

“Take an object/Do something to it/Do something else to it.”

Sparked by the gift of a printed plan of the continental United States from fellow artist Robert Rauschenberg, *Map* (1961; plate 107) is the first of a group of paintings, drawings, and prints that Jasper Johns devoted to this subject. Along with such earlier works as *Flag* (fig. 1) and *Target with Four Faces* (fig. 2), *Map* hastened the return to representational subject matter, which had long been disdained by critics (and artists) during an era dominated by abstraction.¹ Johns’s depictions of these everyday forms are far from straightforward, however. If maps, flags, and targets are only symbols, he seems to ask, what is the difference between a map and a painting of a map?

Johns’s efforts to re-present instantly recognizable objects were a choice, as he put it, to paint “things the mind already knows.”² Whether map or flag or target, all are based on predetermined forms. For Johns, such subjects allowed him to set aside decisions about composition and form,

giving him “room to work on other levels.”³ One of these levels is process. *Map* resulted from the calculated placement of adjacent colors and the unregulated dripping of paint. Johns began by scaling-up the small map by hand and then (according to his friend, composer John Cage), “with a change of tempo he began painting quickly... here and there with the same brush, changing brushes and colors, and working everywhere at the same time... going over it again and again incompletely.”⁴ This brushy paint handling knowingly approximated Abstract Expressionism’s mode of self-expression, but in a repetitive and homogenized way.⁵

Even though Johns blurs the distinction between a real object and its painted representation in *Map*, the painting negates the original function of the map as a source of specific information. The borders between states, though generally placed in their correct locations, are indicated only by loose, imprecise brushwork. This indifference to



107 *Map*. 1961. Oil on canvas,
6 ft. 6 in. × 10 ft. 3 1/8 in.
(198.2 × 314.7 cm)



exactitude is reinforced by Johns's application of color with no apparent regard for the geographic or demographic codes traditionally used in map making—bodies of water are given the same treatment as landmasses, and several coastal states seem to have been engulfed by the adjacent oceans.

Despite the multiple meanings a United States map may have had for viewers in the 1960s—it was, after all, a highly charged symbol of nationalism, patriotism, and progress—Johns insisted that he chose to paint *Map* because of its neutrality: “a thing seen and not looked at, not examined.”⁶ His selection reflects a partiality for logical systems more than for political content; the artist's oeuvre is filled with examples of such systems, including the alphabet, units of measurement, and even pictorial conventions like hatch marks (see plate 120). In *Map*, at least three systems are at work: cartography, which accounts for its basic form; the three primary colors, which constitute the work's main palette; and the stenciled alphabet Johns used to label the states.

Another system that Johns took up in the late 1950s, prior to *Map*, is numbers. In *White Numbers* (plate 108), for example, he uses a grid (yet another system) to divide the canvas into small squares, each of which is filled with a numeral from 0 to 9. Created with a combination of pigment and hot wax known as encaustic, the numbers can barely be seen through the lush, seductive surface. With his turn to printmaking in 1960, which became integral to his practice, Johns was able to explore multiple permutations of his iconic motifs, including numerical sequences.⁷ In his series of lithographs 0–9 (1960–63; plates 110–19), each numeral is given its own space on a white ground. However, because Johns used the same lithographic stone for every print, the sheet retains shadowy fragments of each preceding number. As in *Map*, with his numbers Johns “takes an object,” then transforms it, and in so doing questions its existence as an everyday form, as an element in a system, and as a work of art. — MR

• FIG. 1 Jasper Johns. *Flag*, 1954–55 (dated on reverse 1954). Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, 3 panels, 42 ¼ × 60 ½ in.

(107.3 × 153.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.



• FIG. 2 Jasper Johns. *Target with Four Faces*, 1955. Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, overall, with box open: 33 ⅜ × 26 × 3 in. (85.3 × 66 × 7.6 cm);

canvas: 26 × 26 in. (66 × 66 cm); box (closed): 3 ¾ × 26 × 3 ½ in. (9.5 × 66 × 8.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull

Epigraph: Jasper Johns, “Sketchbook Notes,” *Art and Literature* (Lausanne) 4 (Spring 1965): 192.

1. See, for example, essays by Clement Greenberg such as “‘American Style’ Painting,” “Abstract, Representational, and So Forth,” and “The New Sculpture.” Reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). Johns's use of common objects such as light bulbs, beer cans, and flags as subjects in his work of the mid to late 1950s anticipated the ascendancy of American Pop art in the early 1960s. See G. R. Swenson, “What Is Pop Art? Answers from Eight Painters, Part I,” *Art News*, November 1963, pp. 24–25, 62–64.
2. Jasper Johns, in Leo Steinberg, *Jasper Johns* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1963), p. 15. Originally published in *Metro*, nos. 4–5 (1962) and republished as “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” in Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 17.
3. Jasper Johns, “His Heart Belongs to Dada,” *Time*, May 4, 1979, p. 58. Excerpt reprinted in Kirk Varnedoe, ed., *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996), p. 82.
4. John Cage, quoted in Helen M. Franc, *An Invitation to See: 150 Works from The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p. 155.
5. Kirk Varnedoe describes Johns's paint handling in *Map* as “self consciously generic and often openly repetitive.” See Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996), p. 15.

6. Reverberating with patriotic sentiment, the map of the continental United States harks back to the westward expansion of the frontier in the nineteenth century. *Map*, however, fails to document the complete composition of the United States in 1961 because it excludes Hawaii and Alaska, which were granted statehood in 1959. For more on the cultural implications of American westward expansion, see Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 1893, in *The Frontier in American History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), pp. 1–38. For the Johns quote, see Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), pp. 45–46.
7. In fact, the numbers are his most thoroughly explored theme, appearing in nearly seventy of his paintings and sculptures, almost the same number of drawings, and twenty-five series of prints.