

Paris VIe, 29, rue Cassette,
October 10, 1907

... If one didn't know (and know more and more) that without resistance there would be no movement and none of the rhythmic circulation of all the things we encounter, this would be very confusing and upsetting: that because of the money you won't be coming to see the Salon d'Automne (which I'm so preoccupied with) and that for the same reason I'll probably have to forgo my own trip, even though inwardly, in my expectation, it's still awaiting me, strong and undamaged ...

Meanwhile I'm still going to the Cézanne room, which, I suppose, you can somewhat imagine by now, after yesterday's letter. I again spent two hours in front of a few pictures today; I sense this is somehow useful for me. Would it be instructive for you? I can't really say it in one breath. One can really see all of Cézanne's pictures in two or three well-chosen examples, and no doubt we could have come as far in understanding him somewhere else, at Cassirer's [Paul Cassirer, 1871–1926, Berlin art dealer and publisher] for instance, as I find myself advancing now. But it all takes a long, long time. When I remember the puzzlement and insecurity of one's first confrontation with his work, along with his name, which was just as new. And then for a long time nothing, and suddenly one has the right eyes ... I would almost prefer, if you should be able to come here some day, to lead you to the *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, to this female nude seated among the green mirrorings of a leafy wood, every part of which is Manet, shaped by an indescribable expressive capacity which suddenly, after many unavailing attempts, came about, was there, succeeded. All his means were released and dissolved in succeeding: you'd almost think no means were used at all. I stood in front of it for a long time yesterday. But it's valid, the miracle, only for one person, every time; only for the saint to whom it happens. Cézanne had to start all over again, from the bottom ... Farewell until the next time ...

(Rainer Maria Rilke, October 1907)

Among the many shocks the avant-garde art of the twentieth century delivered, one of the most disconcerting was that brought by the early work of Jasper Johns. The critic Leo Steinberg considers its impact.

Let me take an example from nearer home and from my own experience.

Early in 1958, a young painter named Jasper Johns had his first one-man show in New York. The pictures he showed – products of many years' work – were puzzling. Carefully painted in oil or encaustic [hot wax], they were variations on four main themes:

Numbers, running in regular order, row after row all the way down the picture, either in colour or white on white.

Letters, arranged in the same way.

The American Flag – not a picture of it, windblown or heroic, but stiffened, rigid, the pattern itself.

And finally, Targets, some tricoloured, others all white or all green, sometimes with little boxes on top into which the artist had put plaster casts of anatomical parts, recognizably human.

A few other subjects turned up in single shots – a wire coathanger, hung on a knob that projected from a dappled grey field. A canvas, which had a smaller stretched canvas stuck to it face to face – all you saw was its back; and the title was *Canvas*. Another, called *Drawer*, where the front panel of a wooden drawer with its two projecting knobs had been inserted into the lower part of a canvas, painted all grey.

How did people react? Those who had to say something about it tried to fit these new works into some historical scheme. Some shrugged it off and said, 'More of Dada, we've seen this before; after Expressionism comes nonsense and anti-art, just as in the twenties.' One hostile New York critic saw the show as part of a sorrowful devolution, another step in the systematic emptying out of content from modern art. A French critic wrote: 'We mustn't cry "fraud" too soon.' But he was merely applying the cautions of the past; his feeling was that he was being duped.

On the other hand, a great number of intelligent men and women in New York responded with intense enthusiasm, but without being able to explain the source of their fascination. A museum director suggested that perhaps it was just the relief from Abstract Expressionism, of which one had seen so much in recent years, that led him to enjoy Jasper Johns; but such negative explanations are never adequate. Some people thought that the painter chose commonplace subjects because, given our habits of overlooking life's simple things, he wanted, for the first time, to render them visible. Others thought that the charm of these paintings resided in the exquisite handling of the medium itself, and that the artist deliberately chose the most commonplace subjects so as to make them *invisible*, that is, to induce absolute concentration on the sensuous surface alone. But this didn't work for two reasons. First, because there was no agreement

on whether these things were, in fact, well painted. (One New York critic of compulsive originality said that the subjects were fine, but that the painting was poor.) And, secondly, because if Johns had wanted his subject matter to become invisible through sheer banality, then he had surely failed – like a debutante who expects to remain inconspicuous by wearing blue jeans to the ball. Had reticent subject matter been his intention, he would have done better to paint a standard abstraction, where everybody knows not to question the subject. But in these new works, the subjects were overwhelmingly conspicuous, if only because of their context. Hung at general headquarters, a Jasper Johns flag might well have achieved invisibility; set up on a range, a target could well be overlooked; but carefully remade to be seen point-blank in an art gallery, these subjects struck home.

It seems that during this first encounter with Johns's work, few people were sure of how to respond, while some of the dependable avant-garde critics applied tested avant-garde standards – which seemed suddenly to have grown old and ready for dumping.

My own first reaction was normal. I disliked the show, and would gladly have thought it a bore. Yet it depressed me and I wasn't sure why. Then I began to recognize in myself all the classical symptoms of a philistine's reaction to modern art. I was angry at the artist, as if he had invited me to a meal, only to serve something uneatable, like tow and paraffin. I was irritated at some of my friends for pretending to like it – but with an uneasy suspicion that perhaps they did like it, so that I was really mad at myself for being so dull, and at the whole situation for showing me up.

And meanwhile, the pictures remained with me – working on me and depressing me. The thought of them gave me a distinct sense of threatening loss or privation. One in particular there was, called *Target with Four Faces*. It was a fairly large canvas consisting of nothing but one three-coloured target – red, yellow, and blue; and above it, boxed behind a hinged wooden flap, four life casts of one face – or rather, of the lower part of a face, since the upper portion, including the eyes, had been sheared away. The picture seemed strangely rigid for a work of art and recalled Baudelaire's objection to Ingres: 'No more imagination; therefore no more movement.' Could any meaning be wrung from it? I thought how the human face in this picture seemed desecrated, being brutally thingified – and not in any acceptable spirit of social protest, but gratuitously, at random. At one point, I wanted the picture to give me a sickening suggestion of human sacrifice, of heads pickled or mounted as trophies. Then, I hoped, the

whole thing would come to seem hypnotic and repellent, like a primitive sign of power. But when I looked again, all this romance disappeared. These faces – four of the same – were gathered there for no triumph; they were chopped up, cut away just under the eyes, but with no suggestion of cruelty, merely to make them fit into their boxes; and they were stacked on that upper shelf as a standard commodity. But was this reason enough to get so depressed? If I disliked these things, why not ignore them?

It was not that simple. For what really depressed me was what I felt these works were able to do to all other art. The pictures of de Kooning and Kline, it seemed to me, were suddenly tossed into one pot with Rembrandt and Giotto. All alike suddenly became painters of illusion. After all, when Franz Kline lays down a swath of black paint, that paint is transfigured. You may not know what it represents, but it is at least the path of an energy or part of an object moving in or against a white space. Paint and canvas stand for more than themselves. Pigment is still the medium by which something seen, thought, or felt, something other than pigment itself, is made visible. But here, in this picture by Jasper Johns, one felt the end of illusion. No more manipulation of paint as a medium of transformation. This man, if he wants something three-dimensional, resorts to a plaster cast and builds a box to contain it. When he paints on a canvas, he can only paint what is flat – numbers, letters, a target, a flag. Everything else, it seems, would be make-believe, a childish game – ‘let’s pretend.’ So, the flat is flat and the solid is three-dimensional, and these are the facts of the case, art or no art. There is no more metamorphosis, no more magic of medium. It looked to me like the death of painting, a rude stop, the end of the track.

I am not a painter myself, but I was interested in the reaction to Jasper Johns of two well-known New York abstract painters: one of them said, ‘If this is painting, I might as well give up.’ And the other said, resignedly, ‘Well, I am still involved with the dream.’ He, too, felt that an age-old dream of what painting had been, or could be, had been wantonly sacrificed – perhaps by a young man too brash or irreverent to have dreamed yet. And all this seemed much like Baudelaire’s feeling about Courbet, that he had done away with imagination.

The pictures, then, kept me pondering, and I kept going back to them. And gradually something came through to me, a solitude more intense than anything I had seen in pictures of mere desolation. In *Target with Faces*, I became aware of an uncanny inversion of values. With mindless

inhumanity or indifference, the organic and the inorganic had been levelled. A dismembered face, multiplied, blinded, repeats four times above the impersonal stare of a bull's-eye. Bull's-eye and blind faces – but juxtaposed as if by habit or accident, without any expressive intent. As if the values that would make a face seem more precious or eloquent had ceased to exist; as if those who could hold and impose such values just weren't around.

Then another inversion. I began to wonder what a target really was, and concluded that a target can only exist as a point in space – 'over there', at a distance. But the target of Jasper Johns is always 'right here'; it is all the field there is. It has lost its definitive 'Thereness'. I went on to wonder about the human face, and came to the opposite conclusion. A face makes no sense unless it is 'here'. At a distance, you may see a man's body, a head, even a profile. But as soon as you recognize a thing as a face, it is an object no longer, but one pole in a situation of reciprocal consciousness; it has, like one's own face, absolute 'Hereness'. So then surely Jasper Johns's *Target with Faces* performs a strange inversion, because a target, which needs to exist at a distance, has been allotted all the available 'Hereness', while the faces are shelved.

And once again, I felt that the levelling of those categories, which are the subjective markers of space, implied a totally non-human point of view. It was as if the subjective consciousness, which alone can give meaning to 'here' and 'there', had ceased to exist.

And then it dawned on me that all of Jasper Johns's pictures conveyed a sense of desolate waiting. The face-to-the-wall canvas waits to be turned; the drawer waits to be opened. That rigid flag – does it wait to be hoisted or recognized? Certainly the targets wait to be shot at. Johns made one painting using a lowered window shade which, like any window shade in the world, waits to be raised. The empty hanger waits to receive somebody's clothes. These letters, neatly set forth, wait to spell something out; and the numbers, arranged as on a tot board, wait to be scored. Even those plaster casts have the look of things temporarily shelved for some purpose. And yet, as you look at these objects, you know with absolute certainty that their time has passed, that nothing will happen, that that shade will never be lifted, those numbers will never add up again, and the coat hanger will never be clothed.

There is, in all this work, not simply an ignoring of human subject matter, as in much abstract art, but an implication of absence, and – this is what makes it most poignant – of human absence from a man-made

environment. In the end, these pictures by Jasper Johns came to impress me as a dead city might – but a dead city of terrible familiarity. Only objects are left – man-made signs which, in the absence of men, have become objects. And Johns has anticipated their dereliction.

These, then, were some of my broodings as I looked at Johns's pictures. And now I'm faced with a number of questions, and a certain anxiety.

What I have said – was it *found* in the pictures or read into them? Does it accord with the painter's intention? Does it tally with other people's experience, to reassure me that my feelings are sound? I don't know. I can see that these pictures don't necessarily look like art, which has been known to solve far more difficult problems. I don't know whether they are art at all, whether they are great, or good, or likely to go up in price. And whatever experience of painting I've had in the past seems as likely to hinder me as to help. I am challenged to estimate the aesthetic value of, say, a drawer stuck into a canvas. But nothing I've ever seen can teach me how this is to be done. I am alone with this thing, and it is up to me to evaluate it in the absence of available standards. The value which I shall put on this painting tests my personal courage. Here I can discover whether I am prepared to sustain the collision with a novel experience. Am I escaping it by being overly analytical? Have I been eavesdropping on conversations? Trying to formulate certain meanings seen in this art – are they designed to demonstrate something about myself or are they authentic experience?

They are without end, these questions, and their answers are nowhere in storage. It is a kind of self-analysis that a new image can throw you into and for which I am grateful. I am left in a state of anxious uncertainty by the painting, about painting, about myself. And I suspect that this is all right. In fact, I have little confidence in people who habitually, when exposed to new works of art, know what is great and what will last.

(Leo Steinberg, 1972)

Matisse bequeaths a Cézanne to the French nation.

Nice, 10 November 1936

Yesterday I consigned to your shipper Cézanne's [*Trois*] *Baigneuses*. I saw the picture carefully packed and it was supposed to leave that very evening for the Petit Palais.

A famous formalist art critic answers a philistine inquiry; the witness to this exchange, another celebrated critic, explains the answer.

One day while the show, 'Three American Painters' was hanging at the Fogg Museum at Harvard, Michael Fried and I were standing in one of the galleries. To our right was a copper painting by Frank Stella, its surface burnished by the light which flooded the room. A Harvard student who had entered the gallery approached us. With his left arm raised and his finger pointing to the Stella, he confronted Michael Fried. 'What's so good about that?' he demanded. Fried looked back at him. 'Look,' he said slowly, 'there are days when Stella goes to the Metropolitan Museum. And he sits for hours looking at the Velázquez, utterly knocked out by them and then he goes back to his studio. What he would like more than anything else is to paint like Velázquez. But what he knows is that that is an option that is not open to him. So he paints stripes.' Fried's voice had risen. 'He wants to be Velázquez *so he paints stripes.*'

I don't know what the boy thought, but it was clear enough to me. That statement, which linked Velázquez's needs to Stella's in the immense broad jump of a single sentence, was a giant ellipsis whose leap cleared three centuries of art. But in my mind's eye it was more like one of those strobe photographs in which each increment of the jumper's act registers on the single image. I could see what the student could not, and what Fried's statement did not fill in for him. Under the glittering panes of that skylight, I could visualize the logic of an argument that connected hundreds of separate pictorial acts into the fluid clarity of a single motion, an argument that was as present to me as the paintings hanging in the gallery – their clean, spare surfaces tied back into the faint grime of walls dedicated to the history of art. If Fried had not chosen to give the whole of that argument to the student, he had tried to make the student think about one piece of the obvious: that Stella's need to say something through his art was the same as a seventeenth-century Spaniard's; only the point in time was different. In 1965, the fact that Stella's stripes were involved with what he wanted to say – a product, that is, of *content* – was clear enough to me.

(Rosalind Krauss, 1972)

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