It's in the Can: Jasper Johns and the Anal Society

BY JONATHAN WEINBERG

I can scarcely detail for you all the things that resolve themselves into — excrement for me (a new Midas!).
—Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess,
December 22, 1897

Sooner or later any critic grappling with Jasper Johns' art has to deal with Johns' claim of separation from his own paintings: ¹

I have attempted to develop my thinking in such a way that the work I've done is not me—not to confuse my feelings with what I produced. I didn't want my work to be an exposure of my feelings. Abstract-Expressionism was so lively—personal identity and painting were more or less the same, and I tried to operate the same way. But I found I couldn't do anything that would be identical with my feelings. So I worked in such a way that I could say that it's not me. That accounts for the separation.²

Undoubtedly, Johns' statement is a response not only to Harold Rosenberg and his followers who saw Abstract Expressionist painting as a stage for the performance of the artist's angst, but to Jackson Pollock's famous statement in which he claimed to have actually found a way in to his painting. With notable exceptions, Johns' cool detachment from his art has been accepted at face value. Johns' series of flags, numbers, and targets, with their mechanized images, stenciled or found, have been taken as antidotes to both the confessions of the first generation of the New York School and to a brand of late Romantic criticism which reads paintings as expressions of the artist's self.

What is odd about Johns' claim is that if his intention were to assert the essential separation of the work of art from its creator, to, as it were, pull the Abstract Expressionist artist out of his painting, why does he so repetitively put images of himself, photographs, or literally prints of his own body into his paintings? If we are not meant to read these fragments as surrogates for the artist's ego, then what do they signify?

Certainly, many monographs could be devoted to a study of Johns' use of the body in his canvases. In this short essay I am directed to the question of Johns' use of anal imagery by the very title of the Jasper Johns and Samuel Beckett collaboration, the book Fizzles.³ Published in a limited edition in 1976 by the Pittsburgh Press, the final etchings and various working proofs that Johns executed for

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Beckett's text are now touring the country in a show that was organized by James Cuno at the Wight Gallery of the University of California at Los Angeles. As Judy Goldman points out in her catalog for the first public showing of the book at the Whitney Museum, the word originally meant "to break wind without noise," while one of the meanings of Beckett's original title, *Foirades*, is diarrhea. While both words roughly are connected to failure, their roots are in, as Goldman put it, the language of the toilet. As if to remind us of the subject of the book, Johns caps the list of body parts in *Words* with "Buttocks" and its French equivalent *Fesses*. As the working proofs show (Figure 1), Johns arrived at the final image by superimposing the English and French words. "Fesses," particularly when merged with the c in "Buttocks," becomes uncomfortably close to feces. The covering of one language with another, rather than producing incoherence, oddly brings us closer to the book's title.

Johns' introduction of anal imagery does not begin with his collaboration with Beckett. If we decipher what has often been called the private "code" of Johns' work using the great code book of our time, the writings of Freud and his followers, anal symbols dominate. Freud's biographer, Ernest Jones, in a landmark
essay, "Anal-Erotic Character Traits," lists some of the objects that are associated with the anal character:

any dirty material, street-filth (including, of course, dung), soiled linen and other things, dust, coal, house or garden refuse, waste-paper, and, indeed, waste material of all descriptions, for in the unconscious the ideas denoted by the words "waste" and "dirty" seem to be synonymous—the terium comparationis doubtless being that of "refuse." Either disgusting or waste matter relating to the body is especially apt to become thus associated. The former of these may be illustrated by the material of loathsome diseases—e.g., purulent and other secretions—and this is also the reason why a corpse is often a symbol of faeces. Examples of the latter one are hair and nails, parts of the body that are apt to get dirty and which are periodically cast off. Books and other printed matter are a curious symbol of faeces, presumably through the association with paper and the idea of pressing (smearing, imprinting).*

Newspapers, bones, smeared paint, soiled towels, dirty dishes, books—add to these an intense interest in numbers and calligraphy so central to the trope of the anal type and we have a catalog of the subjects and even the very substances of Johns' art. In this context, a story that appears in all the official biographies about Johns becomes telling:

In the Museum of Modern Art, a woman said to him, "Jasper, you must be from the Southern Aristocracy."

He said, "No Jean, I'm just trash."

Significantly, the artist doesn't say he comes from so-called white trash. He is trash, and despite his repeated claims of separation he finds himself unconsciously identifying himself with the materials and subjects of his painting.

Johns' literally "trashes" himself right in the beginning of Fizzles. In Face (Figure 2), a print of Johns' profile is crossed out with the mark artists usually use to cancel an etching plate to insure that no more prints will be run off after the limited edition is complete. Yet such a cancellation mark in rendering the plate worthless simultaneously protects the integrity of the limited edition—an act of disfigurement is converted into one bestowing value. In this way Johns' denigration of his profile, his losing face, is as much an insistence on distinction. Given this interpretation, it is no surprise that Face appears on the reverse side of Numeral 1, an ultimate designation of priority even as it is the most diminutive of the cardinal numbers.

The biographies also tell us that Johns, alias "trash," chose a converted bank for his studio and placed his paintings in the vault.* Aristocracy and trash, distinction and disfigurement, money and shit, Freud's "aliment and excrement," psychoanalysis asserts that these are the polar extremes of the language of the anus. Curiously, in replying to a friend's question of origins, Johns was probably unknowingly reliving a similar scene from Beckett's biography. When an adoring critic compared The End favorably to the work of another Nobel Laureate, Beckett replied, "No one is interested in this... this rubbish."*

It is important to caution that by examining anal imagery in Johns' art I am not attempting to delve into his psyche but rather to explore the expressive mechanics of his art. Johns' art is not case history and his personal life, so far as it is not in the public record, is of little interest here. My aim is to wonder how Johns' seeming refusal of engagement with biography and politics so often ends up producing an
art which is expressive of anxieties and desires which seem to be both personally and culturally determined.

Johns’ “excremental vision,” to use a term coined by Norman O. Brown, reveals itself at the beginning of his career in Target with Plaster Casts (Figure 3). Most critics of this work have stressed the expressive difference between the casts of body parts in the small boxes above and the flat abstraction of the target. Richard Francis suggests that the “cool” target acts to negate any potential emotional response to the castrated penis, which he tactfully calls “private” in the conventional definition.” Leo Steinberg writes of an attempt to render us indifferent to the torn body parts by their association with such a matter-of-fact image as a target. For Steinberg, the “human body is not the ostensible subject.” Yet isn’t the target a surrogate for another body part? Johns later suggests as much himself, making the obvious pun on “bull’s eye” even more obvious in the later eyellite drawing Broken Target (Figure 4). But if the target is the artist’s eye, or his entire face, as when we speak of the face of a target, it is also his anus. The very word “anus” comes from the Latin word anus, “ring.” The target is nothing but rings within rings—a hole to aim at, or to spit out the dead matter that fills the boxes above. Johns’ very medium—newspaper dipped in warmed wax, and pigment (what would be taken for soiled paper in a different context)—only makes the connection clearer.
Kenneth Silver has spoken on the relationship of the Johns' target paintings to the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Silver's theory is useful in that it focuses our attention on the premeditated brutality that underlies Johns' act of precisely placing torn body parts into small coffinlike spaces which earlier critics seemed so intent on ignoring. Saint Sebastian, traditionally depicted seminude with arrows piercing his body, has in the Western tradition often served for a figure of homoerotic desire—his "miracle" of surviving a shower of missiles converted into a fantasy of anal intercourse. The "broken" of Johns' Broken Target, perhaps alluding to the torn eye of Le Chien Andulou, only returns us to this idea of attack and penetration.

Silver's Saint Sebastian connection is limiting in that it too narrowly insists on the male gender of both the attacker and the victim, the lover and the love object. Silver wants to see Johns' art along with the paintings of Hockney and Warhol as on some level an attempt to come to terms with homosexual desire. Certainly Johns' seeming fascination with anal eroticism raises important questions about the role sexual difference, or lack of sexual difference, plays in his painting. However, raising the issue of anal desire is not tantamount to raising the issue of homosexuality. Anal intercourse is by no means an exclusively homosexual act. In the case of the companion piece to Target with Five Casts, Target with Four Faces, it also should be acknowledged that the heads are supposedly female.
Perhaps the very appeal of a target for Johns is its ability to be any one and all of the openings of the body, even as, when placed in proximity to real body parts, all those connections somehow could be ignored. Still I return to the anus—male or female, or both, because unlike the penis or the vagina, the anus is not gender bound—as an essential trope, because like Johns' painting itself, it is a part of the body that centers both passive and aggressive drives. Whether through the small boxes with their traplike doors (a classic anal image) or the containing edges which make up the target's form, *Target with Five Casts* is about holding in. Yet this holding in, which the early critics mistook for distance, is itself a means of attack equivalent to the arrows that the target waits for.

The theme of *Target with Five Casts* is reworked in Johns' *Souvenir 2* (Figure 5). Here Johns' face is itself the target, now placed inside a dish which is smeared with sepia-colored paint. The idea that we are looking at something cheap, the painting itself as garbage, something shoddily put together, was suggested in the title "Made in Japan!" which Johns originally gave the very similar *Souvenir 1." (Fortunately, the phrase "made in Japan" no longer has the connotation of cheapness that it did in the early sixties.) Both "Souvenir" and "Made in Japan" refer to the plate which Johns purchased in a tourist store on a trip to Japan. In *Souvenir 2*, the "souvenir" is placed on the back of a canvas stretcher which is glued to the painting proper. To the right of the stretcher is a shiny metal flashlight, pointed at a
mirror. Thick gray paint, with the consistency of mud, covers the remaining surface. A bit of gray paint stains the top of the stretcher frame, while the bottom is marked with smudged finger prints.

A fascination with the backs of objects is an essential element of the anal character. Jones writes: “Interest in the act of defecation often leads to interest in the site of defecation—i.e., in the anal canal itself. . . . The most interesting one is the tendency to be occupied with the reverse side of various things and situations. This may manifest itself in many different ways: in marked curiosity about the opposite or back side of objects and places—e.g., to reverse words and letters in writing.” If we continue with the logic of this approach, Johns’ face appears at the opening of the anal cavity. The words “Yellow,” “Blue,” and “Red” along the brim of the plate make it look something like a lifesaver with the name of a ship on it. Is it meant to protect against the aggression of the phallic flashlight which is exposing itself in the mirror? Is Johns’ position in the hole in relationship to the flashlight an attempt at seduction? Next to the mirror is a bit of torn paper or cloth painted with a gray profile of the flashlight. Is this an image of the flashlight after it has been taken out of the lifesaver? Or, finally, is this painting a kind of autoerotic machine with Johns as both giver and receiver of pleasure? To ask these questions is to try and turn the back of the canvas around. Johns’ deadpan expression is transposed by the painting’s symbols of sexual desire and conflict—the por-
trait's passivity is a holding tactic against the potentially aggressive relationships embodied in the objects that make up the painting's surface.

In the last ten years, the Savarin Can, first introduced in 1960 as Painted Bronze (Savarin) (Figure 6), has replaced the target and flag as the essential Johnsian image. Placed against a field of cross-hatchings (the flag gone awry?), just above the stenciled lettering "JASPER JOHNS," the coffee can with its dirty brushes was the poster for the retrospective the Whitney Museum gave the artist in 1977. It is a clever kind of self-portrait that is not as far removed from the target as it may seem at first glance. In the placement of the brushes into the round opening of the can there is a trace of the act of applying paint in rings on the canvas. Savarin is the perfect anal image—brushes in a dirty liquid that is contained in a can, slang for toilet, or simply the anus. As with Fizzes, we are confronted with the language of the bathroom which is now synonymous with the language of art making. If we accept the anal trope we cannot ignore the sexual implication of the self-portrait. While its phallic/anal pairing seems to focus our attention on anal intercourse, it is equally masturbatory, the artist becoming both penis and anus, the brush and the dirty can. In 1973, Johns took this autoerotic self-portrait one step further. Mimicking the process out of which he made Study for Skin I—IV in the earlier sixties with their images of his hands and face, Johns made body prints of just his penis in Skin I (1973) (Figure 7) and his buttocks in Skin II (1973) (Figure 8). Significantly, this anal process of printing his behind occurs at about the time Johns began to work on Fizzes. The artist, once self-portrayed by his face or even, as in the heroic paintings by Pollock, by his hand is now represented by his genitals, and this is all he needs to make his art. This act is pure exhibitionism (Johns presenting his cock and his ass to the world), yet characteristically in the prints' murkiness, their vagueness of form, there is the canceling out that always accompanies his "exhibits." Unlike Lucas Samaras, who has worked with similar material, going so far as to make pictures of himself masturbating or seeming to sodomize himself, Johns' attacks are discreetly measured and contained.

What I see as the autoerotic quality of Johns' self-portraits raises another aspect of the anal imagination. The fantasy of the artist creating his own sexual pleasure in a game of exhibition and masturbation is a playing out of the infantile wish to father the self and therefore ultimately triumph over death. To be able to give birth to the self is to posit a self-sustaining being who has no discernible beginning and end. The connection between excrement and money to which psychoanalysis gives such weight is dependent on the idea that the young child, knowing nothing of the genital functions and of the womb and having only the experience of his own body, initially believes that he was born out of his mother's stomach through the anal canal. In this process, excrement, which in Brown's words "incorporates the body's daily dying," is transformed from dead matter into something of value, the living, breathing entity of the self's own body. Given this context, Johns' association of the artist's craft with the anus, embodied in the Painted Bronze (Savarin), is not so peculiar. The great claim for the exalted position of art in society is that it passes through exactly this route—this anal canal, if you will—from inanimate object to highest repository of our sense of selfhood. Art is a lifeless
Fig. 7. *Skin I*, charcoal on paper, 1973. Private collection, photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery.

Fig. 8. *Skin II*, charcoal on paper, 1973. Private collection, photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery.
object, a thing to buy and sell, yet it is the cliché of those who merchandise, study, and make it that art has a life of its own which transcends its physicality. In the end, it is taken to do what human life cannot do—vita brevis, ars longa. Ironically, art’s very immortality is dependent on its being so many droppings which we leave behind to show we were here.

As a portrait of the artist, the paintbrushes in dirty turpentine is a passive one, running counter to the tradition of showing the artist with paintbrush in hand. Instead, work has been suspended, and the artist’s tools are left to soak until they are pulled out to be used again. The seeming passivity of so many of Johns’ works is often discussed in the literature on the artist. Steinberg writes of his pre-1958 works: “the objects he chooses show a distinct preference for letting things happen. A flag has nothing to do but be recognized; a target is aimed at; a book is opened, letters and numbers are shuffled, shades are pulled, drawers are filled and closed.” "Moira Roth writes: “In his interrogation of language, numbers and objects, Johns’ manner is neutral and indifferent.” She goes so far as to term Johns and his fellow artists of the late fifties as participants in an “Aesthetic of Indifference" that characteristically responded to the right-wing climate of the period with images that were noncommittal. Such a view ignores the fundamental aggressiveness of Johns’ characteristic deadpan stance. The very banality of Painted Bronze (Savarin), like Duchamp’s famous Fountain, which is its precursor, in its equation of the process of aesthetic production with waste is purposely offensive.

Again and again, Johns holds back to strike out. In an often quoted notebook sketch he writes:

> The watchman falls “into” the “trap” of looking. The “spy” is a different person. “Looking” is and is not “eating” and “being eaten.” (Cézanne?—each object reflecting the other.) That is, there is continuity of some sort among the watchman, the space, the objects. The spy must be ready to “move,” must be aware of his entrances and exits. The watchman leaves his job & takes away no information. The spy must remember and must remember himself and his remembering. The spy designs himself to be overlooked. The watchman “serves” as a warning. Will the spy and the watchman ever meet?"

Rather than some stream of consciousness scribbles, the terms of this private note made public seem carefully considered. Is Johns the watchman, the spy, or both? To the degree that spy and watchman meet, they meet in the similarities of their tasks—they both protect treasures, the watchman the money in the vault, the spy his secrets. Both keep things within. It is not just the spy who must be aware of “entrances and exits”; this is the essential task of the watchman. The world Johns describes is an anal one of protecting the body from dangers that lurk outside, of carefully controlling what leaves and goes in, all with the goal of eating without being eaten. Above all the spy endeavors to be “overlooked,” to seem invisible so that later the information that has been so carefully gathered can be converted into weapons.

In a complex study of Johns’ cross-hatch paintings beginning with Untitled (1972) and Scent, Charles Harrison and Fred Orton assert that even when Johns is at his most abstract, this very abstractness is a cover for a clandestine subject
matter: "in Johns' first all-over cross-hatched painting [Scent], what is signified and/or (occasionally) expressed is partly concealment; the very concealment of that which signifies." 22 For Harrison and Orton the cross-hatch motif is not just a lively decorative surface, it signifies hiding. Jasper Johns himself said that he was inspired to use the hatchings when he passed by a car covered with the markings. A National Geographic photograph of a tree being painted by a Mexican barber outside his shop was also said to be an important inspiration.23 Yet I think what might have been most satisfying about the pattern for Johns, perhaps only unconsciously, was its closeness to the design of the inside lining of envelopes that certain businesses use to conceal an enclosed check, credit card, or stock certificate from prying eyes. In Fizzles, Johns uses the cross-hatch motif as the book's endpapers—it literally becomes the cover, enclosing the "secrets" of the work of art within. Harrison and Orton are perhaps being coy in not fully pursuing the content of Johns' subject, yet in a sense any biographically determined factors that might make up that content are not as important as Johns' insistence that there is a secret. It would be difficult to think of another artist who has so publicly made an issue of his privacy. Despite photographs on the cover of Newsweek, numerous interviews, the publication of notes, and most recently a pre-exhibit "pin up"—style foldout of his latest paintings in Vogue, the trope of Jasper Johns as a reclusive figure stands.24

This emphasis on secrets, on canvases turned to the wall, is perhaps the most obvious anal characteristic of Johns' art. Freud writes in a footnote to his famous essay on the anal character about a man who doubted his theories about the anal stage in childhood development. Only a few minutes after laughing about the absurdity of an infant purposely holding back his stool to thwart his parents, the same man told a story that provided a perfect illustration for Freud's theories: "Do you know, there just occurs to me, as I see the cocoa in front of me, an idea that I always had as a child. I then always pretended to myself that I was the cocoa manufacture Van Houten... that I possessed a great secret for the preparation of this cocoa, and that all the world was trying to get this valuable secret from me, but that I carefully kept it to myself." Freud comments: "Displacement from behind forwards; excrement become aliment; the shameful substance which has to be concealed turns into a secret which enriches the world."25 Freud could be describing Johns' method of art making with its conversion of trash into riches—Fizzles' fragments of body parts, so much excreta meticulously printed on elegant paper and enclosed in linen.

I focus on Johns' anality not to unveil some secret of his personality but to connect his art to larger societal obsessions. A great deal of the criticism of Johns' work has insisted that behind his secretiveness is an artist struggling to reconstitute the fractured persona that is the inheritance of modernism. According to such readings, the cool surface of Johns' premanufactured forms is a mask beneath which some more essential content is waiting to be discovered. Certainly, Johns' work is puzzling, its very multivalence of meanings or even refusal of meanings through a kind of scratching out of signifiers part of just such a facade. Yet essential to my argument is that there is much on the surface of Johns' painting
that is expressive of powerful fears and desires which has been largely ignored in this process of emphasizing its qualities of distance and opaqueness. Perhaps the anality that I see present in the work has been overlooked because it is too close to our culture’s fixation with “entrances and exits.” The psychoanalyst William C. Menninger writes:

Our culture emphasizes the importance of the anal period, in contrast to primitive cultures described by Mead in Samoa and Röheim in Central Australia which place no taboos or restrictions on the excremental functions, and where no so-called anal character develops. . . . The emphasis on production, the value of time, the importance of material possessions, the striving for wealth and its implied power, are all paramount goals in our age of civilization, which might be said to be in an anal phase. Perhaps because these have all assumed such large proportions in our personal strivings, acceptance of their psychological origins meets with special resistance.28

The anal character is our character. The very squeamishness with which we face its terms is in direct relationship to its force in modern interactions. To connect money with shit or art with shit (certainly art and money have always had an intimate relationship) is to return capitalism to the primal workings of the body where all objects found their original value. Norman O. Brown writes:

property remains excremental, and is known to be excremental in our secret heart, the unconscious. Jokes and folklore and poetic metaphor, the wisdom of folly, tell the secret truth. The wisdom of folly is the wisdom of childhood. What the child knows consciously, and the adult unconsciously, is that we are nothing but body. However much the repressed and sublimating adult may consciously deny it, the fact remains that life is of the body and only life creates values; all values are bodily values. Hence the assimilation of money with excrement does not render money valueless; on the contrary, it is the path whereby extraneous things acquire significance for the human body, and hence value. If money were not excrement, it would be valueless.29

This also is the wisdom of Johns’ art, in which so much that is of importance to human affairs, the body, money, art itself, is in danger of being confused with “extraneous things.” Rather than a random scatology, Johns’ art characteristically forces us to consider the derivation of values: why is one object better than another, why is one thing money and the other thing shit, why is one kind of work art and another just production.

These themes are brought to the fore in Fool’s House (Figure 9), where Johns brings together a broom, a soiled towel, a stretcher frame, and a dirty cup, each with its name scribbled next to it. The broom is the artist as a giant brush that sweeps paint and found objects into their designated areas. Fool’s House compares the exalted role of the artist to the daily role of the housewife who in her daily tasks fights the hopeless battle against the ever-repeating accumulation of filth. The job is never done because the tools are never quite up to the task. The dirty and the clean are always getting confused.

Fool’s House is only the most obvious of Johns’ paintings that seems to concern itself with the issue of how to determine what is dirty and what is clean. Critics have not paid enough attention to the way Johns actually handles paint in his collage/paintings. There is a tendency to read Johns’ sweeping brush strokes and drips as pastiches of Abstract Expressionist handling, signs of the lively Modern-
Fig. 9. Fool's House, oil on canvas with objects, 1962. Private collection, photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery.
Fig. 10. Diver, oil on canvas with objects, 1962. Private collection, photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery.

ist surface becoming a method that any artist can imitate. Yet Johns' very pastiche of Expressionist handwriting depends on a confusion of paint marks with dirt and the accidental. If we look again at Souvenir 2, we might take the top corner of sweeping brush strokes as technique à la de Kooning, but the bravura and elegance of the expressive hand is rudely cancelled out by the matter-of-fact dab of gray paint on the stretcher. Finger marks on the stretcher work the same way. They are probably an allusion to Pollock's famous hand prints, but the heroic act of inserting the artist's hand literally into the web has been converted into dirt that the artist leaves on the painting as he moves it around.

Something of the same procedure is at work in Diver (Figure 10). In contrasting an area of loosely brushed jagged forms with the cool gray bands, Johns knowingly mocks Abstract Expressionism by claiming that the marks of the artist's self can be reproduced as mechanically as an artist's tonal scale. The painterly style of Clyfford Still et al. are undermined, not through a simple comparison of practices but by actually converting Expressionist brush strokes into dirt—"matter in the wrong place." The red of one of the freely painted panels in the center smears over onto the hard-edged monochrome scale. It does so not in an emphatic gesture of freedom but as if by mistake. The stenciled names of colors in Diver work in the same way. "RED" is actually painted blue and invades a yellow passage. "YELLOW" is red but is over a yellow area. "BLUE" is actually painted blue but lies on top of a yellow and red section. Even the power of words to put matter in its place fails—they too are so much dirt on the canvas surface.
Johns' "mistakes" of naming are premeditated, just as the drips and smudges of his paint handling are carefully controlled. There is an emphatic neatness to Johns' messiness which is precisely why discussions of the anal character as it is described in the psychoanalytic literature seem to have so much force in describing his work. If Johns was either fastidiously precise in his handling of paint, consistently producing hard-edged painting, or if he was producing work that was a great jumble of rough surfaces and gestures, the anal trope would not fit. It is his paintings' emphatic bringing together of these extremes in the same images so that we are left with their oddness that justifies evoking psychoanalytic terms that in another context may seem inappropriate or constraining. Ernest Jones' anal character who is clean to a fault, who dresses meticulously, but insists on wearing the same dirty underwear day after day is in the same sphere as the clash of painting procedures in Johns' Diver, or the differences between the elegant hatchings of the endpapers and the dismembered body in Fizzles. The dirty underwear expresses anxiety not just because it is dirty, but because when it is uncovered it brings forth the strangeness of the mask of meticulous cleanliness—both become symptoms of the same uneasiness about the body and its evacuations. Returning to Johns' Target, the precision of the rings in its exactness does not negate the dismemberment in the boxes above, nor does the trashin of the human body cancel out the blandness of the circles. The extremes coexist as two sides of the same obsession with dirt as "matter in the wrong place."

If the polar quality of Johns' handling of "dirt" was a personal quirk it would be of only marginal interest, yet this obsession with "matter in the wrong place" is also one of the essential aspects of our society. In fact, it could be argued that culture is nothing more than an elaborate set of systems for putting experiences and people into their proper categories and functions. Moira Roth has connected Johns' "dense concentration of metaphors dealing with spying, conspiracy, secrecy and concealment, misleading information, coded messages and clues" to the Cold War paranoia of the fifties. But the McCarthy witch hunt was only an extreme example of a constant process of marking off people into groups and designating certain actions permissible and not permissible. While it is at best difficult to pin down the ways in which works of art may come to represent and criticize their culture, I think it makes sense to take the anality of Johns' images as an embodiment of the society's structure of limits and its peculiar mechanisms for controlling human experience. The works' quality of anxious protection against hidden aggressions, the sense of latent violence even in his handling of paint surfaces, while perhaps indicative of personal struggles, is also a mirror for the fragile techniques of societal control. Indeed Johns' boundaries, like the systems they mimic, are constantly in danger, whether from arrows that dismember in Targets, or from the inability of names to keep their objects in place in Diver. He wrote in his "Sketchbook Notes," "Think of the edge of the city and the traffic there." Again and again Johns takes as his subject edges and the pressure that accumulates along their surfaces. Where the hard edge becomes a smudge, or the elegantly worked surface touches a piece of trash, is exactly the point in which the precise definitions so essential for the existence of cultural and personal integrity come apart.
Oddly, it is Johns' own paintings which more than anything come to undermine his repeated claim of separation from his art. If names simultaneously stick and come unglued from the objects they signify, if edges contain and fail to contain their subjects, if all the elaborate scaffolding that maintain culture amount to mere fizzles, just so many silent farts, how can Johns be so sure of the essential difference between himself and the things he makes?29

NOTES

1. I wish to acknowledge the enormous help of Dr. Eugene Glynn in suggesting the initial idea which led to writing this essay and in advising me where to find relevant psychoanalytic material. I would also like to thank Professor T. J. Clark, John O'Brien, Marc Lida, and Nicholas Boshnak for patiently listening to my ideas and making suggestions.
3. I am not the first to notice the importance of anal imagery in Johns' art. Barbara Rose circled around the issue in "The Graphic Work of Jasper Johns, Part II," Art Forum 8 (March 1970): 65–74. Discussing Johns' famous "watchman" passage that I quote later in my article, she writes: "we appear to have a scenario for some unspecified crime involving 'eating' and 'looking,' two acts of incorporating what is in the outside world into the body—the former cannibalistic and physical, the latter harmless and mental—that are in some way equated in the artist's mind, if not, as Norman O. Brown suggests, in everyone's mind." The snide Brown reference suggests that Rose is aware of the anality of Johns' terms but for reasons that I can only guess at she does not pursue it. Unlike Rose, I take Brown's theories, which were formulated contemporaneously with Johns' art, seriously, particularly for their ability to tie artistic obsessions to larger questions of societal control.
   In discussing my finished article with my friend, Richard Martin, editor of Arts Magazine, he told me that he too had been struck by what he called the scatology of Johns' images and that a number of years ago he had given a paper at the College Arts Association called "Jaspers' John." Unfortunately the paper was never published and was not available when I wrote this essay.
4. The exhibit originated at the University of California at Los Angeles, Wight Art Gallery (September 20–November 15, 1987) with stops at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (December 6, 1987–January 31, 1988), the Archer M. Huntington Gallery, University of Texas (February 12–March 28, 1988) and the Yale University Art Gallery (April 12–May 22, 1988).
   In the context of this essay it is interesting to note that a discussion of anal images in Beckett's work, particularly the play Not I, has been made by Keir Elam in "Not I: Beckett's Mouth and the Ars(e) Rhetorica," in Beckett at 80: Beckett in Context, ed. Enoch Brater (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 124–48.
10. See Norman O. Brown, Life against Death, the Psychoanalytic Meaning of History (Middletown, Conn., 1983, 1st ed. 1959), particularly part 5, "Studies in Anality."

15. Although I largely avoid the issue of homosexuality and American art which Silver raised at the College Arts Association in 1986 I share with him the ongoing project of studying such themes in art history. I am currently completing work on a dissertation on homosexuality in early American Modernist painting, centering on the art of Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley. See my article “‘Some Unknown Thing’: The Illustrations of Charles Demuth,” *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 4 (December 1986): 14–21 for a discussion of the role of homosexuality in Demuth’s illustrations.


19. I thank James Cuno, curator of the current *Fizzes* show at the Wight Art Gallery, for pointing out the importance of *Skin II* for my argument.


23. Harrison and Orton rehearse and give the sources for the supposed origins of the cross-hatch motif in their article.

24. In this context it is interesting to compare Jasper Johns’ public/private stance to the much more emphatically solitary Beckett who for years would leave even his publishers unaware of his whereabouts.


29. Recently Jasper Johns has admitted to the difficulty of maintaining a separation between himself and the objects he creates: “In my early work I tried to hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions. This was partly due to my feelings about myself and partly due to my feelings about painting at the time. I sort of stuck to my guns for a while but eventually it seemed like a losing battle. Finally one must simply drop the reserve.” See Judith Goldman, *Jasper Johns: The Seasons* (New York: Leo Castelli, 1987), no page numbers.