

Johns

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Jasper Johns: Work Since 1974
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Foirades/Fizzles: Echo and Allusion in the Art of Jasper Johns University of California, Los Angeles, distributed by the University of Chicago Press
by Jasper Johns and Samuel Beckett and Edith A. Tonelli and John Cage and Richard S. Field and Andrew Bush and Richard Shiff and Fred Orton and James Cuno
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1.

S.I. Newhouse shifted his left hand slightly, Larry Gagosian responded to the sign by making a small one of his own, and John Marion then announced another \$250,000 advance in the bidding for Jasper Johns's 1959 canvas called *False Start*. However, it was finally not a wave from the publisher of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* but a nod that passed the call for a half million boost in the pace of business from prospective owner through his agent to auctioneer, and overdrew the bankbooks of the competition. It was wholly appropriate, at this level of high finance, that the chairman of Condé Nast should bend his head and the chairman of Sotheby's bring the hammer down while onlookers applauded the price of victory; for when fashion and gossip possess a fortune, where better to make a \$17 million show of it than in the rooms where the idols of the marketplace are invested with their divinity. A few days before, Jasper Johns's *White Flag* had reached \$7 million at Christie's, and a simple drawing slipped away to St. Louis for \$3.9 million.

For a successful artist such as Jasper Johns, the blank canvas has become a blank check. Marks, yen, dollars, francs, and pounds must dance in the same head which once held sugar plums, and, despite the most pure and otherworldly of intentions, all the painter's gestures seem to end as bottom lines. Like any commercial firm, an artist is supposed to make money for his investors—for those who, early on, bet on him—and perhaps, as in this case, put down \$3,175 for another potential icon of income to hang in their home. Of course, the artist is not paid so applaudable an amount, since he labors at the low end of the system (up to half of the swag will be swallowed by the agent); but if the artist has confidence and self-esteem; if he will cooperate with

the publicists and be polite to his wealthy patrons; if he will shrewdly release his work to avoid a glut, and keep back the best of his efforts for himself; then he or his heirs, even after litigation, will do all right.

The divinities of the dollar have been growing more numerous and more holy by bids and bounds. Back in 1980, the Whitney Museum of American Art made off with *Three Flags* for a mere million, while the record price for the work of a living artist (\$1.98m) was paid for De Kooning's *Two Women* in 1984, an eminence which is now, and for the moment only, occupied by *False Start*. Jasper Johns will occasionally give a painting an aggressively neutral name (*Untitled*, for instance), but for the most part his labels tease; they make puns, crack jokes, are rich in sly personal references; and they must be worth a hundred thou all by themselves, now, since some are stenciled on the canvas. Of course, hoary old gods like Van Gogh have been bringing far grander sums and have lit many more worship candles. Soon, when Sotheby's goes public, as it promises, we shall all be able to buy stock in the sale of Precious Things.

Such prices may not seem so outlandish if they are compared to the multitude of mils which tanks, bombing planes, and rockets fetch; nevertheless, in this world of increasingly sacred secularities, one has to wonder whether we would take the same pains to repair the ruptured reputation of the Blessed Virgin, were it seen to be damaged, as we have taken to restore the nose of a Michelangelo *Pietà*, or a buckshot-punctured drawing which happens to be from the hand of Leonardo. Corbusier's Ronchamp, this century's single significant church¹ (and it is, even so, not a public but a monastery chapel), cannot outweigh the number and magnificence of our museums: ThingDomes as plentiful and super as stadiums.

Bookstores have small shows in their basements; libraries lure lovers of the image to the vicinity of the word with little displays of local photos; bank lobbies play host to artists; restaurants enliven their walls with short-term loans; synagogues go in for similar sorts of spiritual education; malls make hay while the paint dries. We are "into it" in a big way.

The economic difference between a poet mostly mute and inglorious, and one who may be named our laureate, is only a few thin dimes; but the financial gap that separates two painters can resemble the distance between some orphan of the storm and the carrot-headed kid adopted by Daddy Warbucks. The art world is reft in this way. Mammon has never had more muscle, and the gods you might wish to serve instead of this creepy version of the Satanic spirit are all on the counter and all for sale. In such a haze of green, what can be seen? A Picasso Rose, it is trumpeted, may break a record. You can bank on it. A New York gallery decorates its ads with the enticing image of a ten-thousand-dollar bill. Honesty is their insurance policy. A show of the nineteenth-century "money painters" opens, on its walls depictions of dough

stacked on barrel-heads. Their satire sentimentalized, these pictures are better over a bar than any length of nude. Once promised poverty, the painter must now fight a far sturdier foe: half brute, half seductress; and the friends of his former “romantic” impoverishment—street people, other painters, poets, whores—have been supplanted by the pimps of publicity, canapé-corrupted critics, and greedy, parvenu patrons. Bleached of its stars and stripes, and a symbol of surrender, Johns’s *White Flag*, from the collection of the artist, nevertheless fetches a fat sum.

Perhaps that’s because this is, as one might say, the Year of the Johns. It began with his widely publicized and triumphal exhibition in the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and culminated in the “through the roof” auctions that have most fortunately coincided with the move of the Biennale show to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the home of its initiator, arranger, and cataloger Mark Rosenthal. The exhibit remained in Philadelphia through January 8, when its paintings were returned to their owners, and one set in particular (the splendid *Seasons*) perhaps permanently dispersed.

Johns had surprised the art world’s eye in 1958 when his Targets, Flags, Alphabets, and Numerals were exhibited by Leo Castelli, and several pieces were purchased by Alfred Barr for the Museum of Modern Art. Instead of cows in a meadow, pears on a plate, or a brunette on a divan—instead of a spill, drip, or interwhirl of acrylic and oil—the painter chose to render the face of a target or a flag, the form of a letter or a figure. These were surfaces already geometrically arranged, in some cases outlined and colored in; they were stereotypes that our normal looks neglected, since they were entirely functional, abstract, and symbolic, particular in no important way, and, at least where the flags were concerned, so essentially twin-sided as to seem the same wherever they were; furthermore, when held still and pressed flat, these banners were like a canvas complete, ahead of any brush.

Beneath the conventional image of an American flag, as if he were building up to it, Johns placed a piece of plywood to which he glued canvas (sometimes a stretched section by itself sufficed). To this he added a composition made of newsprint scraps and snapshots in a pattern that would harmonize with the one to come. Then he covered the paste-up with thin coats of melted wax to which appropriate pigments had been added, working quickly as the wax cooled, so that eventually the material beneath—a collage of ghost-cast shadows—seemed to rise up into the surface like a stream bottom, riffing and enriching it.

With a craftsmanship at once meticulous and yet apparently impulsive, Johns assembled his surfaces, laid out his arrangements, using silhouettes and a ruler, body casts and other objects, and avoiding the painterly gestures of the past in order to cobble a picture

rather than paint one: parting the plane of the canvas with a pair of steel balls, then with a lacquered wedge of newspaper; or hanging a metal coat hanger on a canvas along with its painted shadow, or a cup with its label, or a souvenir plate containing a photo of the painter's face; sometimes affixing to the canvas a broom or a plaster hand, a piece of leg, a flashlight, string of paint tins, rearview mirror; depicting drawers that might be pulled out by their knobs, including hooks on which to depend things; seeming to spill assorted stuffs on a completed picture, dripping and smearing, erasing and ripping; and invading the frame (which was sometimes of wood, sometimes steel channel, sometimes like a ledge, and sometimes seemed not to be there) by investing it with objects—knife, fork, spoon—breaching it, stretching it, stressing it; and time and time again suggesting a kind of continuous curvature in the worked-over space, as if it were the flat map of a round world, or a playpen, perhaps, or a puzzle box, anything but a painting.

Jasper Johns makes artifacts out of artifacts, things from things, and images out of images. He delights in rendering the useful useless by nailing it, as it were, out of reach of ordinary reality, turning the upside sideways, and relieving capacities of their natural energies. The canvas becomes a tabletop, a tray to sort slides, a scrapbook, Schwitters nursery, a cutting board, anything but a painting.

The ontological balance of power in this work has swung from nature to culture, from the objects of consciousness to consciousness, and then to a consciousness rounding on itself like a pup in pursuit of its tail. The true theater, as Paul Valéry's *Monsieur Teste* said, is the theater of the head. To a painter like Johns, the equipment of such a reflective faculty (all looking that looks at looking, with its burnished surfaces, its words, maps, other signs and symbols) becomes the subject of his art, including the very conventionality of such signs and symbols, their deeply seated artificiality, their remote abstractness, their noncommittal presence. The curvature implied for the canvas by the repeated stencil of the painter's name and the painting's title along the bottom of the composition, sealing one side to another and implying that the stenciling could continue on the other side and that the back is in the same plane as the front, resembles the way in which the text of *Finnegans Wake* cements its first line to its last so as to capture and contain and continue attention through many a sleepless night and lengthy day by saying (against the evidence of the frame, the page) that there is actually no end, no edge, and that things come round again (as it were, upon repeated reading, repeated viewing), making real change consist in reinter-pretations of the same.

When once the king sat to have his portrait painted, it was because history needed to memorize his physiognomy. Although flattering the facts, the resemblance remained faithful to majesty, and both rearing horse and rider, sovereignty and power, were recalled within the frame. Now no one visits the Prado to view Philip IV. One visits to

marvel at the genius of Velazquez. Nor did any obliging Angel of the Lord pose for the Annunciation, other annunciations did that; and the local ladies who modeled bodies, gowns, or hats were in the studio only to be supplanted by the painting which would lend them what little lasting life they would ever have. The faithful may have felt that the Virgin gave her images their significance, and that they needed no more art from the artist than an easy way with recognition; but for others, including many of the faithful themselves, artistic quality increasingly won the tug: the so-called real, whether metaphysical or material, gave way to an invented being, and what had been a king or a goddess, an agent of action, became an object of observation, enclosed in a removed world, where reality grew in a painted pot like a plant, and even a sacred anecdote—a Flight into Egypt, a Flagellation—was reformed, finally, into a festival for the eye.

For all its pain and noise, politics often has only a poltroon's power. Philip IV, for instance, rattles around like a bean in a box, while his image maker remakes the consciousness of his culture. And it is, perhaps, a dim sense of this potency in the painter which leads some men to pay their life's lotto winnings for even the smallest piece of a Period's mode of perception—for even a smidgen of the shared soul of a Time.²

The humblest of objects—a coffee can in which the painter's brushes have been soaking—is altered by Johns into an image, or reproduced in plaster, cast in bronze, then painted. Consider how Johns then rings the turp tin's changes: as an oil painting, a lithograph, an etching, poster, monotype; now it is a still life, next a motif, finally it is an emblem of his art; the image of this discardable utilitarian container passes through and among media, yet unscathed as a swift fish, and remaining all the while a simple tin packed with stems, stems which resemble the thick lines he sometimes hatches behind them, or the whole bronzed like baby shoes instead—embalmed, vased, urned—the motif moving through his thoughts, and down the years, too, assuming the realities of ink at one time, watercolor, pencil, or crayon at another, for drawings on plastic done a decade or even two after the first cast. Finally, alluding to a self-portrait by Edvard Munch, Johns plants his flowerless vase of brushes in the place that would be occupied by a face, signing the work with the impress of his own arm, and the initials of his referee: EM.

Johns clearly conserves his sources; he continually refines his techniques; he wrings his material dry, then shakes free the dust; he makes one work serve as the subject for another, advancing with some logic along a line of possibilities like one of Schoenberg's tone rows and their transformations, because Johns is constantly studying what a difference a difference makes. Like every other great painter, he is a persistent student of the real; but the real, now, comes and goes like a wraith, and the old order of things which led so securely from shadows to substances, from nightmares to the certainties of sunny

scenes, from particulars whose uniqueness was inexplicable to universals designed solely to be known: that hierarchy has come tumbling down (a hill, but not a heap, may have its king). Reality runs every which way, from sadness to the sighs that are its signs, from colors to their labels, from a single original to ubiquitous copies, so that the images of the Eiffel Tower, for instance, the Taj Mahal, or the *Mona Lisa*, of no value in themselves, are nonetheless as potent, as in touch with their idea, as the objects in their more restricted locales.

On the canvas, in contemporary consciousness, whether as a tracing or a recollection, Being has become democratized; each streak of light, tear drop, cloth crease, concept, ordered undertaking, chaotic crash, is equal, clamorous for attention, appreciation, response: foreground and background, corner and center, color and line, volume and plane, edge and interior—they are all like the brushes jammed in the solvent, in the mocked-up coffee can with its Savarin label, a design copied by the painter as though it were a thigh, a design which once had a life on the shelf of a supermarket, announcing the contents of its can, and before that a start on its maker's drafting board, in the same world far away.

2.

One entered the Philadelphia exhibit along the spine of a book, *Foirades/Fizzles*, the pages and plates of which were displayed the length of a long hall.³ As one viewed the results, an intersection of the texts of Samuel Beckett with the designs of Jasper Johns seemed natural, if not inevitable. Both are obsessive, double-jointed artists, devoted to fugue-like forms of development, and their outlook on the human condition, even from the tip of their higher toccatas, could hardly be described as lighthearted. Beckett not only seems to compose in French and English simultaneously, his spare yet theatrically active vision imposes itself on the reader even when the text is not a drama. His vocabulary is minimal, his imagination baroque, his subject unvarying, and the music of his prose, made of measured units set within a pattern as carefully as laid stones, is appropriately dolorous yet sweet: "Old earth, no more lies, I've seen you, it was me, with my other's ravening eyes, too late." As most of them are, this is a line so Anglo-Saxon it seems more in flight from Latin than translated from French.

The plane of a Johns painting frequently plays hookey. Percept and concept clap together there like a school-master's note of warning. He would have world and word one, yet their persistent oppositions and ambiguities are like the hot wax in which his hues dissolve. And, in effect, his paintbrush puns. The competition between color and color word that constitutes a painting like the record-setting *False Start*, with its excited bursts of red, yellow, blue, and orange and its calm over- and underlays of stenciled names, might be put into a dialogue

that tries out Beckett's lines from *Fizzles*: "You'll be on me, it will be you, it will be me, it will be us, it was never us." That's what we indeed see in this prose: the earth which will cover us; the body, like our own body, which will lie upon us; the large death, like the little one, that leaves us, for an eternal moment, alone, lost, out of breath; that leaves us like a leaf leaves its tree; that leaves, yet not before we've groaned through our growing up and our growing old, and therefore leaves too late. "It won't be long now, perhaps not tomorrow, nor the day after, but too late. Not long now, how I gaze on you, and what refusal, how you refuse me, you so refused." Refused, yet, when lit, still a fizzle.

It takes a slow eye to take in Johns and Beckett properly: a slow, wide, witty, meditative eye for meaningful bits and repeated pieces, for conning the canvas, slowly sighting-saying-sighing-singing the words, stress by heavy stress, in their little groupings like hatched lines: old earth, no more lies.

It is a magical match; nevertheless, the conjunction was relatively fortuitous, and the book that emerged was the result of work largely concluded (in Beckett's case) or already well in motion (for Johns). Offered five short prose pieces, Johns arranged them in an order he chose, drawing upon his experience with stencil-felt numerals to number them, scratching or darkening the ground where they stood like lead, and developing a group of ideas he had broached in a turning-point painting (*Untitled*, 1972), where the fundamental puns which will play together during a succeeding decade of work are first formally articulated.

In Harlem, in 1967, when Johns saw a building with flagstones oddly painted on it, his eye was intrigued by the idea of a floor turning up as a wall. With *Harlem Light* he initially set forth the pattern, putting down on a pavement largely white, with mortar-pale capillary connections, a few startling red and densely black stones. *Untitled* of 1972 is composed of four panels, the center pair executed in *Harlem Light* style. The section to the far right has a smeary light brown leathered background over which narrow numbered wooden slats, crossed like a skewed lattice, have been nailed. On these stretcher-like battens are fastened shattered hunks of a body cast in wax, as if they had been crucified on an armature of bones: Face here, collage of HandFootSockFloor there, a Buttocks, then a bit of Torso in the shape of a baked potato, pair of crossed and ballet-slippered feet, loose Leg, Knee. The moment their joint project was suggested, Johns must have seen how purely Beckettean these elements and their groupings were, both as body parts and as words (HandFootSockFloor). They furnish him with the principal motifs for the book's design. *Untitled* thus gains a title—*Foirades*—the voice of the fundament—*Fizzles*—the farts that failed. The painting's far left panel, looking like a field of pick-up-sticks, is made of violet, red, or green hatchings that occupy areas the suggested shape of paving stones, but objects that are otherwise outlineless like fingers from whom all glove has gone.

The parade of the pun is now complete: the stripes that curled' round in targets and crossed flags, now cross and cover paving stones; they unite only to separate again when stripes and shapes alone remain—the poor torn body and its bones. It is in this way that the appropriately named “endpapers” are given a pattern from which the words they enclose can be said to “hatch,” and memorial markers to which they can be felt to descend—slabs to cover their closing. Unfortunately, these bright and lively linings are, in spirit, at odds with the whole book, whereas the two morose panels of hatch and slab which hang in the show, doused in violet like an Eliot evening (and which resemble a less jagged, dark, double-spread in *Fizzles*), are the corrective second thought.

The first wall of the Philadelphia exhibition, like an opening curtain, was given to a large three-panel field of hatches called *Scnt*. Not a body, but its scent. Clues to a whereabouts. The technique—filling the area of an absent flag-stonebodypart with freehand brush lines (as many as six or seven, as few as three), usually of the same color, and directing them in such a way they break off just before they collide—has been frequently described as “crosshatching,” and is so called in Mark Rosenthal’s catalog copy,⁴ but this descriptive term is, I think, seriously misleading, because the lines don’t cross, each line is a distinct and independent entity, coded with others by parallel paths and color, but nevertheless a separate little spark of life, swollen slightly at each end where the brush either landed or took off. So “hatch” is a more accurate nomination, although I also often feel, as my eye pans over them, that the hatches don’t break off but only duck beneath one another; that, in effect, they “thatch.” However, it is the refusal to cross, to dip, that tenses this nominally flat and unflappable surface, because these hatches seem like the shards of something shattered elsewhere and propelled into our view. I can’t help recalling the famous Targets of the Fifties, with their central eyes and aims. If one were, in physics, to diagram an apparently helter-skelter rattle of forces, this might be a good way. Still, the lines always halt before they hit. They fall like the prongs of a hay rake, only to hover just ahead of the hay. So it is easy to understand why Johns might prefer his term, for these hatches are certainly at cross purposes. They are, in a phrase he recorded for himself, “puns on intentions.” Hence the surfaces they create are intensely dynamic. They boil.

The past use of the hatch in drawing and painting was decorative and discreet. Hatchings darkened a shadow. They added a dash of depth. They got together to form chevrons. They enlivened cloth. But now what had been simply a distant atmosphere and moan of color—the repeated thummm of the sea, *à la* Philip Glass—has come to the fore, and hatches have hatched out everywhere, in painting after painting, so that what serves in background’s place (since it has taken all those paces to the front) is actually an underground, a brief irregularity

showing up inside the pattern like a bump beneath the bedclothes, hump in drape, a shy and hesitant image, breath in a net, loom behind the haze.

Perhaps the most purely beautiful of Johns's paintings is an encaustic composed of three separated but united panels in the colors of aging ivories, where the hatches are subliminally controlled by a plan of repetition and encirclement suggesting a cylinder, and whose surface is occasionally marred and faintly ringed by what might have been the footstep of a cookie cutter. This work is called *Usuyuki*, a Japanese word which Rosenthal tells us means "light snow." What we know about snow, about how it is formed and falls, collects and goes, may inform our visual experience somewhat, yet there is a disturbing incongruity between the laws that cause and control and crystallize it, and the slow, light, whitening of the world. *Usuyuki* is a relatively uncluttered, "unclever" painting, profound in what it does not have to say; however elsewhere, in Johns's work, profundity is alleged, but not as readily reached. His symbols sometimes get a bit nervous and fussy. There is a lot of tugging at the observer's sleeve.

Not only do the Targets, Flags, and Numerals form a group, as the Hatches do in the group of paintings that includes *Usuyuki*, but such is Johns's skill and interest in processes and techniques that each motif is run through an exploratory range of media whose plastic consequences form a family, and it is as part of its family that any member is best understood. Beneath *Cicada*, for instance (a relatively unthreatening watercolor hatch in which the red, yellow, and blue linings congregate in the center—where, perhaps, the cicada's metamorphosis will occur—while the greens, purples, and oranges drift out near the edges), Johns has appended, by simply extending the mat, a page of images in notebook style: several phallic shapes, two views of the insect, a faucet handle, skull and crossbones, burning boat; along with a headline, POPE PRAYS AT AUSCHWITZ, and the words, "Only Peace!" as well as a doodle or two, triangle, and a few trial hatch lines, as if testing the color in the brush; but these private jottings, now made public, are dubious aids to the understanding of the paintings in which many of the "notes" will later appear. A look at the constellation of prints on this theme which Johns has made will demonstrate that the cicada is far from a tranquil subject. The drawings, done in ink on plastic, are violent and brutish: the colored lines are accompanied by black "eyeliners," the hatches crash into one another, turmoil is beautifully and powerfully depicted.

Johns is aware that before one of his paintings completes its passage from his atelier to a commercial gallery, or from gallery to early owner to auction house, or from bidding block to bank and its temporary grave in some vault, critics and commentators will observe its movements in order to complete the conceptual bridge the work requests by educating an otherwise uninformed eye: glossing the

imagery, explaining techniques, interpreting themes, linking watercolors, prints, and canvases, calling upon the appropriate traditions.

Central to the Philadelphia exhibit was a series of three three-paneled hatch paintings entitled *Between the Clock and the Bed*. If we look at any one of these triptychs (the one loaned by the Museum of Modern Art, for example), we shall notice how the outside panels mirror one another's lines, although the left side is in yellow and violet, the right in green and red, while the middle panel glows as if there were a light behind the center of its hatchings—lines that run smoothly across both cracks to join the sides. The lower-right-hand corner of the entire composition seems to be soaking up brightness like the wet corner of a towel, and thin red, blue, yellow lines hatch the thicker ones there.

Without the title, we have nothing in front of us but a tripartite field of mutually deterrent forces in which the central panel joins a design to its mirror image (although we don't know which is actually reflecting which), but the resemblance is only at the level of line, not of hue.

With the title, we can begin to suspect that the violet-soaked left side represents in some sense Change: those changes which have brought us successively (on the right side) from childbed to marriage bed to death's bed; and if that is so, the vertical lightness in the middle of the painting may be a human figure. If we know, or happen to be told, of Edvard Munch's similarly titled painting, and if we can recall it, or have the catalog's reproduction handy (see above), we shall understand how this painting "mirrors" Munch's, and that it is indeed a human figure in the middle (where Munch is standing), and that the lighter hatched area on the right is the bedspread, also striped, of the earlier painter's (1940-1942) work.

Continuing our scrutiny, we can now see a resemblance between our ghost from a canvas past and the herky-jerky lines of Duchamp's famous *Nude Descending a Staircase*, also conveniently nearby in the Philadelphia Museum's spectacular collection of this challenging innovator, along with the Great Glass, the Bottle Rack, the stool-mounted bicycle wheel, Duchamp's cage of marble sugar cubes, his peekaboo knothole, and so on. The upshot of our investigation is that we are (we learn) actually looking at a simulacrum of Jasper Johns, immersed in his hatches, an uneasy amalgam of expressionistic impulse and conceptualist plan, fearfully, positioned, as Munch depicted himself, between Sex and Death, between violent protest and ironic put-down.

Yet what a lot of literature! Are we reading Jorge Luis Borges or Italo Calvino? Through such a cloud of critical commentary, can we still see the art? And if we step along to the version of *Between the Clock and the Bed* that is still owned by the artist (see illustration on page 24), we shall find that he has silkscreened a much reduced image of *Usuyuki*

across its upper edge. It looks a lot like a Band-Aid. Rosenthal suggests that this “added element is a sort of intrusion from the real world,” and it is, certainly, an intrusion, but there are no intruders from “the real world” in Johns, only artifice enters it: newspapers, which are already accounts of events and not the events themselves, casts of body parts, smears or rubbings, bronzed spoons and forks, graffiti, the skull and crossbones of the danger label, not a skull not the body, not a daisy, not a cat, a sky, a fish. Even the hatches are devices of drawing. As I have suggested earlier, only what is already, in some sense, art has any chance of admission. The print of his painting, like the print of his hand elsewhere, certainly signifies his presence—his mana, his magic—but it also puts, in the portentous scale of *Clock and Bed*, his art in the pan, where sex and sleep and the pleasures and passivities of life have sat.

3.

For three years, in the middle Eighties, through a series of *Untitled* drawings in ink, watercolor, or encaustic (see illustration on page 24), Johns worked on the layout and execution of a set of symbols, which, taken together, might be said to be “in the studio of the artist’s head.” A number of sometimes overlapping apartments divides up the main space, and in these places old friends, like flags and flagstones, take up their residence, while in others will be pasted the image of the *Mona Lisa* or the Dance of Death sign. To this highly personal potpourri of emblems is added a few newer items, figures of visual ambiguity such as the vase created by the confronting profiles of two faces, or the Lautrec-like head which turns into either a young woman or an old hag, depending upon your strategy of organization. Alongside the Janus vase sits a George Ohr pot with the body of a brown owl, and in the lower right corner is a catalog rendition of the faucet and water knobs for a laboratory sink. The left half of these exploratory works is occupied by hatched flagstones whose contours have been increasingly softened so they more nearly resemble scraps of fabric now. They will ultimately fit together (in the Seasons paintings—*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter*) like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.⁵ Across perhaps the strongest of these works (an encaustic from 1984) march three squares containing diagramed body parts from the *Fizzles* series: feet face knee. They appear to be fastened there with masking tape—although upside down. Unless, of course, the entire composition has been hung incorrectly.

By the time the observer has reached the four panels which, in a way, sum up this exemplarium, it should be clear that the artist is working in two worlds at once, in the manner of his master, Duchamp. Each perceptual gesture is accompanied by a corresponding conceptual one, and moves made by the painter on the surface of the canvas are counterpointed by ones made in and for the mind. We see something in the picture and say: “Mona Lisa,” “faucet,” “two-faced vase,” and

(because we have been well schooled) our thoughts immediately skip from the masking tape to something that may be masked, or we travel from the shadow we see cast on the canvas through the word “cast” to the plaster casts which are elsewhere at work in these paintings.

Such moves of the mind can be rich, complex, and apparently endless. They can also take us in quite divergent directions. On the encaustic called *Summer* (see illustration on page 25), we see an area of rose-red and gray white, which we read as a stand-in for the *Mona Lisa* (we have already run rapidly up several steps). The space it would normally occupy is rectangular. However, since a good part is eclipsed by a black circle across which a stigmata’s hand sweeps like the hand of a clock, we infer the absent corners. This is one kind of inference. Mechanical replication has made the *Mona Lisa*’s face ubiquitous. Here, her image has been squeezed, blotted, recolored. How does she remain the *Mona*? Or is she the *Lisa* who has appeared in other of Johns’s paintings and prints?

The masking tape that pretends to fix the *Mona Lisa* to its plane suggests that it has been brought to the studio from a farther-away world, unlike the two flags that lie beside it, since those flags are our artist’s own. This is another kind of inference. The meaning of the *Mona Lisa*’s smile is a notorious, though fatuous, enigma; her face is almost as well known as Charlie Chaplin’s; while it is more narrowly remembered for the mustache which Duchamp drew upon one of its simulacra. Like the *Venus de Milo* and *Winged Victory*, the *Mona Lisa* is one of the Olympian divinities in the mythology of Fine Art. But it is not drawn here because it is thought to be divine, although Johns’s paintings certainly serve an aesthete’s religion; nor is it here because it must be worth multimillions, even more than the hatches and the flags. It is here because Duchamp anticipated the cultural and commercial deification of this wry version of the Blessed Virgin, and double-crossed her with a crayon.

While Vivaldi fiddles in our inner ear, and our memory fills with examples of art on the same sweet theme, we follow, in the *Seasons* paintings, Johns’s shadow where it falls in each season of his life: his life as it was, is, and is foreseen, because he is still too young (b. 1930) to have honestly entered winter. First we observe him rising like dark smoke from the pale child-shape he once was; while in narrow panels on either side of this chimney for the spirit are objects significant to that forming self: the gray-black slab of the clock (standing for the same thought that frightened Munch), a bunch of puzzles of perception (representing, no doubt, the contrary possibilities which confront youth), a few flagged stones, stars, and the ladder of success—the entire painting streaked with rain as though it were a window, except for the gray square where the child is, the most familiar figures of Euclidean geometry incised upon his image like genes. In windows, indeed, sit the silhouettes of folks who I feel must have mattered to Jasper Johns back then, and whose faces now form funeral urns.

Much of this imagery (the ladder of success, the wheel of life, a painting in its frame, a bit of tree and starry sky) are borrowed from Picasso's composition, *Minotaur Moving his House*, an oil from 1936. Although Johns's painting represents spring, there is little in it that is green. The colors are twilight, and the mood is somber.

Take three steps, and it's summer. There is Johns's shade pulled down like a gray glaze over a wall. Our thoughts are urged to follow the bouncing ball from shadow to shade to spirit, so what we see now are the souls of his objects, not just his own faint blockage of the light. It's a strange ghost who wears faintly figured genitals, and whose legs become transparent before they reach their terrace. A literalist like Johns might say this transparency showed their owner had little to stand on. Through each canvas there rises a thin, theatrical, Godot-like tree whose one bough bends toward stars which are drawn like leaves. As discreet as the shadow's sex, there nests on the branch one perky bird. Representations of pots, the clock, and other paintings, as well as the ladder with its drape of rope: these are collected here, but what in *Spring* had been schematic renderings of circle, square, and triangle cut into the gray world of the child, have, by this time, solidified, and look as woody as pieces of tree.

Fall (see illustration of page 25) is full of Finnegan. The Dumpty is king, and through the same central chute that divided the composition of *Spring* (where, however, the painter's figure rose like clearing fog) now a broken ladder tumbles, a lot of pots, a spoon, a large swatch of hatches pitches, and even the hand of time itself, whose arm is hung from a wire, as well as the warning skull and its charming words, CHUTE DE GLACE—these elements subside—they subside, and only the figures of geometry have risen to usurp the stars and their furry place in heaven.

W*inter* tells a still tale. Its general design is static, as *Summer's* was, whose format it roughly mirrors, so that the painter's figure, gray as the wall it fails to hide, is on the right rather than the left side (since the future lies always in the direction of the reading eye), and snow floats everywhere, its blears replacing the streaks of rain. There is also a snowman, drawn by a child. Euclid's spheres, blocks, and pyramids rest solidly on the painting's floor, having returned to earth fully realized. Ambiguities are mostly gone, for there is nothing ambiguous about death, nothing puzzling there—no—death is pure solution... although the clock's fell hand has passed through only half its ticks.

In *Winter* the shadow of the self which *Fall* had sundered, with its avalanche of symbolic objects, is whole again, for we take all our inner oppositions, like a bunch of logs, over the falls together. The mind disappears with the disappearance of its matter, ideas die with their signs, objects would not survive without their images. We stand, like a

snowman, in the painter's place, a listener "who listens in the snow," as Wallace Stevens has written, "And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

What will remain when the final panel arrives, empty in its absent frame, and we realize that for us, as for every painting, there are ultimate ends and absolute edges? What will be left will be the children of our lives, the acts of our imagination, the leavings of our feelings, the scars of our crimes. And for this painter, whose paintings have always been about the problems of painting (both material and metaphysical); who has done what he could to overcome the edge of his compositions by matching the sides, as he does here with *Spring* and *Fall*, to suggest a cylinder; who has subverted the hierarchy of object and image; who has continually questioned as Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit drawing does) the loyalty of the line (is it the "real" world, which the line has been drawn to represent and from which it appears to borrow its Being? Or is it to other lines that lie around it in the field where it may find itself? Or is it to the new signs it sees itself shaping, and the meanings it may take on, as it resonates like an icon that's been struck and rung like a bell?)...for such a painter, whose paintings have posed questions concerning every "given" they have taken, who pulled the flag from its patriotic stand and gave it back to pure design, thereby restoring to its image a little grace...for such a painter, his work must remain, as he will not, in order to outlast even the winter of its winter, to count the leftover tocks on that sullen slab of daily round, and carry its crucified hand through an upward arc (against the command of a downswinging arrow), because a hand whose palm has been pained in this way has been implicitly promised some kind of redemption.

Nearly every image in these panels has had a rich history in Johns's previous work. The symbol of the circle with its shaping hand appears as early as 1963 in a painting, *The Periscope*, which refers to the suicidal death of Hart Crane. Before that, in an encaustic of 1959 called *Device Circle*, a thin strip of wood, fastened like a compass to the canvas, has inscribed one that looks like the outer ring of a target. By 1961, with *Good Time Charley*, the stick has been replaced by a wooden ruler that seems to be cutting a swathe through the paint, but we shall see only arcs, now, never wholes. *Device*, an oil of 1962, has two pieces of apparently whirl-prone wood. Sometimes a broom is allowed to do the sweeping, as in *Fool's House*. Palm prints were used in a series of works concerning the poet Frank O'Hara. Johns was doing fleshflics then, rubbing portions of prepared skin—his face, his bottom, his genitals, his arm, his hands—on various kinds of surface. When a palm is inked, its deepest recess tends not to print, so the suggestion that the hand has a wound comes about quite naturally. In a painting like *Land's End* (1963), there is an arm drawn awkwardly as a board on one part of the canvas, with a palm print pulled over its end like a glove; then a half-circle swept by a strip of wood in another

part; finally an arrow in its own rectangle, which occupies yet another spot. In the four panels of *The Seasons*, circle, arrow, arm, and hand will be united in the leaden clock.

For Duchamp, the circle signified boredom, sterility, the dull daily round, containment, loneliness, onanism. In the *Seasons* paintings, the arena of the sweep is black as a blackboard, and the arm with its pierced palm is highlighted with white and seems to come from the dull glow of a chalk smear. It is a left hand, an unclean hand, the hand of doom and of desire, always falling counterclockwise through at least the fragments of this circle, with an arrow showing the way like a gloomy waiter to a poor table.

The gesture is unmistakably that of the famous male nude in a drawing by Leonardo called *The Proportions of the Human Figure After Vitruvius*. The arms of this figure have two positions: in one they are strictly horizontal, and reach the edge of a superimposed square; in the other they are slightly elevated in order to touch the circumference of a circle. There are also four feet simultaneously positioned: two on the circle and two on the square.

We could go on, there is more to churn a spoon through; but this is already a rich sauce, this sign of an empty, mechanical, passing time: Picasso's cartwheel, Leonardo's Vitruvian modular, Duchamp's sense of the sterile circle, the sweep of a hand that's been nailed and now hangs by a wire. Some ingredients come from the painter's personal history, some from the history of his paintings, some from the history of art itself, while others have wandered in off the street and from the history of our time. They represent aesthetic issues, ontological problems, personal fears, human concerns, technical issues, love affairs, and they engage the eye and its appetites in a most intimate way, with blandishments which say: "Don't think about what I am, only let me enfold you," while turning toward the blackboard or testing the mike.

Yes. What a lot of literature! And we have barely begun to parse these texts, which are more like pages from *Finnegans Wake* than I care to contemplate: scanning a line, reading a paragraph, catching an allusion, interpreting a symbol, filling in a bio, glimpsing a skyhigh overview. We are in a rebus world, the Puzzledome of the Theme Park.

4.

A wonderfully revealing photograph of Jasper Johns at work (see page 22) serves as one endpaper for Richard Francis's book about the painter.⁶ A projector has thrown lines from some preparatory design on a canvas, and Johns has stepped into its beam in order to trace the shadows in charcoal. Across the back of his shirt, like veins, the interrupted image runs, while on the canvas, in company with the

drawing, stands his own form, right arm raised. Here, indeed, his shade is only a shadow, but once it has been cast into the work, as it literally has been for *The Seasons*, that shade will have real substance, though at, as we know, the mercy of so many forces: the chemistry of decay in collage and encaustic, for instance, the whimsical swings of a culture's taste, forgetfulness, misuse, imitation, exploitation, a sudden slide in the market, the dark of the museum basement.

In his paintings of the Eighties, Jasper Johns may have lowered his guard a little, as Mark Rosenthal suggests, but it hasn't come down very far. The retreat from the human—a modernist mark—is everywhere in evidence. To allow only your shadow to enter a room is to make a point of how completely you continue to remain outside it. The will to concentrate on form (or the purely decorative impulse, as its enemies would describe it)—a mark of modernism, too—is subdued somewhat, but still muscular. The experimental urge—another mark of modernism—is fearlessly inquisitive. Johns has a happy disregard for genres, plays with abstractions of every kind, makes a proud show of his formidable technical skills, and reaffirms his commitment to the progressive exhaustion of a few motifs and themes. Here are the cultural thefts of Pop, the denials of Dada, the literary leanings of the Surrealists, the frank hedonism of Matisse, the emotional zip and freedom of Expressionism, the Cubist strategies of Picasso, and so on. Sometimes, and out of one eye, it does look like a quilt, a kind of modernist mosaic. Yet Johns's work is nevertheless unique, a successful integration of philosophical issues, textual construction, and artistic technique. Canvas after canvas calls out: "You believe such and such shouldn't—mustn't—can't be done? Come here, I'll show you."

Much of the time, I, at least, wanted just to look, to gaze in all the greedy eager ways of gazing (in front of the vibrant series called *Voice 2*, for instance), and have my mind blown by great gusts from the lungs as the breath left. The formal still bears the brunt and carries the load, I thought, so I didn't want continually to have to read from left to right, across the room, or up and down, or back through time, from duck to rabbit, hag to fancy lady, Mona to Lisa; because that feat might be performed for any industrious cabbalist or clever prestidigitator. There is nothing particularly privileged or pure about such a wish. I recently read a promotional ad for an international art exhibition whose come-on, in part, said: "By investing in art, you obtain a real profit from your own emotions." Still, it was worthwhile remembering, while you made your way past all that money to look at the many fine signs, Borgesian games, and aesthetic reminiscences in this notable show that there was also hung on these walls simply a lot of great paint.

Letters:

Jill Johnston

Grünewald Lives

[June 15, 1989](#)**William H. Gass**

William H. Gass (1924–2017) was an essayist, novelist, and literary critic. He grew up in Ohio and taught philosophy at Washington University. Among his books are six works of fiction and nine books of essays, including *Tests of Time* (2002), *A Temple of Texts* (2006), and *Life Sentences* (2012).

1. If we measure it in amounts of publicity, at least. Jorn Utzon's Bagsvaerd church is scarcely known outside of architectural circles. The crypt and apse of Antoni Gaudi's Sagrada Familia were begun in the nineteenth century. The towers belong to the twentieth. ↵
2. The Tremaine Collection Catalogue, for a sale on November 9, 1988, lists *Grey Numbers*, an oil by Jasper Johns which it says came directly from the ownership of the artist, at between \$250,000 and \$350,000. The painting is less than six inches high and a fraction more than four inches wide, so that a buyer will likely be paying between ten and thirteen thousand dollars a square inch for this modestly sized if immodestly priced work. Note the English style spelling of "gray," a small bit of snobbery no doubt worth tens of thousands. ↵
3. Originally published by the Petersburg Press in 1976, this book is reproduced, along with many of Johns's trial proofs and five informative essays by notable critics of the artist's work, as an exhibition catalog by the Wight Gallery of UCLA. ↵
4. Rosenthal is aware of the problem, but he points out that Johns himself has called these gestures "crosshatching." ↵
5. There are allusions to the work of Mathias Grünewald in this puzzling patch of hatches, and in an amusing and informative article Jill Johnston describes her pursuit of them. But why does one look for such allusions in the first place? Because it is assumed that every outline in a Johns is predrawn. The fragment from the Isenheim Altarpiece which Johns quotes is so discreet about its role that it is all but invisible. Consequently, Johnston concludes, "Johns has a relationship with his work that is exclusive, or that leaves out a great deal in its final embrace with his public... While Johns keeps his public at bay, he toys with it as well. He offers suggestive subject matter, which he short-circuits with tricks and deceptions. His ambivalence seems extreme, though concealment still reigns over its opposite." "Tracking the Shadow," *Art in America* (October 1987), p. 142. ↵

6. *Jasper Johns* by Richard Francis (Abbeville Press, 1984). The photograph is by Mark Lancaster. In general, Johns has been well-served by his critics. Barbara Rose has done a number of especially discerning articles for *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine*, and *Vogue*. Richard Field has followed Johns for many years. He wrote the text for *Jasper Johns: Prints 1960-1970* (The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1970), and has a fine essay in *Foirades/Fizzles*. Riva Castleman composed the catalog for *Jasper Johns: A Print Retrospective* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1986). Michael Crichton discussed him for the Whitney show, *Jasper Johns* (Abrams, 1977). David Shapiro did *Jasper Johns Drawings 1954-1984*, for Abrams in 1984, and Max Kozloff has two books from that same publisher, a *Jasper Johns* of 1969 and 1974. ↵