

6 *Device*, 1962, oil on canvas with objects, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. Trustee Corporation Fund and by Edith Ferry Hooper (no. 53)

7 *Study for "Skin" I*, 1962, charcoal and oil on drafting paper, Collection of the artist (no. 56)

8 *Diver*, 1962, oil on canvas with objects (five panels), Collection of Irma and Norman Braman (no. 65)

9 *No*, 1964, graphite and graphite wash on paper, Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles (no. 85)

10 *Diver*, 1962–1963, charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on paper mounted on canvas (two panels), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Partial gift of Kate Ganz and Tony Ganz in memory of their parents, Victor and Sally Ganz, and in memory of Kirk Varnedoe; Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest Fund; Gift of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. (by exchange) and purchase; Acquired by the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art in memory of Kirk Varnedoe, 2003; The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY (no. 66)

11 *Voice*, 1964–1967, oil on canvas with objects (two panels), The Menil Collection, Houston (no. 91)