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**Between Chance and Habit:  
The Ink on Plastic Drawings of Jasper Johns**

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## **Between Chance and Habit:**

### **The Ink on Plastic Drawings of Jasper Johns**

by

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The ink on plastic drawings of Jasper Johns count as one of his most prolific and enigmatic media, and yet they stubbornly remain the least investigated on their own terms. As early as 1961, Johns became attracted to the medium's lack of absorbency and the distinctive patterns ink made during the time it took to dry. These dense palimpsests collapse mind and matter into singularly resonant works; they are somewhere between spontaneity and habit, between immediate feeling and mediated representations. Less significant as indices of chance or deliberate effects of the artist's hand, they more importantly represent a paradoxical medium, which as Johns declares, is unique in the way "it removes itself from my touch." In this paper, I trace particular transformations across media, from painting to drawing and printmaking. In doing so, my analysis relies on the work of American philosopher and semiotician Charles S. Peirce, whose phenomenology and theory of signs is well suited to elucidate the significance of these changing symbolic and material effects in Johns' work. As art historian Richard Shiff and others have written, it is almost as if Johns were like a medium of change and transformation rather than a medium of self-expression. In these recent drawings, as in most of Johns' work, he complicates notions of artistic authorship with a characteristic appropriation and transformation

of banal images and everyday objects, a practice that has remained consistent in Johns' work from the late 1950s to the present. With Peirce, I attempt to analyze Johns's materials and tools as an active agent in the creative process, something he has often specifically mentioned in relation to the ink on plastic drawings.

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## **Introduction: “It Removes Itself from My Touch”**

“I have attempted to develop my thinking in such a way that the work I’ve done is not me—not to confuse my feelings with what I produced...I found I couldn’t do anything that would be identical with my feelings.”<sup>1</sup>

–Jasper Johns

“I believe the law of habit to be purely psychical. But then I suppose matter is merely mind deadened by the development of habit. While every physical process can be reversed without violation of the law of mechanics, the law of habit forbids such reversal.”<sup>2</sup>

–Charles Sanders Peirce

Among artists working in the last half-century, Jasper Johns counts as one of the most technically gifted—a master of techniques as varied as oil and encaustic on canvas, intaglio printmaking, bronze casting, silverpoint, and drawing in ink on sheets of translucent, non-absorbent plastic. The latter is one of his most prolific and enigmatic media, and yet it remains the least investigated on its own terms, either in exhibitions or scholarly literature. Since the mid-1980s, several exhaustive survey exhibitions and catalogues of Johns’s drawings have been produced, yet the full implication of his ink on plastic drawings in particular still needs to be assessed, or at the very least given more considered scholarly and critical attention.<sup>3</sup> Even the texts accompanying his 1996 Museum of Modern Art retrospective catalogue make only passing mention of the importance of ink on plastic in Johns’s career, despite the reproduction of nearly thirty of these drawings in full color, a testament in itself to their enduring value.<sup>4</sup>

Johns completed his first drawings in ink on plastic in 1962, and to this day, has produced hundreds of drawings on plastic with varying surface applications including

India ink, water-soluble encaustic, paper collage, crayon, and even metal dust. He has effectively made dense palimpsests that collapse mind and matter into singularly resonant works; they are somewhere between spontaneity and habit, between immediate feeling and mediated representation; they could be conceived of a collaboration, if you will, between the artist and his materials. Less significant as mere indices of chance effects of pooling liquid, on the one hand, or alternatively deliberate and willful marks of the artist on the other, these drawings on plastic paradoxically represent a medium that is unique in the way, as Johns says, “I like the way it removes itself from my touch.”<sup>5</sup>

By working in a medium that is not “identical with his feelings,” and one which “removes itself” from his touch, Johns expresses a tendency to avoid self-identification with his art, preferring instead anonymous or commonplace objects and images for his subjects, which are often put through a series of transformations in various media. For instance, the *Device* motif, which has appeared in Johns’s works since the late-1950s, has been rendered in numerous paintings, drawings, and prints, only a few examples of which are illustrated here (Figures 1, 2, 3).<sup>6</sup> Johns also often reworks, typically in what he refers to as “tracings,” various images from the history of art as yet another means of eliding his own self-expression, invoking iconic works by artists from periods both historically remote and modern. Examples of these “tracings” include two exceptional ink on plastic drawings made within a year of each other, the first of which is *Tracing (after Hans Holbein)*, 1977 (Figure 4), and is derived from—as one should guess from the title—a painting by German Renaissance painter Hans Holbein. Another, *Tracing (after Jacques Villon after Marcel Duchamp)*, 1978 (Figures 5) is similarly based on a painting by Jacques Villon. The great irony with the latter drawing, however—something that could

also be gleaned from its title—is that the Villon painting Johns based his drawing on is itself a copy of the original version painted by Villon’s younger brother Marcel Duchamp. This kind of playful appropriation of images by well-known figures from the art historical canon only further underscores Johns’s tendency to complicate issues of originality and authorship through repetition and variation. As Johns is often quoted, referring to his practice, “take an object, do something to it, do something else to it.”<sup>7</sup>

For Johns, *doing* becomes more important than *thinking*, or rather, thinking is collapsed into the process itself, whether he is working an image through collage and encaustic, engraving a copper plate, or applying ink onto the recalcitrant surface of a plastic sheet. He has said: “The mind can work in such a way that the image and technique come as one thought, or possibly one might say there is no thought. One works without thinking how to work.”<sup>8</sup> This sentiment is analogous to what art historian Richard Shiff has written about Johns, an artist he believes appears more like a medium of change than a medium of self-expression.<sup>9</sup> Johns operates as if his self were in constant flux, as if his mind were like an unprimed canvas or an empty sheet of paper or Mylar upon which a series of images could be impressed, brushed, or spilled.

Johns has also expressed a seeming lack of control over his artistic choices, as if his mind were merely a vessel for thoughts and actions determined by someone (or something) else: “I am not sure what’s chosen. It’s what I did; it’s what I’ve done. I’ve moved in that way. I don’t know if it’s out of choice or out of necessity—how my mind *must* move.”<sup>10</sup> His mind moves as would the end of a burin, or a brush on canvas, tracing the outline of a thought, or a sequence of thoughts, into a malleable, a *plastic* medium. Is not the mind also a plastic medium in its own right? Often an idea or a memory triggers

another, and Johns has said working these ideas out through his art serves as a way of ridding himself of them, to “stop their nagging.”<sup>11</sup>

A great illustration of this would be Johns’s aptly-titled *Racing Thoughts*, 1983, (Figure 6), a painting that features a constellation of iconic images from art history combined with an equally iconic repertoire of motifs Johns has used repeatedly over the years: we see a black and white Barnett Newman lithograph, the likeness of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* set opposite that of Johns’s influential dealer Leo Castelli, silhouettes of George Ohr pots, as well as wood grain motifs and crosshatching especially prevalent in Johns’s painting from the 1970s and 1980s. These disparate, but not entirely random, assortment of images and motifs come together in a single work, a literal and illusionistic “collage” that incorporates a wide array of media including encaustic, screenprinting, crayon, and collaged canvas on linen. As a way of habitually, almost obsessively, working out and thus “ridding” himself of his ideas, it was characteristic of Johns in the 1980s and 1990s to layer and combine disparate images and motifs in a single work as if they were snapshots of his mind in motion, like a computer desktop perpetually bombarded and infiltrated by pop-up images, spawning faster than they can be shut out—a snapshot of the mind’s eye stuck in overdrive.<sup>12</sup>

These kinds of images come from both the history of art and Johns’s own imagination and experience, combining and contrasting across the entire span of his *oeuvre*. For Johns, the classic dichotomy between the *idea* and the *art object* yields to a dialogue: he internalizes objects and images, and externalizes his thoughts, disrupting the conventionally understood split between subject and object.<sup>13</sup> As Shiff has elegantly written on this matter, “if the preliminary thought generates the idea, then the hand that

renders the concept as an image and a certain object, changes it. The hand, its touch, is *metanoic*: it changes the mind.”<sup>14</sup> For Johns, and I suspect this is the case for any capable artist, the very *making* of art changes the original idea itself. The making of art in its own right can, and often does, constitute what we might refer to as the “idea” behind it, a fact that should significantly influence any interpretation of an artwork’s “meaning” and significance.

Jennifer L. Roberts, a Harvard-based scholar and author of several trenchant essays on Jasper Johns’s prints, has noted that he has almost always attributed to his tools and materials a kind of collaborative agency, long before “thing theory” came to the attention of art historians.<sup>15</sup> This kind of interpretation allows us to treat Johns’s materials and tools as an active agent in the creative process, something he has often mentioned in relation to the ink on plastic drawings. This notion resonates with some aspects of so-called “new materialism,” a collection of interdisciplinary methods grappling with the real and theoretical significance of non-human agents.<sup>16</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen specifically to hone in on the work of American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, some of whose writings presciently anticipate contemporary theoretical debates.

For the art historian or critic, Peirce’s insights are more utilitarian than they seem at first glance, but only when combined with close formal analysis and appreciation of process and technique. To a limited extent, Peirce’s theory of signs is useful in my discussion of Johns’s signature variations and transformations of iconic imagery across media, but mostly in its most basic form: in short, Peirce proposed three fundamental categories of the sign: the icon, the index, and the symbol.<sup>17</sup> For the most part, commonly understood definitions and usage of these terms within our field will suffice and will save

us all the trouble of delving too deeply into Peirce's complex semiotic system.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, Peirce can be helpful as we unpack the multivalent signification operating in any single work of art, like an ink on plastic drawing by Jasper Johns. It can help us trace what happens as an artist repeats and transforms an image into different media.<sup>19</sup> Johns is an artist with an acute (almost uncanny) sensitivity to any particular medium's *materiality*, its haptic, tactile properties, which he exploits to a singular advantage.

It follows that any serious analysis of Johns's iconic imagery without a substantive discussion of technical execution and his artistic process would be limited at best, giving only a shallow impression of the true depth of his artwork and its ultimate importance in the context of postwar American art. Nearly a century before our present theoretical debates over the anthropomorphism of inanimate objects, Peirce had already theorized an interplay between mind and matter, between spontaneity and habit, subject and object, as is evidenced from one of the two epigraphs at the beginning of this essay: as Peirce writes, "...matter is merely mind deadened by the development of habit."<sup>20</sup> In this light, Johns's *Savarin* motif, his now-classic image of a coffee tin filled with paint-spattered brushes, could very well stand as the artist's most iconic self-portrait (Figure 7). The animate person has become the animated object.<sup>21</sup> I suspect this dialectic is as old as the origins of culture itself.

Yet more than a few art historians and academics have vehemently opposed analytic models or theories that in any way appear to anthropomorphize objects that are—at least *presently*—considered inanimate, such as an artist's paintbrush, a Mayan sculpture, or a Renaissance altarpiece. Art historian Christopher S. Wood has asserted that any attribution of agency to things or images must be motivated by a lack or flaw in

the work of art itself.<sup>22</sup> Johns would most likely vehemently disagree, since it is precisely his sentiment that his materials *do* in fact collaborate with him and often seem to operate with a “will” or “intention,” all their own; this is especially the case regarding his drawings in ink on plastic as we will see throughout this essay, often assisted by Johns in his own statements on the medium. Although Wood claims that using “common sense” in thinking about the nature of reality would preclude any notion that *things* could have any of the aspects of *living* entities, Peirce, the co-founder of philosophical *pragmatism*, has on many occasions addressed this issue with much more nuance and sensitivity by eschewing simplistic dichotomies.<sup>23</sup> In short, for Peirce as well as for Johns, the animate and inanimate aspects of existence are not mutually exclusive. If “common sense” is all that Wood believes is required to explain why objects like paintbrushes, sheets of Mylar plastic, or a jar of India ink, are unable to share aspects characteristic of living entities, and vice versa, then it is surprising he required over twenty pages to make such an obvious point.<sup>24</sup>

It goes without saying, however, that artists and art historians often disagree, and oftentimes productively so. But in the case of Johns in particular, it would be wise for art historians as well as critics to pay close attention to how he thinks, how he works, and perhaps most importantly, the specific technical and material foundations of his practice.<sup>25</sup> These are obviously important considerations for any contemporary or historical artist, so why not also for the art historian? When entrenched interpretations and superficial dichotomies are no longer helpful in analyzing an artist’s work, especially the work of an artist as inscrutable and talented as Johns, it is time to seek alternative analytical frameworks that can accommodate change, uncertainty, and the blurring of

definable boundaries, all of which are hallmarks of Johns's work as a whole. His work has changed frequently, stylistically and otherwise—sometimes dramatically as with the “crosshatch” paintings of the 1970s—but the above-mentioned characteristics remain unchanged. And in the case of the particular writer of this essay, who like a hiker lost in dense woodlands takes a forking and winding path which ultimately leads him back to the beginning of his journey, perhaps it is a sign that he is actually spiraling closer—and not farther away from—the veiled and shadowy recesses of Johns's compelling, mysterious, and very often inscrutable art (Figure 8).

Instead of seeking definitive conclusions, or exhaustively applying any particular analytic model or theory (even Peirce's) to explain the significance of these drawings in ink on plastic, this essay will instead seek to illuminate a long-ignored medium within Johns's *oeuvre*. I intend to demonstrate how these drawings in ink on plastic relate to one another and to his work in other media, especially to his prints. I hope that the following analysis of these drawings in ink on plastic, which will exploit various analytical and historical methodologies, can lead to a better understanding of Johns himself—how he thinks and works—by challenging entrenched dichotomies such as subject and object, mind and matter, spontaneity and will.

Peirce's writing on chance and habit provides a theoretical point of departure for my study, but it is only useful in combination with close formal analysis and description. Johns has made hundreds of drawings on plastic since the early 1960s, and a discussion of each one, or a chronological survey of their production over the past half century, would be a monumental task and beyond the scope of this essay. Instead of laying out a complete chronology of all the ink on plastic drawings, I will focus on a handful of major

works from different periods of his career, from the 1960s to the present, which demonstrate the uniqueness and the breadth of the medium. In the process, I will show how, especially in the case of Johns, an artist's materials and techniques—long considered separate from the “content” or meaning of an artwork—could in many cases be considered one and the same. This essay is not intended to be exhaustive in any way, but rather a substantive first attempt to describe and conceptualize a prolific medium that has long been overlooked by scholars and curators of Johns's art alike.<sup>26</sup> There is perhaps no medium Johns has explored that so perfectly captures his essence—and his essential paradox— than these drawings of ink on plastic.

If, during the subsequent analysis—before the reader and writer together lose their way within the labyrinths of Johns's mind and his mark-making—we catch a glimpse of something more, something we previously did not know about Johns, or about his technical process, or about the greater significance of these drawings in ink on plastic, the study will be worth the effort. As Willem de Kooning stated famously: “Content, if you want to say, is a glimpse of something, an encounter, you know, like a flash.”<sup>27</sup> Trying to find, and hold onto, any stable meaning in the art of Johns would be a decidedly futile effort. The best we can hope for is catching one of the glimpses that de Kooning refers to, perhaps a momentary flash of insight reflected off Johns's multi-faceted genius, as we are together caught in the flow of his ever changing universe. Objects like works of art—much the same as living things—are forever spiraling through space and time, always changing, congealing and dispersing, yet ultimately headed towards the same uncertain future together.

### **“Accident Does Not Exist”**

“I tend not to think that accident exists, although I’m very grateful when it happens. I will sometimes apply ink on a sheet of plastic and let it dry. I put it there and it does something. It performs independently.”<sup>28</sup>

–Jasper Johns

As we have seen, Johns has long rejected the idea that his materials merely passively convey images and ideas. Instead, he believes his materials—such as pooling ink or dripping encaustic—can short-circuit human agency altogether, either by chance or force of habit, imbuing the artwork with something of its own nature.<sup>29</sup> It is notable that Johns almost *never* resorts to the language of chance, despite the tendency in the limited scholarship about these ink on plastic drawings to make it seem that chance is the operative force at work.<sup>30</sup> Rather, Johns speaks of the medium of ink on plastic as if it were an independent process all its own, one capable of “removing itself” from his touch, as if the pooling and drying ink had a choice in the matter—thus the actions of these materials cannot be chance, in the strictest sense. Before discussing and qualifying the admittedly slim body of scholarship on the ink on plastic drawings and diving into a more substantive description of its origins or individual works, I will devote several pages to a discussion of chance and habit (in Peirce’s terminology), as well as issues related to artistic subjectivity and originality.

As cagey as Johns is in the discussion of his artistic choices or subject matter, the effects he orchestrates are not just the result of chance; there are never any true “accidents” in anything he makes.<sup>31</sup> Despite how Johns might characterize himself or his work, he is a living archive of technical expertise and is always sensitive to the unique

effects of all media. Whatever his intentions, he is generally aware of how a specific effect might appear, how a particular medium will react within a prescribed set of conditions, or even how a particular image will look if it were translated from encaustic on canvas into intaglio on paper or ink on plastic. As a testament to this expertise—and also as a way of staying on the path in which his “mind must move,” as he would say—Johns has made the repetition of images across media a habit of his artistic practice, to create a tension between a catalytic image and its various material iterations across media, in constellations of different compositions and combinations.

Art historian Richard S. Field has written that Johns generates “chains of transfers” among and between images in various media, as an “exploration of a process in language rather than an idle variation-on-a-theme.”<sup>32</sup> All of his drawings—and this is the case with his ink on plastic works as well—are generally made either after or alongside his paintings and do not generally serve as preparatory studies.<sup>33</sup> Most of Johns’s drawings stand on their own terms, even when they have clear and direct relationships to his paintings, and this is also the case with the drawings in ink on plastic. The ink on plastic works from the early 1960s to today include several distinct series and thematic “suites” in and among themselves, some of which will be discussed in the following sections. Of particular interest are three series of ink on plastic drawings, which bookend the majority of his career. These series include five studies for *In Memory of My Feelings* from 1967 (Figures 9 - 13), four drawings from his 2013 *Regrets* series (Figures 14 – 17), and most recently, three drawings from the informally titled series *Farley Breaks Down – After Larry Burrows*, which Johns began in 2014 (Figures 18 – 20). These particular groupings of ink on plastic drawings display a broad range of approaches towards

medium that Johns has experimented with throughout his career, while also prominently showcasing a classic predisposition for repetition and variation.

Regardless of the particular medium, each artwork Johns makes follows from the previous and influences the next—sometimes bluntly stating such obvious facts as a useful reminder of what is at stake in art making, at least for Johns; “make an object, do something to it, do something else to it.” This statement is perhaps too often quoted, but for good reason. This is not to say that a recently completed artwork simply *determines* the next one Johns decides to make, or the particular course he may take when he sits down, brush in hand, with a clean sheet of Mylar and a brimming jar of India ink. In the midst of all these habits, routines, and repetitions, accident manages to intervene. Perhaps it comes in the form of something as simple as an unintended effect of pooled and splattered ink that had a pleasing visual appearance. Or maybe Johns sees a striking image in a new *National Geographic* magazine lying on his studio drafting table, causing him to momentarily stop painting while recalling a familiar image that had been long buried in the recesses of his mind, never forgotten, just waiting for an eventual resurrection in ink, or graphite, or encaustic. What might seem like a mere technical accident for Johns could easily be transformed into a repetitive motif in the next drawing, and then return again and again. Accident can easily interfere with habit, just as often as habit can check spontaneity and subject it to its will.

It might be tempting to theorize that Johns has made a *habit of chance*—or we might use the term “accident”—with the ink on plastic drawings in particular, given how much of the limited literature on the subject of these drawings focuses on *chance*, despite several statements by Johns—discussed at various points in this essay—that challenge

this interpretation. On second thought, does not the very statement, “a habit of chance,” appear to be a logical contradiction? How could an artist, or anyone for that matter, make a habit of something that is supposed to be spontaneous, lacking both cause and law? Several other artists from the mid to late twentieth century seriously grappled with the notion of chance or indeterminacy in their thinking and their art, often as a means of escape from the burden of the now-romanticized notion of self-expression extolled by leading practitioners and critics of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s.

The emergence of color field painting, Minimalism, and Pop Art in the early 1960s was in many ways the result of a younger generation of artists, like Jasper Johns, who had begun to question the exaggerated form of self-expression that had been championed by the previous decade’s leading artists and critics. In some cases, these younger artists seemed as if they were trying to remove themselves from their art entirely. But some artists of this earlier generation, like Willem de Kooning (who is usually discussed in the context of mid-century Abstract Expressionism), used slightly different language to express a sensibility very similar to Johns’s. De Kooning once cryptically stated, “You have to change to stay the same.”<sup>34</sup> This corruption of an often-quoted adage could just as easily apply to Jasper Johns, who, like de Kooning, continued to fight orthodoxy and banality by exploring different styles and methods throughout his career—sometimes to the dismay and ire of critics—constantly changing while remaining, paradoxically, ever more truthful to himself.

Interestingly, during de Kooning’s return to lithography in 1970 after a brief three year hiatus, he made several prints, such as *Minnie Mouse*, 1971 (Figure 21), which bear a striking resemblance to many of Jasper Johns’s drawings in ink on plastic. This

lithograph, with its restricted palette of black and grays, pools and splatters of inks, and combination of loose gestural strokes combined with finer, more intentional marks, could almost be mistaken for some of Johns's drawings in ink on plastic. The striking visual similarities between de Kooning's 1970s lithograph and Johns's drawings on plastic is not merely coincidental. At this time, lithography in the United States was in an experimental phase, with some artists sometimes combining tusche—the greasy, black ink used to make lithographs—with unconventional materials in an effort to explore a broader range of visual effects.<sup>35</sup> By 1970, de Kooning already had to keep up with a younger generation of American artists including Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, and most notably, Johns, who beginning in the early 1960s, were pushing printmaking into new terrain, and at significantly larger scale. As a diverse group, these artists would together restore printmaking to a prominence among other media (such as painting), which it had lacked among artists working in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>36</sup>

Contemporaries and near-contemporaries of Johns, like Ellsworth Kelly or John Cage, the latter being one of Johns's close friends and collaborators, similarly conceived of ways to remove traces of themselves, or their subjectivity, from their art, often by intentionally embracing chance and indeterminacy.<sup>37</sup> As Kelly said in 1969 of his signature Paris-period works from the early 1950s, “The new works were to be objects, unsigned, anonymous. Everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something to be made, and it had to be exactly as it was, with nothing added. . . . the subject was there already made.”<sup>38</sup> In some of his early paintings, such as *Colors for a Large Wall*, 1951 (Figure 22), Kelly established a signature gestalt and began courting chance operations to make a type of painting with “no evident meaning.”<sup>39</sup> These paintings expressed a desire,

quite unlike that of his peers across the Atlantic, to “eliminate a personal signature through brushwork” and to avoid depiction by expressing “the form of the painting itself.”<sup>40</sup> Of course, Johns, for his part, never *really* abandoned bold and gestural brushwork. Yet in his typically wry manner, he has used this trope of authorial “self-expression,” still most commonly associated with Abstract Expressionism, to undermine the very notion of subjectivity and authorship with intentionally orchestrated “accidents:” a drip of encaustic here, a splash of ink there, indices of apparent instances of chance that are anything but random.

In 1951, the same year Kelly painted *Colors for a Large Wall*, and a year before Johns produced his first recorded artwork, John Cage began systematically exploring chance after discovering the *I Ching*, a classic Chinese text that used a symbolic system to identify order in chance events.<sup>41</sup> This interest led to the production of Cage’s 1951 work, *Music of Changes*. This groundbreaking work of indeterminate music created for his pianist and friend David Tudor, was the first piece of music that uses chance procedures throughout (Figure 23).<sup>42</sup>

The practices and aims of artists like Kelly, Cage, and Johns anticipate many key features of Roland Barthes’ influential 1967 essay, “Death of the Author,” in which Barthes writes:

The speech-act [like a painting or any other text] in its entirety is an “empty” process, which functions perfectly without its being necessary to “fill” it with the person of the interlocutors: linguistically, the author is nothing but the one who writes, just as *I* is nothing but the one who says *I*:

language knows a “subject,” not a “person” and this subject is empty outside the very speech-act which defines it.<sup>43</sup>

Intuitively, Johns and other artists of the post-war era were similarly questioning ideas of selfhood, originality, and artistic expression as traditionally understood in Western philosophical and artistic traditions, which had by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, already been dealt a crippling blow by leading artists, writers, and philosophers who would collectively define what we now call modernism.<sup>44</sup>

## Chance, Habit, and Change

It would be mistaken to conflate Jasper Johns's desire for neutrality towards his imagery with a lack of control over his media. Several writers have commented that the predominant element of Johns's ink on plastic drawings comes from the *chance* effects of pooling and drying ink, reflecting a deliberate acquiescence to a difficult medium and subsequent loss of control.<sup>45</sup> Yet others, notably Jennifer L. Roberts, have more keenly discerned that Johns is actually always in consummate control over every medium. He enjoys the challenge of giving form to a seemingly formless material, of arresting its entropic predilections and subjecting it to a rubric defined by his working habits.<sup>46</sup> Johns has said that ink on plastic is, contrary to what one might think, *not very difficult* to control. Rather, he likes it for "its independence" and how it can "manifest its own nature...to change its form as it dries," as if the material were revealing a mind or intention all its own.<sup>47</sup>

These ink on plastic works seem less concerned with *chance*, per se, than they are concerned with *change*: the delight in change in and of itself is what seems to motivate Johns to keep working. I would argue that the effect of material change in Johns's repeated use of familiar imagery constitutes one of the foundations of his artistic practice—especially with regards to the ink on plastic drawings. Earlier I suggested the notion that Johns was making a "habit of chance," before quickly dismissing it as illogical. Perhaps it would be better to think of chance in relation to the ink on plastic works in a somewhat different way, that is, through *change*—an unfolding, temporal condition that encompasses aspects of *both* chance *and* habit. What I mean to say is,

perhaps what Johns is doing with in ink on plastic is neither really chance or habit, but rather something akin to a habit of changing habits.<sup>48</sup> Like a chameleon, or Shiff's metaphor of the cicada, perhaps this has something to do with his being "identified"—his desire to have no "identity."

Johns has on various occasions acknowledged the influence of the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom he started reading in 1961, the year before he completed his first drawings in ink on plastic. Yet the writing of American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, whom we have already encountered, seems to resonate more closely with Johns's habits of hand and mind, and will be useful as we start to look more closely at particular drawings.<sup>49</sup> An uncharacteristically brief and illuminating letter Peirce wrote to a friend in 1891 wonderfully condenses his phenomenology and is worth quoting here at some length:

The state of things in the infinite past is chaos, *tohu bohu*, the nothingness of which consists in the total absence of regularity. The state of things in the infinite future is death, the nothingness of which consists in the complete triumph of law and absence of all spontaneity. Between these, we have on *our* side a state of things in which there is some absolute spontaneity counter to all law, and some degree of conformity to law, which is constantly on the increase owing to the growth of habit.<sup>50</sup>

As for "our side" of things, it seems *any* kind of consciousness would require not only a measure of habit—a kind of logic or structure that could give both form and stability to our thoughts—but also a degree of spontaneity, the ability to be diverted by chance, to

allow us to change and evolve our conceptions. Otherwise, as Peirce wrote, our brains would just be inert gray matter “deadened,” calcified by the “development of habit.” This is how Johns’s mind—or any mind for that matter—can move, can *change*, and like his ink on plastic drawings, can exist somewhere between pure chance and the absolute dominion of habit. But “conformity to law,” as Peirce notes, is always on the rise.

In Johns’s most recent ink on plastic drawings one can sense a kind of mastery, of complexity and systematization, which is perhaps the unintended consequence of his having worked in this medium for over fifty years. But at the same time, one can find examples of recent ink on plastic drawings which appear as “complex,” variegated, layered, as works from decades earlier (see Figures 18 and 24). As Johns once said, “employing whatever way of working, one expects a certain class of events to occur. The individual events need not be premeditated.”<sup>51</sup> The particular gestures, the final states these drying puddles of ink may form, might not be entirely premeditated, but Johns surely anticipates a range of desirable effects and controls the medium with expert precision. Once again, it seems what is at stake here with Johns and ink on plastic is more complicated than merely letting chance take its course. There is always a give and take between Johns and his materials, between mind and matter, a dialectic in which *habit* plays just as significant a role as *chance*, if not the dominant one. Furthermore, he is always copying when he makes an ink on plastic drawing—the “original” source itself provides a law, rule, or habit for him to follow.

As we have seen from the quotation at the outset of this essay, Johns has often sought to distance himself from himself, from “his feelings.” If we consider the self as existing primarily within the conscious mind, feelings seem somehow at odds with its

formal logic, a part of us yet just that—only a part. One could draw an analogy to the discrete puddles and gestures from one of these new drawings, complete in themselves yet conveying just a fragment of the whole image—they are simply meaningless, formless blobs when considered on their own. For Peirce, what corresponds to this state of pure spontaneity and chance is what he refers to as *feeling* (a commonly used term which, because so colloquial, can cause some confusion); feeling is a state isolated from everything that came before or will come after, complete and sufficient unto itself in each moment as long as it lasts.<sup>52</sup> But a feeling *cannot be a thought*, for there is no consciousness in an instantaneous moment. Peirce writes that feeling is simply a quality, a mere possibility.<sup>53</sup>

If not of feelings, what does a consciousness consist of? For Peirce, consciousness is not a *state*, like a feeling, but rather a *mediation*, a representation of something to somebody.<sup>54</sup> This is why, as the quotation at the beginning of this essay indicates, Peirce considers habit to be primarily a *psychic* phenomenon. How is that possible, if mind depends on spontaneity to keep it “moving,” as Johns would say? Because at the far end of the spectrum, too much habit leads to its own kind of death, a peculiar state of nothingness, of stasis, of exhausted possibilities: without some degree of spontaneity, there can be no mind, no consciousness, which like a stone on the beach, has been so “habituated” by time and geologic forces—the pressure of the earth’s crust, the tumbling over and again along the coast as the tide rolls in and out—that there is no longer any spontaneity left within. There is no longer any chance for the stone to change, to move, to think—only the mere capacity to exist, or be affected by forces external to it. Its defining habit, one might say, would be the condition of “stoniness.”

Philosopher Robert Burch, writing on Peirce's concepts of chance and habit, condenses some key points:

Although the universe displays varying degrees of habit...the universe does not display deterministic law. It does not directly show anything like total, exact, non-statistical regularity. Moreover, the habits that nature does display always appear in varying degrees of entrenchment or “congealing.” At one end of the spectrum, we have the nearly law-like behavior of larger physical objects like boulders and planets; but at the other end of the spectrum, we see in human processes of imagination and thought an almost pure freedom and spontaneity; and in the quantum world of the very small we see the results of almost pure chance.<sup>55</sup>

As discussed earlier, if we try to conceive of Johns as a *medium of change*, he would most closely embody Peirce's notion of habit. Like early punched-tape computers, we could imagine his inputs as particular images, which he subjects to his habits of hand and mind, and the outputs are the works of art. But the punched-tape analogy is extreme, and unfair, because Johns—and what constitutes his mind, and his art—is not merely the result of habit. In the midst of all this habit—mind, consciousness, whatever you prefer to call it—a phenomenon somehow borne of nothingness and the chaos of our unfolding universe, still depends on indeterminacy and chance, the same forces Johns has always tried to keep in check, to confine and delimit with materials like ink and plastic, graphite and paper, or encaustic and canvas. And as much as he tries to maintain order, to keep the ink poured on plastic from extending past his desired point, it possesses that peculiar

ability of “removing itself from his touch,” as he would put it. It would appear that the real challenge for Johns in making art, and probably something he finds enjoyable, is this constant battle between the forces of chance and habit in his work.

As Johns has said about working in ink on plastic, “the idea of chance seems to me to suggest something more haphazard in the way that things interact. I’d love not to be in control, but that’s not what I’m interested in. I think there’s a play between the subjective and the objective that is in operation constantly when I’m working that tackles the idea of chance from both directions.”<sup>56</sup> The “congealing” Burch speaks of in the quotation above aptly describes Johns *vis-à-vis* his materials. They come together or “collaborate,” if you will, in varying degrees. Sometimes the result is more spontaneous, more “chancy,” such as in one of the studies for *In Memory of My Feelings*, 1967 (see Figure 11), a drawing that appears to be the result of a single, loose, inky gesture scribbled across the plastic surface. In this drawing (and the other four in the same series: see figures 9 – 13), Johns first applied an oil-based resist medium in the shapes of a fork, knife and spoon, over which he brushed a water-based ink, thus revealing the negative silhouettes of the flatware where the ink “refused” to settle.<sup>57</sup>

To the contrary, sometimes his results are much less chancy, more regimented, inflected by habit and the controlling tendencies of a technically-gifted artist, as in the ink on plastic drawing *Untitled*, 1984 (Figure 25). This work displays numerous layers of ink wash overlaid with deliberate, almost obsessive, crosshatching on the right hand side, while on the left, we notice a strict use of alternating parallel lines drawn to fit precisely within shapes that look like puzzle pieces. It is not unusual, as in the case of this particular drawing, for Johns to combine the more random effects of the ink wash with

fine, deliberate marks in pen or pencil, creating a wonderful tension between chance and habit in a single work.

Another exceptional ink on plastic drawing, *Untitled*, 1983-84, (Figure 26) has the same effect. After an initial chaotic impression, the scintillating forms and garish hues yield to more subtle contrasts in tone and deliberate tracing along the edges of the pooling ink. This drawing is unusual—but not exclusive—in its vivid jewel-like coloration and appearance of being almost entirely abstract. What is truly unique about this work, however (among all works in Johns’s complete *oeuvre*, not just his drawings), is its photographic source material.<sup>58</sup> Johns traced the image from a vintage advertisement from the 1940s or 1950s for a drain-cleaning product called *Drainz* (Figure 27). By rendering each part of the original image in vivid, variegated colors, changing the orientation, and finally outlining the edges of the pooled ink with sharp contour lines, Johns has once again given the impression of chaos in the most ordered, methodical fashion. Interestingly, the advertisement slogan, which runs across the top edge reading, “do this / or that,” is so overwhelmingly Johnsian it makes one wonder whether it was the slogan, and not the image, that first caught his attention.

The word “congealing,” used by Burch a few pages earlier, aptly describes material nature of the India ink Johns most often applies to these sheets of plastic (although he has experimented with many different applications on plastic, from paper collage to water-soluble encaustic). On any particular day, the ink may flow with ease from the tip of Johns’s brush and then dry in a predictable manner or, alternatively, for some unknown reason—perhaps because of the humidity or temperature of the room—it may take longer than usual to dry and congeal, allowing it to spread farther and more

evenly across the plastic sheet. On another day, perhaps both hotter and drier, the water in the ink evaporates quicker than usual, resulting in a more crusty appearance. Examples from both extremes—and everything in between—occur in almost all of Johns’s ink on plastic work. Yet as stated before, any perceived “accidents” in these drawings are hardly the result of *chance*. Johns knows the range of likely ways his medium might react, and he plans accordingly.

John Elderfield, writing in reference to de Kooning—although in this case it seems just as applicable to Johns—betrays an understanding of the neglected position that the notion of “habit” has occupied in twentieth-century art history and criticism.

Elderfield writes:

Will is exercised, then it is willfully surrendered. And then this process of exercise and surrender of will becomes a habitual part of painting. The surrender is not, however, the passive submission to chance...It is the decisive impulse of a sudden, last-second release from a strictly learned and structured system into the instinctual unknown; but not a release from human agency itself...[an] ability to shift gears required its own kind of skill, which de Kooning made into a habit.<sup>59</sup>

This is almost exactly what I meant earlier about Johns making a habit of changing habits. In terms of twentieth-century art criticism, models of the pictorial process advanced by both Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were based in a simple dichotomy of spontaneity and will.<sup>60</sup> As Elderfield realized about de Kooning—and is the case with Johns as well—“what is missing is habit, which completes the triangle.”<sup>61</sup> This

is something also realized by the renowned nineteenth-century art critic, John Ruskin. He writes, “Speaking truth is like writing fair, and comes only by practice; it is less a matter of will...than of habit.”<sup>62</sup> Habit, according to Ruskin, allows the artist—one such as Johns—to embrace a truth in his art that “breaks and rents continually,” by encountering difficulty, accident, and ambiguity in the process.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this is why after over half a century of making art, despite the stylistic ruptures and reversals, when viewed as a whole, Johns’s entire body of work seems surprisingly true to itself. An artist who merely embraces a single signature style for his or her entire career tends to have exhausted the creative potential well before ceasing to make art.

And yet today, Johns is still making some of the most compelling work of his career, sixty years since his serendipitous introduction to Leo Castelli. In March 1957, Castelli was invited by composer Morton Feldman to visit Robert Rauschenberg’s studio, which was in located in the same building as Johns’s.<sup>64</sup> Recognizing Johns’s name in connection with the painting *Green Target*, 1955, which he had seen at the Jewish Museum, Castelli asked Rauschenberg for an introduction to his friend. After his first visit with Johns, Castelli offered him a solo exhibition at his gallery.<sup>65</sup> The rest, now, is history.

## **Ink on Plastic: Origins, Parallels, and Contrasts**

Johns has experimented with ink on plastic as a medium since 1961, the same year that he purchased a home in Edisto Beach, a sparsely populated town in South Carolina. Soon after, in an art and drafting supply store in nearby Charleston, he found sheets of translucent plastic on which he began a series of new drawings the following year.<sup>66</sup>

Johns was attracted to the medium's lack of absorbency and the distinctive patterns the ink made during the time it took to dry, much like lithography, a medium with which he was already familiar.<sup>67</sup> Two of the earliest drawings in this medium, *Device* (Figure 2) and *Disappearance II* (Figure 8), both from 1962, are based on paintings he had started the year before.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the composition for Johns's 1962 *Device* lithograph (Figure 3) derives directly from the drawing in ink on plastic, and *not* the original painting, and is of comparable scale.<sup>69</sup> The rich and varied back and forth between printmaking and ink on plastic is among the most interesting and substantive inter-media relationships in Johns's larger body of work. This has received little if any attention in existing scholarship, with the notable exception of Jennifer L. Roberts, as mentioned above. Johns's monotypes, perhaps even more than his lithographs, in both technical execution and subject matter, share many similarities with his ink on plastic drawings. The following section is devoted to a more substantive exploration of this rich inter-media relationship.

To date, there has been only one exhibition singularly devoted to Johns's ink on plastic drawings: a 2010 exhibition at Craig F. Starr Gallery in New York. However, only a mere fourteen—albeit exceptional—drawings were exhibited, accompanied by an anemic three-page essay consisting mostly of formal description, with few, if any,

insights whatsoever into the ink on plastic medium itself.<sup>70</sup> David Shapiro and David Whitney's 1984 survey catalogue of Johns's drawings includes some interesting insights on the ink on plastic drawings, and although nearly half of the catalogue plates consist of works in this medium, Shapiro falls short of assessing the medium's essential uniqueness among Johns's drawings as a whole.<sup>71</sup> A similar critique can be made against Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine's lavish exhibition catalogue published to accompany Johns's drawing retrospective held six years later at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Despite the fact that Rosenthal and Fine included numerous ink on plastic drawings in their catalogue and accompanying exhibition, they make only passing mention of the broader implications of the ink on plastic medium itself as something truly distinct from Johns's other works on paper, a significant point that this essay aims to rectify.<sup>72</sup> Instead, Rosenthal and Fine focus more heavily on Johns's use of particular imagery and its symbolism. In contrast, of particularly great value is the interview between the authors and Johns, in which he often discusses the ink on plastic works explicitly.<sup>73</sup>

More recently in 2003, Mark Rosenthal organized a small survey of Johns's drawings at The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas. Nearly half the drawings included in the exhibition and reproduced in the catalogue were ink on plastic, and a detail of an ink on plastic drawing was chosen to illustrate the book's front cover (Figures 28 and 29). Despite this fact, Rosenthal's text often refers to all the drawings in the catalogue as merely "works on paper"; and at several points the author seems to contradict himself regarding the nature of chance and randomness operating in the ink on plastic works.<sup>74</sup> At the conclusion of the essay, however, Rosenthal mentions the simultaneous visual effects of opacity and translucency that almost all the ink on plastic drawings share.<sup>75</sup> These are

signature characteristics of the ink on plastic works, but not restricted to that one particular medium. Johns's paintings in encaustic, in particular, have the tendency to simultaneously veil and reveal, somehow seeming to be both opaque and luminous. Needless to say, contradictions and paradoxes such as these proliferate in almost every Jasper Johns work of art, and sometimes even extend into the critical interpretations of his work, as if the writers have picked up the habit from Johns himself, perhaps the result of looking and thinking too much about his work.

An essential aspect of most ink on plastic drawings is their predominantly monochromatic palette. It is characteristic of Johns—but by no means a steadfast rule—that when he decides to render the subject of a painting in another medium (see Figures 1 – 3), he often transforms an original palette of bright colors into shades of gray, which is arguably one of Johns's most characteristic “colors.” As Richard Shiff writes, Johns uses gray to “suppress the chromatic values in order to perceive tactile energy, enhancing the degree to which looking is equivalent to touching...gray does for color what metamorphosis does for the cicada: it removes the traces of previous states...”<sup>76</sup> Johns's rendering of imagery in neutral *grisaille* veils potential significance that the original colors may have had, just as ink on plastic “removes itself from [his] touch,” furthering distancing Johns from his work.

Richard S. Field has noted that Johns began to remove the color from his prints in 1962 (Figure 30), the very same year he completed his first extant works in ink on plastic.<sup>77</sup> While it may be tempting to see Johns's prints or ink on plastic drawings rendered in shades of black, white, and gray as mere reproductions of his paintings, this observation neglects his often more subtle usages of gray, as well as the fact that many

drawings are made either prior to or alongside the paintings themselves.<sup>78</sup> Analogous to the three-panel painting *Three Deliberate Greys for Jasper Johns*, 1970 by Brice Marden (Figure 31), an artist who was greatly inspired by Johns, very often the greys Johns creates are inflected with gradations of delicate tonal and color variations (Figure 19). Among the better-known and respected postwar painters, Marden and Johns are perhaps the leading experts at making “colorful” gray paintings.

Yet many of Johns’s ink on plastic drawings, from the 1960s to the present, do in fact incorporate vivid coloration, such *Voice 2*, 1982 (Figure 32) or *Farley Breaks Down - after Larry Burrows*, 2014 (Figure 20). Or in the case of another ink on plastic drawing, *Flag on an Orange Field*, 1977 (Figure 33), the title makes an oblique reference to the dominant color of the painting that preceded it. The title, in a way, serves as an *aide-de-memoir* of the original feeling of orange, one no longer present. That *feeling* is gone, only its memory remains: Johns writes, “Sometimes, when I’m working, I may feel a work has a certain...a certain spirit. But later I wonder how I ever had that feeling. I can remember having it, but can no longer feel it.”<sup>79</sup> As Field has suggested about the restricted palette Johns often employs, this may actually be closer to how the mind remembers things and events, more analogous to the seemingly two-dimensional “memory images” that reside in the less logical, less symbolic, recesses of human mentality.<sup>80</sup> However a neurologist might qualify such an interpretation—that is, how images and memory actually work physiologically at the molecular and atomic level—is largely irrelevant. For all practical purposes, I think most people can admit to sharing a similar kind of visual experience when recalling particular memories.

Memory, as such, is explicitly invoked in the titles of a suite of drawings executed in ink and pencil on plastic, mentioned briefly at the outset of this essay (Figures 9 – 13). These five drawings were intended to be illustrations for a Museum of Modern Art publication on the poet Frank O’Hara; they prompted Johns to resurrect the title of a painting he made back in 1961, *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O’Hara* (Figure 34).<sup>81</sup> In a peculiar fashion, these works in ink and pencil on plastic could themselves be considered memory images of a previous memory image represented by the original painting, a work that obliquely references Johns’s recent break up with his romantic partner at the time, the artist Robert Rauschenberg, who nevertheless remained a close friend and creative collaborator.<sup>82</sup> Ironically, around the same time, the titles of Johns’s works appear to become more personal and less descriptive, despite his increasing use of impersonal objects and imagery, and of course, an ever expanding repertoire of grays.

In reference to Field’s notion of monochromatic “memory images,” it seems appropriate that not only the original *In Memory of My Feelings* painting from 1961, but also the related suite of 1967 drawings on plastic, are all rendered in tones of gray. As Johns is quoted a few paragraphs above, while an original *feeling* he may have had during the making of an artwork—a transient, spontaneous excitation of body and mind—ultimately disappears, a persistent *memory* remains, albeit flattened and reduced to shades of gray. Works like these vividly externalize, quite literally materialize, the processes of Johns’s mind itself. In turn, his subsequent ideas are affected by having made these artworks. It may be stating an obvious fact that objects can affect the mind, and that the mind can affect objects. Yet it is becoming increasingly evident that when discussing Johns, the boundaries between the two are anything but clearly defined.<sup>83</sup>

The *In Memory of My Feelings* drawings on plastic have as their key actors a fork, knife, and spoon, which are in some cases bunched together (Figure 9), and in other cases arranged in the manner of a formal table setting that frames an empty field in the center where a plate should be (Figures 10 and 11). These works constitute a poignant reminder of what is *missing* from the picture, this particular drama's star actor; for what use would a knife, fork, and spoon be used for without a *plate* to eat from? In consideration of this particular absence—*absence* as such being a major theme of Johns's work as a whole—it is hard not to recall another iconic work—the prime example is *Souvenir*, 1964 (Figure 35)—that features a photographic likeness of Johns screened onto a ceramic plate that has been attached directly to the lower left corner of the canvas.<sup>84</sup> It is significant that there are only a handful of actual photographic images in his entire body of work, and even fewer images featuring his likeness, a subject to which a later section of this essay returns. The dualities of presence and absence, subject and object, the artist and his materials—for Johns in particular—seem to be locked in a desperate and mournful dance, always splitting and coming back together, but never truly embracing. This leaves the viewer of Johns's art, paradoxically, with traces of both extremes at once, and yet nothing really at all.

Before moving on from the *In Memory of My Feelings* drawings, a few words ought to be given to their technical execution. Their seeming simplicity, minimal compositional structure, and casual gestures, appear in contrast with some of the denser, more variegated examples of ink on plastic drawings we have already seen. But on closer examination of one drawing in particular (Figure 12), we notice more is going on than initially meets the eye, which is generally the case with Johns. The more gestural,

spontaneous washes splashed across the surface of the drawing veil further layers underneath, which are only visible in the areas around the negative silhouette of the spoon and towards the edges of the sheet (Figure 36). The negative silhouette of the spoon results from the application of an oil or Vaseline resist applied to the sheet of plastic beforehand.<sup>85</sup> Almost in a single, uninterrupted pencil line, Johns has precisely traced the outer contour of the spoon, which appears in this negative void. It is hard to tell which was applied first, the oily resist or the pencil outline. On top, Johns has brushed a loose swath of India ink to complete the picture. The ink wash, in fact, might actually have been applied in two distinct layers, between which appears to be a series of diagonal pencil crosshatches—marks dragged repeatedly in parallel lines across the negative silhouette of the spoon, in some cases pulling still-wet ink across the spoon. In other cases, these diagonal marks appear to have scraped up the oily resist medium, allowing some of the India ink to seep underneath to the plastic below, “staining” (perhaps “tarnishing” would a better word) the interior of the spoon. This kind of close formal analysis allows us to get a sense of the wonderful interplay between Johns’s deliberate, habitual layering and mark-making combined with the unpredictable effects of his medium.

## Traces and Impressions: Implications of the Index

To enter into a substantive discussion devoted to the relationship between Johns's work in printmaking and the ink on plastic drawings, I introduce his iconic *Skin* drawings from 1962, which he began the same year he completed his first works in ink on plastic. The *Skin* drawings feature rather unsettling imprints of Johns's face and hands pressed onto sheets of drafting paper, which make it appear as if he were stuck behind, or even within, a pane of translucent glass, as in *Study for "Skin" I* (Figure 37). These works wonderfully exemplify Johns's obsession with *indexical* mark making as a means of indirectly signifying the body through its absence, a practice of his that extends back to the mid-1950s, when he often included both positive and negative casts of various body parts in his work.

This series of four *Skin* drawings was produced in preparation for a never-realized sculpture, a rubber cast of a head that was to have been stretched on a board and cast in bronze.<sup>86</sup> The drawings, each called *Study for "Skin"* (and numbered I – IV) were produced in two distinct stages: first, the artist applied oil to his face and hands and pressed them onto sheets of drafting paper, which have a translucent appearance not unlike the Mylar used for the ink on plastic drawings. Next, similar to the *In Memory of My Feelings* drawings on plastic—but in this case the result of an inverse process—the barely-perceptible oily imprints of the body are revealed by the vigorous application of charcoal over the top, which gets stuck to, instead of being repelled by, the oil medium.<sup>87</sup> The resulting image shows the artist's handprints and a flattened and distorted impression of the entire volume of his head, which he had essentially "rolled" across the sheet, as if it

were the roller of a printing press, again conceptually and literally blurring the boundaries between Johns and his materials, the artist and the artwork. While the body here is partially preserved as an index, it has been flattened, as if steamrolled, made coextensive with the plane of the sheet, and in typical Johnsian fashion, gives the viewer a sense of simultaneous depth and flatness.

While primarily indexical images, these works have over time become very iconic: signature imagery associated with the art of Jasper Johns. Their symbolic associations are rich too, and by now, classic Johns: absence and presence, body and object, interior and exterior, flatness and depth, dualities which are combined in singular, rather unsettling, image. The iconic aspects of Johns's artworks—which are largely the result of his fame and repeated use of familiar, *already* iconic images such as the American flag—are inextricably linked to their indexical aspects, and both together affect their symbolic meaning. As I will demonstrate later in this essay by applying Peirce's theory of signs to some of his most recent work in ink on plastic—as a case study, if you will—Johns work is characteristically multivalent. There is no image Johns has made for which the iconic, indexical, and symbolic aspects can be separated from each other; they all join in a single, often inscrutable, package.

As Field has written about Johns's prints from the 1960s and 1970s, the *Study for "Skin"* drawings on drafting paper have a peculiar effect on the viewer, as if one were actually looking beyond the flat surface of the paper at another object behind it, the effect of which Field called "transparency."<sup>88</sup> The viewer cannot help but be aware of the extreme flatness of sheet, yet at the same time there is the peculiar effect of looking past it, into a space behind or beyond it. I prefer the word "translucency" to Field's

“transparency,” because when this effect appears in the work of Johns—as it very often does—there is a sense that the space beyond the surface is always veiled, somehow inaccessible to the viewer. A perfectly transparent plane of glass, for instance, would still allow a person to perceive objects with three-dimensional form and volume from behind the two-dimensional pane.

However, in Johns’s work, the viewer is never afforded such clarity, there is always a distancing, an absence, an essential contradiction. In the *Skin* drawings, the body is there, but it is flattened and reduced. The artist’s presence is invoked by the literal impression of his body, but exists only as a trace. These traces also reveal an interesting temporal disjunction. The index, in this case, points to something that *was* there, but which is now gone. The flat, ostensibly inanimate, timeless, motionless artwork hanging on the wall of the gallery collapses into its surface effects of *time*—not just the time it took to make the work, but also a time and space no longer accessible, a glimpse of Jasper Johns as he *was* in the past, working in his studio. The effect is not completely unlike that of looking at an analogue photograph. A photograph is itself an indexical sign, which is just simply a more accurate and precise representation created by light reflecting off an object onto a light-sensitive medium spread across a photographic film or plate, which registers the final image. One might think photography would occupy a greater place in Johns’s body of work than it does—an issue to which a later section returns—but I suspect it is precisely this potential clarity, the seeming “completeness” of the photographic image that Johns finds distasteful. This effect of “translucency” paradoxically produces simultaneous visual effects of both indeterminate depth and extreme flatness. It presents the effect of looking beyond a two-dimensional surface into

some kind of space behind it, and is an essential characteristic of almost every Johns drawing in ink on plastic.

The *Study for "Skin"* drawings, despite their visual similarity, contrast interestingly in concept and technical execution, with the drawings in ink on plastic, a medium Johns has characterized as one that "removes itself" from *his touch* (my emphasis). But even the simple impression of a fingerprint or handprint on paper undergoes a fundamental alienation from the subject in its own right. It is an index, a trace that points to an already absent subject. It is ultimately a sign of someone who is not present. In 1965, three years after making his *Skin* drawings, Johns used a similar process and the same imagery to make a lithograph titled *Skin with O'Hara Poem*, 1963/65 (Figure 38). However, in the print, unlike the drawing, the bodily index undergoes an even more profound alienation from the artist by being printed, becoming yet another degree removed from the artist's touch.<sup>89</sup> Johns made this print by pressing his face and hands, which had been covered in tusche (viscous printing ink), across a lithographic stone. The stone, now covered with the sticky, dark impressions of Johns's hands and face, was passed through the printing press along with a sheet of dampened paper, thereby transferring the positive image from the stone onto the surface of the paper.<sup>90</sup> By pressing the paper between the lithography stone and the printing press, the final image becomes *reversed*, a mirrored version of the original Johns drew, or in this case smeared, across the printing matrix.

Despite the similar appearance that the *Skin* lithograph shares with the oil and charcoal drawing that preceded it, they are ultimately the result of inverse processes. In the 1962 *Skin* drawing, marks of the face and hands are transferred to the drafting paper

with translucent, nearly invisible oil (unlike the dark printing ink used in the lithograph). These greasy impressions are finally made visible by the subsequent application of charcoal over the top, which sticks to the oil underneath to make a positive image. Although the technical process used in the *Skin* drawing is similar to how Johns made the 1967 ink on plastic drawings of the *In Memory of My Feelings* series, in the case of these latter, we end up with a negative, rather than a positive image. With the ink on plastic drawings, the oily resistant medium is combined with a water-based ink, instead of charcoal. Instead of sticking to the oily silhouettes of the fork, knife and spoon, the water-based ink resists it, creating a negative, rather than a positive, image.

As Roberts has written, it is hard to imagine a more intense trace of Johns's presence, or a more intimate "collaboration" between an artist and his materials, than in the 1965 *Skin* lithograph.<sup>91</sup> This brings us back to the active role that Johns's tools and materials play in his art making, and ultimately their significance. Johns has said, "A large part of the work is in the materials, in playing with the materials. Any idea that precedes the work is liable to change. The work is always different from the idea."<sup>92</sup> This is related to what was meant earlier when Shiff discussed how making art can change the very idea itself. Just as the mind directs the course the artwork will take towards its final realization, the materials and process the artist uses can, in return, change the mind as well. Johns claims that he would love not to be in control of his process, but we have seen up to this point just how much a creature of *habit* he really is. This does not mean he is resistant to *change*, or to the habits themselves changing, or even to a truly accidental, random occurrence while making his art. Once again, this play between the subjective

and objective, artist and materials, allows Johns to, in his words, “tackle the idea of chance from both sides.”

Yet in the very making of these lithographs, or the drawings in ink on plastic, Johns seems to be stuck on one side of the stone or sheet of translucent Mylar.<sup>93</sup> It is as if no matter how hard he tries, he will never be able to pass through its two-dimensional surface. It is precisely this resistance—the extreme impermeability of the lithographic stone or plastic surface—that not only generates the final work, but also constitutes much of its primary significance.<sup>94</sup> The viewer, to the contrary, seems trapped on that other side: we can never occupy the space Johns does. And yet, paradoxically, there is always that condition of “translucency” in Johns’s work, as mentioned earlier. Occasionally this offers the viewer a veiled glimpse beyond the impermeable barrier through to the other side. Perhaps this gets to the heart of what Johns means when he says that he likes to tackle chance from “both sides,” only one side of which, it seems, the viewer ever has the privilege to experience.

## Printmaking and Plastic

Christian Geelhaar: “Didn’t the use of washes on the lithography stone or plate inspire the ink drawings on plastic film of yours?”

Jasper Johns: “I’m not sure, but it’s apt to be the case. Lithography has affected all of my thought of course.”<sup>95</sup>

The intimate relationship between Johns’s work in various print media—especially lithography and monotype—and the drawings in ink on plastic is without question. Within Johns’s larger body of work, the connection between the two is perhaps among the most interesting and generative inter-media relationships in which the ink on plastic drawings partakes. One might speculate that the connections between the two, both materially and conceptually, are stronger than the connection to Johns’s paintings or even to his other works on paper, although few scholars have written on this relationship in any real depth. So far, Roberts’s essay, which will be included in the forthcoming *catalogue raisonné* of Johns’s monotypes, perhaps stands as the most interesting, and ironically the most substantive, analysis of the ink on plastic works.<sup>96</sup> The focus of her research is on Johns’s monotypes, but at several points she addresses the ink on plastic works, the implications of chance in relation to intention, and Johns’s tendency to yield control to the impersonal and material properties of his medium.

As Johns coyly admits in a snippet from an interview included at the beginning of this section, lithography, a medium which he began using in 1960, has had a profound impact on all of his thought, necessarily extending to his techniques and materials as well, considering the liberal give and take between concept and material execution,

subject and object, characteristic of all of Johns's work.<sup>97</sup> When asked by Ruth Fine in a 1990 interview if his drawings on plastic grew out of the printmaking process, he responded, "They may connect in some way...it resembled the stones and metal plates used in lithography in its lack of absorbency. Puddles of liquid on any of them form distinctive patterns when they dry, taking a good deal of time to do it."<sup>98</sup> It is precisely this non-absorbency, the recalcitrant stubbornness of the plastic—much like the lithography stone—that is among the most important details in understanding the unique character of this particular medium. For this reason, Johns's drawings in ink on plastic have several direct and indirect linkages to his varied work in printmaking.

Calling the ink on plastic works "drawings" seems acceptable merely for the sake of art historical categorization, an academic concern that Johns himself is keen to disrupt in most of his art. His characteristic intermediality—his working through and with ideas simultaneously in various media—consistently confounds easy categorization of his work. Nevertheless, it is decidedly unusual that so many critics and art historians well-versed in Johns's work would fail to at least remark—as Johns himself has several times, as quoted in this essay—about this particular medium's unusual relationship to the rest of his works on paper. As mentioned previously, Mark Rosenthal, in his exhibition catalogue essay for the 2003 Johns drawings exhibition at the Menil Collection, at several points refers to all the drawings as merely "works on paper," thereby falling into the trap set by the art historian's tendency to obsessively categorize, even when the categories themselves fail to account for the breadth, complexity, or contradictions of their contents.<sup>99</sup> The contents of these categories invariably run into each other and spill out from their convenient delineations, much like the pooling puddles of ink on plastic that

spill out from and among the sharp contours lines Johns sometimes includes in these drawings, which delightfully contrast in their deliberate gestures with the irregular, fluid boundaries formed by the dried up reservoirs of ink (Figure 39). On closer inspection, many of these deliberate contour lines, drawn in pen, trace the edges of the puddles of ink themselves, indicated they were added *after* the ink wash was applied and left to dry.

These drawings operate not unlike Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970 (Figure 40), the artist's signature monumental earthwork that juts out into Utah's Great Salt Lake. Due to natural forces of erosion and evaporation, this work is sometimes more or less submerged beneath the water, or encrusted with precipitating salts. As with Johns, the deliberate gestures of the artist seem always on the verge of being submerged beneath another medium outside the Smithson's control, yet are destined only to reappear again in due time. It is precisely the acquiescence to forces beyond their control, and the mediating and tense position the artist occupies between these opposing forces or tendencies, that links the works of Smithson and Johns in these instances. The issue of temporality, or multiple simultaneous temporalities collapsed into a single artwork, also links these two artists together. As we have seen, Johns's ink on plastic drawings are veritable palimpsests, revealing successive layers of pooling and drying contours, marks that by their very nature imply successive temporalities, a material fact also linking the drawings on plastic even more closely to printmaking, which often deals with successive iterations of separate plates run through a press in order to create a single, aggregate image. One can imagine Johns in the studio, starting work on a new drawing while waiting for his last mark to dry, before coming back an hour later to submerge it under yet another wash of India ink or water-soluble encaustic. This process results in the

appearance of sediments of varying density deposited in successive layers, both visually and materially similar to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*.

One would think, considering how many ink on plastic works have been exhibited and reproduced together with Johns's other works on paper, more scholars would have discussed the peculiar nature of this plastic medium.<sup>100</sup> Unlike the woven fibers of paper or canvas, these plastic sheets are completely impermeable. And unlike his tendency to paint on a vertical surface, these ink on plastic drawings, as with lithographs, are executed on a flat plan. Like the lithography stone, the Mylar plastic sheets that Johns uses for his ink on plastic drawings prevent a liquid medium (or otherwise liquid-soluble medium) from penetrating beyond the surface plane and binding with its support.<sup>101</sup> How is it possible for these puddles of dried up ink to hold their position, to sit on the surface, especially when hung vertically on the wall of a gallery or museum, neither really adhering, nor ever separating, from the support?<sup>102</sup>

Indeed, in a practice by now quite widespread as printmakers and master printers have expanded their repertoire to include the latest materials, Johns started using Mylar and other plastic sheeting—the same material he uses in the drawings—as a lightweight and convenient printing “plate” or “stone” for his lithographs and monotypes as early as the 1960s, often running several successive plastic sheets (or even the same sheet, multiple times) through the press to create a final print whereby the ink is lifted from the plastic by the roller press and onto dampened paper.<sup>103</sup> He seems to have used the plastic material just as frequently to create the lithographs of the 1960s as he does with his most recent monotypes, such as, *Untitled*, 2015 (Figure 41). Considering that, since the 1960s, Johns has been using sheets of Mylar as a printing matrix as well as a substrate for

drawings, it is no wonder that there are so many visual and conceptual linkages between the two.

Only as recently as 1996 did Johns forge a direct material linkage between the two more or less discrete media, discounting the obvious fact that both utilize plastic sheets in some fashion. This date marked the first instance—as surprising as it is that it took Johns this many years to make the move—when he deliberately ran an actual drawing on plastic through a printing press to create a monotype.<sup>104</sup> In this rather straightforward instance, he fed a drawing made with water-soluble crayon on frosted Mylar plastic through a press, applying just the right amount of pressure to transfer the crayon image onto a sheet of moistened paper, resulting in a newly-created monotype, *Untitled*, 1996 (Figure 42). It is worth noting that the printing process effectively defaced the drawing on plastic, although I would argue not completely, since the remaining “ghost” image on plastic could easily have further artistic merit—and use—for Johns. It would have been nearly impossible to distinguish the appearance of the original drawing from the print, save for the image reversal, but only Johns or his printer would be aware of that fact.

It is, in fact, extremely difficult to tell by sight alone that many Johns monotypes are *prints* (technically), not drawings, unless one is supplied with further information about the medium or has had the chance to witness its printing firsthand.<sup>105</sup> With intaglio, for instance, there is generally a characteristic dip, or embossing, around the perimeter of the image where the print matrix, such as a copper plate, has been pressed firmly into the dampened paper in order for the paper fibers to scoop up and absorb the ink deeply embedded in the grooves of the plate. Lithographs and monotypes, to the contrary, rarely

have any embossing at all, considering that much less pressure is required from the press in these printing techniques to transfer the image from the plate to the paper. The transfer of the image happens from one completely flat surface to another. As Roberts asks, if one cannot tell the difference between the drawing and the monotype—save for the image reversal—why bother making the print, the monotype, at all? <sup>106</sup> Considering Johns's love of reversals, deferrals, and his tendency to further distance the final product from his hand, it only seems appropriate that he would make something which, by sight alone, cannot be definitively categorized as one thing or the other.

At a very basic level, one might call these *printed drawings*, in as much as they are artworks that feature a medium *drawn*, pulled, smeared, across a surface, just not the *final* surface the image lands on. But to that end, all monotypes and lithographs could be categorized as printed drawings. In classic Johns fashion, just as he conceives of his ink on plastic drawings, printmaking in general (and the monotype in particular), most surely embodies a technical process that removes itself from his touch.

## The Photographic Paradox

“This purely ‘denotative’ status of the photograph, the perfection and plenitude of its analogue, in short its ‘objectivity,’ has every chance of being mythical. In fact, there is a strong probability...that the photographic message too...is connoted...the photographic paradox can then be seen as the co-existence of two messages, the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the ‘art,’ or the treatment, or the ‘writing,’ or the rhetoric, of the photograph).”<sup>107</sup>

-Roland Barthes

The following sections shift gears slightly, focusing on a discussion of the two series of ink on plastic drawings Johns has made, all within the last five years. Among the most significant differences between these recent works on plastic and those Johns made in the past, is that these new works are derived from a *photographic* image, which is a very recent development for him. The first series of drawings I will discuss is part of a series informally titled *Regrets*, completed in 2012 and 2013. All the works in this series—including those in media other than ink on plastic—are based on a photograph Johns saw in an auction catalogue. Taken by John Deakin, it shows the 42-year-old painter Lucian Freud, head in hand and seated on a narrow bed (Figure 43).<sup>108</sup> It must have appealed to Johns in a large part because of its *material* condition; it is crinkled and torn, splattered in paint, with some parts folded back and held together with a paper clip.<sup>109</sup>

The material aspects of this *photograph as object*—the creases and folds in the emulsion—not only appealed to Johns on a tactile, material level, but would also ultimately determine compositional and chromatic elements in several paintings in the series derived from it (Figures 44 and 45). In these paintings, the original image has been mirrored and doubled to produce a slightly off-center composition.<sup>110</sup> Four ink on plastic

drawings specifically, which are varied in their wide range of experimental effects, were made subsequent to these paintings and explore variations on the same visual motif (Figures 14 – 17).

Similar to the *Regrets* series, is another, informally titled *Farley Breaks Down—After Larry Burrows*. It also takes its inspiration from a photographic image, one that Johns first saw in a 2014 edition of National Geographic (Figure 46). This black and white photograph of Lance Corporal James C. Farley was taken by Vietnam War photojournalist Larry Burrows and originally appeared as part of a larger photo-essay titled *One Ride with Yankee Papa 13* in *Life Magazine*'s April 1965 issue. The obvious similarities between Farley's pose and Freud's in the other photograph are striking. There must have been a clear imagistic association, one dictated by the particular direction that Johns' *mind must move*. An inscription on one of the *Regrets* drawings suggests that the photograph caught Johns's eye because, as he is often quoted as saying of his targets or flags, it was a thing "the mind already knows."<sup>111</sup>

In this instance, it was not a banal or commonplace image or object, but rather an art historical connection, suggested by Johns's annotation: "Goya, Bats, Dreams? Just notes of mine, association"<sup>112</sup> (Figure 47). This chain of association, from Francisco Goya's etching to Deakin's photo of Freud to Burrows' photo of Farley, is surely noteworthy, yet we should not let the particular imagery over-determine these works' significance. Just like Johns's flags, the images may be less significant in themselves and more important as prompts, as vehicles for experimentation across and within media. These images were things Johns was attracted to, things his mind already knew, like long

forgotten friends, or half buried memories, revealing themselves to his conscious mind without his having to deliberately choose them.<sup>113</sup>

Deriving two full bodies of work from photographs is decidedly unusual for Johns, who—unlike Robert Rauschenberg, for instance—rarely used photographic imagery (as mentioned earlier in this essay). Johns has personally attested to his general disinterest in photographs and has taken only a handful in his career, because, as he put it, he disliked “looking through the thing,” that is, the lens of the camera.<sup>114</sup> Only a mere handful of works made by Johns before 2012 include, or are derived from, photographic images.

One of these rare works was discussed briefly earlier in this essay, *Souvenir*, 1964 (Figure 35), which notably features a photographic image of his visage on a ceramic plate affixed to the corner of a painted canvas.<sup>115</sup> Almost twenty years later, we find another rare example of a photographic image in Johns’s painting *Racing Thoughts*, 1983 (Figure 6), which depicts his longtime dealer Leo Castelli; it has been silkscreened over the painting’s encaustic surface. Upon closer inspection, the image of Castelli shows itself to be overlaid with a matrix of what appear to be puzzle pieces (Figure 48). It was not the photograph of Castelli per se that appealed to Johns, but rather the photograph as *object*. The puzzle appearance of the photograph was not a Johnsian invention, but rather a veristic representation of an *actual thing*: a jigsaw puzzle that had been given to Johns by a gallery employee and which bore an enlarged photographic likeness of Castelli’s face.<sup>116</sup>

Beginning in the early-to-mid 1990s and culminating with the *Catenary* series from the late 1990s and early 2000s, Johns occasionally included an image of an antique

family portrait in several paintings, drawings, and prints (Figure 49). He would typically layer this photographic image into already dense compositions of overlapping imagery; however, this old portrait has never stood alone as the *sole* basis for an entire artistic composition, in contrast with work works from the *Regrets* or *Farley Breaks Down—After Larry Burroughs* series. Interestingly enough, the image of the catenary itself appears to be derived from a photograph as well, specifically an image of Rwandan refugees that the artist clipped from the *New York Times* (Figure 50), an image that also displays a vertical compositional division that also occurs in most of the *Catenary* series works.<sup>117</sup> This series shows a gradual unraveling of the collage strategy/aesthetic typical of Johns's work from the mid 1980s to mid-to-late 1990s, typified by works like *Racing Thoughts*. By the time of the *Catenary* works, it is as if some centrifugal force has begun to push imagery back out of the picture plane, with the catenary itself—the dangling string linking one part of the canvas to the other—symbolizing both the literal and associative connections linking them an expansive field of indeterminate gray.

As rare as photographs are in Johns's work, it is often the specific material condition he is attracted to, not necessarily the imagery, but I doubt Johns would argue that there is a fundamental distinction between the two. not the material fact of a silver halide precipitate suspended in a gelatin matrix. It is as if, as in the Barthes quotation opening this section, Johns implicitly recognized the already coded, pre-mediated nature of photographic images. Although one could conceive of photographs as “messages without a code,” simple analogues to objective reality—purely denotative indexical signs—they are, as Barthes wrote, also messages “with a code.” They are also *representations*, which are already categorized from the moment of perception, already

structured by linguistic and social systems of signification.<sup>118</sup> As the puzzle-piece image of Leo Castelli seems to imply, all photographs at some level images beg to be decoded, and are still *representations* organized by some generalized principle or physical law, a composite whole formed from individual units. Although at first glance appearing to be a whole and continuous message, even a black and white photograph at the microscopic level reveals discrete atomic units, polygonal shapes that compose it (Figure 51). These are the individual silver halide crystals suspended within a gelatin matrix, whose edges seem to fit together much like pieces of a puzzle or like the scintillating facets of Johns's most recent ink on plastic drawings.

## All Thought is in Signs

“All this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.”<sup>119</sup>

-Charles Sanders Peirce

Jasper Johns is a master of creating multivalent works of art that combine various kinds of signs and marks. Almost every work of art he has made, as a testament to his habit of repetition and variation, reveals different combinations of signs. This is obviously the case with all the ink on plastic drawings, but especially true of some of his most recent works, which are wonderfully varied in their effects of pooling and splattering. This multivalency is not merely confined to the “collaging” of various signs and images into a single painting, as is the case with *Racing Thoughts* (see Figure TK). Any single sign, Peirce would maintain, something as simple as a letter or number, is primarily a symbolic sign, but it also has iconic and indexical aspects. Signs constitute not just our impressions of the perceptible universe, but also the very substance of our thought, caught in unfolding temporal dialectic. Art historian George Kubler has eloquently encapsulated this premise: “Time emerges only in *signals* relayed to us at this instant by innumerable stages and by unexpected bearers.”<sup>120</sup> Johns is most definitely an unexpected bearer—a veritable *medium* of change and of meaning—but so are most (good) artists by definition.

Some recent Johns drawings combine loose ink washes with crisscrossed marks and sharp outlines deliberately tracing contours created by the drying ink (Figures 52 and 53). As we know, Peirce proposed three categories of sign: the icon, the index, and the symbol, defined by how each one relates to its respective object and corresponding with his three phenomenological categories. Peirce maintains that these categories are not

mutually exclusive and can coexist in a single image. We see evidence of this kind of multi-valence in almost every artwork Johns has made; they often incorporate multiple signs into a single image. The original photographs Johns used as prompts in his most recent ink on plastic drawings would surely be what Peirce would describe as *iconic*, that is, a sign determined by some resemblance, signifying its object by imitating some quality or aspect of it.<sup>121</sup> But also, as Peirce readily admitted, a photograph is just as equally (if not predominantly) an *index*, relating to its object by means of a direct factual or causal relationship, by having been actually affected by that object, much like a footprint or a weathervane.<sup>122</sup> Although an index can resemble its object, this is not its primary relationship. Peirce's third type of sign, the *symbol*, signifies by virtue of convention, rule, or code, because it refers to a type or class rather than a single thing.

By appropriating a photographic image and using it as the basis for his *Regrets* series, then translating it into a collage of painting, and finally into ink on plastic, Johns plays with a range of signifying effects. In one particularly vivid collage that was one of the first works made in the series (Figure 54), Johns has filled the right side of the composition with bright color, limiting the left to more muted tones. In one of the paintings Johns made subsequent to the collage, it appears as if gray floods across the surface, like India ink across a sheet of plastic, leaving just a small sliver of the original colors (Figure 45).<sup>123</sup> And once finally translated into ink on plastic the colors have yielded entirely to shades of gray (Figures 14-17).

Whatever rule or rationale Johns used to color-code the previous iterations has been eliminated along with any potential *symbolic* significance they may originally have had. Now the dominant neutral grays seem to work like those *seemingly* random pools

and splatters of India ink, those marks which seem, at first glance, independent of Johns's artistic intention, marks that have "removed themselves" from his hand and appear to spill out beyond the crisp linear boundaries present in the earlier drawings and paintings in the series. In one drawing from this series (Fig. 14), the formless, "chancier" effects of the medium seem to predominate. Indices of successive pooling and drying render the original imagery so abstract as to be almost invisible. In this work, the iconic has been reduced almost to pure *indexicality*. But this kind of index is not really the same as those we saw earlier in thin *Skin* drawings, for example. Here it is less representative of Johns's touch—direct traces of his bodily presence—than are signs created by a material process operating independently of the artist. Yet we must be mindful of the lessons learned throughout this essay. What appears as the result of chance with Johns is not always what it seems. Even this "splashy" drawing is complex in composition and execution, which required an extreme amount of control, precision, and planning by a master technician to make it look exactly the way he wanted.

In three other drawings from this series (Figures 15-17), Johns adopts a progressively complex working process and repertoire of marks—the pools of ink in these works are overlaid by deliberate hatch marks and sharp delineations emphasizing the contours created by the puddles of ink. In two of these drawings (Figures 16 and 17), the more or less continuous, all-over tonality of the previous one (Figure 15) is disrupted as Johns plays with varied effects of contrast, with gradients of greater and lesser saturation extending across their surfaces. With these hatch marks and outlines it is almost as if Johns is *iconizing the indexical*, utilizing these new marks for the purposes of illusion, to simulate other kinds of indices. One could also describe it as *symbolizing the*

*indexical*, using a conventional system of marks for specific effect. The simultaneous inclusion of intentional crosshatching together with seemingly random pools of ink could be read, oddly enough, as a coexistence of two different kinds of indices: one with a direct relationship to Johns's hand, and the other as the sign of an independent process—one, as Johns has said, that makes it “difficult to tell from the finished drawing what gestures were used to produce it.”<sup>124</sup>

By playing with the effects of these various signs and then combining them all within a single image, Johns affords the viewer the kind of paradoxical experience we have seen time and again throughout this essay, a tense and precarious union of habit and chance, mind and matter, the artist and materials. His most recent series of ink on plastic drawings betrays a wonderful surface complexity unmatched by most other examples of his work in this medium. The looser, more continuous gestures and broad planes of contrasting tonality characteristic of some of his earlier ink on plastic drawings—such as the studies for *In Memory of My Feelings* from 1967, or others like his *Tracings after Cezanne* from 1994 (Figures 55 and 56)—have in recent years yielded to drawings that are characterized by dense labyrinths of variegated textures, superimposed upon and enclosing one another within finer constellations of marks (Figures 39 and 57s). Like Johns's earlier works, however, these more recent drawings continue to play with successive effects of reversal, mirroring, and the flipping of positive form with negative ground. Over time, with Johns as with any other artist, some habits change, while some habits stay the same.

In one particular drawing from the recent *Farley Breaks Down* series, highly contrasting areas of light and dark play out across the surface with dramatic effect (Figure

18). In yet another, contrasts between the planes are reduced and subjected to a more consistent tonality, yet their discreteness is emphasized in this case by Johns's deliberate application of accentuating contour lines in the gaps between the pools of ink (Figures 19 and 39). Many of these accentuating contour lines—which are noticeable in the *Regrets* series as well—follow the edges of ink that has already pooled and dried, indicating that they were drawn after, and not before, Johns applied the washes of India ink. The washes do not merely trace or fill in previously delineated compositions, but rather, constitute them in their own right. The linear tracings in pen come after the fact. In these works, there is a remarkable tension, a play between wholeness and fragmentation that Johns often utilizes, now manifested with unusual intensity. The original photographic image that inspired these two recent series of drawings in ink on plastic, threatens to disappear entirely within the play of varied surface effects and textures as if it were a pixelated image or a photograph translated into low resolution.<sup>125</sup>

Standing out among the recent ink on plastic drawings is one particularly beautiful work, *Farley Breaks Down - after Larry Burrows*, 2014 (Figure 20), which reintroduces a delicate and subdued palette of jewel-like colors, and with it, the potential of connotative significance that has been neutralized by the shades of gray which predominate in the other works. Also unique to this drawing is the rendering of its title in stenciled capital letters within the composition itself, a recurrent motif in Johns's work since the 1960s, here visible along the bottom edge. The anonymity of the stenciled letters serves as yet another means of distancing the artist from his work. However, the addition of color in the first place almost begs some kind of decipherment, opening itself to the possibility that a system is at work. Is there a connection between the colors of

each letter and those in the larger composition? At the very moment we think we have solved the system, imagining that Johns may have used color to code the drawing, the connections disintegrate.

## Conclusion: The Artist and His Materials

I think it is worth taking another look at one of the recent ink on plastic drawings, *After Larry Burrows*, 2014 (Figure 19). Upon close inspection one can discern a fragmentary grid in this drawing's upper left quadrant, made by the impression of a screen or cheesecloth onto the still-wet surface (Figure 58). It is as if this were the image's skeleton, its underlying matrix—revealing itself. Order and habit in Johns's work always seem to assert themselves just as they are on the verge of collapsing, of dissolving into formlessness. This ever-present tension is what makes Johns's work so appealing. Order constantly seems to yield to chance, before it flips back again, yet finally more forcefully, leaving a lasting impression that although Johns may say he is trying to tackle chance “from both sides” in his drawings on plastic, it seems as if habit is going to have the final word. As Johns closes in on chance from either side, it will soon have nowhere left to go.

We have seen repeatedly that Johns rejects the notion that merely matter passively conveys the ideas or intentions of the artist. Peirce said as much long before this became a subject of contemporary art historical debate. If we accept this as the case, there most surely would be some kind of “mind” at work in those drying puddles, but only if we are willing to be conceive of mind and matter as existing on a kind of spectrum, as Peirce did and Johns still does, rather than a mutually exclusive dualism. Yet Johns also rejects an alternative view, espoused by many modern artists and writers, that matter can bypass the artist altogether, entering the artwork spontaneously according to the laws of chance.<sup>126</sup> As Johns has been variously quoted throughout this essay, he clearly ascribes to his tools and materials an independent agency or life, and rarely resorts to the language of chance,

quite unlike the few art historians or critics who have written about the ink on plastic drawings. Rather, Johns describes a process at work outside himself, one that acts independently. As he said in 1964, “I want an object to be free from the way I see it...I want images to free themselves from me.”<sup>127</sup>

It is worth remembering that Johns is one of the most habitual, obsessive, technically masterful artists working today, and that nothing he does is the result of chance, a term too casually used by historians and critics of modern and contemporary art. Perhaps instead, contrary to the vehement objections of naysayers like Wood, we might be able to avoid the trap set by the language of chance by seriously considering the notion that inanimate objects and materials might possess, at some fundamental and imperceptible level, a kind of independent agency, or mind—whatever you wish to call it—a notion that has been a theme throughout this essay. Field, who made the following statement about Johns’s prints, could just have easily been writing about the ink on plastic drawings: “with its built in ‘delays’ [it] conspires to abet, not so much the appearance of accident, as the emergence of new meanings...”<sup>128</sup> Field too seems to understand that accident is not the Johns’s main concern, despite what may appear to be the case. Field’s particular choice of words is significant, essentially anthropomorphizing the artist’s materials. It is as if he were implicating them in some great gnostic conspiracy with Jasper Johns to fundamentally change the world—with art.

## Epilogue: A Most Improbable Signature

“...Writing, if there is any, perhaps communicates, but it does not exist, surely. Or barely, hereby, in the form of the most improbable signature.”<sup>129</sup>

—Jacques Derrida

If Johns can be regarded as attempting to avoid self-identification or expression in his art, one might think his signature, of all visible marks, would firmly reassert his ego. The signature revives the presence of the artist as creator; as Derrida writes, “by definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer.” Yet also, “in order to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production.”<sup>130</sup> What a beautiful paradox this is, and one that in *Regrets*, Johns seems to understand innately. Instead of merely *signing* his signature in this series, he used a readymade signature, one derived from a rubber stamp he custom-ordered years back to deal with myriad inquiries.<sup>131</sup> The stamp—bearing the eponymous title of the series—simply reads “Regrets, Jasper Johns,” serving as a demure refusal to personally address the question. By inserting his stamped signature together with his handwritten one directly into the composition of these drawings, Johns is once again playing the game of simultaneously denying and asserting his presence. On the one hand, his ink on plastic drawings exude anonymity, a feeling that they were created by someone else or by the chance effects of dynamic forces beyond his control. On the other hand, they appear to be deliberate and carefully modulated. Johns, perhaps more than any artist of his era, creates deeply complex, resonant, and paradoxical works of art for his viewers.

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Notes to text, pages 1 – 58:

<sup>1</sup> Jasper Johns, interview with Vivian Raynor, *ARTnews* 72, no. 3 (March 1973): 20-22. Reprinted in *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 145. Hereafter, this particular source will be referred to as Varnedoe *Writings* (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, “To Christine Ladd-Franklin, On Cosmology,” in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 8:318. Subsequent references in the following pages are consistent with established practice in Peirce literature. The numbers refer to the paragraphs of the respective editions of his collected writings, rather than to the pages. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* consists of eight volumes. Volumes I-VI are edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935). Volumes VII-VIII are edited by Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> This is a sentiment shared by Jennifer Roberts in her brilliant essay Johns, to be included in the forthcoming *catalogue raisonné* of monotypes scheduled to be published in late 2017. See Jennifer L. Roberts, “The Metamorphic Press: Jasper Johns and the Monotype,” in Jennifer L. Roberts and Susan Dackerman, *Jasper Johns: Catalogue Raisonné of Monotypes* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2017) 28, note 16 [forthcoming]. This publication follows an exhibition of Jasper Johns’s monotypes opened at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, which was on view from May 5 to June 25, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, 1996 is the same year Johns discovered how to use an ink on plastic drawing as a “plate” for creating a monotype. This will be discussed more in depth in a later section that will address the intimate relationship these drawings share with Johns work in lithography and monotype.

<sup>5</sup> Jasper Johns, “Interview with Jasper Johns,” by Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine, in *The Drawings of Jasper Johns*, ed. Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 73.

<sup>6</sup> All figures referenced in captions in the above text correspond to the numbered figures beginning on page 65.

<sup>7</sup> Johns, written in an annotation on a sketchbook page, *Book A*, c. 1963–64, p. 42, reproduced in Varnedoe (1990), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Jasper Johns, in an interview with Christian Geelhaar (1978), reprinted Reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996) 145.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Shiff, “Metanoid Johns, Johns Metanoid,” in *Jasper Johns: Gray*, ed. Douglas Druick and James Rondeau (Chicago, IL: Art Institute of Chicago, 2007), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Jasper Johns, “An Interview with Jasper Johns,” by Roberta Bernstein, in *Fragments: Incompletion and Discontinuity*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, *New York Literary Forum* 8-9 (1981): 279-90. Reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996), 201.

<sup>11</sup> Jasper Johns, in Richard Francis. *Jasper Johns* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1984), 98.

<sup>12</sup> Ironically, perhaps, this “computer desktop” aesthetic Johns achieves in the paintings of this time predate the complete digitization of life. Just as the digital world started to influence the visual arts, it is almost as if Johns returned to a previous *modus operandi*, largely emptying his pictures of imagery he had used repeatedly for over a decade.

<sup>13</sup> Shiff (2007) 136.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Roberts 16.

<sup>16</sup> See the following for a general overview of this diverse field, and thanks to Jennifer Roberts for her leads: H. Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and*

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*Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005); Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Autumn 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Charles W. Haxthausen, in his essay "Translation and Transformation in *Target with Four Faces*," written for the exhibition catalogue published to accompany Jasper Johns's 1990 solo exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, makes excellent use of Peirce's triadic sign theory in examining the changes an image undergoes in various media. As such, it serves as a useful reference point for my own essay. See Charles W. Haxthausen, "Translation and Transformation in *Target with Four Faces*," in *Jasper Johns: Printed Symbols*. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1990) 63-75.

<sup>18</sup> As some art historians and critics, like James Elkins, have rightly pointed out, Peirce's complex sign theory is perhaps all too often used inaccurately and unnecessarily when simpler definitions and descriptions would suffice. Elkins cites only a few scholars, including Richard Shiff, who have made productive use of Peirce in our field. See James Elkins, "What Does Peirce's Sign System Have to Say to Art History?" *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 44 no. 1 (2003): 5-22.

<sup>19</sup> Peirce's semiotic theory will be demonstrated primarily in the last sections of this essay, which focuses on Johns's most recent work. In these most recent ink on plastic drawings, the relationships between Johns's photographic source imagery and the resulting paintings and drawings ink on plastic are especially rich and interesting.

<sup>20</sup> See note 2.

<sup>21</sup> I wanted to thank Richard Shiff for this beautiful turn of phrase, from personal email correspondence, August 8, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher S. Wood, "Image and Thing: A Modern Romance," *Representations* 133, (Winter 2016), 130.

<sup>23</sup> Wood goes on, on the second page of his essay, sparing us little of his characteristic certainty or arrogance: "In the last several decades the device of partial anthropomorphism, or attribution of some human qualities to nonhuman entities, has been favored within critical and historical writing across several disciplines... Someone who writes or speaks about what images "want," the "life" of things, or "things that talk" would seem to be making a claim, against common sense, about reality. I am personally unconvinced that pictures desire anything, or that images think, or that things live," 131.

<sup>24</sup> In point of fact, excellent work continues to be done in art history and closely related fields on this topic. In Mesoamerican studies in particular, several recent works have tackled the issue of the "life of matter" or the agency of inanimate materials in compelling ways. See, for instance, Stephen Houston, *The Life Within: Classic Maya and the Matter of Permanence*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Also significant are Johns's own quotations about ink on plastic, discussed throughout this essay.

<sup>26</sup> A forthcoming *catalogue raisonné* of Johns's drawings will be published within the year, so attempting anything like an exhaustive survey would be redundant and beyond the scope of this paper. See *The Catalogue Raisonné of the Drawings of Jasper Johns: 1954-2014*, eds. Allegra Pesenti, Bernice Rose, Eileen Costello, and Kate Ganz. Houston: The Menil Collection, 2017 [forthcoming].

<sup>27</sup> Willem de Kooning, in David Sylvester. *Interviews with American Artists*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001: 50. Recorded March 1960 in New York City. Aired on the BBC (1960) under the title "Painting as Self-Discovery." Edited version assembled from excerpts first published as "Content is a Glimpse," Location 1, no. 1 (Spring 1963).

<sup>28</sup> Johns, in an interview with Bryan Robertson and Tim Marlow. "Jasper Johns," (1993) *Tate: The Art Magazine* No. 1, (Winter 1993): 40-47, reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996), 287.

<sup>29</sup> I am again indebted to Jennifer Roberts for her keen insight in this matter. See Roberts 16.

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- <sup>30</sup> Fine and Rosenthal (1990); Rosenthal (2003); Smith (2010); Yau (2010); Rosenthal and Brice (2010).
- <sup>31</sup> Richard Shiff. "Preference without a Cause," in *Past Things Present: Jasper Johns Since 1983*, ed. Joan Rothfuss. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Richard S. Field, *Jasper Johns: Prints 1970-77* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1977) 9.
- <sup>33</sup> Rosenthal, Nan and Kristy Bryce. *Jasper Johns: Ink on Plastic*. New York: Craig F. Starr Gallery, 2010, n.p.
- <sup>34</sup> Willem de Kooning, quoted in Jack Cowart, "De Kooning Today," *Art International* (Summer 1979): 16.
- <sup>35</sup> The bubbling noticeable in de Kooning's lithograph, for example, resulted from the addition of gasoline into the printing ink. See John Elderfield, *Willem de Kooning: A Retrospective*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011) 401.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid* 329-330.
- <sup>37</sup> For an excellent study on Ellsworth Kelly's use of chance, see Richard Shiff's essay, "Make Your Own Chance," in *Ellsworth Kelly: New York Drawings, 1954-1962*. (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2014).
- <sup>38</sup> Ellsworth Kelly (1969) as quoted in Diane Upright, *Ellsworth Kelly: Works on Paper*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987) 9-10.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>40</sup> Ellsworth Kelly, in an interview by Nathalie Brunet (May 1991), quoted in Brunet, "Chronology, 1943-1954," trans. Thomas Repensek, in Bois (1992) 184.
- <sup>41</sup> For further details on this work and procedures, see Pritchett, James. 1988. "From Choice to Chance: John Cage's Concerto for Prepared Piano," in *Perspectives of New Music* 26, no. 1 (Fall): 50-81; and Lejeune, Denis. *The Radical Use of Chance in 20th Century Art*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rodopi Press, 2012, 185-189.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>43</sup> Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author" (1967) as reproduced in *The Rustle of Language*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 51.
- <sup>44</sup> As Richard Shiff pointed out to me on August, 11, 2017 via email correspondence, it is important to remember this is contrary to the usual assessment by art historians who falsely associate modernism with the obsession of original expression.
- <sup>45</sup> See note 28.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Ayers, "Reviews; New York: Jasper Johns: Craig F. Starr," *ART- news* (Summer 2010): n.p.; Cherix and Temkin, *Regrets*, 29.
- <sup>47</sup> Johns, "Interview with Jasper Johns," by Rosenthal and Fine, 73.
- <sup>48</sup> Habits seem to yield to, or generate even more habits, but somewhere in how does chance arise? Peirce writes: "the tendency to form habits or tendency to generalize, is something which grows by its own action, by the habit of taking habits itself growing" (Peirce 8:317.).
- <sup>49</sup> Wittgenstein is mentioned variously by Johns in Varnedoe 22, 165, 168, 184, 254, 283.
- <sup>50</sup> Peirce 8:317.
- <sup>51</sup> Johns, "Interview with Jasper Johns," by Rosenthal and Fine, 73.
- <sup>52</sup> Peirce 1:306.
- <sup>53</sup> Peirce 1:310; "A feeling is necessarily perfectly simple, in *itself*, for if it had parts these would also be in the mind, whenever the whole was present, and thus the whole could not monopolize the mind." (Peirce 1891: 6:18)
- <sup>54</sup> Peirce 7:630. He continues, "when we think, we are conscious that a connection between feelings is determined by a general rule, we are aware of being governed by habit. . . the one primary and fundamental law of mental action consists in a tendency to generalizations" (Peirce 6:19).

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- <sup>55</sup> Robert Burch, "Charles Sanders Peirce," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/peirce>>, paragraph 5.
- <sup>56</sup> Johns, in an interview with Robertson and Marlow (1993), reprinted in Varnedoe 287.
- <sup>57</sup> Jasper Johns, *Sketchbook Notes*, S-34. Book B, c. 1967, reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996) 62.
- <sup>58</sup> Rosenthal and Fine (1990) 278.
- <sup>59</sup> Elderfield, John. *Willem de Kooning: A Retrospective*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011) 19.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> John Ruskin. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1880) II.I, p. 55. Since there are numerous editions of this book, references are given to chapter and section, as well as page numbers of the first edition.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid II.10, p. 103; 11.1, p. 52
- <sup>64</sup> Kirk Varnedoe et al. *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996) 127.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Varnedoe et al 191; Rosenthal and Bryce, n.p.; Smith C25; Cherix and Temkin 29.
- <sup>67</sup> Johns, in an interview with Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine (1990) in Rosenthal and Fine 73.
- <sup>68</sup> Rosenthal and Fine 174.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>70</sup> Rosenthal and Bryce (2010), n.p.
- <sup>71</sup> Shapiro, David. *Jasper Johns: Drawings 1954-1984*, project director David Whitney, ed. Christopher Sweet (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984).
- <sup>72</sup> Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine, eds. *The Drawings of Jasper Johns*. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990).
- <sup>73</sup> Jasper Johns, Interview with Ruth Fine and Nan Rosenthal," (1990), reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996).
- <sup>74</sup> Mark Rosenthal, *Jasper Johns: Drawings*. (Houston, TX: The Menil Collection, 2003), 8, 25, 69.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid, 45.
- <sup>76</sup> Shiff (2003) 134.
- <sup>77</sup> Field, 21.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid. Field writes incisively on the issue of black, white, and gray in his volume on the 1970s prints.
- <sup>79</sup> Johns, in an interview with Gerald Marzorati (1986) in Varnedoe 219.
- <sup>80</sup> Field, 22.
- <sup>81</sup> Rosenthal (2003) 25.
- <sup>82</sup> Varnedoe, et al, 194.
- <sup>83</sup> See note 13, and Shiff's mention of the *metanoic*.
- <sup>84</sup> Also significant is the translation of *souvenir* from the original French: "to remember."
- <sup>85</sup> See note 55.
- <sup>86</sup> Rosenthal and Fine, 170.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>88</sup> Field 14-15.
- <sup>89</sup> Roberts 12.
- <sup>90</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> Johns, in Paul Clements, "The Artist Speaks," *Museum & Arts Washington* 6 no. 3 (May-June 1990), excerpted in Varnedoe, ed., *Jasper Johns: Writings*, p. 243.

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<sup>93</sup> Roberts 12

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Johns, interview with Christian Geelhaar, 1978 (Basel catalogue, reprinted in Varnedoe, 1996), 189.

<sup>96</sup> Jennifer L. Roberts, “The Metamorphic Press: Jasper Johns and the Monotype” in Jennifer L. Roberts and Susan Dackerman, *Jasper Johns: Catalogue Raisonné of Monotypes*: New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2017, p. 28, note 46 [forthcoming]).

<sup>97</sup> In August of 1960, Tatyana Grosman of ULAE invites Johns to make his first lithographs. See Varnedoe (retrospective), 168.

<sup>98</sup> Johns, interview with Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine, 1990 (Drawings of Jasper Johns, NGA, reprinted in Varnedoe 1996), 73.

<sup>99</sup> Rosenthal (2003) 8.

<sup>100</sup> Beyond the scope of this particular study, but worth further attention, would be the cultural and societal implications and impact of plastic, which as far as art media go, is a very recent invention. See Jeffrey L. Meikle. *American Plastic: A Cultural History*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

<sup>101</sup> In conversation from May, 2017, conducted with the author’s father, Gerald Hoepfner, former director and chief conservator of the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, questions were raised as to the ultimate preservation and conservation of these drawings on plastic. If the support and the medium do not bind chemically or physically, as with more traditional works on paper or oil paintings, for example, it is Hoepfner’s prediction that the dried ink of Johns’s ink on plastic drawings will eventually slough off the surface. The earliest examples of the medium still hold up without any apparent conservation issues, so only time will tell.

<sup>102</sup> Mark Rosenthal speculated on this as well, the only mention of this important detail I have been able to find in the literature. See Rosenthal (2001) 45.

<sup>103</sup> Roberts 7.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid 13.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid 13. This indeed was my own experience viewing a recent (2014) monotype from the *Farley Breaks Down* series. The monotype had the same characteristic pooling and drying, and without the indication from the artwork’s label as a monotype, it would be nearly impossible to tell it was not, in fact, a drawing.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Barthes 19.

<sup>108</sup> Christophe Cherix and Ann Temkin. *Jasper Johns: Regrets*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014) 11–12.

<sup>109</sup> This mangling was the direct result of its being the source image for Francis Bacon’s 1964 painting, *Study for Self Portrait*, and it became, over the years, yet another piece of detritus in the compost-like mass that was the artist’s studio.

<sup>110</sup> Cherix and Temkin (2014) 14. The mirroring and doubling apparent in this body of work resulted from a photocopying of a hand-drawn tracing that was paired with the original catalogue reproduction itself.

<sup>111</sup> Johns (1959), “His heart belongs to DADA,” *Time* 73, 4 May, 1959, p. 58, reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996) 82.

<sup>112</sup> Cherix and Temkin (2014) 15.

<sup>113</sup> It should be mentioned that Johns is surely among the most art historically literate artists of any era, and that images he encounters on a daily basis are frequently apt to resonate in some way with his knowledge of art historical precedents.

<sup>114</sup> Johns, in an interview with Paul Taylor. “Jasper Johns,” (1990), *Interview* 20, no. 7 (July 1990): 96-100; 122-23, reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996), 248–49.

<sup>115</sup> Johns made another, very similar work, aptly titled *Souvenir II* the same year.

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- <sup>116</sup> Johns, in an interview with Paul Taylor. “Jasper Johns,” (1990), *Interview* 20, no. 7 (July 1990): 96-100; 122-23, reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996), 248–49.
- <sup>117</sup> Scott Rothkopf. *Jasper Johns: Catenary*. (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2001) 7.
- <sup>118</sup> As Barthes writes, “Is this to say that a pure denotation, a *this-side of language*, is impossible? If such a denotation exists, it is perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective, but on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic images. The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning” 30.
- <sup>119</sup> Peirce 5.448.
- <sup>120</sup> George Kubler. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962) 17.
- <sup>121</sup> Peirce 2:229.
- <sup>122</sup> Peirce 2:248.
- <sup>123</sup> Note that the planes of color in the painting *directly* correspond to the drawing.
- <sup>124</sup> Johns, in an interview with Rosenthal and Fine (1990), 73.
- <sup>125</sup> Shiff’s unpublished essay from 2015 explores the idea of representations of low resolution. He distinguishes between the effects of “blur” and “fuzz,” both of which seem operative in these works in ink on paper by Johns.
- <sup>126</sup> Roberts 16.
- <sup>127</sup> Johns, in Yoshiaki Tono, “I Want Images to Free Themselves from Me” (in Japanese), *Geijutsu Shincho* (Tokyo) 15 no. 8 (August 1964), reprinted in Varnedoe *Writings* (1996), 100.
- <sup>128</sup> Field 9.
- <sup>129</sup> Derrida, Jacques. “Signature Event Context” (1971), in *Margins of Philosophy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985) 330.
- <sup>130</sup> *Ibid* 328–29.
- <sup>131</sup> Cherix and Temkin (2014) 18.

## Figures



Figs. 1, 2, 3 (from left to right)

Left: Jasper Johns, *Device*, 1961-62, oil on canvas with wood, 72 1/16 x 43 3/4 x 4 1/2 inches. Dallas Museum of Art.

Middle: Jasper Johns, *Device*, 1962, ink on plastic, 24 x 18 inches. Private collection.

Right: Jasper Johns, *Device*, 1962, lithograph on paper, 31 1/2 in. x 22 3/4 inches.



Figs. 4, 5 (from left to right)

Left: Jasper Johns, *Tracing (after Hans Holbein)*, 1977, ink on plastic, 36 1/4 x 31 inches. Collection of Anne and Anthony d'Offay.

Right: Jasper Johns, *Tracing (after Jacques Villon after Marcel Duchamp)*, 1978, ink on plastic, 23 1/2 x 16 inches. Collection of the artist.

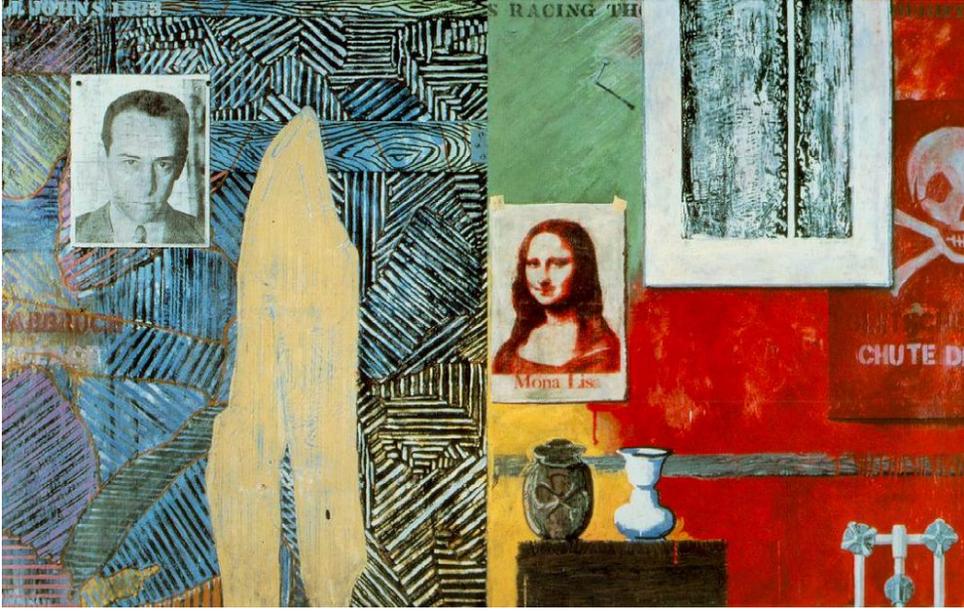


Fig. 6. Jasper Johns, *Racing Thoughts*, 1983, encaustic, screenprint, and wax crayon on collaged cotton and linen, 48 1/16 x 75 3/16 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Fig. 7. Jasper Johns, *Savarin*, 1977, ink on synthetic polymer sheet, 36 1/4 x 26 1/8 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Lauder Foundation.



Fig. 8. Jasper Johns, *Disappearance II*, 1962, ink on plastic, 18 x 18 inches. Private collection



Fig. 9. Jasper Johns, *Study for In Memory of My Feelings*, 1967, ink and pencil on plastic, 12 1/2 x 19 inches. Collection of the artist.

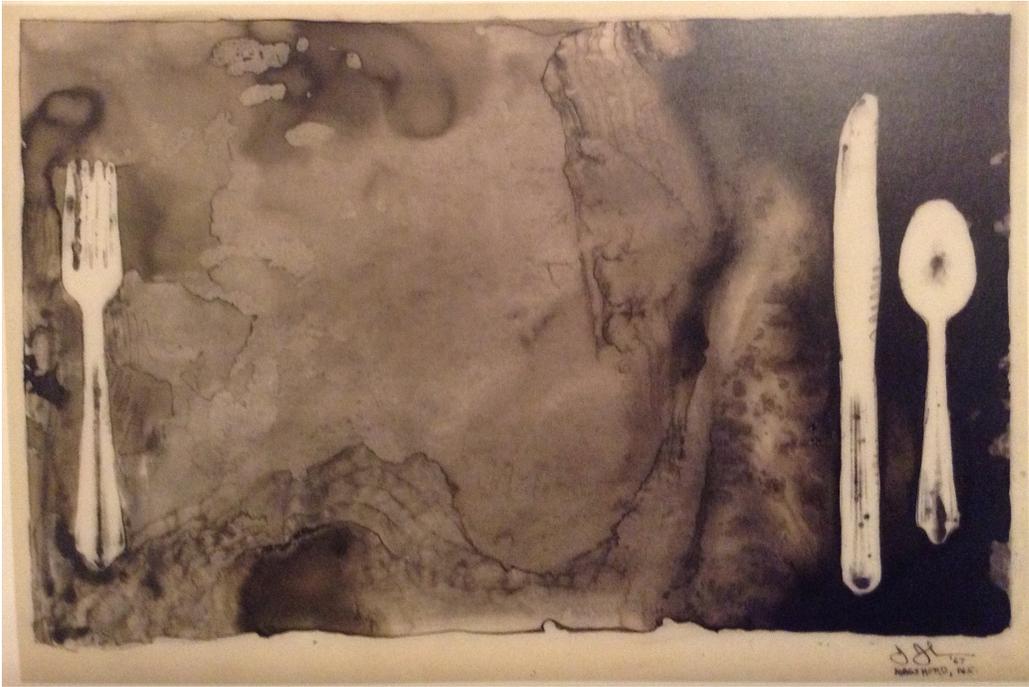


Fig. 10. Jasper Johns, *Study for In Memory of My Feelings*, 1967, ink and pencil on plastic, 12 1/2 x 19 inches. Collection of the artist.

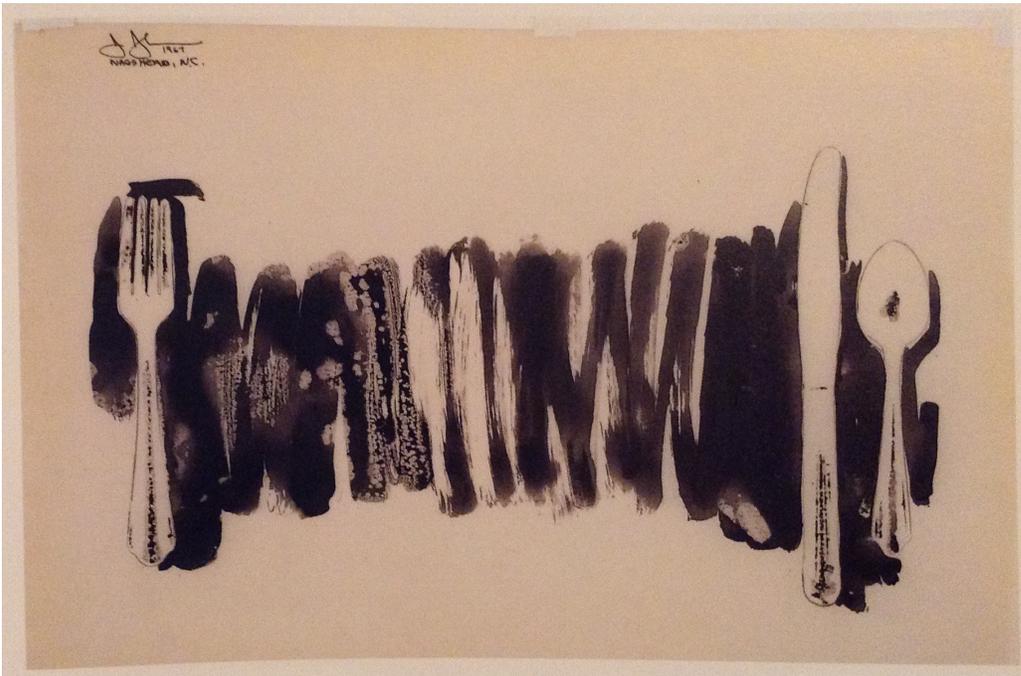


Fig. 11. Jasper Johns, *Study for In Memory of My Feelings*, 1967, ink and pencil on plastic, 12 1/2 x 19 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 12. Jasper Johns, Study for *In Memory of My Feelings*, 1967, ink and pencil on plastic, 14 1/8 x 11 inches. Collection of the artist.

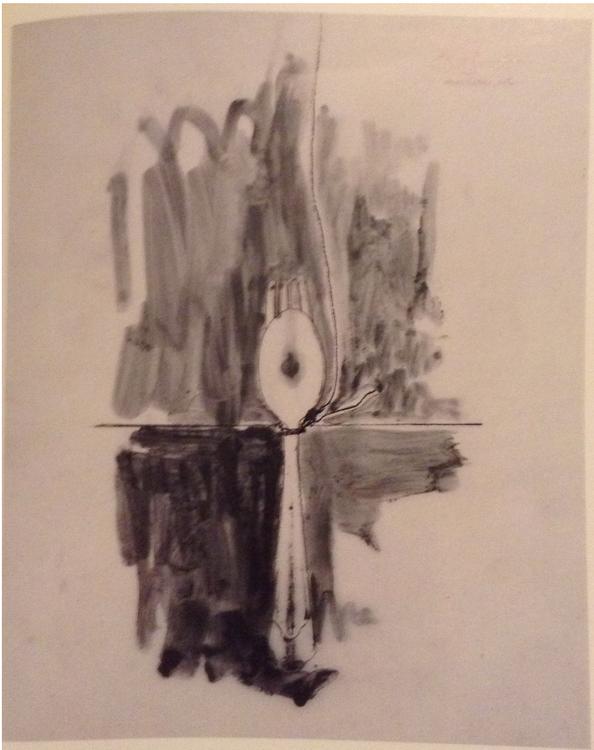


Fig. 13. Jasper Johns, Study for *In Memory of My Feelings*, 1967, ink and pencil on plastic, 14 1/8 x 11 inches. Collection of the artist.

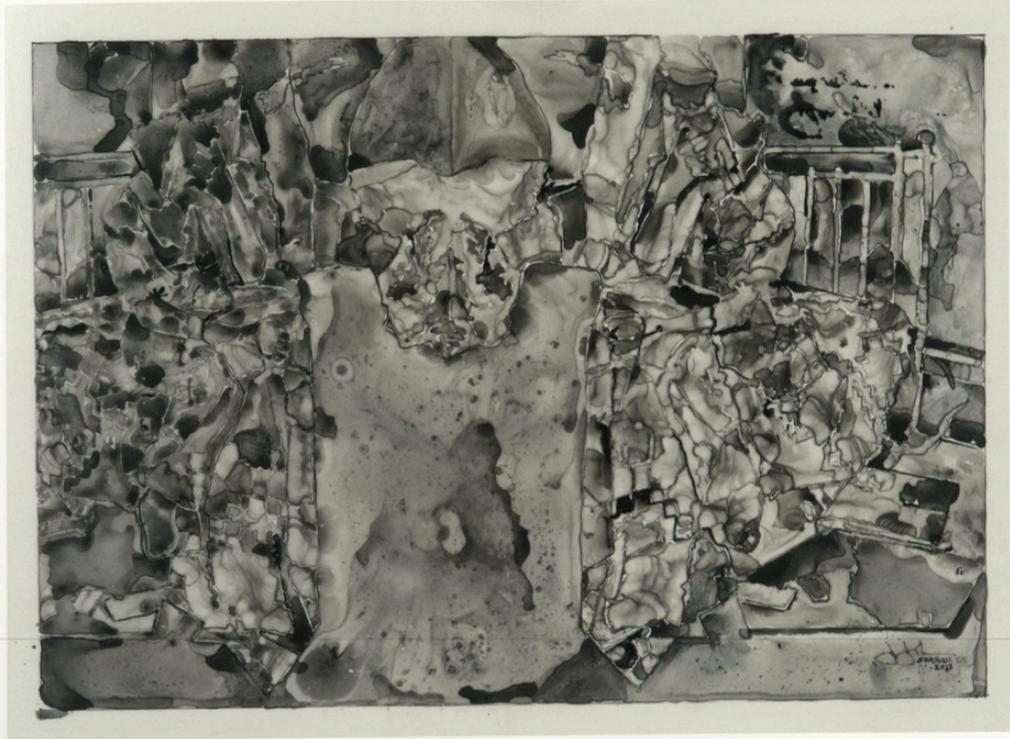


Fig. 14. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2013, Ink on plastic, 27 1/2 x 36 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift from a private collection.



Fig. 15. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2013, Ink on plastic, 27 1/2 x 36 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift from a private collection.

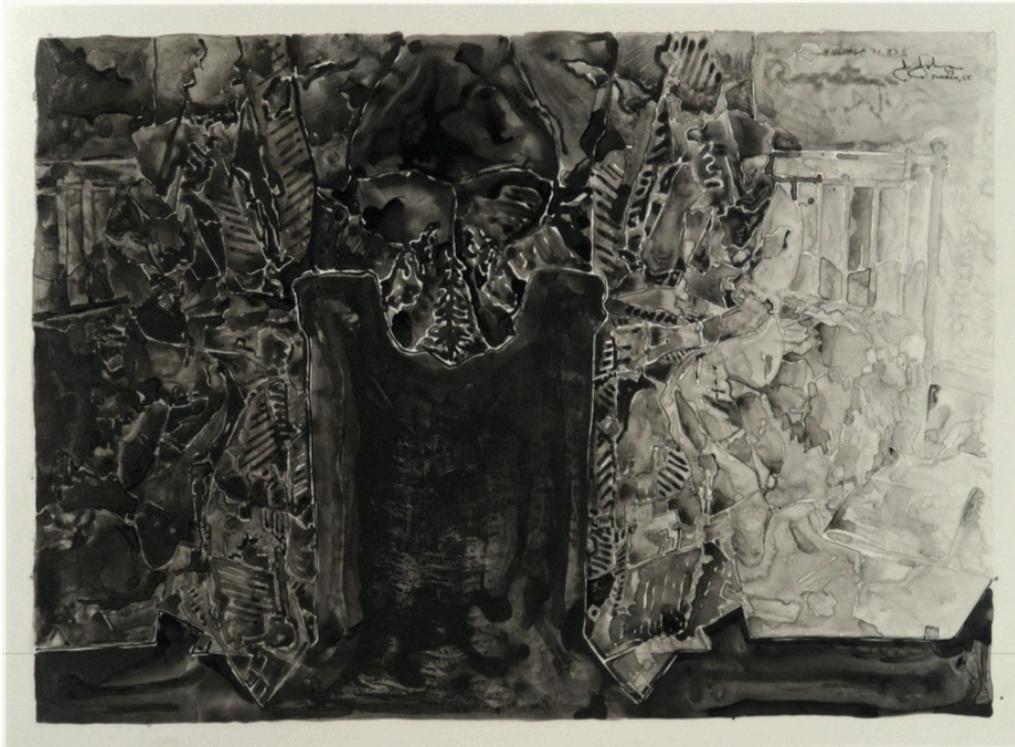


Fig. 16. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2013, Ink on plastic, 27 1/2 x 36 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift from a private collection.



Fig. 17. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2013, Ink on plastic, 27 1/2 x 36 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift from a private collection.



Fig. 18. Jasper Johns, *Farley Breaks Down - after Larry Burrows*, 2014, Ink on plastic, 31 7/8 x 24 inches. Collection of the artist.

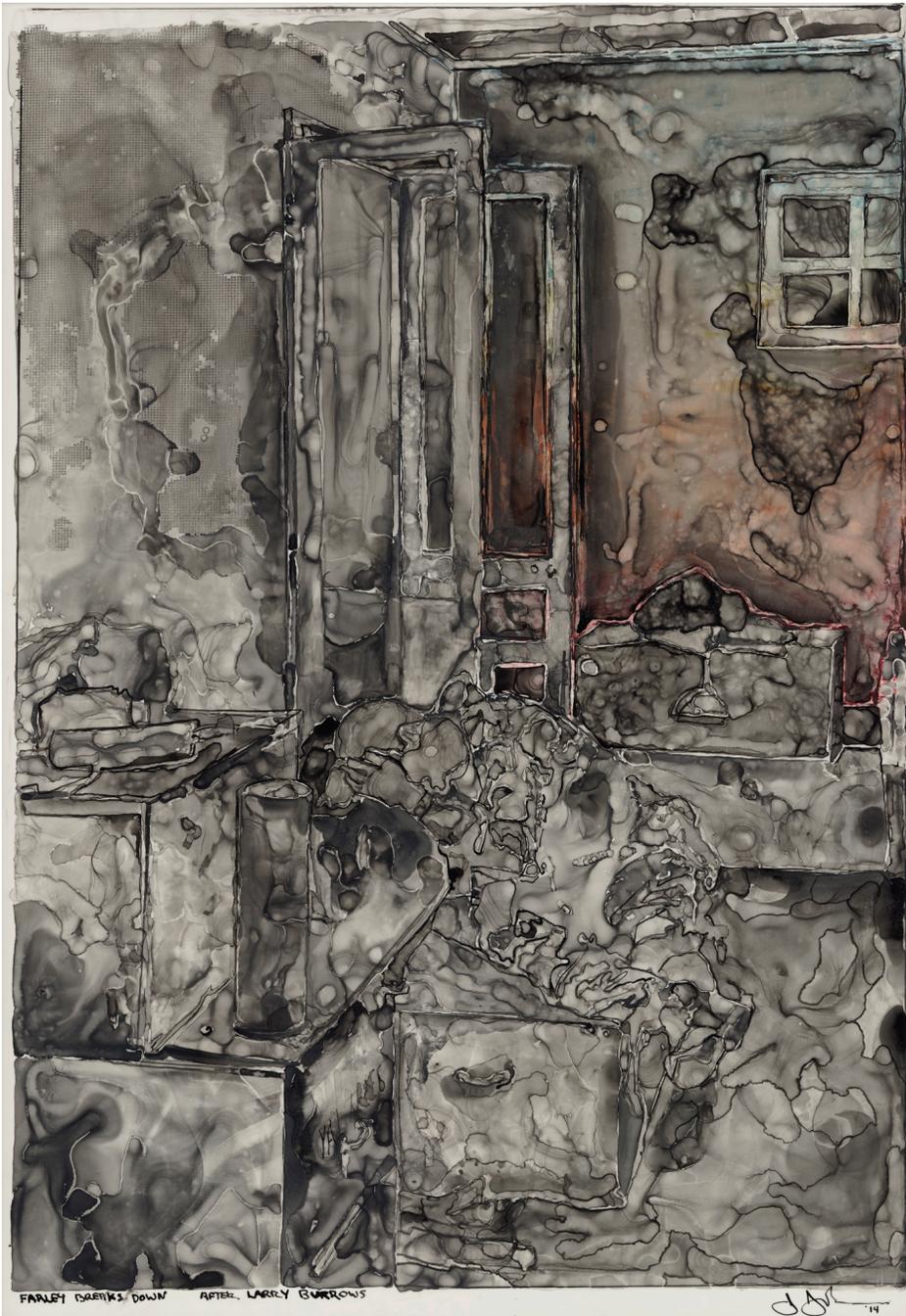


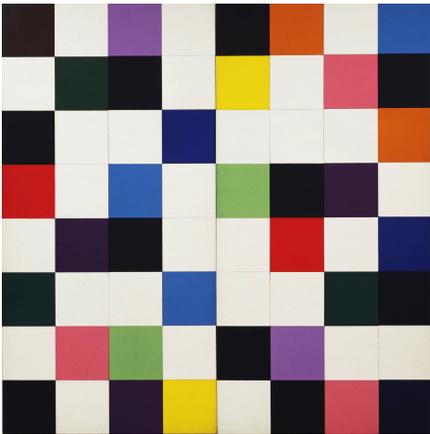
Fig. 19. Jasper Johns, *After Larry Burrows*, 2014, India ink and water-soluble encaustic on plastic, 32 x 24 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 20. Jasper Johns, *Farley Breaks Down - after Larry Burrows*, 2014, Ink and water-soluble encaustic on plastic, 32 x 24 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 21. Willem de Kooning, *Minnie Mouse*, 1971, lithograph on paper, 30 x 22 7/16 inches. The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the International Council, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figs. 22, 23 (from left to right)

Left: Ellsworth Kelly, *Colors for a Large Wall*, 1951, oil on canvas, 64 joined panels, 94 1/2 x 94 1/2 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Right: John Cage, *Music of Changes*, 1951, excerpt from Book IV of Cage's handwritten score.



Fig. 24. Jasper Johns, *Between the Clock and the Bed*, ink and watercolor plastic, 18 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches. Private collection.

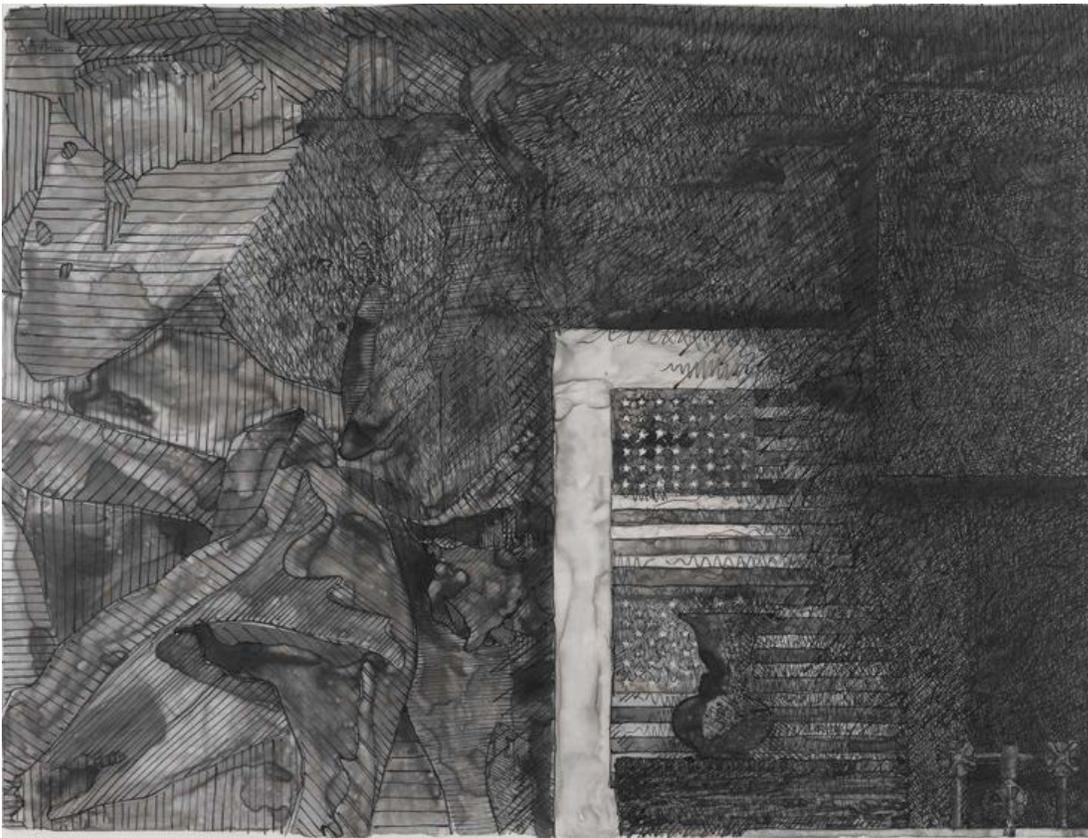


Fig. 25. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1984, ink on plastic, 26 3/8 x 34 1/4 inches. Collection of Janie C. Lee.



Fig. 26. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1983-84, ink on plastic, 23 3/8 x 34 1/4 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Hilson.

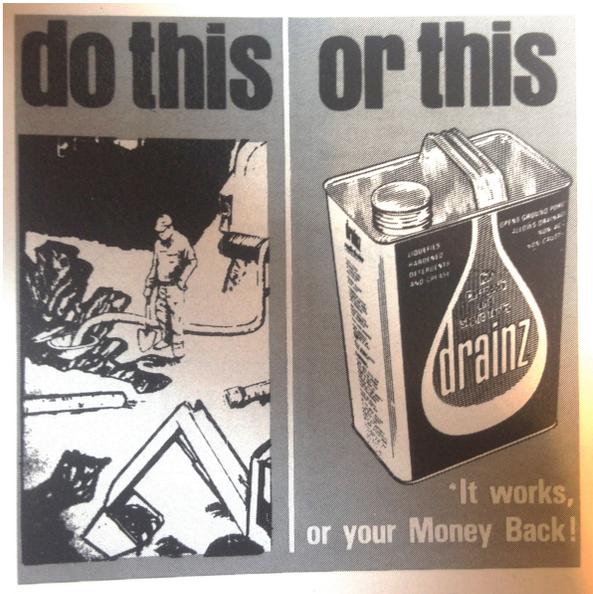


Fig. 27. Advertisement for *Drainz*, c. late 1940s – early 1950s, courtesy Jancyn Manufacturing Corporation, Georgia.



Fig. 28: Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2000, ink on plastic, 25 1/2 x 36 1/4 inches. Collection of the artist.

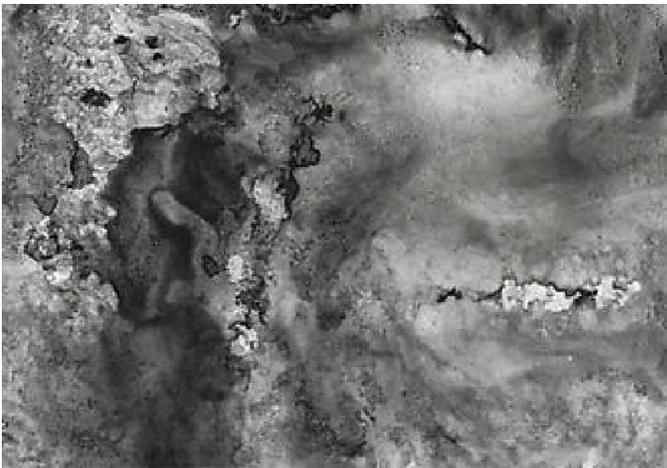


Fig. 29: Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (detail), 2000, ink on plastic, 25 1/2 x 36 1/4 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 30. Jasper Johns, *False Start II*, 1962, lithograph on paper, 31 x 22 1/2 inches.

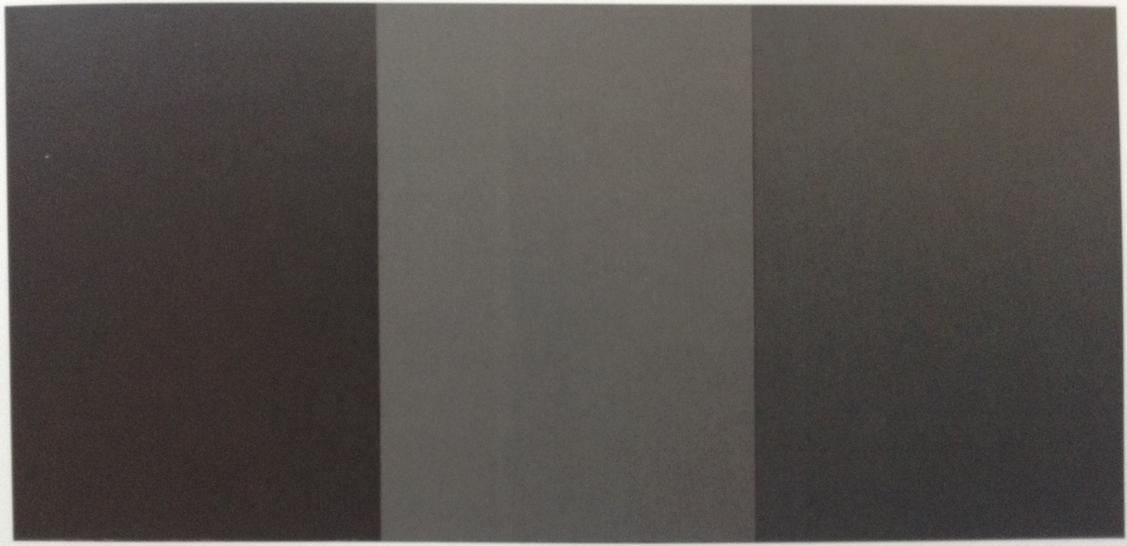


Fig. 31. Brice Marden, *Three Deliberate Greys for Jasper Johns*, 1970, oil and beeswax on canvas, three joined panels, 72 x 150 inches (overall). The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Fig. 32. Jasper Johns, *Voice 2*, 1982, ink on plastic in three panels, each measuring 35 1/8 x 23 7/8 inches. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Promised Gift of Keith L. and Katherine Sachs. Image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



Fig. 33. Jasper Johns, *Flag on an Orange Field*, 1977, ink on plastic, 15 11/16 x 11 13/16 inches. Private collection.



Fig. 34. Jasper Johns, *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara*, 1961, oil on canvas with objects, two panels, 40 x 60 inches. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Partial Gift of Apollo Plastics Corporation.



Fig. 35. Jasper Johns, *Souvenir*, encaustic on canvas with objects, 28 3/4 x 21 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 36. Jasper Johns, *Study for In Memory of My Feelings* (detail), 1967, ink and pencil on plastic, 14 1/8 x 11 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 37. Jasper Johns, *Study for "Skin" I*, 1962, charcoal and oil on drafting paper. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 38. Jasper Johns, *Skin with O'Hara Poem*, 1963/65, lithograph on paper, 22 x 34 inches.

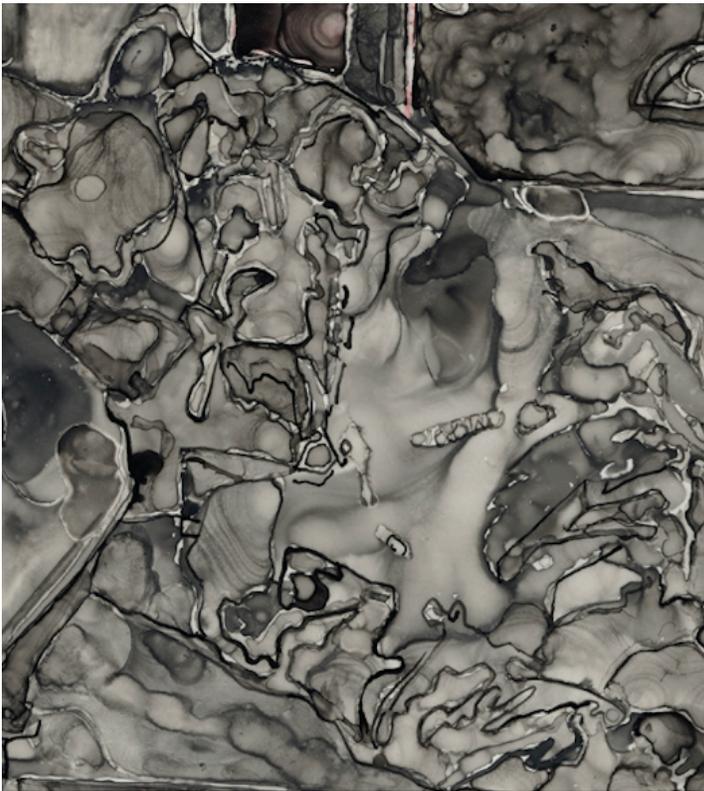


Fig. 39. Jasper Johns, *After Larry Burrows* (detail), 2014, India ink and water-soluble encaustic on plastic, 32 x 24 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 40. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, earth, mud. Great Salt Lake, Utah.



Fig. 41. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2015, monotype on Sommersett Velvet Cream paper, 37 3/8 x 29 7/8 inches. Private collection.



Fig. 42. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 1996, monotype in Aquarelle crayon on Lavis Fidelis (Arches en tout cas) paper, 41 x 23 inches. Private collection.



Fig. 43. John Deakin, *Photograph of Lucian Freud*, c. 1964, gelatin silver print with paper clips, 12 x 12 inches. Dublin City Gallery The Hugh.



Fig. 44. Jasper Johns, *Regrets*, 2013, oil on canvas, 67 inches x 8 feet. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift of Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis.



Fig. 45. Jasper Johns, *Regrets*, 2013, oil on canvas, 50 x 72 inches. Collection of the artist.

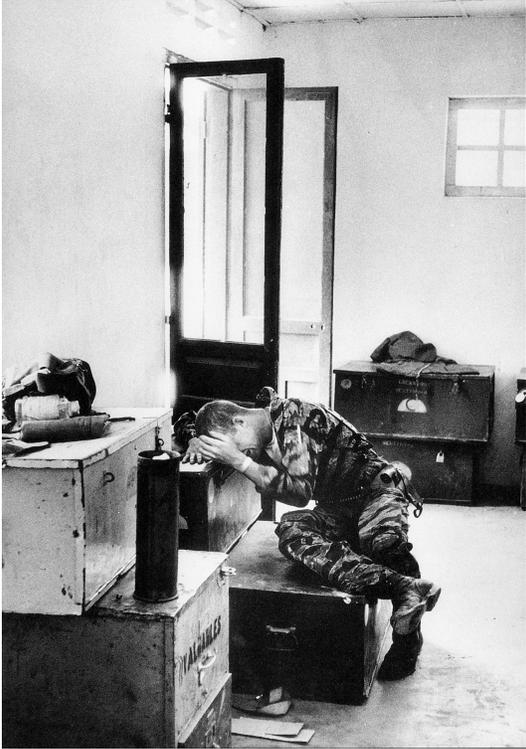


Fig. 46. Larry Burrows, *James C. Farley* from *One Ride with Yankee Papa 13*, 1965, courtesy *Life Magazine*, Getty Images.



Fig. 47. Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, c. 1797-99, etching, aquatint, and drypoint, 8 7/16 x 5 1/8 inches. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Fig. 48. Jasper Johns, *Racing Thoughts* (detail), 1983, encaustic, screenprint, and wax crayon on collaged cotton and linen, 48 1/16 x 75 3/16. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

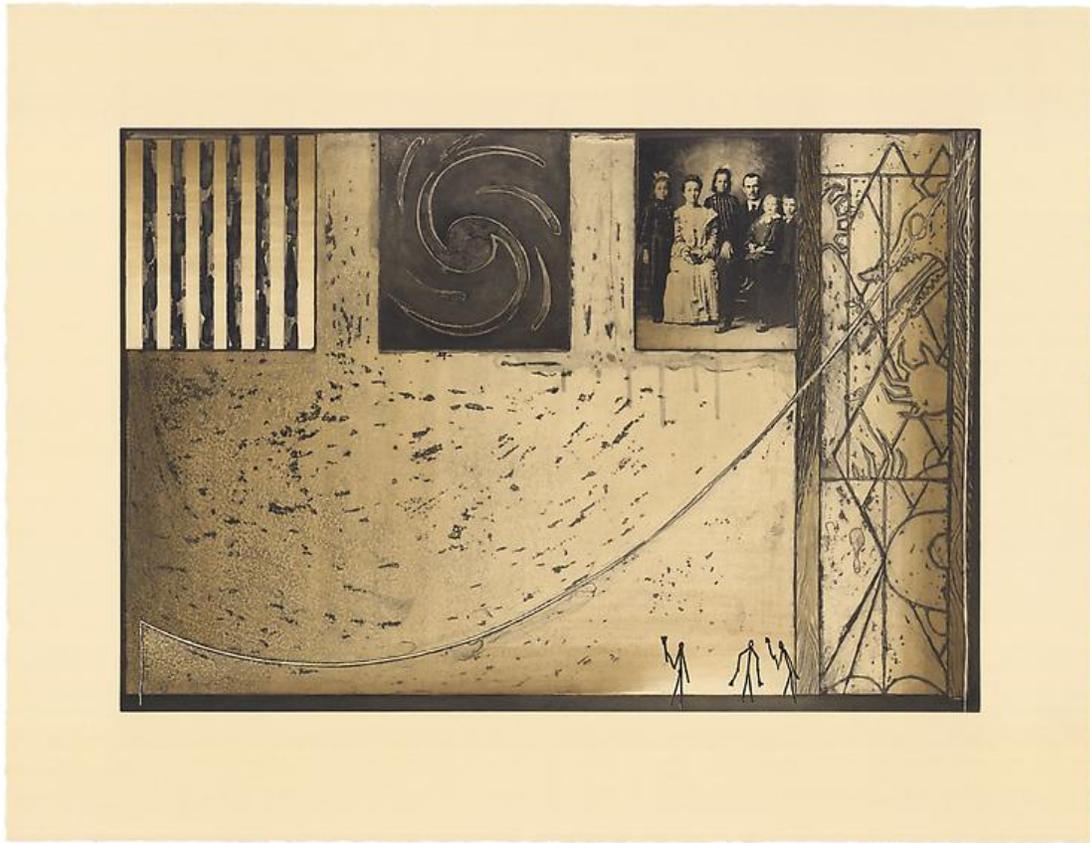


Fig. 49. Jasper Johns, *Untitled*, 2001, intaglio on paper, 25 7/8 x 33 5/8 inches.



Fig. 50. John Parkin, *A Rwandan Hutu refugee woman helps her daughter with an intravenous drip at a local hospital in Goma, Zaire*, November 17, 1996. Courtesy of the *New York Times*.

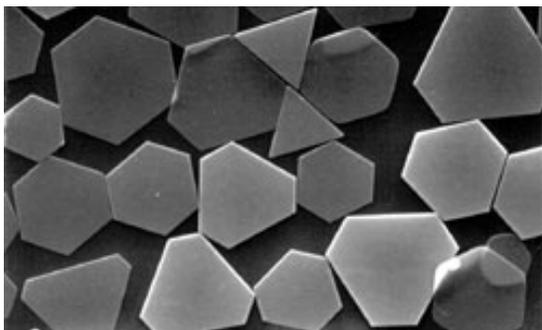
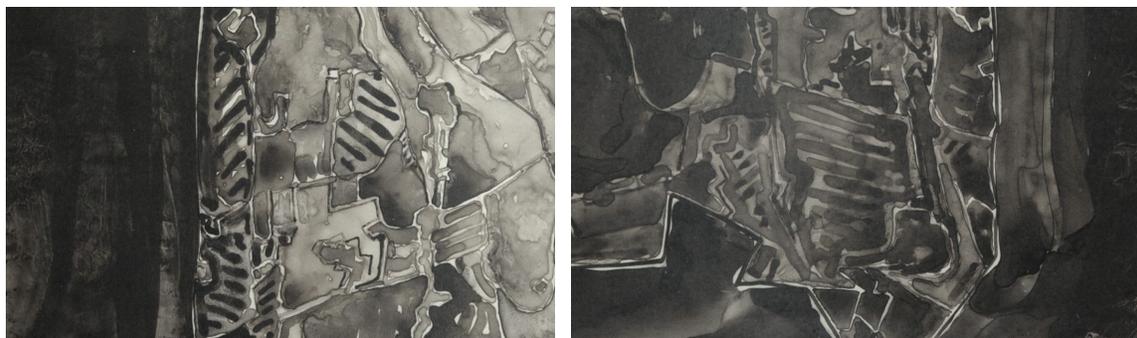


Fig. 51. Electronic microscope image of photographic emulsion (silver halide crystals suspended in a gelatin medium)



Figs. 52, 53  
Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (details), 2013, Ink on plastic, 27 1/2 x 36 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, promised gift from a private collection.



Fig. 54. Jasper Johns, *Study for Regrets*, 2012, Acrylic, photocopy collage, colored pencil, ink and watercolor on paper, 11 3/8 x 17 3/4 inches. Private collection.



Figs. 55, 56 (from left to right)

Left: Jasper Johns, *Tracing after Cezanne*, 1994, ink on plastic, 18 1/8 x 28 3/8. Collection of the artist.

Right: Jasper Johns, *Tracing after Cezanne*, 1994, ink on plastic, 17 9/16 x 28 3/16. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 57. Jasper Johns, *Farley Breaks Down - after Larry Burrows* (detail), 2014, Ink on plastic, 31 7/8 x 24 inches. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 58. Jasper Johns, *After Larry Burrows* (detail), 2014, India ink and water-soluble encaustic on plastic, 32 x 24 inches. Collection of the artist.

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