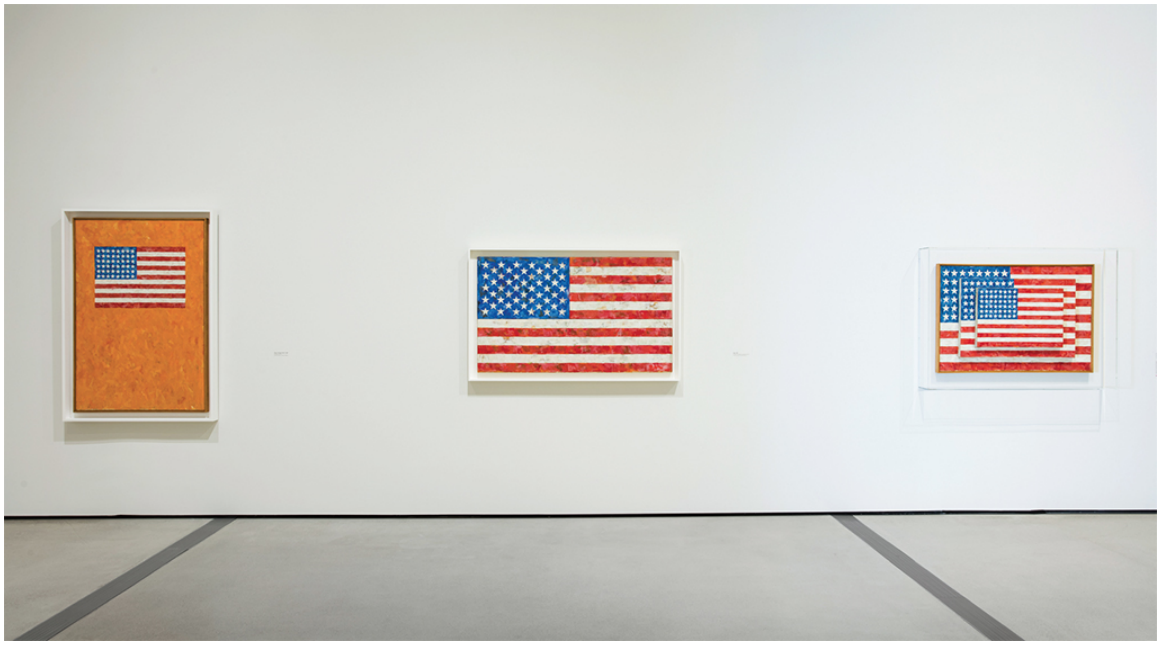
Jasper Johns

THE BROAD



View of "Jasper Johns: Something Resembling Truth," 2018. From left: *Flag on Orange*, 1958; *Flag*, 1958; *Three Flags*, 1958 Photo: Pablo Enriquez. © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

AT AGE EIGHTY-EIGHT, Jasper Johns has come to occupy a unique position in American culture. Rivaling Bob Dylan for sheer unrelenting inventiveness, he persists in the form of an enigma, continuing to mine a vein by turns ultra superficial and maddeningly hermetic. Any attempt to summarize Johns's significance runs immediately into contradiction: Indifferent to public attention yet virtuosic in his performance of artistic savoir faire, Johns is at once the iconic face of postwar American art and its most obscure, inward-focused contributor. A touchstone of queer art history—together with Robert Rauschenberg (his partner between 1954 and 1961), Merce Cunningham, and John Cage, Johns pierced the bubble of modernist hetero-sexism during the McCarthyite 1950s—he has nevertheless maintained a strict (some would say a closeted) code of silence about his personal life, flatly refusing to bring sexuality into the discussion of his art. The lone proprietor of a palatial Connecticut estate, he cuts the figure of the ultimate bourgeois, an artist whose trajectory from penury to plenitude has long since been realized. Yet he is the mirror opposite of old Picasso: Allergic to Bacchic abandon or ejaculatory spontaneity, he prefers stymied self-questioning to ruddy-faced hedonism.

Hence Johns's strange currency at present: Unplaceable in the archnarrative of twentieth-century art, his career appears to transcend any particular moment or movement. Spared from devaluation during the long postmodern winter, Johns now furnishes the prime example of art-historical continuity across the Y2K boundary, singlehandedly bridging the moment of Abstract Expressionism with

the aughts. Concatenating the main currents in postwar modernism—gestural abstraction, Duchampian readymade, Conceptualist indexicality, even deadpan self-portraiture (as in *Souvenir*, 1964)—Johns's art holds a key to the art of the present; indeed, we seem to be witnessing his late-in-life coronation. Last year, Roberta Bernstein published her long-awaited catalogue raisonné of his painting and sculpture which was followed by the opening of a major survey, "Something Resembling Truth," at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, for which she served as cocurator. This show then traveled to the Broad in Los Angeles, its only North American venue. An even grander ceremonial is planned for the year 2020, when two separate institutions, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, will simultaneously launch a retrospective of Johns's work, in what is certain to be billed as an apotheosis.

Jasper Johns, *Souvenir*, 1964, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 28 3/4 x 21".

All of which raises the Johnsian query, *According to what?* How should the importance of Johns's work be measured in what is likely to be his final decade? Is he to be celebrated as modernist stalwart or postmodern ironist? As queer hero or epistemologist of the closet? How is history to connect the artist to his art, when Johns has made the connection so difficult to discern? And what perspective on history—what *American* history—does his art invoke, if not simply the atemporal quietude of a new fin de siècle?

Jasper Johns, *Painting Bitten by a Man*, 1961, encaustic on canvas mounted on type plate, 9 1/2 x 6 7/8".

The answers to these questions are certain to confound. Ambivalence has always been fundamental to Johns's art, including, crucially, ambivalence about history itself. *Flag*, 1954–55, one of his first biographically sanctioned (i.e., neither destroyed nor disowned) artworks, made such ambiguous use of the American standard—was it a picture of a flag or the genuine article? a token of patriotism or countercultural subversion?—that the Museum of Modern Art declined to purchase the painting when it was offered in 1958, fearing reprisal from militant nationalists. For art historian Anne M. Wagner, addressing *Flag* in these pages in November 2006, Johns's equivocal usage of the Stars and Stripes registered a deeper uncertainty about public life in twentieth-century America: "What is most instructive about *Flag*," she writes, "is its terrifying, inevitable ambivalence in the face of the kinds of commitment demanded by the United States." Johns's ambivalence is political, in other words: Interpreted one way, *Flag* might project the ultimate mockery of democratic politics, rendering the icon of national community as a lavishly patinated luxury. Read differently,

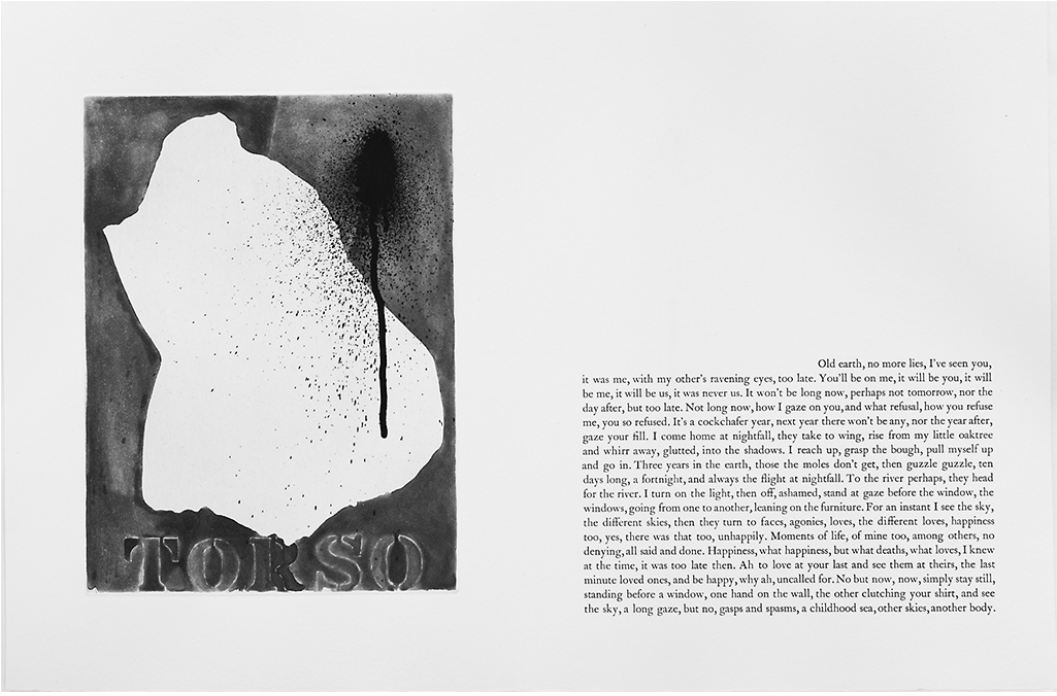
however, *Flag* becomes a testament of naive faith in democracy, handmade with exacting fidelity—with genuine zeal, even—to its prototype. Yet the logic of *Flag* is less both/and than neither/nor. Negative and positive, the democratic and the illiberal are un-resolvable in Johns's art; each performance cancels the other, throwing the whole question of politics—of art's publicness—into doubt.

Jasper Johns, *Green Angel*, 1990, encaustic and sand on canvas, 75 1/8 x 50 1/4".

"SOMETHING RESEMBLING TRUTH" impressed on viewers the depth and complexity of Johns's project in the aftermath of *Flag*. Spanning Johns's first forays of the mid-'50s to his paintings of the present decade, the survey opened with a roomful of flags, followed by other thematic groupings, encompassing his "0 through 9" series, 1958–; his crosshatched paintings, 1973–; his suite *The Seasons* of the mid-'80s; the "Catenaries"series, 1997–; and his most recent series, "Regrets," begun in 2012—and much more besides.

Those who might wish to know who Johns really is, and what sort of a mind (what sort of a man) stands behind the artworks that bear his name, are left in Beckettian darkness.

In spite of the exhibition's blockbuster popularity, at no point did Johns come across as populist; to the contrary, his work remained inscrutable from start to finish, leaving visitors to puzzle over each new motif, never certain what the whole sum amounted to. Toward the end of the show, viewers confronted an unidentifiable ghostly shape—is it the contour of an island? the outline of a prone body?—at the center of *Green Angel*, 1990, a canvas that would otherwise (were it not for the intervening form) portray a woman's face, with pimiento eyes and suspension-bridge lips. The shape's indecipherability is bizarre, yet typical; even where the sources of Johns's quotations are firmly documented (for example, his tracings of a tangle of limbs from the sixteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece and of the imprint of Marcel Duchamp's *Female Fig Leaf*, 1950), their semiotic purpose remains elusive. Wanderers through Johns's forest of signs traverse an essentially closed circuit of meaning-making, in which near-mythic significance accrues to mere happenstance, as with the flagstone-painted wall the artist glimpsed while on a taxi ride through Harlem (the source of a motif used in numerous works, from *Within*, 1983/2005, to *Nines*, 2006). The sort of *public* meaning broached by Rauschenberg and Warhol is largely absent from Johns's corpus; at issue is rather a personal, private history—but a history withheld from inspection, accessible only in the form of illegible detritus.



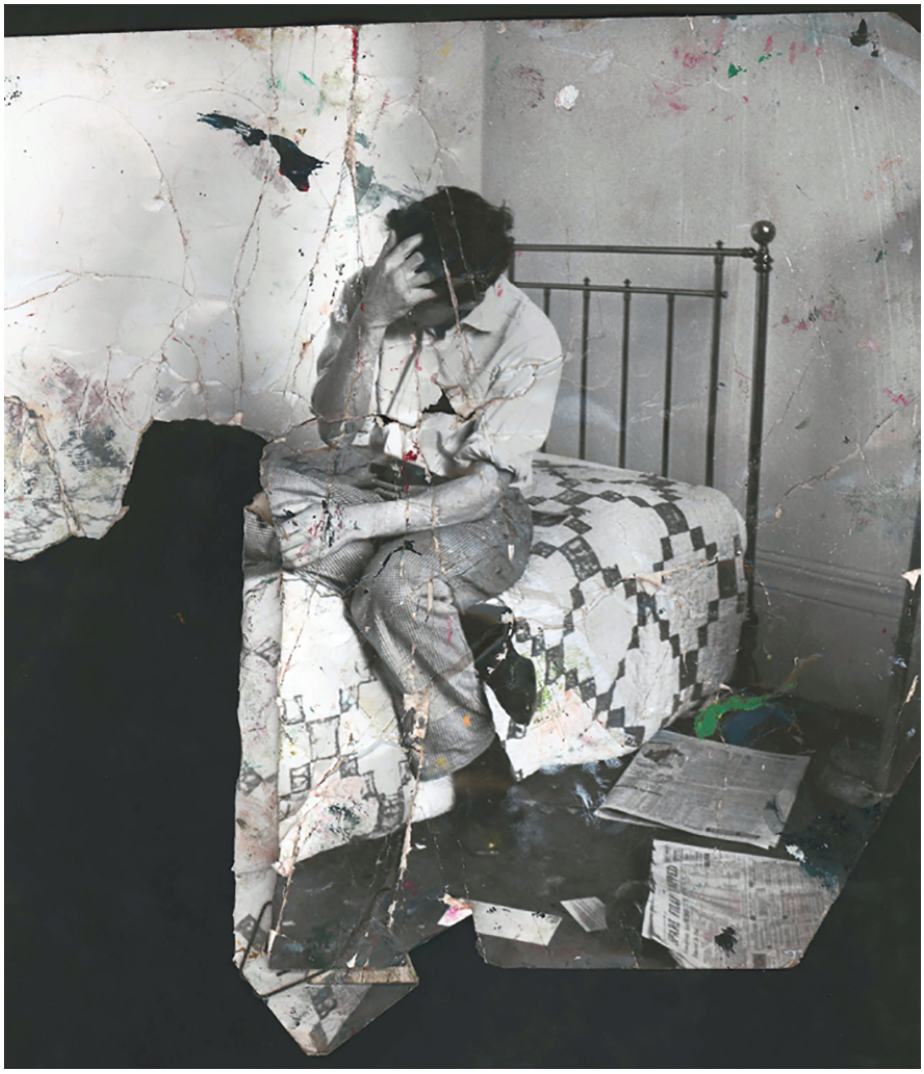
Jasper Johns, *Foirades/Fizzles* (detail), 1976, thirty-three intaglio-and-letterpress prints with five texts by Samuel Beckett in French and English, thirty sheets, each 13 x 19 1/2". © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

The hermeticism of Johns's art has been claimed variously as evidence of deconstruction (the artist short-circuiting the conditions of symbolic meaning), as an enactment of closeted homosociability, and as symptomatic of the split subject of poststructuralism. For the curators of "Something Resembling Truth," Johns's oblique perspective is simply empiricist, questing after truth "through the layered and shifting meanings uncovered through the process of perception"—an attitude more Cartesian than Derridean. Implicitly, however, the Broad's survey reinscribed Johns within the canon of modernism, wherein truth and artifice, knowledge and doubt, are ultimately indissociable—including, not least, the truth and artifice of the authorial subject. At the approximate center of the exhibition was a wall-length display of *Foirades/ Fizzles*, 1976, comprising thirty-three intaglios made to accompany five short texts by Samuel Beckett, which together figure Johns as exemplary of the unnamable, an artist who goes on communicating without any hope of being understood. Those who might wish to know who Johns really *is*, and what sort of a mind (what sort of a *man*) stands behind the artworks that bear his name, are left in Beckettian darkness.

Jasper Johns, *Painting with Two Balls*, 1960, encaustic and collage on canvas, wooden balls, 65 x 54".

The reconstitution of Johns as ur-modernist makes good sense. Never fully rejecting the legacies of Picasso and Rimbaud (one thinks of Rimbaud's mantra:"'I' is somebody else"), Johns has always been a painter in the second person, treating every artwork as the document of an absent presence. Yet modernism is made strange in Johns's hands, turning inward on itself: Compare *Painting Bitten by a Man*,1961, a small canvas swathed in pasty gray encaustic that someone—the painter? a jealous spectator?—has visibly gnashed, with the previous year's *Painting with Two Balls*, a picture at once uproarious and ominous, glowering at the viewer with its two beady (ballsy) eyes. Although each artwork departs from the conventions of easel painting in arresting, sardonic ways, neither appears bent on negating the art of painting as such. In spite of its modest dimensions, *Painting Bitten by a Man* conjures both the title and subject of Nicolas Poussin's much larger *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake,* 1648, in which death and hunger figure as key moments of the human tragicomedy—moments Johns evokes with comparable pathos. Likewise, for all its aping of boys-club humor (and/or AbEx misogyny), *Painting with Two Balls* is not simply, or even primarily, an in-joke. The painting skewers the Cedar Tavern crowd, but it points just as insistently toward Picasso, its titular balls echoing the insectoid eyes of Picasso's *Seated Bather* of 1930 (the work was acquired by MoMA in 1950; Johns cannot have missed it). Yet Johns's pantomime of sculptural figuration (balls into eyeballs) in *Painting with Two Balls* is at most a half measure, the gesture failing to negate the painting's status as such—*as painting*. And what a painting! Its balancing of vulgarity with equipoise—its explosive (but climaxless) play of color against color, the constant flickering between flatness and depth, the studied absence of order, the bloodless movement of the hand—takes us back to modernism's primal scenes of the 1870s: to Manet's *Boating at Argentenil*, 1874, for instance, or Cézanne's *Bathers at Rest*, 1876–77.

Something of Impressionism's combined anxiety and imperiousness survives in *Painting with Two Balls*, which boasts of virility while lacking, crucially, any hint of a phallus. The same two-sidedness is evident—indeed, is pivotal—in *Painting Bitten by a Man*, which enacts the rites of modernist self-abnegation in Beckett's despairing tone. The picture mimes screaming, but also choking (the painter gumming his throat with encaustic), conjuring bitings far removed from the dinner table. Yet *Painting Bitten by a Man* is equally lighthearted, even wryly comedic. The painting just is what it is, after all: Johns's humor is characteristically deadpan, deriving as much from John Cage as Manet. The bite mark effuses Cagean silence, saying nothing but containing—or rather, permitting—everything.



Lucian Freud, 1964. Photo: John Deakin.

ANYONE HOPING to resolve the contradictions of Johns's art is bound to fail: The ironist and the agonizer both answer to the name Jasper Johns. Defenders of Johns's oeuvre would do well to keep this ambiguity squarely in view. What Wagner calls the "terrifying, inevitable ambivalence" of national belonging is one part of Johns's legacy; so, too, is the ambivalence born of a guarded privacy—ambivalence about loving, remembering, and forgetting. Using a purpose-made rubber stamp, Johns declines unwanted solicitations with the terse apology REGRETS, JASPER JOHNS. The phrase is pathetic and comedic in equal measure, and meant to be read that way, no doubt.

Again, Johns cannot be found *in* his art, but he haunts it nonetheless. Beyond reproach, he is hardly beyond sorrow: Two photographs recur in Johns's recent bodies of work, one depicting the painter Lucian Freud, alone, tormented, weeping on a bed, the other, taken from a 1965 issue of *Life* magazine, a young American officer in Vietnam bewailing the death of a comrade in arms. One imagines how both images might be linked in the painter's mind, joined by an ambivalence arising from different circumstances than *Flag*—not a young man's

brushing against the grain of politics, but an older man's sounding the depths of his solitude. Yet the linkage is unmistakably Johnsian, connecting (and confusing) the private with the public, memory with history, art with war, emotion with silence. The enduring strangeness of Johns's art, its unsteady place in the American canon, has everything to do with this endless, bottomless equivocation: In a society governed by two contradictory fictions, proclaiming national unity and personal sovereignty with equal fervor, Johns expresses a rare skepticism of both. The last modernist, he has tarried with the negative to the bitter end.

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