

## THE PROVOCATION OF JASPER JOHNS: PUSHING THE REPRESENTATIONAL LIMITS OF PICTORIAL EXPRESSION\*



### JASPER JOHNS'UN KIŞKIRTICILIĞI: RESİMSSEL İFADENİN TEMSİLİ SINIRLARINI ZORLAMAK \*

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the relationship between visuality and verbal language in the works of Jasper Johns roughly between the period of 1955-1965. Works such as Numbers in Colors (1958-59), Gray Alphabets (1956), False Start (1959), Jubilee (1959), By the Sea (1961), Fool's House (1962), Map (1961), The Critic Sees (1961), Voice (1964-67), Voice 2 (1982), Light Bulb (1958) and Watchman (1964) provide us with fertile ground to explore issues pertinent to the limits of pictorial expression by revealing how visual and verbal spaces are intricately interwoven. However, the relationship in between also embeds a great deal of tension hosting constant interruption and violation. For a fair evaluation of any visual artwork, we end up having to suspend our habitual ways of looking and realize the complexity of the basic task of looking. These works challenge our vision by making us question the diverse experience of looking (seeing, beholding, saluting, reading, counting, studying, memorizing, spying, voyeurizing, gazing etc.). The paper claims that what grants Johns' art its provocative power is the realization that the realm of the visual is never a pure space but is constantly influenced by verbal and other senses.

**Keywords:** *painting, pictorial language, image, verbal language, representation*

#### **Öz**

Bu çalışma Jasper Johns'un kabaca 1955-1965 yılları arasındaki çalışmalarındaki görsellik ve sözel dil arasındaki ilişkiyi inceler. Sanatçının Numbers in Colors / Renkli Numaralar (1958-59), Gray Alphabets / Gri Alfabeler (1956), False Start / Hatalı Çıkış (1959), Jubilee / Jübile (1959), By the Sea / Deniz Kenarı (1961), Fool's House / Ahmağın Evi (1962), Map / Harita (1961), The Critic Sees / Eleştirmen Görüyor (1961), Voice / Ses (1964-67), Voice 2 / Ses 2 (1982), Light Bulb / Ampul (1958) ve Watchman / Gözcü (1964)

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gibi işleri görsel ve sözel dillerin birbirleriyle ne kadar yakın ilişki içinde olduğunu açığa çıkararak bize resimsel ifadenin sınırlarına ilişkin meseleleri araştırma alanı sağlar. Ancak bu alanlar arasındaki ilişki içerisinde yoğun olarak kesinti, karmaşa ve gerilim de barındırır. Herhangi bir görsel sanat eserini doğru bir şekilde değerlendirebilmek için eninde sonunda bakma alışkanlıklarımızı askıya alıp bakma eyleminin kendisine has karmaşıklığını fark etmek durumunda kalırız. Johns'un eserleri de bakma deneyiminin çeşitliliğine (görmek, seyretmek, selamlamak, okumak, saymak, incelemek, ezberlemek, casusluk yapmak, röntgenlemek, gözünü dikmek vs.) dikkat çekerek bize görme alışkanlıklarımızı sorguladır. Bu çalışma, Johns'un eserlerini bu denli kışkırtıcı kılan özelliğin görsel alemin kendi içinde saf bir alan olmaktan ziyade sürekli olarak sözel dil ve diğer duyuların etkisine maruziyetinin vurgulanması olduğunu iddia eder.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *resim sanatı, resim dili, görsel, sözel dil, temsil*

## Introduction

“... if you can say that painting can be interpreted in such a way, you have to realize that you are limiting the meaning of the painting, that the painting doesn't really mean what you say. Because saying means what you say and painting means something else. Though one might agree that what you say is a reasonable thing to say, it may be the best description you can make of the painting, but it is not the painting. I think that most art which begins to make a statement fails to make a statement because the method used (is) too schematic or too artificial. And that is simply to reverse what I just said. That I think if you set out, in a painting, to say something you could say, you would have been better to say it, rather than to paint it. Painting has a nature which is not entirely translatable into verbal language. I think painting is a language, actually. It's linguistic in a sense, but not in a verbal sense.”<sup>1</sup>

This idiosyncratic quote is taken from an interview Jasper Johns has with Yoshiaki Tono, in 1975, in which Johns talks about the relation and the conflict between painting and verbal interpretation. This paper explores how Jasper Johns depicts the transitivity and the rapport between pictorial and linguistic expression in his works roughly between the years 1955-1965, focusing particularly on works such as *Grey Numbers* (1958), *Numbers in Colors* (1958-59), *White Numbers* (1958) *Gray Alphabets* (1956), *False Start* (1959), *Jubilee* (1959), *Fool's House* (1962), *Map* (1961), *By the Sea* (1961), *The Critic Sees* (1961), *Voice* (1966-76), *Voice 2* (1971), *Light Bulb* (1958) and *Watchman* (1964). Throughout this period we see how his works display a rich juxtaposition of language and thought with visuality providing a rich repertoire for his iconography. This paper argues that the tension between the visual and the verbal gives these works their provocative power and prompts us to call our habitual ways of looking at or *reading* paintings and (verbal) texts in question.

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1 Johns, quoted in Varnedoe, 1997, 35.

In particular, Johns' last comment summarizes the leading question of our current inquiry by drawing attention to the undecidability between what can and cannot be translated from visuality into verbal articulation. The continuity and discontinuity; rapport and tension between *word* and *image* are dominant themes of Johns' art. His critics have always regarded his work as a "field where language, thought and vision act upon one another"<sup>2</sup>. As the opening quote indicates, for Johns, the ambiguous relation between a painting and a verbal statement reveal that there will always be a discontinuity between the two; even the most rigorous verbal interpretations will not suffice. Perhaps this oscillation between *word* and *image* makes both parties even more mysterious, and the void in between them hosts that which gets lost in translation.

W. J. T. Mitchell, one of the key figures in the exploration of the relation between visual representation and language, claims that "The domains of word and image are like two countries that speak different languages but have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange, and other forms of discourse."<sup>3</sup> As Mitchell puts it, visuality and verbal discourse are two different languages but they are in constant transition, superimposition and dialogue. Their mutual influence upon one another is a very crucial aspect of Johns' art. Johns' examinations of the relation between word, image and object surface in paintings like *Jubilee* (1959), *False Start* (1959), *Fool's House* (1962), *Voice II* (1964-67) in which he explicitly points at the instability of visual and verbal concepts – such as colors, names or commonplace objects as they constantly evoke one another. Towards the end, it will be argued that Johns's art invites us to revisit our habitual way of evaluating paintings by revealing the complexity of the act of looking. This paper roughly consists of two parts: the first part focuses on the ambiguity of pictorial representation by pointing at the problematic relationship between image and word. Drawing on the conclusions of the preparatory previous part, the second part explores the differences between looking at and reading images and questions the nature of the act of looking by calling our visual habits in question.

### **The Ambiguity of Visual Representation: Image and Word**

Johns' interest in the abstraction of the representational is most explicit in his works concerning numbers and alphabets which are means of representation. Philip Fisher notes that in his choice of painting numbers, maps and letters, Johns seems to suggest an allegory of obsolescence and extinction of modern civilization<sup>4</sup>. The way they are stripped off from their usage – the letters do not form words, and numbers do not serve mathematical functions – make them look isolated and bare. Reminiscent of ruins, they seem to pay tribute to a ghostly past in a nostalgic manner. It is like they had done good

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2 Johns, in Masheck, 1975, 147. Even though Johns makes this statement for Marcel Duchamp, critics like Michael Crichton and Roberta Bernstein agree that the statement is also very true for Johns, himself – as will be seen, below.

3 Mitchell, 1996, 49.

4 Fisher, 1990, 324.

work in their time, but now they symbolize an “epitaph”. This notion is especially evident in *Grey Alphabets* where the twenty six letters look almost hardly visible; rather they seem to disappear inside of the grey paint, “as if in a mud that dissolves their outlines”<sup>5</sup>.

Johns’ paintings of numbers and alphabets bring us into a crisis with representation. Numbers and letters themselves are devices that serve representation. We do not see, notice or even think about them; we just use them. As if in a Heideggerian manner, whatever we instrumentally use – such as a hammer - as “ready-to-hand” gets lost in usage, we become oblivious to its existence through its familiarity<sup>6</sup>. We only realize its presence when it gets broken. Letters and numbers may be regarded in a similar way as our *tools* for representation whose commonplace presence get lost in usage and we only remember them as themselves when they fail to fulfil their tasks; when they are extracted out of their ordinary web of relations, decontextualized, they lose their meanings. They only maintain their identities within the maintenance of their equipmental totality.

That’s why when we see those numbers and alphabets painted as an artwork in an objectified manner, we sort of go through a sudden shock of recognition. Seeing letters and numerals de-contextualized creates in us a sense of detachment and alienation as if we have been robbed of our mediators for expressing ourselves. Numbers and letters are our mediators for having access to the external world and interpreting reality; hence if they themselves are turned into independent representations, we have no tools to neither identify the outer world nor make sense of reality.

What is so provocative about those paintings – *Grey Alphabet* (1956) (Figure 1) and *Numbers in Colors* (1958-59) (Figure 2) – is that they draw attention to the materiality of signifiers, which, we normally do not pay attention at all as we habitually assume a necessary relationship between the signifier and the signified. In that respect, Johns’ works remind us of Saussure’s notion of the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified<sup>7</sup>. We tend to believe that there is a direct, immediate, transparent and necessary relationship between the two and this way of thinking enables us to take representations for granted, as transcendental reality.

Yet Johns not only demystifies this relationship by problematizing the arbitrariness of the letters and numbers but also undermines our habitual ways of perceiving visual representation. As components of images, in John’s works, colors have been treated in an arbitrary way as well. In paintings like *By the Sea* (1961), *False Start* (1959) and *Jubilee* (1959), Johns questions the ontology of colors and their relations to images and words. *By the Sea* (1961) (Figure 3) is made up of four multi-colored panels labeled RED, YELLOW, BLUE, and the last layer is like a flux, a juxtaposition of all the three colors; hardly readable. In terms of the colors referring to their names; they barely do.

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5 Fisher, 1990, 324.

6 Heidegger, 1962, 97.

7 Saussure, 2010, 854.

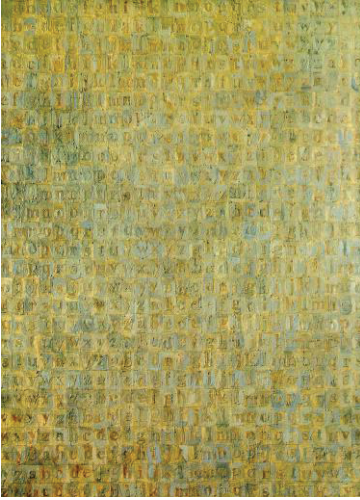


Figure 1. Jasper Johns, *Gray Alphabet*, 1956



Figure 2. Jasper Johns, *Gray Alphabet, Numbers in Colors*, 1958-59

RED has some redness in D; the yellowness of YELLOW is more “ghostly”; BLUE has some blueness for the first three letters, but they are challenged by the strong blackness in E; and as for the mixture color-name label, all colors are mixed. It is fair to say that the labels do not match the actual colors, and a person who does not read English would have no idea (if told that the words are color names) what colors the labels are supposed to correspond to. Peter Higginson suggests that the word as an entity is visually and semantically in question<sup>8</sup>.

However, the painting may also be regarded as a pun about this visual and semantic entity of the word, and of the colors as well. Philip Fisher notes that the three colors are the primary colors that are open to countless permutations<sup>9</sup>. All the other colors come out of the mixing of these three. Yet this mixing of letters does not create new words, especially when we attempt to superimpose one over another as Johns does. Thus Fisher comments that Johns makes all the colors

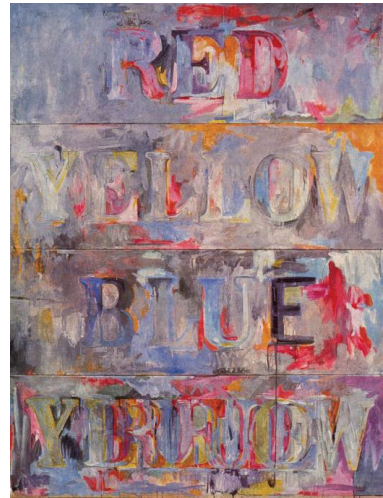


Figure 3. Jasper Johns, *By The Sea*, 1961.

8 Higginson, 1976, 53.

9 Fisher, 1990, 346.

as he mixes them in the last panel whereas “the words destroy one another rather than yielding a new word in the way that colors would” and as a result, in the last panel we witness a “lovely riot of colors triumphing over a ruin of words”<sup>10</sup>. The identities of objects are established on very conventional, contextual and hence, slippery grounds. Johns notes this by saying:

“For instance, there is the word ‘red’. But what is ‘red’ out of many shades of red, or which ‘red’ is the real red? When we gradually add yellow, exactly how much yellow will turn ‘red’ into ‘orange’? I find this way of seeing things very interesting. If you take up something, for instance, and you name it ‘something’, then you and I can understand exactly what the other party means through this naming. This is useful and necessary in our daily life. If we come closer and closer to that ‘something’ to identify it, however, we will begin to wonder whether that ‘something’ is really ‘something’ or not.”<sup>11</sup>

Also, the viewer manages to see those words in the last panel only if one thinks of looking for them there. What we see is very much dependent on our presumptions based on what we already know from the three panels above. The inherently contextual nature of seeing is also noted by Wittgenstein as touches on this issue: “What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of an object, but an internal relation between it and other objects”<sup>12</sup>. So, if we saw this mixture of words in the last panel in another context, we would not be able to make any meaning out of it; but here we “recognize” what is going on since we know the context. Our visual experience could be entirely different if we were not familiar with the three upper panels and the relationship between them. This point is expressed by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*:

“Someone suddenly sees an appearance which he does not recognize (it may be a familiar object, but in an unusual position or lighting); the lack of recognition perhaps lasts only a few seconds. Is it correct to say he has a different visual experience from someone who knew the object at once?”<sup>13</sup>

The theme of the mismatch; the gap; or the discontinuity between the word and the image is explored in paintings such as *False Start* (1959) (Figure 4) and *Jubilee* (1959) (Figure 5) as well. In *False Start*, we are confronted by a splendidly chaotic and expressive brushwork of colors with stenciled color names imprinted on those patches of colors, randomly. The stencils are themselves colored; so what we see is the relation between the color patches, the color of the stencils and the actual name of the colors. They

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10 Fisher, 1990, 346.

11 Johns, quoted in Prinz, 1991, 27.

12 Wittgenstein, 1972, 212.

13 Wittgenstein, 1972, 197.

do not necessarily correspond with one another. Or sometimes we get as close as the yellow patch corresponding with the YELLOW (the canvas ends there; at the upper right side) stencils but the stencils themselves are painted in bluish. When we come across with such a painting, instinctively we search for correspondences between the words and the color of the stencils and the color patches. However our attempts to mark continuities between these media are doomed to futility as the painting depicts the arbitrariness of the relation between the signifier and the referent; the representation and the reality.



Figure 4. Jasper Johns, *False Start*, 1959.



Figure 5. Jasper Johns, *Jubilee*, 1959.

Jessica Prinz notes that in *False Start*, “the words seem to, but do not, operate as labels”<sup>14</sup>; the words are wholly dysfunctional, not only because they do not refer to the correct color patch but also because they are rendered as objects by paint being applied to them. In *Jubilee*, the words are partly functional; not only because at times the words match with the accurate tone of color, but also because the “neutral” tones – namely, the tones ranging from white, gray to black - that the stencils themselves are painted seem to de-materialize the words and secure their identities as letters. In the painting, Johns refers to these issues even further by painting the painting in tones of black, white and grey tones with color name stencils BLUE, ORANGE, BLACK, RED, GREY, YELLOW in the same tones as the patches. However, the curious aspect of this painting is that, - probably owing to its relatively more melancholic mood compared to the lively and vivid tone of *False Start* - here, the words seem to “echo”<sup>15</sup>.

Presumably, partly because the mood of the painting is gloomy, and partly because the stencils are painted in blackish, whitish and grayish colors – by familiarity

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14 Prinz, 1991, 27.

15 Prinz, 1991, 27.

much more “letter-like” compared to the bright “colorful” colors of *False Start*, as in texts we always see letters in black – these words seem more “textual” than “painterly”. In *False Start*, the words are objectified by being painted whereas in *Jubilee*, since the letters are not painted in that sense, when we wonder what has been “subtracted” from the former, we assume that our conventional habits of perception do not consider grey tones – ranging from black to white - as “colors” the way they consider the “rest” – all the colors other than black, white and grey. These works make us question our habitual conception of what qualifies as a color.

In addition, this discussion can also lead us to an exploration of how we perceive words differently from colors or visual material in general. First of all, the stencils in *Jubilee* seem to “echo”, and the words imprinted upon that painting look more “textual” than “visual”, because words become much less “suppressed” or “assimilated” into the painting as opposed to the vivid colorful surface of *False Start*. The more colors a surface has, the more distraction we come across as we attempt to read. Not only the colors seem to choke the letters, but also the letters are overtly robbed off of their identities as signifying units by becoming too “visualized”. Yet in *Jubilee*, contrary to *False Start*, the power relations seem to switch; the colors have been silenced or deadened through “neutralization” – as the words come alive and raise up in a zombie-like manner. This painting gives a much less visual but much more “audial” impression.

What makes these two paintings so intriguing is that they draw attention to the difference between reading and seeing. As Fisher states, reading and seeing are two different activities, requiring the employments of two different perceptual habits. When we read the word “red”, we do not at that moment see anything “red”:

“Even if the word itself is red, or part of it is, to read it and to see its redness are two acts. Although most letters that we read are printed black we never smile when seeing the words ‘white and black’ thinking that the second word describes itself because the ink is black, whereas the first contradicts itself because the word ‘white’ is written in black ink. To read is to make irrelevant the color of the print.”<sup>16</sup>

Fisher claims that in such paintings when Johns uses words, he actually causes a turmoil in the viewer’s mind. The viewer is confronted with a situation in which her response to the painting is in tension because she needs to make a choice between reading words and looking at the painting. Reading, by nature, is a non-visual activity, which is essentially, “an inner voicing of the word”<sup>17</sup>. Mitchell advocates that the borders between “textual” and “visual” disciplines ought to be a subject of investigation and analysis, collaboration and dialogue rather than defensive reflex<sup>18</sup>. When it comes to differentiating between a word and an image, we have no difficulty; the word is a phonetic sign, meant

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16 Fisher, 1990, 347.

17 Fisher, 1990, 347.

18 Mitchell, 1996, 48.



to be read aloud or subvocalized, and “heard” as an acoustical event. The image, on the other hand, is a visual sign representing the visual appearance of an object. Thus, the difference between word and image is simply the difference between hearing and seeing, speaking and depicting. However, Mitchell notes that the separation is never that straight forward since both seeing and verbal signs are conventional; for instance, according to the recent neuropsychological studies, people who have been blinded for an extended period of time have to relearn the cognitive techniques of seeing even when the physical structure of the eyes are fully repaired<sup>19</sup>. Other than that, a visual image, like a tree, in the context of a pictographic or hieroglyphic inscription may evoke a symbolic meaning such as a forest or growth or fertility and be attached to verbal sign. So, a visual sign may transfer from an image to a verbal sign, to the domain of language and become part of a phonetic writing system there, blurring the boundaries in between.

Johns continues to problematize the ambiguous relationship between word and image that he had started in late 50s with alphabets and *False Start* and *Jubilee* in 1960s with *Voice* series as well. The differences between *Voice* (1964-67) (Figure 6) and *Voice 2* (1982) (Figure 7) are notable. In the former, a fork and spoon are part of a device connected by wires to a stick at the other end. The stick scrapes a path in the gray encaustic surface is about to erase the word “voice”. The word is barely “audible” as it blends into the large field of gray. In *Voice 2* however, the word creates the effect of a loud sound, impossible to ignore. What makes the voice in *Voice 2* louder is the fact that it is painted much bigger and more visible than *Voice*. Its verbal capacity increases based on its visual display; the larger the figure is, the louder is the echo of the inner “voice” we hear. Our experience of *seeing* the word becomes inextricable from *hearing* the image. Just as Mitchell points, the difference between word and image cuts across the difference between visual and aural experience, making it “untraceable”<sup>20</sup>.



Figure 6. Jasper Johns, *Voice*, 1964-67.



Figure 7. Jasper Johns, *Voice 2*, 1982.

19 Mitchell, 1996, 48.

20 Mitchell, 1996, 53.

If we try to differentiate word from image by claiming that the latter depends on imitation or resemblance whereas the former is arbitrary, we would be mistaken as well. As Walter Benjamin marks in his essay “On the Mimetic Faculty”, language is based on our capacity for producing similarities, or imitation<sup>21</sup>. Very primitively, onomatopoeia is the blatant example of imitation or resemblance in verbal language. Regarding the interplay between word and image, the verbal aspect of Johns’ art is probably most obvious in his creation of visual puns. Puns are very important for him because they undermine the fixity of meaning and de-contextualize the meaning of the artwork by introducing more than one contexts, suggesting a plurality of meanings; playful and unpredictable, the language at work in puns is ripe for various interpretations.

One of the best examples of such puns could be *Light Bulb* (1958) (Figure 8) where he displays the irony of illumination versus darkness. The light bulb literally and symbolically brings to mind light and illumination but the very medium used, lead, evokes the sense of darkness and gloominess. Another irony is the contrast between lightness and heaviness; light is supposed to be ‘light’; evoking mobility in great speed. However the lead makes it heavy and wholly immobile; movement is completely frozen. Especially the sculpture conveys the sense of entrapment of the light much more strongly by being made in the sculpture base; it is as if the base is like a mud or a quicksand that is pulling the light bulb – and the light - deeper and deeper inside and preventing it from any kind of movement.



**Figure 8.**  
Jasper Johns,  
*Light Bulb*, 1958.

*Fool's House* (1962) (Figure 9) is another painting questioning the notion of representation by including the object itself as well – in addition to the image. In the painting we see a canvas on which various tools of the artist – presumably the items that Johns ordinarily keeps in his studio – such as a broom, a cup, a stretcher and a towel are attached to the canvas and painted. The names of these objects have been scribbled with an arrow pointing to each object. Those arrows stretching from the word to the object seem to question the correspondence between pointing and naming objects.

Conventionally, still life paintings depict images that represent the objects. Whereas in this case, we see objects representing themselves; or rather, objects, represented

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21 Benjamin, 1999, 722.

by naming; or names represented by objects. Seeing the painting, we remember Magritte's statement in his 1929 essay "Les mots et les images":

"An object never performs the same function as its name or image... Everything tends to make one think that there is little relationship between an object and that which represents it... In a painting the words are of the same substance as the images: one sees differently the images and the words in a painting".<sup>22</sup>

Magritte's quote hints at his notorious pipe – which is not a pipe but an image of a pipe – questioning the ontological status of an image. But in Johns' work, the very notion whether there is an image at all is questionable. Is the broom an object or an image – solely because it has been inserted within a canvas and ambiguously painted over? Is it both? Or is it just a name? The arrows make the connection between the objects and names as if mediators between each party, suggesting a discontinuity between the word and the object and the lack of an immediate, spontaneous relation between the object and its verbal representation. Yet on the other hand, the paint applied upon the objects assimilates them *into* or *upon* the painting; actually, these propositions mark an essential problematic of the painting regarding whether the objects are insiders of or outsiders to the painting. Especially, the cup attached to the very edge of the canvas exploits this controversy as an item stuck between the boundaries of the canvas and the exterior. Moreover, the paint splashed or painted upon the cup adds to the undecidability of where this refuge is supposed to belong.

Prinz suggests that via this work Johns implies that the meanings of the words do not reside in the objects adjacent to them<sup>23</sup>. We do not learn the meaning of the word from this specific hanging object but rather, our understanding of this word derives from its contextual totality. However, the way Johns suggests this idea is very ambiguous. We derive meanings from objects depending on their uses, and here, the use of broom is questioned. It is not in its regular instrumental context. Perhaps we could also say that the painting actually reminds us of scientists or medical students dissecting frogs in laboratories for examining how their digestive systems work. When they dissect the frog, the frog is already partially dead or about to die. The students witness a process in which the digestive system of the frog is about to be obsolete; it is there, but no longer



**Figure 9.** Jasper Johns, *Fool's House*, 1962.

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22 Magritte, quoted in Bernstein, 1985, 92.

23 Prinz, 1980, 32.

working; out of use; dead. Ironically, the knowledge about the digestive system of the frog is acquired at the expense of the its death. In this still-life painting, we encounter a similar situation; the objects are there but dead, out of use. And, being named does not make them any more alive. Rather, it makes them even more redundant; evoking labeling in museums the objects that we no longer use. Overall, the site of the painting is like an exhibition of ruin that Fisher mentioned above for alphabets, flags and numbers.

### The Trap of Looking and Blindness

“The Watchman falls ‘into’ the ‘trap’ of looking. The ‘spy’ is a different person. ‘Looking’ is & is not ‘eating’ & also ‘being eaten’. That is, there is continuity of some sort among the watchman, the space, the objects. The spy must be ready to ‘move’, must be aware of his entrances & exits. The watchman leaves his job & takes away no information. The spy must remember and must remember himself & his remembering. The spy designs himself to be overlooked. The watchman ‘serves’ as a warning. Will the spy & the watchman ever meet? In a painting named *Spy*, will he be present? The spy stations himself to observe the watchman. ... If the spy is a foreign object why is the eye not irritated? Is he invisible? When the spy irritates, we try to remove him. ‘Not spying, just looking’ – Watchman”.<sup>24</sup>

The quote above is taken from Johns’ sketchbook for 1964, regarding his painting *Watchman* (1964) (Figure 10). Having read this intriguing note, it becomes a bit difficult not to associate the painting with the note. However, if we rely on the note too much in order to make sense of the painting, then, we fall into the trap of *reading*, actually. Even though throughout his works Johns emphasizes the inseparability of vision and thought, the spectator, faced with the uncanniness of his works, feels the need to familiarize and verbalize what she sees – yet, even the note does not really help here; since Johns’ notes seem to be as mysterious and idiosyncratically obscure as his paintings. Nevertheless, the note is about the act of looking; and modes of looking – spying; watching; remembering; overlooking; observing and so on.



Figure 10. Jasper Johns, *Watchman*, 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Johns, quoted in Bernstein, 1985, 75.

Some critics argue that the watchman refers to the critic or spectator whereas the spy, the artist. According to Roberta Bernstein's interpretation, Watchman is the seated figure upside down, about to fall down dissolving into the colors and space of the surface ("there is continuity of some sort among the watchman, the space, the objects"); whereas the spy is invisible ("the spy designs himself to be overlooked")<sup>25</sup>. Under the disturbing force of art, Watchman is forced to change his perceptual habits – the "trap" signifying the territory of the unknown. The analogy between looking and eating suggests the idea of an active involvement on the spectator's part; as he visually consumes the work, he ends up being consumed by it.

What makes Johns' early paintings on flags, targets, maps, alphabets, numbers so tricky and thought-provoking is that all these objects are related to looking, and they challenge and question our ways of looking. In those paintings, he creates not only the image but also the object itself. We may not be able to smoke Magritte's pipe or cigar, but we may salute Johns' *Flag* (1955)<sup>26</sup> (Figure 11) because his choices of such objects are all related to seeing, and they stimulate our perceptual habits concerning seeing. These objects require a different mode of looking. We "salute" or "honor" flags; "aim at" targets; "study" or "examine" or "follow" maps; "read" words; "count" numbers; but above all, we "look at" paintings... So the trouble is, how can we "purely" look at paintings when our vision is incorrigibly "contaminated" with all those various diverse modes of looking? And which habits are we supposed be "loyal" to as we view Johns' paintings? When do we cease to be "readers" in order to be "beholders"? In each case, seeing becomes a different experience and partly overlaps with the act of looking at the artwork.



**Figure 11.**  
Jasper Johns,  
*Flag*, 1955.

Fisher comments that another remarkable aspect of these paintings is that all of these objects are "usable"; for instance, one can "use" *Map* (1961) (Figure 12) while looking at it; for instance, the painting may provoke our curiosity to learn what states border Kansas, or whether it is further from Michigan to Maryland than from Texas to California. Or we may be tempted to find out how many states have more than one

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25 Johns, quoted in Bernstein, 1985, 114.

26 Johns, quoted in Bernstein, 1985, 3.



The notion that the idea - or the intention - and the painting are at one with one another suggests that the distinction between the two evaporates. However as Krauss conveys above, this situation is usually ignored; when a work is done, it ceases to be an extension of the artist and turning into a commonplace object, the painting gets “translated” into the verbal and securely situated within a certain legitimate discourse. This practice consolidates the belief that vision and language are two distinct realms established within a binary opposition in which the verbal has the upper hand – the finished work ends up as “statement”. The obsession over the verbal interpretation of visual material is depicted in the sculpture *The Critic Sees* (1961) (Figure 13), which Johns produces as a response to a personal experience:



**Figure 13.**  
Jasper Johns,  
*The Critic Sees*,  
1961.

“I was hanging a show of sculpture and drawings, and a critic came in and started asking me what things were. He paid no attention to what I said. He said what do you call these? And I said sculpture. He said why do you call them sculpture when they are just casts. I said they weren’t casts, that some had been made from scratch, and others had been casts that were broken and reworked. He said yes, they’re casts, not sculpture. It went on like that”.<sup>29</sup>

The critic’s annoying fixation on the ontological identification of the object as a cast rather than a sculpture is reminding of *Fool’s House* where Johns neatly identifies objects for fools, in order to prevent any such confusion – after all, the reduction of the object to a linguistic name makes life easier. Michael Crichton remarks that *The Critic Sees* points at the relation between sight and speech by emphasizing how visual experience provokes talking while on the other hand the sculpture also invokes a sense of “imprisonment”, as the mouths are boxed inside of the frames of the glasses<sup>30</sup>. The sculpture draws attention to the replacement of the eye with the mouth - and moreover, the openness of the mouth revealing the teeth may even imply the consumption of the visual, hence violence. The critic in the anecdote does not even listen to what Johns tells him since he is only occupied with what he says; the only thing he hears is the narcissistic

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29 Johns, quoted in Crichton, 1976, 48.

30 Johns, quoted in Crichton, 1976, 48.

echo his own interpretation. He does not see the artwork but only utters statements. He does not consider the possibility that casts may mean different things in different uses and contexts by way of turning into sculptures. His fixed association of objects with their conventional uses *blinds* him to what happens in Johns' work.

Seeing and blindness are important issues for Johns. The critic's blindness in *The Critic Sees* (1961) arises from the conflict between "knowing" and "seeing". When we know an object, we no longer think about it or see it. This idea has always been crucial for Johns; the very reason he worked with commonplace objects was that those are the materials that our perceptions are already immune to. He confesses that working on familiar items such as flags, targets, coat-hangers, coffee cans etc. saved him a lot of work because he did not need to design these things; they were "the things the mind already knows"<sup>31</sup>. This way, Johns was able to canalize his time and energy on working on other levels – such as questioning the complicated act of looking itself. If he worked with unfamiliar items, the novelty factor would create a visual overstimulation on the part of the viewer; hence the focus would be only on the subject matter. However, Johns is interested not only on creating visual works but also in the very act of looking as well. Perhaps precisely because the mind already "knows" these objects, the mind does not *think* about them or question them anymore. Familiarity eventually leads to indifference. Yet his works undo this numbing effect by bringing up the unfamiliar in everyday objects; confronted with these works, the viewer feels challenged and forced out of her comfort zone to make sense of what she encounters.

### Conclusion

This paper began with Johns' inquiry into the limits of representation, by exploring the relevance of verbal language to pictoriality and vice versa. We have observed that in his examination of the "translatability" of pictorial language, Johns points at the conflicts already at work in our perceptual habits. He opens up space for his imagery by presenting new territories for representation and abstraction and by exploiting the loose gap between the signifiers and the signifieds. He displays the inextricable link between the pictorial and the verbal in the attempt to stretch his artistic limits.

Johns' works show undeniably verbal aspects that influence our perception and conceptualization of artworks. He achieves these ends by creating a rich repertoire of imagery which does not merely engage the eye but also the mind through various pictorial and literal allusions and visual puns. His art exemplifies how images carry meanings and how meanings shift in changing contexts. In that respect, his art trains our eyes in a way, by calling our habitual vision in question. He employs mundane objects and ideas and re-locates them in alienating contexts, pushing our limits of visual literacy. Therefore, it is this constant challenge produced by his art which gives Johns' works their provocative power.

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31 Johns, quoted in Steinberg, 1972, 31.



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