

The Museum of Modern Art

JASPER JOHNS

Jasper Johns was born in 1930 in Augusta, Georgia, and spent his childhood and adolescence in rural South Carolina. In a 1977 interview he recalled, "I'd wanted to be an artist from age five...somehow the idea must have been conveyed to me that an artist is someone of interest in society. I didn't know artists, but at an early age I realized that in order to be one I'd have to be somewhere else. I always had a tendency to try to be somewhere else." Johns studied at the University of South Carolina before moving to New York in 1949, where he briefly attended art school. During the early fifties he served in the army, returning to New York in 1952 with an intensified commitment to becoming an artist.

In 1954 Johns underwent a significant shift that he later described as a decision "to stop becoming and to be an artist." He destroyed most of his previous work and began to concentrate on the techniques of encaustic painting. He began to produce a series of paintings of everyday objects, the first of which was of the American flag, followed by targets, numbers, and the alphabet. He later said, "Using the design of the American flag took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it. So I went on to similar things like the targets--things the mind already knows. This gave me room to work on other levels."

In the mid-fifties Johns became friends with Robert Rauschenberg, with whom he collaborated on window displays in Fifth Avenue department stores as well as on paintings. Through Rauschenberg he met John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and was influenced by their respective innovations in music and

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dance. Johns was artistic advisor to the Merce Cunningham Dance Company from 1968 to 1975 and has collaborated on projects with many leading contemporary artists.

In the early sixties, following an exciting period of sustained critical attention, Johns began to spend less time in New York and more at his home in Edisto Beach, South Carolina. He began to read poetry and philosophy avidly, becoming intrigued by the writing of Marcel Duchamp and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his work, Johns has been concerned with many of the ideas that preoccupied Wittgenstein, particularly those related to language and meaning, structured relationships, and interpretation of visual information.

Throughout the sixties and seventies Johns was the subject of several exhibitions and books. In 1972 he received the Skowhegan Medal for painting, and in 1977 he received one for graphics. A major retrospective of more than 200 paintings, sculptures, and works on paper opened at The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1977 and subsequently traveled to museums throughout the world.

Johns presently divides his time between his homes in New York City, upstate New York, and St. Martin.

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