Abstract

*The painted words in Jasper Johns' art act in two different capacities. First, by being concealed beneath opaque layers of encaustic or oil paint, they partake in the artist's interrogation of visual perception. Second, by being repeatedly set against images, the painted words, this time visible, question classical representation. The questioning of sight is directed against the modernist limitation of painting to pure opticality as well as against the privileged position of sight in Western culture. Words are Johns' means of critiquing modernism; and the different relationships that he establishes between signifiers and signified, either verbal or pictorial, and between signs and things contradict the system of representation, both substitutional and repetitional.*

# *Jasper Johns' Painted Words*

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There is general agreement that Jasper John's fragmented words, which are barely visible and often almost illegible, relate to the painting of "objects the mind already knows"—namely flags, targets, numbers, alphabets and maps. Both the words, hidden under layers of encausting or oil paint, and the common objects induce an investigation of the gaps of ordinary visual perception. The motive behind his veiling of words coincides with that of painting well-known objects: it was, Johns explained, an interest in "what was seen, and what was not seen. . . And then one could deal with the question of when you see it, when you don't see it, what you do see. What do you think it is, how do you change what you see, and what differences do these changes make to what you see, and what differences do these changes make to what you see and to what you think."[1]

Given the privileged position of sight in Western culture, its interrogation no doubt goes beyond a personal, solitary game of hide and seek. In the immediate context of modernist art in New York in the early 1950s, the very questioning of ocular certainty challenges the foundation of the Greenbergian confinement of painting to pure opticality. Further, the relationship between Johns' hidden words and his particular subject matter points to still other correspondences that operate in terms of the shift from the isolated self to the activities of a collection of subjects. Both Johns choice of an impersonal art consisting of public objects (flags, targets, etc.) and his use of language are posited against self-centered abstract expressionism, which is concerned with the subject, the "artist author." Joan Carpenter's investigation of the "Infra Iconography" of *Flag* (1955)[2] and Moira Roth's study of "Aesthetic of Indifference"[3] make amply clear that Johns' "dream" about painting a flag cannot be dissociated from American political and cultural life in the early 1950s and, thus, presents a break with Clement Greenberg's advocacy of an elitist art unsoiled by history, unless the history of art. Johns refutes the subjective statements epitomized by "action painting," and he uses words that are always public.

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Concentrating on the "impurity" of Johns' work—namely, the inclusion of words, whether veiled or unveiled, legible or illegible, (and other objects of no immediate concern to us here), will disclose an additional aspect of the anti-modernist stand. Johns explored and exploded the limits of different modes of communication, visual and verbal, by reversing their accepted relationship in much of abstract art. The understanding of abstract geometric and abstract expressionistic art depended on verbal explanations, but both excluded words from the iconic field. By constrast, Johns' paintings exclude verbal explanations (Johns never explained his work as Newman or Rothko did) and incorporate the word. That is, the set word/image is transferred from writing on paintings to writing *in* paintings.

Besides the negatory aspect of the presence of words in Johns' work—namely the repudiation of abstract expressionism—there is also a positive aspect: the language-games. It is well known that Johns started to read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in 1961, two years after meeting Duchamp. The result of the encounter with Duchamp, it has been suggested, were works such as *False Start* (1959), "which reflect Johns' interest in Duchamp's moving away from work incorporating simply retinal boundaries 'into a field where language, thought and vision acted upon one another.'"[4] Two years later, *By the Sea* (1961)—especially the lower panel in which the three words, "red," "yellow" and "blue" are superimposed—follows Wittgenstein to the letter according to one critic. The reason is that Johns here referred directly to the philosopher's questioning of the relationship between a color and its label—or more generally, to the philosopher's theory that the meaning of a word depends on its use.

At best, this and similar readings of Johns transform the artist into an illustrator both of Duchamp and of Wittgenstein; at worst, they fail to notice that Johns' "Wittgensteinian" language-games started prior to the artist's study of the *Philosophical Investigations* and, hence, independently of it. In fact, the division of the referent "red" (the patch of red color on the canvas), for example, from the sign "red" in *False Start* and also in *Out the Window* (1959), both completed before Johns had even heard of Wittgenstein, was already directed at an interrogation of the relationship among signifiers, signified and referents. Moreover, Johns' games with signs and objects started in 1955 with the very

first words he painted on the canvas. He must have been greatly surprised to learn that research into language was shared by others and his empirical experimentations had a philosophical base that formed the subject of study by a philosopher of whom he had never heard.

The works this paper proposes to study have already been subject to various decodings. The present analysis will concentrate on the words themselves as objects and on the different relationships that Johns examined between signs (verbal and visual) and referents.

By disrupting the connection between the written word and the visual image on the same canvas, Johns obstructed the transparency between signifier and signified, thereby subverting the classical system of representation. *Tango* (1955) consists of an overall monochrome of blue, an opaque and blind color field which refuses to carry its own meaning; except for the word "tango" written in the upper left-hand corner, there is nothing in the image to suggest a dance. Further, if blue evokes any dance, it would be a waltz, the viewer's recalling Strauss' *Blue Danube.* That is to say, the word written on the canvas in this painting clarifies an intentional theme not implied by the image alone; thus Johns annuls both the symbolical and imitational modes of representation. Similarly in *The Critic Smiles* (1959), the spectator might never suspect without the written words that a bronze toothbrush signifies a smiling critic (although here the toothbrush, as is well known, substitutes for the absent teeth of the smiling critic).

Names identifying persons, mostly dancers and poets, form an integral part of the image in Johns paintings. In these works, he relied entirely on the written word to identify the person and, therefore, the theme of the painting; without the name written on the iconic field, the pictorial language would be open to different decodings. Sometimes the dedicatee is named overtly, as in *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara* (1961), although the artist could be referring to his own feelings and memories.[5] *Portrait—Viola Farber* (1961-62) identifies this dancer from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company only by her name, which is printed twice in superimposed letters of different sizes and different shades of gray. The hinged stretcher, where one would have expected to find the painted portrait, is empty.

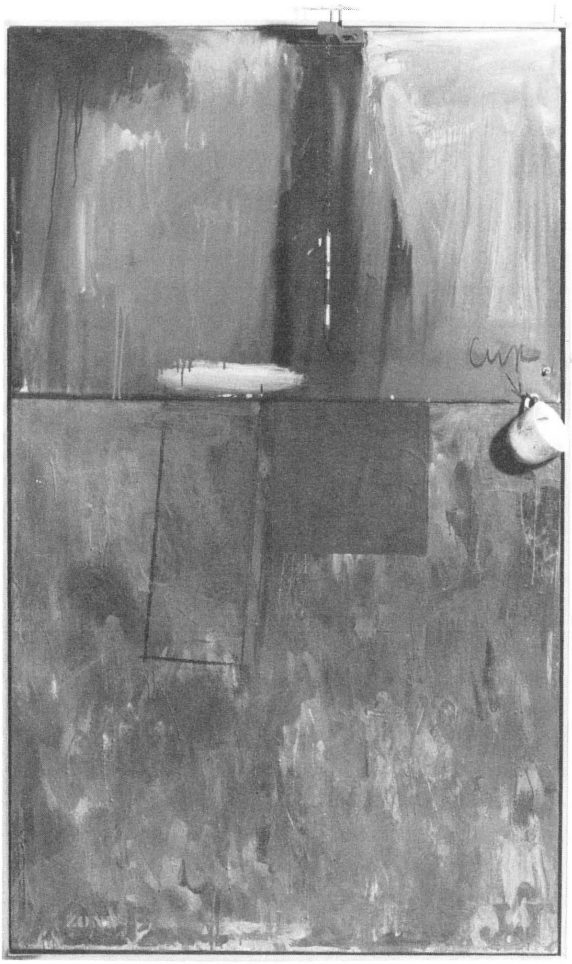
The division between signifiers and signified in the paintings discussed leaves both intact, each existing as a separate entity. In the alphabet paintings, however, Johns proceeded to nullify the signifier. The letters, repeated on the same canvas or on different canvases, in *Gray Alphabet* (1956), for instance, never add up to signifiers; on the contrary, they form a never-ending chain of signifiers. Johns' next step was to render reading materials, the accepted vehicle of knowledge, illegible. Thus the declared theme of three paintings were objects to be read: *Book* (1957), *Newspaper* (1957), and *Tennyson* (1958); in all three, however, not a single word is legible except for the name of the poet in the last work. The book is open, but the pages cannot be turned, and the words are veiled by paint. The newspaper is spread out in its natural size, but the news cannot be read; indeed, scholarly efforts directed at deciphering the text have mostly gone unrewarded since the single words uncoded did not add up to an overall meaning.[6]

Johns' language-games became more complex when he affixed an object to the canvas and proceeded to either transfer the same paintings into prints or to make drawings after them. In the different "Device" paintings, such as *Device Circle* (1959), *Device* (1961-62), and *Device* (1962), or in *Painting with Two Balls* (1960), the written signs relate to things (namely to the corporeal "devices," the wooden sticks or the two balls) that are themselves present. It is as though the signifier, the signified and the referent have reacquired their unity. In the drawings and lithographs of the same works, though, the objects are missing. Johns went back in these versions to the classical system of representation in which the signifier (in this case, both verbal and pictorial) compensates for an absence. Johns, however, is far from building a coherent system of language or a theory of representation. On the contrary, his is an open-ended game in which he moves in different directions according to rules he himself sets up while playing each separate move.

Although the language-games in works such as *Fool's House* (1962) and *Zone* (1962) depend to a large extent on his newly acquired knowledge from the writings of Wittgenstein, since he was obviously referring to the insufficiency of ostensive definition to promote meaning.[7] Johns continued his independent explorations into the relationship between signs and referents and between signifiers and signified by devising his own language-games as he went along.[8] Thus

FIGURE 1

Jasper Johns, *Zone*, 1962
Oil, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 60 x 36".



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the word "Zone," written twice in the lower left of the canvas (figure 1), attracts one's attention to the visual differences between the two separate panels, establishing thereby a unity of word and image. In the upper "zone," painted with translucent oil, Johns affixed an "A" made of neon tubing to enhance its luminosity; there is also a wooden "T" with a magnet from which a chain with a paintbrush hangs freely; and at the border between the two zones, there is a simple

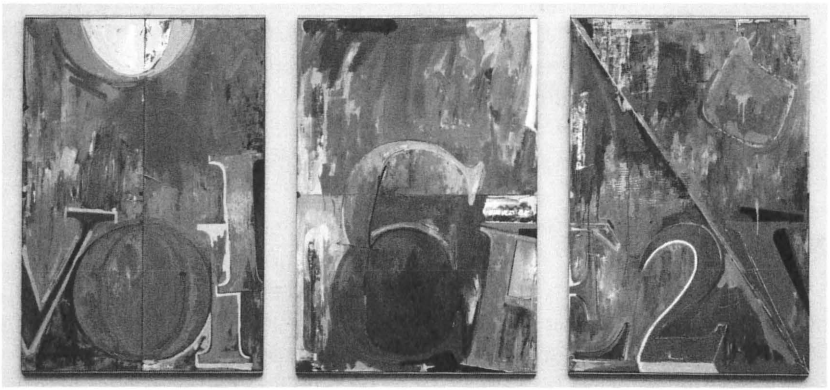
white cup. In constrast, the lower "zone," painted with opaque encaustic over collage, is empty except for two subzones—one defined by a black contour and the other, smaller than the first, painted over and more opaque than the background.

Unlike what happens in *Zone,* the signifier in other works has lost its signified and thereby been transformed, following Frederic Jameson's analysis of postmodern practices, into a material tactile reality. Examples are *THE* (1957), *NO* (1961), and *LIAR* (1961).[9] Johns himself considered the isolated signifier in terms of an object, claiming that the signifier thus isolated could then be treated as an object: "I thought that one thing to do with the written word was to pretend that it was an object that could be bent, turned upside down and I began more or less folding words. . . ."[10] Further, the re-use of an object and of a word/object on canvas in sculpture and in print—indeed Johns' entire practice expressed in the oft quoted entry from his sketchbook: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. . . ." Or an earlier entry: "It and its use and its action. . . . (do what I do, do what I say)" [11]—could be considered an exact counterpart to later poststructurist modes of "mime" derived from Wittgenstein. Hence Gregory L. Ulmer's presentation of post-criticism applies directly to Johns:
*The implication of textual mime for post-criticism. . . . is that knowledge of an object of study may be obtained without conceptualization or explanation. Rather, as if following Wittgenstein's admonition that "the meaning is the use," Derrida enacts or performs (mimes) the compositional structuration of the referent, resulting in another text of the same "kind". . . . Post-criticism, then, functions with an "epistemology" of performance—knowing as making, producing, doing, acting, as in Wittgenstein's account of the relation of knowing to the "mastery of a technique."*[12]

The isolated signifier could also be transformed into an image, as in *Voice 2* (1971). In a first version, *Voice* (1964-67), the word was barely visible, and the wooden stick attached to the canvas threatened to block it out entirely. The word not only was a small part of an image, it also was involved with other objects. In *Voice 2* (figure 2), the word itself constitutes the image. The theme was repeated because, in Johns' words, "there was something left over, some kind of anxiety, some question about the use of the word in the first painting. Perhaps its smallness in relation to the size of

FIGURE 2

Jasper Johns, *Voice 2,* 1971
Oil and collage on canvas, three panels, each 72 x 50".



Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum.

the painting led me to use the word in another way, to make it big, to distort it, bend it about a bit, split it up."[13] The theme of the two paintings is "voice," whether the small voice that vanishes unheard and unnoticed in the almost uniform gray field or the large, dissected voice, echoing itself. The word is taken out of its context, broken up, fragmented and repeated until it becomes a mere sound; until "VOICE" turns into "NOISE." The noise becomes more intense and disturbing in the numerous lithographs in which the voice is echoed again and again as it circles around itself.

*Voice 2* is also about the surplus of exact meaning—or the spilling over and diffusing of meaning. Originally the meaning of the indication, "fork should be 7" long," was literal since Johns wished to instruct the printer that the length of the fork in *Screen Piece* (1967) should be its normal size in the print.[14] Later, however, the artist incorporated that sentence in *Voice 2* in which "everything was very much enlarged, [thus] making the instruction suggest that everything should be reduced."[15] Johns seemed to delight in the alternate or contradictory meaning a sign acquires in the different chains of signifiers, whether verbal or pictorial since he deliberately annulled the identity of the sign with itself. Thus "should be" has still other uses. Johns explained that when he started to work on *Voice 2,* he hoped that the three panels might be shifted around, "might accomodate any order or

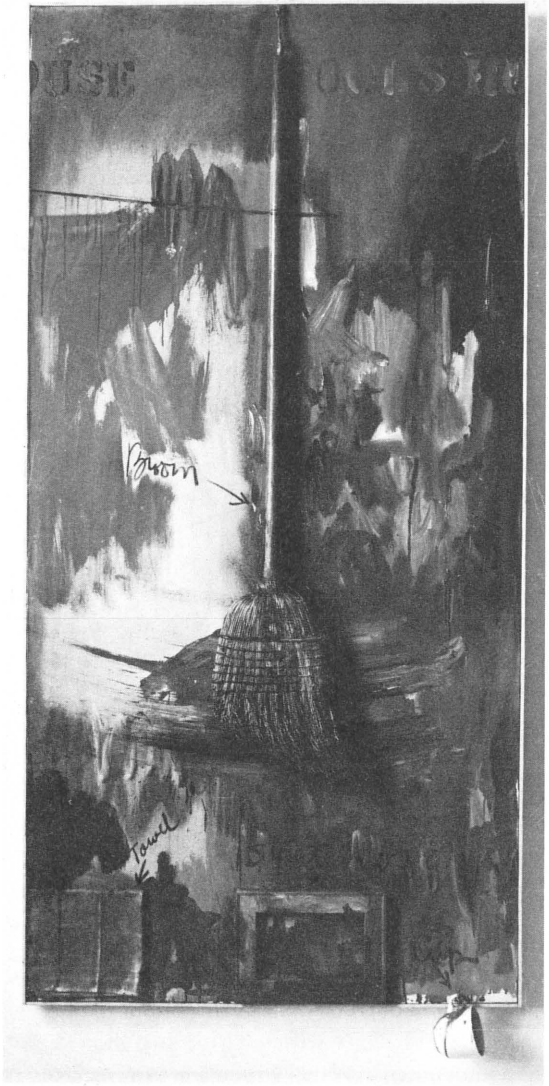
disorder. . . . While working in this way, trying to make the painting have 'no should be'. . . , the 'should be' seemed amusing."[16] Johns' words/objects, then, have no exact or unique meanings. Pertinent examples are works such as *Field Painting* (1963-64) and *Passage II* (1966), in which the letters are corporeal substances, and the spectator is seemingly invited to form different words. (In *Passage II,* the letters forming the names of three colors—red, orange and yellow—may be arranged to form different words, as one pleases.)

Examples of surplus and diffused meanings abound in Johns' work. The signifier "GRAY" in *Painting with Ruler and "Gray"* (1960) could be a "found object"; but it could also designate the dominant gray color of the painting. In *Fool's House* (1962), pictorial representation is restricted to a painted background—a large surface of monochrome grayish blue (figure 3). Instead of painting an object, Johns affixed the real object to the canvas and then proceeded to question that object or/and its name: each object is repeated by having its name written next to it and referred to by an arrow. Although the reference to Wittgenstein in the latter work is clear, Johns also pursued here his own, independent investigation into the polysemous meanings of words and the things the words name: a broom which might serve as a paintbrush; a towel which might serve to wipe one's hand but also, like the broom, to wipe out the whole painting; a cup from which one drinks but also in which one cleans brushes, and a stretcher which frames an insignificant part of the canvas. This is not only an exercise in the insufficiency of ostensive definition to promote meaning, it is a tenacious questioning of the painter's occupation and a deconstruction of the logic of representation. Everything in this canvas may just as well be itself and, at the same time be something else.

Diffused meaning is also the subject of the 1966 lithograph, *Pinion,* in which the pictorial and verbal signs contradict one another. Although this work shows the imprints of two feet, a knee and two hands in a position ready for running, its title, "Pinion," contradicts the visual image. It suggests, instead, that the runner's legs have been tied down, thus obviating flight forever. At the top of this lithograph, Johns added a photographic reproduction of a section of the painting *Eddingsville* (1965), showing a collection of old cracked objects related to the artist's life and work in that town by the sea: a shell, an ice tray, a paintbrush and a hook, two

FIGURE 3

Jasper Johns, *Fool's House*, 1962
Oil on canvas with objects, 72 x 36"



Collection Jean Christoph. Photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

cans, a bottle, a sponge and a fork, all of which are bolted together between a ruler and a wax cast of an arm. These objects could be the trophies offered to a runner who at the last instant refuses to join the race or, conversely, who joins the race without being aware of its total absurdity.[17]

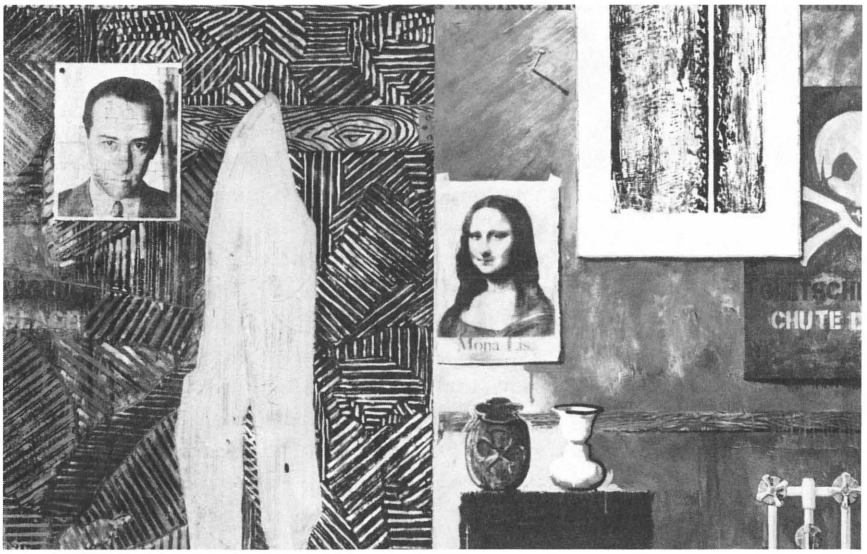
Unlike his early works up to the 1970s, during which period Johns quoted his own works from one painting and one medium to the other, the years since find him repeatedly quoting from other artists' works, which he then appropriates and re-uses in different contexts—that is to say, in varying chains of meanings. *Racing Thoughts* (1983), for example, consists in large part of a sort of collage, an assemblage of various paintings with different techniques (figure 4). On the left, an upturned, veiled image of the dying St. Anthony is taken from Grünewald's *Temptation of St. Anthony*;[18] above that is a photographic jigsaw puzzle of Leo Castelli. On the right, the assemblage consists of a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* (a reference to both Leonardo and Duchamp), a Barnett Newman print and an avalanche-warning sign. Below there are still other images: faucets, and a linen basket on top of which Johns placed a George Ohr pot and a German porcelain vase with the profiles of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip.[19]

Johns used these same images, together or separately, elsewhere; but in this particular work, the inscription, "Racing Thoughts," provides the viewer with a clue to the relationship among the signs, all of which by themselves are pregnant with diffused meanings. Johns associates here the world of art (Leo Castelli), works of art in general (one should also mention the nail painted in trompe-l'œil) and his own private world with death: the death of St. Anthony and a large, white skull on the extreme right of the canvas—the Swiss avalanche-warning sign—containing the words, *gletscherabbruch* and *chute de glace*. The collage, as a whole, presents an allegory of vanity and, in fact, a game on the subject of earlier works (the absurdity and futility of the artist's occupation or any achievement), such as *Fool's House* and *Pinion*.

Johns' critique of modernist art—that is, his questioning of visual perception and classical representation—aims at undermining the limitation of art to sight in an attempt to open it to the experience of all five senses. That Johns was referring to the sound potency of the written word on the iconic field is confirmed by his repeated references to the auditive (*Tango,* which is a singing picture: a music box behind the canvas may be operated by the spectator by winding the key protruding from the canvas), supported by the semantic value of words *(Voice, Voice 2)*. Further, the effort involved in deciphering the word whether hidden under paint, fragmented or reversed—results in one's saying it aloud.[20] Johns

FIGURE 4

Jasper Johns, *Racing Thoughts,* 1983
Encaustic and collage on canvas, 48 x 75 1/8




Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

thereby imparts to the written word its sound potency although print culture had reduced it to the visual. Pictorial representation ceases to be the privilege or property of one organ—the eye—and becomes the shared property of the eye and the ear.

Hence, Johns defies the traditional acceptance of the separation between the senses. More specifically, he challenges the ascendancy of the visual in art. He is engaged, in fact, in an anti-visual discourse. First, Johns denies the relationship of transparency between signifiers and signified. Second, art for this artist is never a unidimensional optical sensation; on the contrary, his paintings declare, at times physically and at other times intellectually, a new cohesion of human faculties and a renewal of the interplay among all the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.[21] The integration of the visual and auditive, then, explains the frequent presence of eating utensils—forks and spoons—in Johns' paintings. (*In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara* and *Portrait—Viola Farber* are two notable examples.) Marshall McLuhan tells us

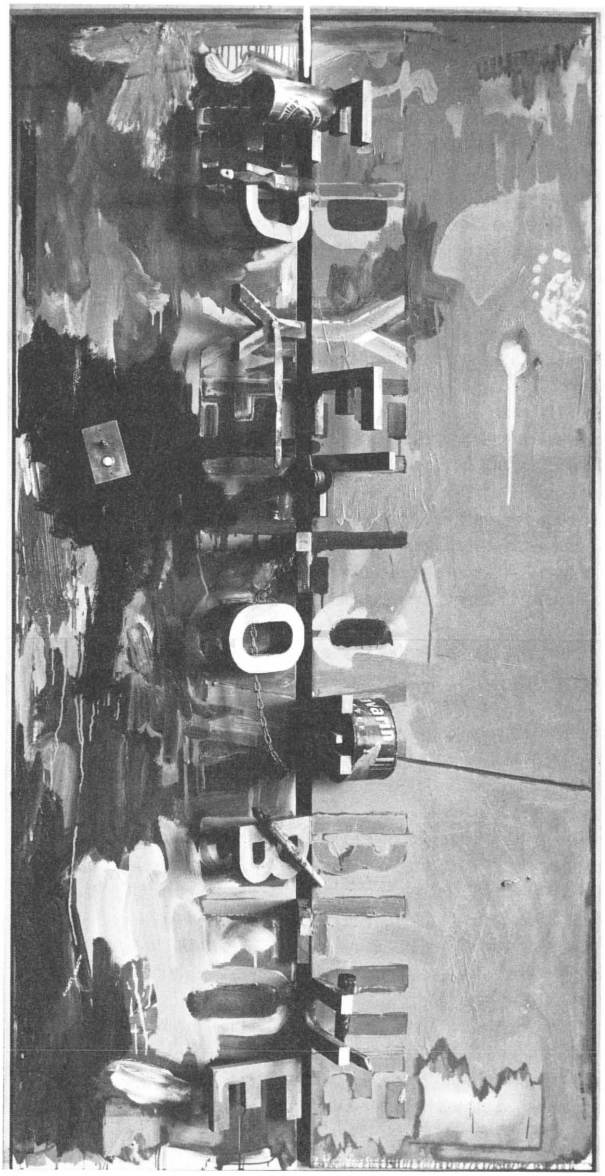
that reading by pronouncing each word was sometimes referred to as rumination: "the repeated mastication of the divine words is sometimes described by use of the theme of spiritual nutrition. The vocabulary is borrowed from eating, from digestion.[22] Johns' reference to eating, or the sense of taste, is also rendered more directly in *Painting Bitten by a Man* (1961): here food is the painting itself.

The modernist project of negating Renaissance perspective reaches unprecedented heights in Johns' work—and in a manner that contradicts previous bi-dimensionality. Again and again, Johns invites the spectator to approach the work—that is, to overcome the necessary ocular distance required by perspective—for the semi-visible words tempt the viewer to look from close up. Moreover, since the first "target" paintings *(Target with Four Faces* and *Target with Plaster Casts),* the spectator of a Johns work is stimulated to manipulate the different three-dimensional devices attached to the canvas. Johns' words, too, involve the sense of touch. The letters of the alphabet in *Gray Alphabets* (1956) are tactile; each letter is made of newspaper cuttings painted over with encaustic, thus contrasting the tangible, protruding letters with the flat canvas that serves as their background and also with the accepted, black, uniformly flat print. In *Passage II, Field Painting* and other paintings, the letters are made of neon tubing, wood or metal and the spectator is invited to approach the work, to touch, to act and to do. Johns thus creates a real physical contact between the spectator and the work because of the painting's pronounced tactility, which induces the impulse to touch.

*Field Painting* (figure 5) integrates in a single painting all the different senses: vision—the colorful brush strokes; hearing—the need to pronounce aloud the words written with very small, barely visible letters: "lower left," "upper left," etc.; taste—the Ballantine Ale can, the Savarin Coffee can and the two spoons on the right; touch—the tangible letters but also the light switch on the left that must be operated. Smell may be evoked by the odor of the paint itself and by the imaginary smell of coffee or of turpentine—if, indeed, the coffee can is a studio feature that serves to hold the liquid to clean the painter's brushes.[23] Johns' painting is a constant exploration and questioning of the accepted unidimensionality of man when it comes to art.

FIGURE 5

Jasper Johns, *Field Painting,* 1963-64
Oil on canvas with objects, 72 x 36 3/4"

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Endnotes

1 P. Fuller, "Jasper Johns Interviewed, Part 1," *Art Monthly* XVIII (July-August 1978), pp.6-12. *Art Monthly* XIX (September 1978), pp.5-7. Quoted in *Jasper Johns, A Print Retrospective* (Exhibition catalogue). (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986), p.19.

2 J. Carpenter, "The Infra-Iconography of Jasper Johns," *Art Journal,* XXXVI (Spring 1977), pp.221-227.

3 M. Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," *Artforum,* XVI (November 1977), pp.47-53.

4 P. Higginson, "Jasper's Non-Dilemma, A Wittgensteinian Approach," *New Lugano Review,* 10, 1976, p.53. For a detailed study of Duchampian themes and objects in Johns' work, see Roni Feinstein, "New Thoughts for Jasper Johns' Sculpture," *Art Magazine,* LIV (April 1980), pp.139-145.

5 For one such interpretation, see C. Harrison and F. Orton, "Jasper Johns: 'Meaning What You See,'" *Art History,* VII (March 1984), pp.94-95.

6 For notable exceptions, see J. Carpenter, "The Infra-Iconography of Jasper Johns."

7 Higginson, pp.53-54.

8 This, of course, accords with Wittgenstein's theory of language: language is a game, the rules of which we have to make up as we go along. See *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), #83.

9 Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p.120.

10 A.R. Solomon, director and L. Slate, producer, *U.S.A. Artists #8: Jasper Johns,* 1966. Quoted in *Jasper Johns, A Print Retrospective,* p.18

11 Quote taken from *Jasper Johns, A Print Retrospective,* p.23 and p.21.

12 Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism,"*The Anti-Aesthetic. . .*, p.94.

13 Christian Geelhar, *Jasper Johns Working Proofs* (Exhibition Catalogue), Basel, 1980, p.52.

14 On the history of "fork should be. . ." see M. Crichton, Jasper Johns (exhibition catalogue), (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977), p.56.

15 Geelhar, p.50.

16 ibid.

17 The idea of "futile racing" was suggested by Roberta Bernstein's reading of *Cup We All Race 4,* in *Jasper Johns' Paintings and Sculptures 1954-1974: "The Changing Focus of the Eye"* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p.85.

18 On the presence of Grünewald's *Temptation of St. Anthony* in Johns' paintings after 1984, see J. Johnston, "Tracking the Shadow," *Art in America,* LXXV (October 1987), pp.138-140.

19 According to R. Francis, "Johns offers us the view from his bath. Some elements in [the] painting (faucets, linen basket, door, and a Barnett Newman print) are correctly disposed: this is the view you would get while taking a bath in his tub." *Jasper Johns* (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1984), p.103.

20 On this subject, see M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), especially the chapter, In antiquity and the Middle Ages reading was necessarily reading aloud," pp.82-84.

21 Johns' denial of the monopoly of vision joins the questioning of the primacy of sight in much of twentieth-century French philosophy. On French philosophy, see Martin Jay, "In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigation of Vision in 20th Century French Thought," *Postmoder-*

*nism,* ICA Documents 4, London, 1986, pp.19-26.

22 McLuhan, pp.89-90.

23 The coffee can as a container of turpentine is suggested by *Painted Bronze* (1960).