

Past Things
and Present:
Jasper Johns
since 1983

Joan Rothfuss Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

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Three Academic Ideas Victor I. Stoichita

In a statement published in 1959, Jasper Johns described "three academic ideas" that were of interest to him. The first, mentioned by one of his teachers, was "the rotating point of view." The second originated from Marcel Duchamp: "To reach the impossibility of sufficient visual memory to transfer from one like object to another the memory imprint." The third is attributable to Leonardo da Vinci: "The boundary of a body is neither a part of the enclosed body nor a part of the surrounding atmosphere."¹ This declaration by the artist does not constitute a rigid program, but it does provide insight into some of the culturally codified explanations and foundations upon which his work has been constructed over the years.

It seems to me that traces of these three ideas can be found—intertwined, superimposed, and intermingled—in recent works by Johns, specifically *Mirror's Edge* (1992; fig. 1) and *Mirror's Edge 2* (1993; fig. 2). The mirror itself is a reversible and rotating object inasmuch as it creates a fundamental uncertainty between left and right—and, in these paintings, between top and bottom. Moreover, the mirror raises in a specific way the issue of the boundaries between the visible world and the body, while its edge, which in these two paintings becomes a vast surface that merges with the actual mirror, presents itself as a place of memory where one can insert and store souvenirs in the form of objects as well as images. Redefined and reworked by Johns, these ideas cease to be truly academic and together raise a single and crucial problem: that of a specific conception of the pictorial surface and its unity. By offering to take apart what is interlaced and to disentangle what is tangled, this essay aims not to destroy the unity, but to understand it.

The Principle of Rotation

Johns has said that the idea of a rotating point of view was introduced to him as a principle of Cubist origin.² As a result, he challenges the laws of perspective and introduces a plurality of viewpoints into his definition of the image. It is no accident that *Mirror's Edge* incorporates a jumbled version of its own title along the bottom edge, which gives the impression that it is an insertion that can only be read if inverted. But it is only an illusion, since the specular inversion is in this case neither total nor defining: Instead, the script intertwines backwards and forwards, thereby pointing out to the reader/spectator the necessity of deciphering and the unavoidability of decoding. In *Mirror's Edge 2*, the (pseudo)specular title of the first painting is absent and, perhaps more importantly, the canvas is inverted. The right/left relationship remains problematic. The wooden frame, which defines the painting as a mirror edge, is now on the right, whereas in the earlier painting it was on the left. Here we also find, between the painted frame and the invisible surface of an illusory mirror, two cards bearing the painter's initials—a common addition to traditional trompe l'oeils. These are accompanied by the date of the canvas. The presence of the signature and date replaces (or completes) the title, which is present only in *Mirror's Edge*. All this could lead us to believe that we might gain profound

¹ See Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Sixteen American Artists*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 22.

² *Ibid.* Johns wrote that this idea was proposed by "a teacher of mine (speaking of Cézanne and cubism)."

fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 1 Jasper Johns, *Mirror's Edge*, 1992, oil on canvas, 66 x 44 in. (167.64 x 111.76 cm), Private collection, Switzerland
fig. 2 Jasper Johns, *Mirror's Edge 2*, 1993, encaustic on canvas, 66 x 44 1/8 in. (167.64 x 112.08 cm), Collection Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Phoenix, Maryland

fig. 3

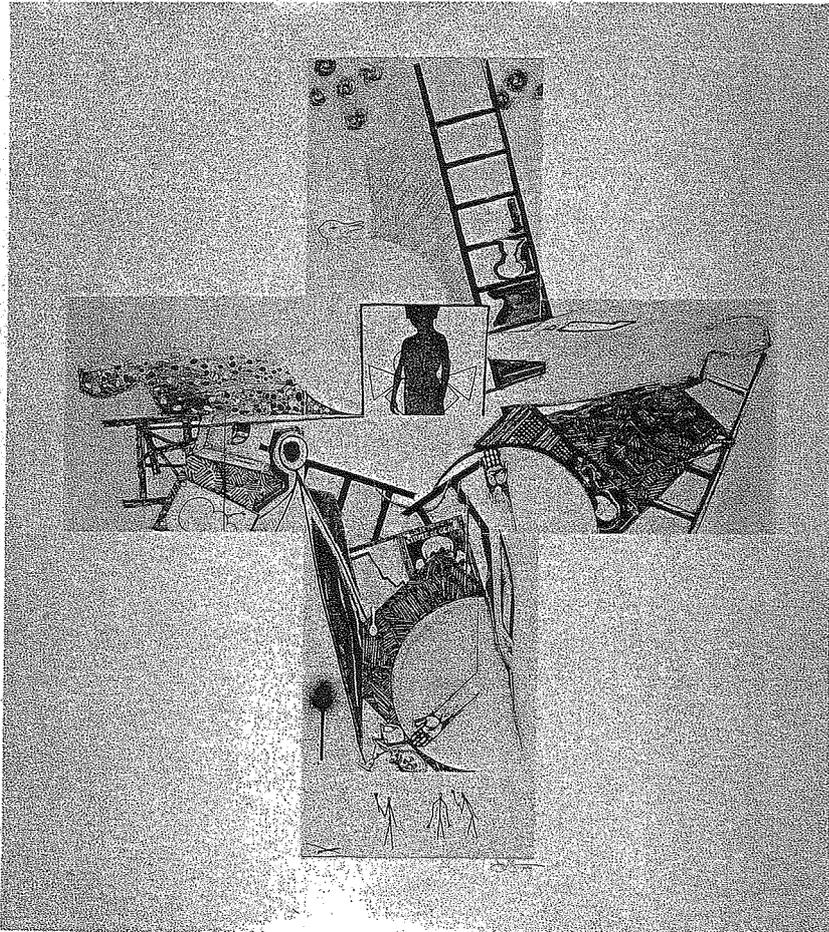


fig. 3 Jasper Johns, *The Seasons*, 1990 (cat. no. 30; p. 76)

understanding only by looking at the canvases as though they were two parts of a diptych.

If the artist's intention was to form a diptych, this is manifested in all its complexity in the top/bottom relationship, but here, too, the inversion is only partial. In the second painting—which gathers the strata of a personal imagination in a mixture of baroque trompe l'oeil and cubist collage—one can pick out certain obsessive motifs and quotations from several of the artist's previous works. Only one of these elements is truly inverted in the two paintings: a detail from the etching *The Seasons* (1990; fig. 3), which simply repeats and rearranges key motifs from the series of color intaglio prints created by Johns in 1987 (cat. nos. 14–17; pp. 62–65). In *Mirror's Edge 2*, two elements instantly stand out to indicate the inversion: the ladder, which is now bottom right, and the childish rendering of an upside-down *Kopffüssler*.³ The latter does not appear in *The Seasons* etching and could be considered at the very most as an extrapolation and/or enlargement of one of the spindly figures in that work. Comparing this *Kopffüssler* to its twin figure in *Mirror's Edge*, it becomes apparent that, in its "fall," its pose has changed slightly. There are, however, other image-objects in which any changes are more ambiguous. Of these, the most significant is undoubtedly that of the central nebula, which thematically presents rotation, so to speak, as the cosmic principle at the very heart of the canvas. A photograph brought in as a trompe l'oeil, this element does not appear to change considerably from one painting to the other (notice that the same

³ *Kopffüssler* is a term used in the study of the psychology of form that refers to a child's drawing of a human figure with a head and limbs, but no torso. In German, *Kopf* means "head" and *Füsse* means "feet" or "legs."

corner of the paper is turned up and the same piece of tape is depicted in both paintings). The nebula itself is identical yet different; it is only inside the representation—where the star dust becomes finer and more diffuse over time—that the change takes place.

One of the main difficulties in interpreting Johns' work is the plurality of registers upon which he constructs his images. This is very much the case with the *Mirror's Edge* paintings. The nebula, for example, harks back to Gestalt psychology, which Johns studied in his youth. In one book, which according to commentators⁴ was especially valued by the artist—Richard Gregory's *The Intelligent Eye*⁵—the nebula known by the name of its discoverer, Herschel, and also referred to by the acronym M51, is reproduced three times: first as a nineteenth-century drawing; then as a twentieth-century drawing; and finally as a photograph. The primary aim of these three reproductions in the text is to illustrate the possible translation of the same truth into optically different forms. Furthermore, they are seen as forms symbolic of dynamic expansion, given concrete expression by the diagram at the end of the book (fig. 4). Johns calls upon the same principle, even though he does not reproduce exactly the same representation (fig. 5).⁶ However, it is crucial to avoid oversimplifying the way Johns operates. It is not just Gestalt psychology at work in *Mirror's Edge*, but a whole pictorial tradition of which the names Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch are an integral part. But by evoking these names, as the reader will already have realized, we are clearly going beyond the Gestaltist problematic of the principle of rotation by opening a second dossier: that of transfer and combinatory mnemonics.

The Art of Memory

That Johns has a phenomenal visual memory is unquestionable. This fact has already prompted some important studies⁷ in which the point of departure is usually the following key assertion made by the artist on the subject:

Seeing a thing can sometimes trigger the mind to make another thing. In some instances the new work may include, as a sort of subject matter, references to the thing that was seen. And, because works of painting tend to share many aspects, working itself may initiate memories of other works. Naming or painting these ghosts sometimes seems a way to stop their nagging.⁸

At this point, we could comment on the way Johns confronts Munch, Van Gogh, himself, and the stars. But we shall not, for the simple reason that there is, it seems to me, more interesting food for thought in the two *Mirror's Edge* paintings: both strike us as being genuine *mise-en-scènes* of an ancient art of memory. To the observant eye, Johns' experimentation with the theme of memory is in evidence throughout his work. He goes beyond the Duchampian notion of the *memory imprint* to revisit deep roots that stretch as far back as the mnemonic systems

fig. 4

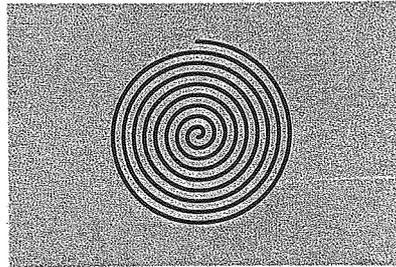


fig. 5

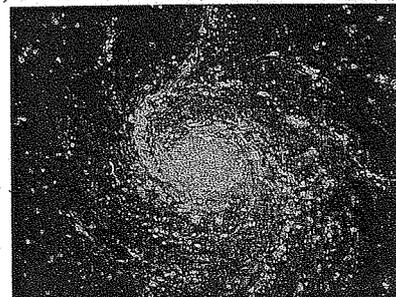


fig. 4 If a larger version of this spiral were spinning clockwise, it would appear to expand. If the motion ceased after a few seconds of viewing, the spiral would seem to shrink. The effect, however, is paradoxical, because just as the spiral looks like it decreases in size, it also appears to remain the same. This consequence of movement can be transferred to other objects. (A version of this text accompanied the illustration in its original publication, Richard Gregory's *The Intelligent Eye* [1970].)

fig. 5 Jasper Johns, *Mirror's Edge 2*, 1992 (detail from fig. 2)

4 Roberta Bernstein, "Seeing a Thing Can Sometimes Trigger the Mind to Make Another Thing," in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 49 and 71, n. 55.

5 Richard Gregory, *The Intelligent Eye* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

6 Ibid. Other elements discussed by Gregory, such as primitive silhouettes and "Rubin's vase," recur in Johns' work.

7 See especially Bernstein, "Seeing a Thing."

8 Ibid., 39.

fig. 6

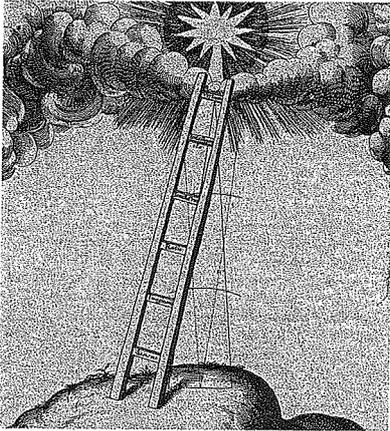


fig. 7



fig. 6 Illustration from Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia*, vol. II (Oppenheim, 1619)

fig. 7 Illustration from Ramón Llull and Thomas le Myésjer, *Electorum Parvum seu Breviculum*, cod.-St. Peter perg., 92, fourteenth century

of the Jewish Kabbalah and *ars inveniendi et memorandi* of the ancient philosophers. How much of this deep reclamation work is the result of the artist's specific intention and how much is the consequence of the innate strength of his work—which, in many instances, can transcend the artist himself—remains an open question. In the absence of the detailed study it deserves, the following observations may provide a few pointers.

Now-classic studies have demonstrated the importance of the graphic construction of cumulative images in the search to systemize universal knowledge, the key to which the Kabbalah and *ars memorativa* sought to discover (and keep).⁹ It is striking how in his experimentation—which, it must be stressed, is an artistic experimentation with personal and universal memory—Johns retraces some of these journeys.

So as not to stray too far from our point of departure, we need only reconsider *Mirror's Edge* and *Mirror's Edge 2* from this perspective to discover the survival of an ancient cognitive symbolism. In the most important book of the Elizabethan period to come out of the tradition of the Jewish Kabbalah, the *Utriusque cosmi* (1619; fig. 6),¹⁰ both the structure of the universe and that of human understanding are visualized as ascending, stepped formulations. It is essential, however, to look beyond the remarkable similarity between some of Robert Fludd's diagrams and some of Johns' works and ask ourselves why—in the case of *Mirror's Edge*—does the similarity exist solely in the later canvas? For it is in *Mirror's Edge 2* that the relationship between Johns' images of the ladder and the nebula can, in every respect, be compared to that of the ladder and the firmament in Fludd's diagrams. In Johns' work, the ladder derives from his 1985–1986 cycle of *The Seasons* paintings (and, therefore, from still further back in time), while the nebula is drawn from theses on psychology of form and, in my view, from images of the night sky by Van Gogh and Munch. In a parallel way, Fludd's images of the ladder, which originate from Ramón Llull (fig. 7), illustrate the ascension of knowledge. Unable to offer a definitive response to the question posed above, and reluctant to try, I shall limit myself to noting two facts. The first is that, even in ancient kabbalistic iconography, there were already indications of a double path, from the top downward and from the bottom upward. In Fludd's illustration, this double path is suggested by the inverted projection of the ladder, drawn in dotted lines, and in Llull by the illustration of the "fall of vices" theme, which also emerges, mutatis mutandis, in Johns. The second and, in my opinion, far more crucial fact is the realization that only by inverting a primary mnemonic system, which we shall call "profane," can we reclaim the valences of an ancient knowledge, which we shall call "sacred."

The Boundary of the Body

Mirror's Edge and *Mirror's Edge 2*, painted in 1992 and 1993 respectively, produce a *mise-en-abyme* with the 1990 etching *The Seasons*, which then presents itself as a summary of the

⁹ See Paolo Rossi, *Clavis universalis: Arti della memoria e logica combinatoria da Lullo a Leibniz* (Milan/Naples: Ricciardi, 1960); Paolo Rossi, *Logic and the Art of Memory*, Stephen Clucas, trans. (Chicago: Athlone, 2000); Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

¹⁰ Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (Oppenheim, 1619). For more on the context, see William H. Huffman, *Robert Fludd and the End of the Renaissance* (London/New York: Routledge, 1988).

cycle of four prints produced in 1987. The principle of rotation is at work in the vertiginous interlocking of forms; this rotation is directly related to the reemergence of the ancient art of memory. When one considers the genesis of the 1985–1986 cycle of *The Seasons* paintings, which has been well-documented and studied,¹¹ one is struck by the openness of the sequential relationship of the four pieces. The canvas dedicated to *Summer* was, we know, the first to have been produced, though in later variations it was relegated to second-place in a logical and chronological sequence that starts with *Spring* and ends with *Winter*. But this is not always the case. In related drawings that Johns created after beginning the cycle of paintings, sometimes summer is in first place, sometimes winter, and sometimes spring (figs. 8–10). These permutations give us access to the artist's thoughts on time, thoughts that endow the human presence with its proper role in the cycle of time. Johns knows that there is no time outside the "consciousness of time," and in *The Seasons* this is brought to light by the huge cast shadow that overruns the representation. But, as he is also fully aware, there is neither consciousness nor time outside man's body. The body exists in time, and therefore, like the seasons, it changes and passes. And yet Johns' shadow is somewhat immutable despite its repetition. What is the significance of this oscillation? What is the secret of the to-ing and fro-ing between "permanence" and "passage" revealed to us by the shadow projected onto the screen of the seasons? Moreover, to whom does this shadow belong? The artist? The spectator? Both?

fig. 8

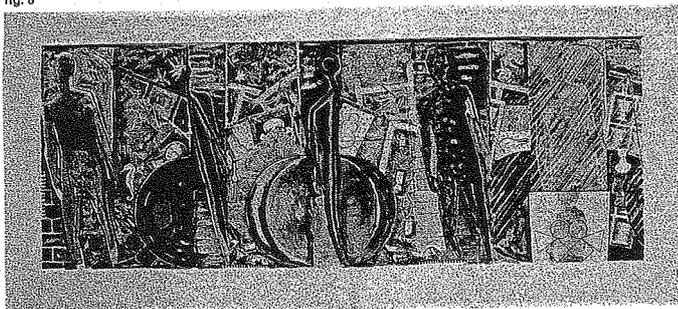


fig. 9



fig. 10

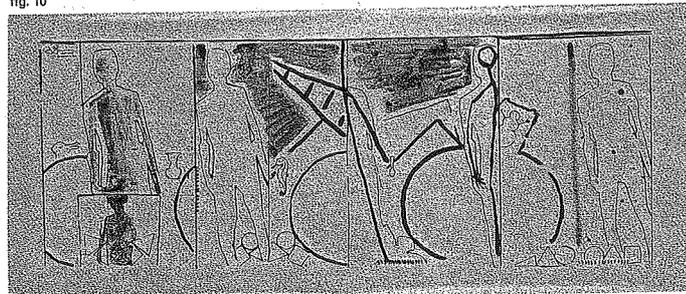


fig. 8 Jasper Johns, *The Seasons*, 1989, ink on plastic, 26 x 58 in. (66 x 147 cm), Collection the artist

fig. 9 Jasper Johns, *The Seasons*, 1989 (cat. no. 24; p. 75)

fig. 10 Jasper Johns, *The Seasons*, 1989, ink on plastic, 20 1/4 x 52 in. (51.44 x 132.08 cm), Collection the artist

11 Jasper Johns: *The Seasons* (New York: Leo Castelli Gallery, 1987), text by Judith Goldman; Roberta Bernstein, *Jasper Johns: The Seasons* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992); Barbara Bertozzi, *The Seasons: Jasper Johns* (Milan: Charta, 1996).

fig. 11

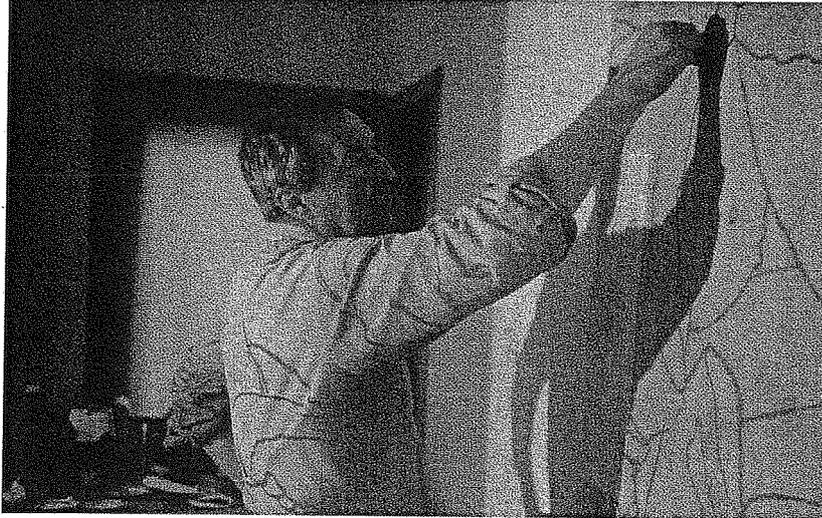
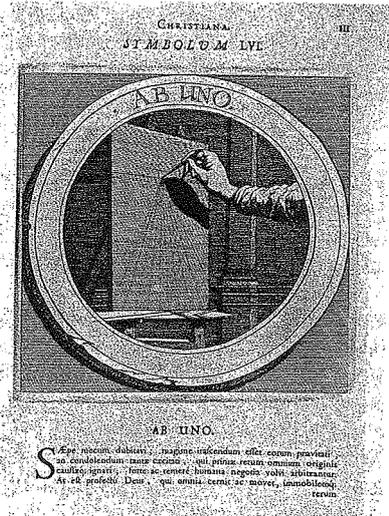


fig. 11 Jasper Johns photographed by Mark Lancaster in Stony Point, New York, working on *Untitled*, 1984

fig. 12 Illustration from Karl Ludwig, Elector Palatine, and Paulus Hachenberg, *Philothei Symbola Christiana: quibus idea hominis Christiani exprimitur* (Frankfurt, 1677)

fig. 12



One of the shots in a very beautiful cycle of photographs taken by Mark Lancaster (fig. 11) a year before the birth of *The Seasons* actually exposes the way the artist's presence *in* his own work becomes visible through the projection of his shadow onto the canvas. It is the actual experience of the act of creation, its temporality, that is significant here. The moment of contact between the hand and the canvas is fleeting, but it produces a form—the result of the intertwining of passage and permanence. Once again, Johns' imagination (and here, too, that of Lancaster) is legible on at least these two registers: historical memory and personal memory.

The artist has no power over historical memory; on the contrary, the artist is in its power. It is therefore pointless to speculate as to whether Johns or Lancaster had either firsthand knowledge or a real understanding of the ancient symbolic *mise-en-scènes* devoted to the relationship between time and eternity (fig. 12). Far more important is their ability to re-create them, and therefore it is not the "repetition" so much as the "difference" that is significant.¹² Now this difference, the "Johns" difference, is produced by countless recurrences and countless differences. Some—such as his debt, in *The Seasons*, to Picasso's *The Shadow*—have time and again been pointed out by commentators (fig. 13).¹³ But once again, going a step further can prove most enlightening. Picasso's idea of "entering" his paintings through a shadow projection has an important precedent in the work of Munch.¹⁴ But in Picasso's work, the shadow is highly sexualized,¹⁵ a fact that has not escaped Johns. If he repeats the shadow, it is to re-endow it with some of the cosmic power with which Munch had previously invested it.

¹² An allusion to Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968).

¹³ See studies cited in note 12 and Jill Johnston, "Tracking the Shadow," *Art in America* 75, no. 10 (October 1987): 129–142.

¹⁴ On this subject, see Louise Lippincott, *Edvard Munch: Starry Night* (Malibu, California: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1988).

¹⁵ See Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow*, Anne-Marie Glasheen, trans. (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 120.

fig. 13

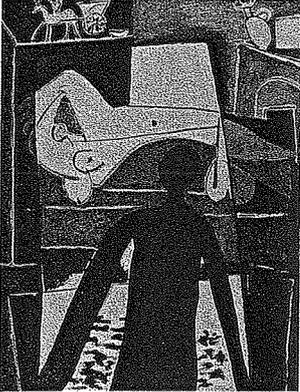
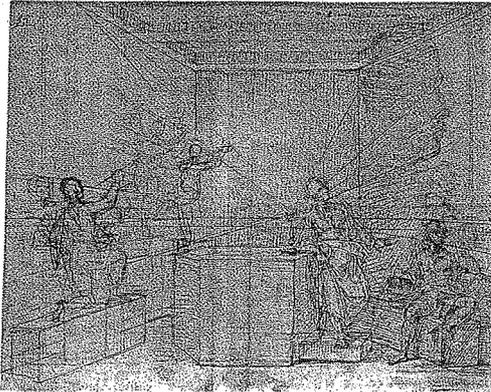


fig. 14



The time has come to turn to the third academic idea referred to by Johns: "the boundary of a body is neither a part of the enclosed body nor a part of the surrounding atmosphere." This concept, which comes from Leonardo, alluded above all to the notion of sfumato, the blurred contour of which the Italian painter was the undisputed master. Leonardo and his students experimented with shadow projections that both dilated and erased the overly rigid boundaries of figures (fig. 14).¹⁶ Once again, Johns expands on this idea in his own way, and what interests him is the problematic of the body in the work, the work-body. In regard to personal memory, this too was old experimentation. The first significant results had been obtained by the artist in the 1960s and 1970s in the most direct and most autobiographical way possible: imprints of the body onto the support (fig. 15).¹⁷ Before incorporating (or before being) the artist's shadow, the work, as it were, incorporates (is) his skin. The titles of the ensuing pieces—*Skin*—are undoubtedly central. Not "imprint," not "projection," just, significantly, "skin"—as though, during the artistic process, the projection had become a thing, as though the surface of the work and the surface of the body had become one.¹⁸ A comparison with the established iconography of the skin (fig. 16) confirms Johns' ability to actualize apparently lost or forgotten ancient motifs, while the personal significance of his approach marks it as unquestionably contemporary.

In his book *Jasper Johns* (1984), Richard Francis has given us a description of the artist "covering himself with oil and pressing against a sheet of drafting paper, which was then dusted and rubbed slightly with powdered graphite."¹⁹ This account thematizes the importance of the materials (oil, pigment, paper) in the transition from surface of the body to surface of the work, but it needs to be corroborated by additional visual evidence. There are several interesting details in the series of photographs taken by Ugo Mulas in 1965 (Shiff, fig. 12, p. 25), although

fig. 13 Pablo Picasso, *The Shadow*, 1953, oil, charcoal on canvas, 51 x 38 in. (129.5 x 96.5 cm), Collection Musée Picasso, Paris

fig. 14 Anonymous, after Leonardo da Vinci, illustration from Carlo Urbini, *Codex Huygens*, sixteenth century, MA 1139 (f. 90), Collection the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

16 See Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "The Perspective of Shadows: The History of the Theory of Shadow Projection," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXXVIII (1979): 267–275.

17 Details in Roberta Bernstein, "Jasper Johns and the Figure: Part One, Body Imprints," *Arts Magazine* 52, no. 2 (October 1977): 142–143; Nan Rosenthal, et al., *The Drawings of Jasper Johns*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 170–173; and Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*, 29–33. For the whole problematic of the imprint in modern and contemporary art, consult Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).

18 Prominent among the studies on the cultural symbolization of the skin are: Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego* (New Haven/London:

Yale University Press, 1989); and Claudia Benthien, *Haut Literaturgeschichte, Körperbilder, Grenzdiskurse* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999).

19 Richard Francis, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 54.

fig. 15



fig. 15 Jasper Johns, *Skin*, 1975, charcoal, oil on paper, 41 3/4 x 30 3/4 in. (106 x 78.1 cm), Collection Richard Serra and Clara Weyergraf-Serra

fig. 16

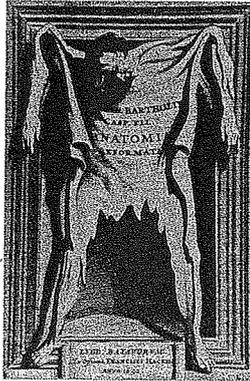


fig. 16 Frontispiece from Thomas Bartholin, *Anatomia Reformata* (Leyden, 1651)

fig. 17



fig. 17 Adolf Schrödter, *The Man in Grey Seizes Peter Schlemihl's Shadow*; illustration from Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl's wundersame Geschichte* (Leipzig, 1836)

fig. 18

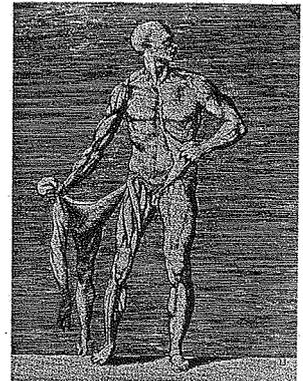


fig. 18 Giulio Bonasone, *Anatomical Study*, circa 1665, illustration from Giulio Bonasone and Stefania Massari, *Giulio Bonasone* (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 1983)

attention will be drawn only to those thought to be of significance here. The first is without question the nature of the series itself, for it is in the unfolding in time, in the almost crazy effort "to pass" that the full significance of the metamorphosis of "Jasper Johns" into a "skin/work" can be seen. Another notable detail is the unusually eloquent role played by the cast shadow, which establishes a kind of intermediate stage in the passage from "Johns" to *Skin*. Virtually absent at the beginning of the story, the shadow grows in importance and eventually blossoms in the line of images that immediately precedes the reification of the skin.

The shadow as a symbol of identity is a wonderful motif in the Western imagination. The most famous example is to be found in Adelbert von Chamisso's *The History of Peter Schlemihl* (1836), the man who lost his shadow (fig. 17). In its absence, Schlemihl no longer has a clear identity, a soul, or a body. He is, literally, *no-body*.²⁰ Johns prefers to take the opposite path. He does not actually separate himself from his shadow; he transforms it into a work, and the latter becomes the symbol of his identity. If we search for an iconography of reified skin, we can find it in different forms and contexts (fig. 18),²¹ but I know of no story that has as its hero a man who has lost his skin, not even for the sake of his art. Maybe Jasper Johns' is one such story.

Dr. Victor I. Stoichita is a professor of modern and contemporary art history at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. His scholarly interests range from Andy Warhol to seventeenth-century Spanish masters such as Francisco de Zurbarán and Diego Velázquez. He has authored several books, including *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art* (1995) and *A Short History of the Shadow* (1997), and coauthored *Goya: The Last Carnival* (1999) with Anna Maria Coderch.

²⁰ Stoichita, *A Short History*, 167–185.

²¹ See especially Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*, 30–33.