

Jasper Johns : a retrospective : October 20, 1996 through January 21, 1997

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Jasper Johns a retrospective



October 20, 1996 through January 21, 1997

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Sometimes I see it and then paint it. Other times I paint it and then see it. Both are impure situations, and I prefer neither.

At every point in nature there is something to see. My work contains similar possibilities for the changing focus of the eye....

Generally I am opposed to painting which is concerned with conceptions of simplicity. Everything looks very busy to me.

— Jasper Johns, 1959

Seldom have mastery, mystery, simplicity, and paradox been so inseparably united as in the art of Jasper Johns. The vocabulary associated with his work conjures obscurity and equivocation. Yet even as words like “enigmatic,” “hermetic,” and “abstruse” are applied to his art, Johns’s working process revolves around procedures that are more methodical than arcane: hard work, intense deliberation and experimentation, obsessive craft, and cycles of revision and repetition. Also ironically, Johns’s frequent appropriations and borrowings from works by other artists have only underscored the singularity of his sensibility.

From the Rural South to New York City

Born in 1930, Johns spent his childhood in small South Carolina towns during the Depression. After his parents’ marriage dissolved, he was raised in the homes of relatives. With a penchant for drawing yet little contact with any actual fine art, Johns conceived the ambition of becoming an artist. At the age of twenty-three, he settled in New York to pursue this objective. He expunged from his art any resemblance to the styles of other artists and destroyed virtually

all his prior work, though a few early examples are seen at the start of this exhibition.

From the mid-1950s, Johns’s work alloyed cool logic and private compulsion. His breakthrough 1954–55 painting *Flag* instigated a series of paintings of the American flag and of targets. When Johns made these paintings, he was interested in what he later described as “pre-formed, conventional, depersonalized,



Flag. 1954–55. Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood (three panels), 42¼ x 60¾" (107.3 x 154 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Photograph: Kate Keller and Erik Landsberg

factual, exterior elements,” and “things which are seen and not looked at, not examined.” The authority of these works, seen in the first two galleries of the exhibition, stems from the tension between depiction and the thing depicted.

The colored plaster-cast body fragments set in lidded boxes atop Johns’s first target pictures were intriguing anomalies amid his early focus on flat signs. His paintings became more complex as he set flags within expanded fields, placed alphabetical and numerical sequences in grids, and inserted actual objects into his art, such as books and drawer knobs. These elaborations expanded into another sphere when he began including words like “The” and “Tennyson” in his pictures. This early evolution was observed only by a few artist friends, including the artist Robert Rauschenberg, principal among them, as well as the composer John Cage and the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham.

In January 1958, the fledgling Leo Castelli Gallery in New York held Johns’s first solo exhibition, which is summarized in the first gallery of this retrospective. With it, Johns was established as a major figure. Almost simultaneously, a target painting appeared on the cover of *Artnews* magazine. The Museum of Modern Art acquired three of his works, and his art became widely discussed as both the extension of and an attack on the formal strategies of Abstract Expressionism, the dominant movement in American art at the time.

First Fame and Forays into Printmaking

Johns’s growing focus on process and craft received an impetus from his initiation into printmaking in 1960. Certain qualities inherent to making prints—the capacity to create chains of closely related variations on an image, the potential for reiteration, reversal, and sequential development—were echoed in his painting. Johns routinely painted in a new mode while simultaneously producing graphic works based on earlier elements. In a tendency that began in 1959, he used doubled or “twin” motifs in his work. Johns’s initial imagery—targets, flags, numbers, etc.—became less the common public subjects they had once seemed to be and more the private touchstones of his artistic progress.

By the end of the 1950s, Johns quickly moved on from the hard-edged style and representative imagery that had won him immediate acclaim. He also completed a series of Sculpt-metal and bronze replicas of flashlights and light bulbs, and, in 1960, a bronze of a pair of ale cans. By 1959, he began to cover the pictorial field with aggressive brushstrokes and clusters of strokes, using the primary colors, their immediate secondaries (green, violet, and orange), and white, black, and gray. In contrast to the deadpan reticence of his previous paintings, these new works featured rocket-burst splashes that some observers of the 1960s linked to Abstract Expressionism. The new paintings introduced a more layered sense of space. Now, in *0 through 9* (1960), for example, straightforward grids of numbers were replaced by the sinuous confusion of the integers rendered one atop the other. In *False Start* (1959), Johns introduced cognitive discordance between actual colors and the words that name them.

A New Emotional Tone

Around 1961, a new emotional tone, chill, dark, and bleak, intervened in Johns’s work. That year, titles of negation, melancholy, or bitterness in works such as *No, Liar*, and *In Memory of My Feelings*—Frank O’Hara underlined the altered mood. The names of colors inscribed in the pictures—red, yellow, blue—slide out of register, fall down, and refract. Gray, formerly an impassive neutral, became an expression of mortality and gloom. In a 1963 interview, Johns suggested that where his earlier work was more “intellectual,” the viewer of his newer work “responds directly to the physical situation,” with the effect that paintings are “more related to feeling or... emotional or erotic content.”

Meanwhile, the inside-out fold of the canvas in *Disappearance II* (1961), like the split title in the 1962 *Fool’s House* (which would come together if the painting’s surface were rolled around a cylinder), shows a growing complexity in Johns’s notions of an implied space beyond the picture plane. In *Fool’s House* and *In Memory of My Feelings*—Frank O’Hara (1961), for example, the appearance of hinged sections, diagrammatic instructions, signs, and labels may also reflect the enormous impact on Johns of the art and writings of Marcel Duchamp. In 1960, with his first explicit image of studio life—a Savarin coffee can filled with brushes set aside to clean in paint solvent, all cast and set in bronze—the act of art-making and the physical properties of the painting or sculpture became central subjects and primary sources of his art.

Working in a newly acquired home in Edisto Beach, South Carolina, in 1961, Johns developed an important motif, the map of the United States. Rauschenberg had given him a small black-and-white map of the forty-eight states showing only their boundary contours. Johns elaborated on this image to

make three major *Map* paintings, as well as a number of related drawings and prints. The first is especially colorful and agitated in its execution; the second is more gray; the last, from 1963, mixes bright and heavily grayed-down hues.

The Body: Fragmented and Assembled

To the right in the next section of the exhibition, the body prints in the unprecedentedly large *Diver* drawing of 1963 evoke a solitary figure virtually crucified in space. The *Study for Skin* drawings seen nearby were made by Johns by pressing his own oiled features against paper and then affixing charcoal to the stain. The outstretched arm in *Periscope (Hart Crane)* (1963), associated through the title with the poet Crane's suicide by drowning, reaches with a thwarted desperation. These raw exposures of his own body and those of others combine fatality and sensuality in a manner that was to become central to his work.

In 1964, a trip to Japan provided the occasion to advance his assemblage aesthetic. While in Tokyo, Johns made the two *Souvenir* pictures (which include his first explicit likenesses of himself) and *Watchman* (using a partial body cast for the first time since the early target paintings). The latter involves a rumination on modes of visual attentiveness that, as Johns penned in a sketchbook note, specifically refers to the differences between a "watchman" and a "spy." *Arrive/Depart* (1963–64), still marked with his painterly style of the early 1960s, introduced some of the elements now in play; it contains Johns's first use of the human skull motif, printed directly from an actual skull, and of the screen-print technique. The summation of this period of work is the programmatic *According to What* (1964); consciously lacking a focal point of reference, this huge reprise of earlier works joins a broad variety of modes of representation in homage to Duchamp.



According to What. 1964. Oil on canvas with objects (six panels), 7' 4" x 16' (223.5 x 487.7 cm). Private collection. Photograph: Gagosian Gallery, New York

Unsettled and Eclectic

From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, Johns's work became still more eclectic. His production of paintings slowed while his printmaking flourished. He became more experimental, using screenprints, photographic reproductions, neon, and metal, as well as more familiar studio materials. He explored altered formats and variable scales, and produced some of the largest works of his career—both spare abstractions and packed, complex constructions with multiple references. In 1967, a painted flagstone pattern that Johns had glimpsed on a wall while driving through Harlem gave him a new motif, more abstract and more random in structure than the found schemas and maps of previous years. The first such image he reconstructed from memory, this flagstone pattern became the focus for systematic experiments in visual inversion, reversal, and overlap—experiments he would expand upon in the next decade. Surrounded



Untitled. 1972. Oil, encaustic, and collage on canvas with objects (four panels), 6' 1/8" x 16' 1" (183 x 490 cm). Museum Ludwig, Ludwig Donation, Cologne. Photograph: © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne

by drawings and prints and providing a terminus for this phase of Johns's career, the painting *Decoy* (1971) was a memory construction of another order, convening the imagery of a previous lithograph and a suite of etchings that had themselves dealt with paintings and sculptures reaching back to 1959.

The "Cross-hatch" Pattern

Johns's progress has usually been punctuated by large paintings that seem to sum up a certain line of inquiry. One of these, the panoramic *Untitled* of 1972, also served as a point of departure. It dominates the first gallery on the lower level of the Museum. On the right, he mounted body casts—fragmentary, eerily clinical, and apparently from at least two different bodies, male and female—on numbered and color-coded battens. In the middle appear two panels of flagstone patterning, one in encaustic and one in oil, in an apparent overlap, such that the right half of the right panel is identical with the left half of the left panel. Finally, the picture's leftmost section is covered by a wholly new motif of colored clusters of hatch marks. Johns pursued the combination of imagery in *Untitled* in the two-print series shown nearby. While he remembers recoiling from what he felt was the "stronger, . . . more subjective quality" of the body casts in *Untitled*, he continued to treat these and other, earlier figurative fragments in his arresting *Skin* body-prints of 1973 and 1975.

For nearly a decade beginning in 1973, the "cross-hatch" pattern first employed in *Untitled* was to become Johns's virtually exclusive vehicle of expression. Johns has said that he glimpsed such markings on a passing car and knew immediately that he would use the motif. "It had," he later recalled, "all the qualities that interest me—literalness, repetitiveness, an obsessive quality, order with dumbness and the possibility of complete lack of meaning." The motif provided a segment of surface order, which Johns then supplemented with shifting rules of patterning that are sometimes clearly demarcated and at other times only discernible by studied effort. The motif's mathematical orders eventually reached fuguelike complexity.

Johns is rarely discussed as an abstract painter, but his cross-hatch paintings, such as *Scent* (1973–74) and *Weeping Women* (1975), are among his central works and constitute a singular chapter in the history of abstract art. Deployed in more splayed and enlarged form, the hatchings take on an expressionist energy; *Corpse and Mirror* (1974–75) uses their degraded replication—a "blotted" mirror reversal—to picture order's decay. At their most complex, in the *Usuyuki* (which means "light snow" in Japanese) series of paintings and prints, these sequences were arranged according to covert topological schemas that implied curving or spiraling movements in space. All the cross-hatch pattern images stand outside the standard categories of gestural expressionism and geometric order, yet they overlap aspects of both. They recall the New York School painting of the early 1950s, specifically the "allover" compositions of Jackson Pollock's poured paintings, while invoking the previous decade's minimalist sensibility.

Issues of Life and Death

Following his 1977–78 traveling retrospective, Johns painted the last of the cycle of cross-hatch abstractions that he had begun in 1972. One has the sense in the later works of this kind that the motif's kaleidoscopic dynamism is locking up, with intensifying rigidity and constriction. The shift began to occur with the two *Dancers on a Plane* paintings of 1979–80. Figurative references and eating utensils are grafted to the cross-hatch abstraction. Johns has said that when he made the first *Dancers on a Plane* painting, he was "thinking about issues like life and death, whether I could even survive. I was in a very gloomy mood when I made the picture, and I tried to make it in a stoic or heroic mood." The paintings can be connected with his fascination at the time with Tantric art. The utensils in both versions introduce associations for him of "cutting, measuring, mixing, blending, consuming—creation and destruction moderated by ritualized manners."



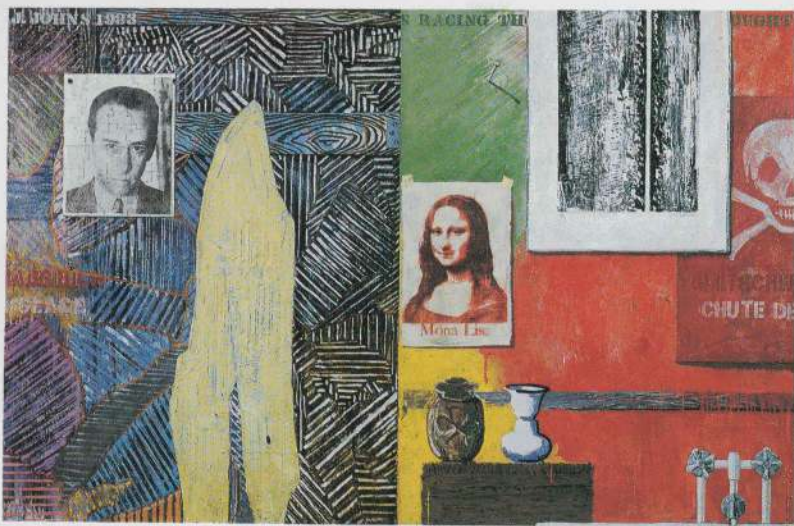
Dancers on a Plane. 1980. Oil and acrylic on canvas with painted bronze frame, 78 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 63 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (199 x 161.9 cm), including frame. Tate Gallery, purchased 1981. Photograph: John Webb

The change in Johns's work was further advanced with his exploration of the cicada theme, seen here in the *Cicada* watercolor of 1979. The complex life of this member of the locust family of insects involves seventeen years spent underground, punctuated only by a brief mating-and-dying season in the open air. In 1979, when Johns pursued the theme, the insect had emerged in the eastern United States. The way the cicada split its larval shell to emerge in final, winged form may have attracted Johns: different forms contained within one shape.

Also arising in Johns's work of the late 1970s were references to Edvard Munch, a painter similarly haunted by the dance of life and death. It was from a late, near-death self-portrait by the Norwegian master that Johns took the title *Between the Clock and the Bed* for three large tripartite canvases, the first two painted in 1981 and the third in 1982–83. In contrast to the tightly swarming, kaleidoscopic structure of the *Dancers on a Plane* pictures, in these final deployments, the cross-hatch pattern assumes its most open and monumental scale.

Perilous Nights

Johns's work took an apparently unexpected turn in 1982, when he was winding down the cross-hatch series. A proliferation of new motifs appeared: three-dimensional objects including body casts and literal depictions of planks, faucets, clothing, and ceramics that strongly contrast with the ready-made flat schemas like maps, targets, and flags. Perspectival space, previously absent from his work, made its first appearance in the "tilted" empty canvas depicted at the bottom center of *In the Studio* (1982), its illusionistic lean inward countered by the very real lean outward of a wood stick attached at the bottom of the picture.



Racing Thoughts. 1983. Encaustic and collage on canvas, 48 x 75 1/4" (121.9 x 190.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art. Purchase, with funds from the Burroughs Wellcome Purchase Fund; Leo Castelli; the Wilfred P. and Rose J. Cohen Purchase Fund; the Julia B. Engel Purchase Fund; the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States Purchase Fund; the Sondra and Charles Gilman, Jr., Foundation, Inc.; S. Sidney Kahn; The Lauder Foundation, Leonard and Evelyn Lauder Fund; the Sara Roby Foundation; and the Painting and Sculpture Committee. Photograph: Geoffrey Clements

With this new space also appeared a changed notion of time: The arm casts that appear in *Perilous Night* (1982), though mottled with color in an unnatural camouflage of their "skin," are those of a child growing into an adult. Simultaneously, Johns's pictures started to include "trick" images from perceptual psychology (a vase, for example, whose stem can be read as the negative space between the facing profiles of England's Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip), which trap the viewer in confusing either-or dilemmas of interpretation. This focus on the languages of illusion also included evocations of a wall in the artist's house, complete with fake wood-grain, drawn with rude simplicity, and images tacked up with shadow-casting nails—staple devices of the American trompe l'oeil painters of the nineteenth century and also of early Cubism. These and other trompe l'oeil devices are frequently contradicted by reassertions of painterly freedom. *Racing Thoughts* (1983) includes the same Barnett Newman print as *Ventriloquist* (1983), reproduced in the latter in correct orientation; an image of a jigsaw puzzle showing Johns's dealer Leo Castelli in his youth; and a Mona Lisa decal. The first of Johns's appropriations in this period were the pair of armored pikemen who are cryptically outlined at the left of *Perilous Night*, which is titled after a musical composition by John Cage. Abstracted via tracing from a grisaille reproduction of a detail of Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (c. 1512–16), the sinuous arrangement of these faceless soldiers and the outlines of a foul-skinned demon from the same altarpiece are embedded in Johns's most densely layered paintings. Along with the Swiss skull-and-crossbones placard that Johns also began including in this period, the quotations of the Grünewald altarpiece, with its references to faith and mortality, profoundly broadened and deepened the range of possible meanings in his work.

The graphic works gathered in the next gallery recapitulate earlier motifs such as the Savarin can and demonstrate once again how Johns's images often start as objective devices and move with intensified self-awareness into the realm of the subjective.

The Seasons of Life

This period's most ambitious works were the four *Seasons* paintings (1985–86), instigated by *Summer* (cover). These four paintings assemble artifacts and seasonal symbols to narrate the stages of life and of Johns's own career. Each shadow falls on a wall of bricks, tiles, or boards that corresponds to one or another of Johns's residences. The pictures owe elements of their iconography to a work by Pablo Picasso of 1936 showing a minotaur moving his household goods in a cart, and Johns's "self-portrait" shadow, which recurs in all four, was inspired by a 1953 Picasso painting titled *The Shadow*. The displacement and splitting of Johns's shadow from picture to picture is another of the artist's codes for a changing point of view and the passage of time; the strategy is meant to suggest sliding quarter-shifts, rotations, and circling patterns of beginnings, endings, and renewals.

In the late 1980s, the art of Picasso emerged as a powerful presence in Johns's art, similar to the way that the ideas and images of Duchamp had inhabited so much of Johns's work of the early 1960s. The autobiographical traces that had appeared in the early 1980s intensified and, in the context of a new interest in infantile perception and representation, extended into memories of early childhood. A peculiar disjointed "face" motif dominates many of the late-1980s paintings. By 1984, inspired by a Picasso portrait of Marie-Thérèse Walter from 1936, in which her eyes are displaced to the edges of opposing breastlike forms, Johns devised an even more extreme image in which bulging eyes cleave to the corner and side of an open field containing equally exaggerated "cartoons" of nostrils and lips. The face motif gave rise to some of the sparest and most open paintings Johns has made, containing broad, flat fields of color unlike anything in his work since the late 1960s. These Picasso-based facial features, projected onto a flat rectangle from a volumetric head, are sometimes shown reprojected onto a trompe l'oeil hanging cloth.

With an airy, rejuvenated simplicity evocative of children's drawings, Johns dealt with his own earliest memories of life in his grandfather's home in South Carolina. *Montez Singing* (1989), a picture with the light, open space of a Caribbean landscape, drew its title and a miniature boating emblem from Johns's recollection of his stepgrandmother, Montez Johns, singing "Red Sails in the Sunset." Elsewhere, against the midnight-blue background of an untitled 1988 "bath" picture, in which the depiction of faucets suggests a view from within a bathtub, Johns introduces the motif of several small spiral galaxies.

Turning Sixty

Johns has said that he felt as if he had "aged twenty years" when he turned sixty in 1990, and he has also jokingly referred to some of the paintings from around this date as evidence of a "second childhood." The dislocated Picassoid "face" he had been working with now reminded him of a magazine illustration he had seen over thirty years before—a drawing, made by a disturbed child, in which a suckling infant's vision sees detached breasts, eyes, and a nose free-floating in a rectangular field. He included this drawing in a trio of identically sized untitled pictures of 1991 and 1991–94, in white, ocher, and purple respectively. Along with these "regressions" to primal ways of seeing, the artist's attention to his own childhood was manifested in renderings of an old family photograph.

By this stage in his career, Johns had become dissatisfied with interpretations of his work in which critics had depended heavily on a priori information to "see" virtually indecipherable motifs like the outlined details of the Grünewald altarpiece. Realizing that knowing often replaces looking, he decided to force less prejudiced attention on the transformed, borrowed image in its own right, independent of its original source. In *Green Angel* of 1990, for example, the central motif is traced from an unknown source.

It imposes an organically irregular horizontal shape over the midline of a complexly patterned vertical form, in a way that some have likened to traditional pictures of Christ's body draped across the Virgin's lap. But Johns also inverted the image, reversed it, and rotated it ninety degrees.

In keeping with the more obvious attention to art history that has marked Johns's work since the early 1980s, the period saw an increase in traced imagery, such as the various remakings in 1994 of a Paul Cézanne bathers composition of c. 1900-05 and the aggressively hued and boldly puzzle-patterned reworkings of Hans Holbein's *Portrait of a Young Nobleman Holding a Lemur* (c. 1541). In the two versions of *Mirror's Edge* (1992-93), Johns revived the format of the studio wall with its trompe l'oeil panels of "taped" or "tacked" images: a plan, reconstructed from memory, of his grandfather's house, where he spent his earliest remembered years; a "photograph" of a spiraling cosmos; and a globe-headed stick man derived from the figure of Icarus in a Picasso mural of 1958.

In 1992-95, when Johns conceived a closely related pair of exceptionally large untitled canvases, these elements, plus the unidentified traced motif, a cruciform shape from the 1990 etching *The Seasons*, and the linear contours of a soldier from the Grünewald altarpiece, were all "laid over" the reversed imagery of the three-part *Untitled (Red, Yellow, Blue)* of 1984. Looking back beyond earlier "tackboard" pictures like *Racing Thoughts* (1983) to previous milestone works such as *According to What* (1964), or the large, four-panel *Untitled* (1972), this grand, summary pair of untitled canvases seem newly dematerialized and synthetic in their weaving together of disparate motifs. Dreamlike in the variety of their floating juxtapositions, they reformulate and synthesize, in Johns's sixty-fifth year, the conundrums of picture-making and the concerns with time, memory, personal history, and art history that have continued to absorb the changing focus of his eye.



Untitled. 1992-95. Oil on canvas, 78 x 118" (198.1 x 299.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Promised gift of Agnes Gund. Photograph: Kate Keller and Erik Landsberg

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.

—Jasper Johns, 1982

Lecture Series

All talks begin at 8:30 p.m. in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater I. Tickets \$8.00; members \$7.00; students and seniors \$5.00. Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, please call the Department of Education at (212) 708-9781.

Monday, October 28

The Beholders' Share: Conflict, Uncertainty, and Change

A lecture by Richard Field, Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

Monday, November 4

The Fifties Avant-Garde and the American Interior

A lecture by Thomas Crow, The Robert Lehman Professor of History of Art, Yale University, New Haven

Monday, November 11

Dialogue on Johns and the Modern Tradition

A panel discussion with Merce Cunningham, choreographer; Barbara Rose, art historian and Research Professor, American University, Washington, D.C.; and David Sylvester, writer on art and exhibitions curator. Moderated by Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, and curator of the exhibition

Monday, November 18

Panel of Artists

A panel discussion with artists John Baldessari, Robert Gober, Elizabeth Murray, and Terry Winters. Moderated by Kirk Varnedoe

Monday, November 25

The Lessons of the Objects

A lecture by Kirk Varnedoe

This brochure abridges texts by Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, drawn from the catalogue for the exhibition.

Museum Hours

Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday 11:00-6:00; Thursday and Friday 12:00-8:30. Closed Wednesday, Thanksgiving, and Christmas day

Admission

General admission \$8.50; members free; fulltime students (with current identification) \$5.50; senior citizens (65 and over) \$5.50; children under 16 accompanied by an adult free (does not apply to children in groups); Thursday and Friday 5:30-8:30, pay-what-you-wish

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Audio Tour

An audio tour of the exhibition, narrated by Kirk Varnedoe, with an introduction by Glenn D. Lowry, comments by artists Elizabeth Murray and Kiki Smith, the words of Jasper Johns read by the writer Reynolds Price, and with music by John Cage, is available for \$4.00, members \$3.50. Amplified headsets and written transcripts are also available.

Exhibition Publications

Jasper Johns: A Retrospective, by Kirk Varnedoe, with an essay by Roberta Bernstein. 408 pp., 482 ills., 275 in color. Clothbound \$65.00, members \$58.50; paper \$32.50, members \$29.25

Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews, compiled by Christel Hollevoet, edited by Kirk Varnedoe. 320 pp., 50 ills. Paper \$24.95, members \$22.45

Available at The MoMA Book Store

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Brochure © 1996 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Cover: **Summer.** 1985. Encaustic on canvas, 75 x 50" (190.5 x 127 cm). Collection Philip Johnson. Photograph: © Dorothy Zeidman