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Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965, press event opening remarks from Earl A. Powell III and Jeffrey Weiss
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MAJOR BREAKTHROUGHS IN JASPER JOHNS' EARLY CAREER EXPLORED AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON PREMIERES JANUARY 28-APRIL 29, 2007



Jasper Johns (born 1930)
Target with Four Faces, 1955

encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull, 1958
Art © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Washington, DC—The work of Jasper Johns (b. 1930) represents an important breakthrough in art at midcentury, a period of radical change in American art. Themes developed in the first decade of his career will be examined as a group for the first time in a comprehensive exhibition of 83 works, on view at the National

Gallery of Art, Washington, January 28 through April 29, 2007.

Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965 presents some of Johns' most iconic paintings, drawings, and prints selected from public and private collections, including the artist's own. Departing from the format of the survey or retrospective, the show will trace the unfolding relationship of four specific motifs in Johns' works—the target, the "device," the stenciled naming of colors, and the imprint of the body—revealing the works' significance to the following generation of artists. The exhibition includes the largest group of target paintings ever assembled. After Washington, the exhibition will travel to the Kunstmuseum Basel, June 2 through September 9, 2007, the only other venue.

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

"Jasper Johns is one of the most influential figures in the history of postwar art and the National Gallery of Art's commitment to his work draws from its profound historical significance," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are proud to premiere an exhibition of this scope, which provides enormous insight into Johns' philosophy of painting. We are enormously grateful to Target for this sponsorship— its fourth sponsorship at the National Gallery of Art— and Target's continuing commitment to the Gallery."

Exhibition Support

This exhibition is proudly sponsored by Target as part of its commitment to arts and education.

"At Target we strive to make the arts affordable and accessible to youth and families," said Laysha Ward, vice president, community relations, Target. "Through our continued partnership with the National Gallery of Art we are able to expand exposure to the arts – helping to build stronger communities and foster an appreciation and understanding of various cultures and points of view."

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

The Exhibition

In 1954, in an attempt to reinvent himself, Johns destroyed all the work he had made up to that point. He wanted to start over as an artist and sought a new direction away from abstract expressionism. In pairs and sequences of paintings and works on paper, Johns reduced art-making to a series of quasi-mechanical procedures. These techniques and their significance were embodied by four related motifs: the target, the "device," the stenciled naming of colors, and the imprint of the body, which appeared alone or together in various combinations and excluded almost all other images, most notably the flag and the number.

Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955–1965 is arranged chronologically in sequences of closely related works:

Of the four earliest icons (targets, flags, numbers, and maps) that occupy his work, the target is Johns' most abstract image. Representing something anonymous and universal, the familiar target appears in Johns' work until 1961. His first two paintings of the target image, *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) and *Target with Four Faces* (1955), incorporate a row on top of small cubicle-like boxes with hinged drop doors, each containing a plaster cast of a body part.

The target as a subject is replaced by the mechanical "device"—a wooden, compass-like instrument attached to the canvas by a pivot on one end and manipulated to scrape through the paint surface in circles and arcs. The first of these works, *Device Circle* (1959), is affixed with the kind of compass arm that Johns used to create his target images. From *Device Circle*, Johns produced two simultaneous sequences of work: those that show the artist changing his manner of applying paint (in long strokes of the brush) and introduce the stenciled color names, and those that use or depict the device.

Johns began naming colors with stenciled lettering in the paintings *False Start* (1959) and *Jubilee* (1960). In these works, he labeled and mislabeled colors using red, yellow, blue, and orange paint in the former, and black, white, and gray paint in the latter.

Combining themes of sensuality and mortality, Johns began using his own body as an instrument and an image. In works such as *Periscope (Hart Crane)* (1963), he incorporated the stenciled words RED YELLOW BLUE and a device image that is attached to an imprint

of his palm. In this way, the artist compared the device to his own outstretched arm. In the *Skin* drawings (1962), Johns covered his head and hands with baby oil and left an impression of these body parts on mechanical drafting paper. The images were revealed when he rubbed them with strokes of charcoal. In *Arrive/Depart* (1963–1964), the composition of red, yellow, blue, and orange paint incorporates several handprints and the imprint of a skull.

Throughout the second half of the exhibition, various works represent a complex combination of the motifs. New themes also emerge: *Periscope (Hart Crane)* is presumed to reference Crane's suicide by drowning through the image of the extended arm. Together with this painting, works such as *Passage* (1962) and *Land's End* (1963), which also draw their titles from Crane's poems, form a sequence of works dedicated to Crane. Others, such as the uncommonly large paintings *Diver* (1962) and *According to What* (1964), are compilations of motifs and techniques. By contrast, one large drawing, also titled *Diver* (1962–1963), is an expansive but diagrammatic representation of the body as device. The monochromatic painting *Voice* (1964–1967) is also startlingly spare. Here the device moves through a field of gray paint, leaving behind a single curving band that brings us back to the image of the target, where we began.

Jasper Johns

Over the past 50 years, Jasper Johns has created a rich body of work that has had profound influence on art in the U.S. and Europe. Johns was born in Augusta, Georgia, in 1930 and raised in South Carolina. After attending the University of South Carolina for three semesters, he moved to New York City at the age of nineteen and briefly attended a commercial art school. After service in the army, including a period in Japan, he returned to New York in 1953, where he flourished as an artist.

Along with his contemporary Robert Rauschenberg, Johns is widely acknowledged as one of the most important American painters of the postwar era and one of the greatest living American painters. He is also regarded as one of the greatest graphic artists of the 20th century, creating important bodies of drawings as well as prints in a variety of media. In 1950s New York, Johns met John Cage and

Merce Cunningham, with whom he collaborated, producing sets and props for performances. Johns' work on canvas and paper from that period, often limited to a single motif against a monochromatic field, has since attained enormous historical stature. Subsequently, his work has grown increasingly complex, even quasi-autobiographical. Developments such as abstract painting and drawing in a crosshatch manner further distinguish Johns' contribution to the history of art since midcentury.

The recipient of numerous awards and honors, Johns was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1988, and that same year he was awarded the Golden Lion, the grand prize at the Venice Biennale. Johns resides in New York City, Connecticut, and the French West Indies.

Curator, Catalogue, and Related Activities

The exhibition curator and catalogue author is Jeffrey Weiss, head of the department of modern and contemporary art, National Gallery of Art, Washington. *Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965* is published by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, and includes essays by John Elderfield, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, associate director for conservation and research, Whitney Museum of American Art; Robert Morris, American artist, critic, and Johns contemporary; and Kathryn A. Tuma, assistant professor of modern art, Johns Hopkins University. The publication will be available late January 2007 from the National Gallery of Art Web site at www.nga.gov or by phone at (202) 842-6002 or (800) 697-9350 (\$60.00 hardcover, \$40.00 softcover, 296 pages, 170 color and 80 black-and-white illustrations).

The National Gallery of Art is planning a full program of related lectures, tours, and concerts. (See Related Activities Press Release).

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden, located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Ave. NW, are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the Fourth Street Entrance of the East or West Building to permit X-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. Any items larger than 17 X 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms. For the safety of the art work and visitors, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left at the checkrooms.

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