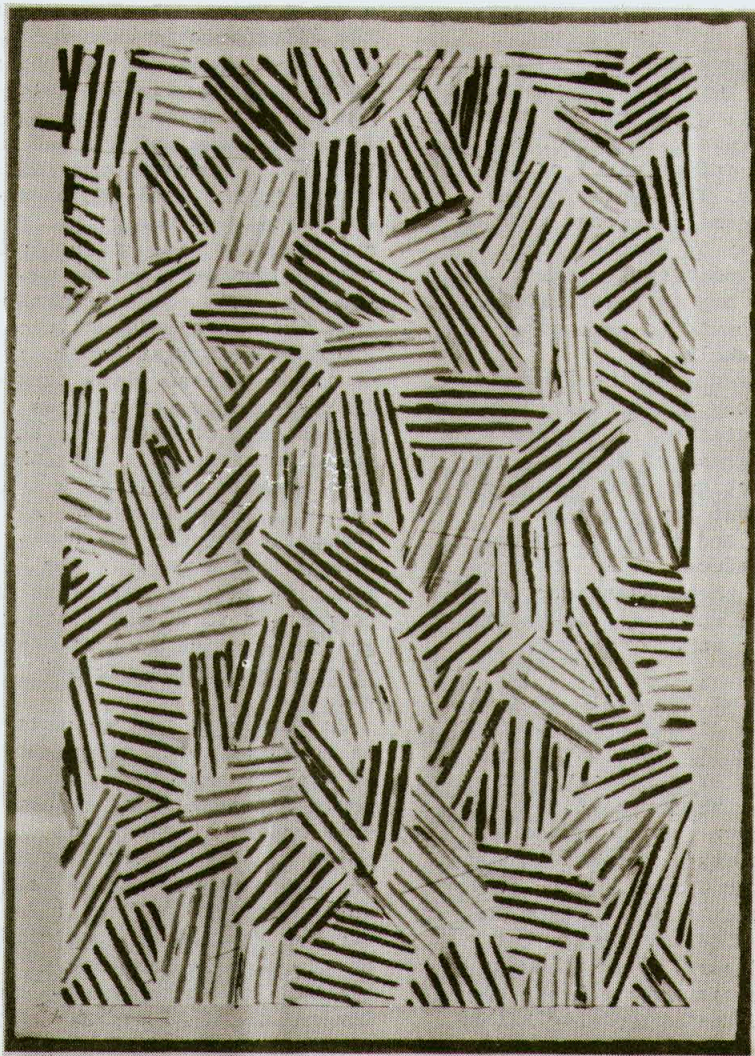


Jasper Johns
MATRIX 20

Wadsworth Atheneum
Mid May to early July 1976

From Four Panels from Untitled 1972, 1973-74



MATRIX is supported in part
by a grant from the National
Endowment for the Arts, a
Federal agency.

Among the most important prints of the 1970s are Jasper Johns's two series, Fragments - According to What of 1971 and Four Panels from Untitled 1972 executed in 1973-74. Both derive from major paintings, respectively of 1964 and 1972, but their look is strikingly different. Fragments are cool, gray, precise, and contrast sensuous areas against others which look machine-made; they closely recapitulate selected portions of their prototype. Four Panels from Untitled 1972 are notably more painterly and coloristic, but retain an air of restraint; they each repeat an entire panel of the painting. Thus while Fragments seems concerned with an inventory of events, Four Panels immediately raises problems of how to relate its disparate parts to each other and to the whole.

The events of the Fragments are highly illusionistic and representational. Fragments are diagrams of devices, systems, actions, and words, diagrams that imply motion, change, and shift of focus. Acting almost as an abstraction of these ideas are the bands of modulated grays that occur in each of the six prints.

How does one begin to look at these lithographs? Consider Bent Stencil with its progression of circles within squares. The topmost is clearly a drawn image, subtle and diagrammatic. The middle contains two darker, flat, gray areas that seem to share the flatness of the paper. The lower figure is an illusion of the stencil itself - the apparatus that purportedly (and in the painting, literally) was the template. It even has a few random dabs of paint adhering to it. Prolonged regard reveals, however, that the lilac-gray area underneath is

too small, and that, in fact (what do we mean by "in fact" here?), the stencil protrudes beyond the edge of the three vertical zones (beyond the bottom edge in the painting) and overhangs a rather indefinite area of succulent lithographic wash. When it is realized that the stencil is really meant to be the same size as the circle-and-squares it left behind, it can be "used" to measure or to provide a scale which serves to control the illusionistic washes below, even if it can no longer carry out its original role. The implied movements up and down the image, of eye and mind working in concert, are reinforced by the band of "blended roll" grays at the right. Simultaneously, the utter blankness of the left column reasserts, with total frankness, that this is simply a lithograph on very flat paper. It is in part these plays between implied and perceived uses, spaces, and objects, and their denial or contradiction (the bent stencil itself is a symbol of loss of function, although it thereby gains another) that populates the painting and, in different and compressed form, the lithographs. A quick look at other Fragments unfolds further events.

In Bent Blue the spectator is moved to total acceptance of what in any other context would be regarded as rather meaningless: the bending of a color as it (the word) moves through pictorial space leaving or projecting itself in various aspects of completion on the machined surface of blended ink to the right, and immersing itself or emerging from the washed surface on the left. It is the total illusion engendered by the wonderfully modulated washes that distracts from the inexplicable qualities of the situa-

tion and sets up an acceptance of the implied motion of the letters. Yet, in another part of the lithograph, Johns explicitly cancels a spatial event, that of reading the newspaper which was transferred from our side of the surface to read illusionistically on the other. Throughout the set, bends in and out of the space are marked by a spectrum line (the closest analogy to bending actual color). Hinged Canvas alludes to a host of inside-outside situations, beginning with the spectrum line and the "action" of the word, "hinge." Most obvious is the ambiguous view of the back of a stretcher (again only a diagram) and the front of another (in the painting Johns used two stretchers hinged together so it was possible to see two versos in succession). The blended shading seems to pass from the front around to the back of the stretcher. The same ambiguity is detected in the profile of Marcel Duchamp whose essence is in the field (a pun on the white of the paper) but whose presence can only be attributed to the gray, template-shape. This, in turn, is only a projected shadow (note the shadow of the suspending string), one that is a slight distortion of the actual Duchampian device (a square of torn paper) which is not within our view. Finally, there is the airgun splash and drip which is unthinkable without the "bachelor shots" (of Duchamp's Large Glass in the Philadelphia Museum of Art), marks made by pigmented matches shot at the glass and yet another mode of paint-application from a position outside the normal arena of painting. Through these allusions we are brought into contact with two Duchamp pieces (the other being Tu M' at Yale University Art Museum) which pose similar questions about illusion, and

which often evolved from methods of image-formation that had nothing to do with conventional acts of painting. The other devices and ironies of Fragments are far too abstruse and allusive to inventory here. They all continue Johns's fascination with the territory that separates fact from illusion. In these works, the artist focused on implied movements, especially those toward and away from the canvas. That many of these occupy the space of our minds more than the depicted space of the works of art, is just Johns's point. In squeezing us into this position of uncertainty, he not only plays with paint-applying methods (literally in the painting and illusionistically in the lithographs), but he begins to question the nature of objects, of illusions of objects, of diagrams of objects, of actions of objects, and even of words as objects. In the end, what he implies is that the only thing one can point to is the specific function or use that an object has in a given context. In painting, the context of meaning is the painting itself.

The same thesis ultimately informs Four Panels from Untitled 1972. The four prints, and especially the painting from which they derive, are so refractive that they have virtually silenced all the critics. Whereas Fragments concerns objects and their apparent manipulation, Four Panels concerns entire fields and their relation to each other. This is made explicit in Johns's stipulation that, provided a sequential order is maintained, the four panels of both painting and lithograph may be revolved, e.g., CDAB, DABC, ABCD, etc. Still, the difficulties of "seeing" the painting may have pressured Johns into making another move

in the prints: the decision to add embossing to each lithograph. Each of these (actually, one is embossed, the other three are debossed) contains a blind, inkless image of the previous panel. That is, the hatchings of panel A are debossed into the paper of panel B, etc. Although very few observers can consciously imprint their visual memories so as to affect a transfer of an experience from one field to another, this kind of thinking has been implicit in much of Johns's past work, as in the green, black, and magenta, "complementary" Flags where the colors of the upper flag seem to transfer themselves to a lower, neutral receptor-flag which could then appear red, white, and blue. The meaning of that painting, however, should not be restricted to that particular use, but should be taken as a more general proposal that one structure can be seen in terms of another. In a more sophisticated manner, the same concern informs Untitled 1972. In addition to the embossings, the two flagstone panels (B & C) are clearly related since the pattern of B is shifted to the right in C. Even the transparent gray in the lower center of C can be detected just appearing at the lower left of B.

Can the other panels be regarded in a similar manner, one that does not search for meaning outside of visual events? The hatched panel (A) is, of course, reminiscent of the Flags of the past; but here an almost stolid application of paint surprisingly results in lively tensions between color areas, reversing the mechanism of older works in which the fluency of the brush served only the most mundane of patterns. Not only do the hatchings read as a pattern of color zones (in the painting the wax encaustic imparts some actual relief to the surface),

but they also embody a different order of space than that of the flags or the flagstones. The nature of this new space is tentative. It is generated by the loose color patterns of the hatchings which impart a weaving motion to the picture surface. Yet, it is the pedestrian and tangible character of these same hatchings that decisively establishes the flatness of the non-representational image.

By comparison, the image of panel B is flatter and considerably less painterly, while the second flagstone panel (C) is dampened to the point of partial transparency. The careful observer of the lithographs will notice that even the white printings are modulated into broader and more transparent swatches. This simultaneous diminution of spatial and pictorial activity is echoed in the sequence of debossings; the single embossing occurs on the most active image, that of the highly illusionistic panel D. At first the casts rudely controvert the expectation of continued plastic abatement, but panel D represents a beginning as well as a continuation. (The notion of sequential circularity is hardly new to Johns who expressed it most concretely in the lithographic sets of numbers, 0-9, of 1960-63.)

In the painting, the high relief of the casts and slats is actual, while in the lithograph it is illusionistic, set up by a photoscreen and the most artful use of the brush. Everything is informed with spatial ideas — the wooden boards pass over and under each other, recalling the hatchings in panel A; they are also marked with orienting letters 'R' and 'L' and with sequencing numerals. Still, the body casts themselves (rubber in the painting)

cannot be reconstituted, like a picture puzzle, into a meaningful whole. They must be seen as visual events, as patterns disposed on the field of the painting or lithograph much like the flagstones or the color patches of panel A. In the print, the compression of the illusion and the disruptive embossed design from panel C almost force this reading, although it still seems to conflict with the natural inclination to interpret the human body. But even this pictorial reading is insufficient, for casts are three-dimensional events of a high order of complexity. They not only replicate the outer surface of the body, but they also imply a hollow inner space and its opposite, the mass of the body known from experience. Again one uncovers a Johnsian play on outside and inside that is a function, as well, of memory. As in Bent Blue, the roles of objects are only logical and acceptable within the painting itself, although something of their meaning derives from the influence of habits of mind on the act of observation. The experience of panel D is determined, therefore, by its own order, by the micro-languages established by the other panels working in concert, and by a limited group of associations from past experience of Johns's own work and of our own lives. To seek other meanings, ones that are not subsummed by visual events themselves, is to desire literature, not painting.

Many of the ideas of reflection, replication, memory, and a concern with the actual application of paint that characterized Fragments and Four Panels are continued in Scent, the lithograph-linocut-woodcut of 1975-76. By referring yet again to a physical sensation, smell, Johns reverts to a complicated metaphor that

equates bodily with intellectual functions, as he already has in Voice (sound) and Map (touch). Scent makes conscious the beholder's activity of searching for traces of intention and organization (the hatchings are actually highly ordered), as well as of the past (Johns's own past works). He also sends the viewer on a false-scent, in fact a self-cancelling one, since the title is a repeat of that used in two rather different works: Jackson Pollock's last painting and a little-known work by Robert Rauschenberg. The entire series of recent paintings that were generated by the hatchings of Untitled 1972 represents a new departure, a new vehicle of flat, modernist painting which both incorporates and expands Johns's study of the ground rules of painting and their relation to the observer.

How can these works of the 1970's be understood? So far we have kept our interpretations within the languages established by the works themselves. Are these sufficient? For those who are not convinced, perhaps it could be suggested that these explorations of memory, of transference, of inside and outside are analogs for a crucial question about the reality of experience: is it out there or in here? Virtually every discipline and every life situation enters into an ongoing dialogue with this critical issue. In the sense that Johns's works question the viewer's decisions about what he sees, they may in fact be very deep commitments to the morality of meaning itself.

Richard S. Field, Guest Curator
Curator, Davison Art Center
Wesleyan University

Works in MATRIX:

Fragments - According to What, 1971

Leg and Chair, lithograph in 7 colors, 35" x 30", edition 68.

Bent Blue, lithograph in 4 colors with newspaper transfer, 25 1/2" x 28 3/4", edition 66.

Hinged Canvas, lithograph in 8 colors, 36" x 30", edition 69.

Bent U, lithograph in 4 colors, 25" x 20", edition 69.

Bent Stencil, lithograph in 9 colors, 27 1/2" x 20", edition 79.

Coathanger and Spoon, lithograph in 7 colors, 34" x 25 1/4", edition 76.

All on Arches paper. Printed and Published by Gemini, G.E.L., Los Angeles. Lent by Leo Castelli Gallery, New York City.

Four Panels from Untitled 1972, 1973-74

A: lithograph in 14 colors plus debossing; B: lithograph in 10 colors plus debossing; C: lithograph in 11 colors plus debossing; D: lithograph in 14 colors plus embossing.

Each panel 40" x 28 1/2" on Laurence Barker Grey handmade paper, edition 45. Printed and Published by Gemini, G.E.L., Los Angeles. Lent by Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. Purchased with Funds from the National Endowment for the Arts matched by donations by Miriam G. Field, Juana G. Flagg, Robert and Helen Mandelbaum, Elise W. Snyder, and the Friends of the Davison Art Center.

Corpse and Mirror, 1975-76, color etching and aquatint, 10 3/8" x 14" (plate) on Rives BFK paper, edition 50. Printed and Published by Petersburg Press Inc., New York. Lent by Petersburg Press.

Scent, 1975-76, offset lithograph, linocut, and woodcut

in 4 colors, 31 1/2" x 47" on Twinrocker handmade paper, edition 42. Printed and Published by Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, Long Island. Private Collection.

Selected one-man exhibitions: Leo Castelli, NYC '58 (first), '60, '61, '63, '66, '68, '70, '74, '76; The Jewish Museum, NYC '64; Philadelphia Museum of Art, NYC Jasper Johns: Prints 1960-1970 '70; Museum of Modern Art, NYC Jasper Johns: Lithographs '70; The Arts Council of Great Britain Jasper Johns: Drawings '74.

Selected group exhibitions: Museum of Modern Art, NYC Sixteen Americans '59; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, NYC Six Painters and the Object '63; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970 '69.

Selected bibliography about Johns:

Greenberg, Clement. "After Abstract Expressionism," Art International, vol. 6, no. 8 (October 1962), pp. 24-32.

Steinberg, Leo. Jasper Johns, (New York), 1963.

Kozloff, Max. Jasper Johns, (New York), 1969.

Field, Richard S. Jasper Johns: Prints 1960-1970, (Philadelphia and New York), 1970.

Hess, Thomas B. "On the Scent of Jasper Johns," New York Magazine, vol. 9, no. 6 (February 9, 1976), pp. 65-67.

© Copyright Wadsworth Atheneum, 1976