yedi
SANAT, TASARIM VE BİLİM DERGİSİ
JOURNAL OF ART, DESIGN & SCIENCE

Araştırma Makalesi
Research Article

YAZ 2020/SAYI 24
SUMMER 2020/ISSUE 24

DEÜ GSF

Keki, B. (2020). Jasper Johns' Flag: Beyond realism and abstraction. *yedi: Journal of Art, Design & Science*, 24, 1-11. doi: 10.17484/yedi.680024

Jasper Johns' *Flag*: Beyond Realism and Abstraction*

Jasper Johns'un *Flag*'i / *Bayrak*'ı: Realizm ve Soyutun Ötesinde

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Abstract

Jasper Johns is one of the most provocative American artists of the twentieth century who has shaped the perception of art and has influenced generations of artists. This paper examines one of his most important works, *Flag* (1955), regarding it as a work defying easy categorizations as either a realist or an abstract work. Without being identified as either kind, it nevertheless displays certain traits of both. As for its suggestion of realism, the work comes up as a response to its political, cultural and artistic context, challenging the Cold War aesthetics; albeit in a mocking manner. Its ridicule is evident in its allusion to the concept of ideology via its 'kitschy' subject matter whilst its delicately painted surface exhibits brushstrokes reminiscent of abstract expressionism. Yet the work also confronts presumptions of abstract expressionists by drawing attention to their implicit conventionalism despite their claims for authenticity and uniqueness. It will be argued that by calling the notion of identity in question, the work suspends and surpasses neat categories and sparks even further controversy by hinting at postmodern art and evoking ready-mades simultaneously.

Keywords: Jasper Johns – *Flag* (1955), Cold War aesthetics, abstract expressionism, realism.

Academical disciplines/fields: Visual arts, plastic arts, painting.

Özet

Jasper Johns, yerleşik sanat algısını değiştirip şekillendirerek kendisinden sonra gelen birkaç kuşak sanatçıyı etkileyen yirminci yüzyılın en kışkırtıcı Amerikalı sanatçılarından biridir. Bu çalışma onun en önemli işlerinden biri olan *Flag* (1955) / *Bayrak*'ı (1955) gerçekçi ya da soyut gibi kaba kategorilerin ötesinde bir eser olarak inceler. Tamamen özdeşleşmemekle birlikte, eser her iki ekolden de özellikler taşımaktadır. Döneme hükmeden Soğuk Savaş estetiğine meydan okuyarak, eserin içinde bulunduğu dönemin siyasi, kültürel ve sanatsal bağlamına bir tepki olarak ortaya çıkması göz önünde bulundurulunca, eserin alaycı bir şekilde bile olsa gerçekçi bir iddiası olduğu düşünülebilir. Bu alaycı tavır özellikle soyut dışavurumculuğu çağrıştıran fırça darbeleriyle özenli bir biçimde boyanmış yüzeyinin aslında konu olarak bayrak gibi ideoloji kavramının en 'kiç' ifadesini kullanmasında kendisini gösterir. Ancak eser bir taraftan da tüm özgünlük ve biriciklik iddialarına karşın soyut dışavurumcuların da gelenekçi ön kabullerini ifşa eder. Bu çalışmada, öncelikle eserin kimlik temasını sorgulayarak kolaycı kategorileri askıya alıp bunları adeta geçersiz kıldığı, sonrasında ise eserin aynı anda hem postmodern sanatı hem de hazır-yapım çalışmaları anımsattığı savunulacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Jasper Johns – *Bayrak* (1955), Soğuk Savaş estetiği, soyut dışavurumculuk, gerçekçilik.

Akademik disiplinler/alanlar: Görsel sanatlar, plastik sanatlar, resim.

* This paper is compiled from the author's MA dissertation thesis titled "An Inquiry into the Language of Jasper Johns: The Influence of Language in Pictorial Expression" submitted to MA Program in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham, UK, in 2005.

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- **doi:** 10.17484/yedi.680024

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on Jasper Johns' notorious work *Flag* (1954a) as a painting that exploits the boundaries between the abstract and the representational. By reintroducing the subject matter, *Flag* not only evokes the end of abstraction but also questions the limits of pictorial representation. The ambiguity of the work reveals itself as the puzzled viewer asks herself whether she is confronted with a painting or collage; whether it is a realist work or an abstract one or even a readymade. *Flag*'s identity as a painting – or, perhaps more accurately referable to as a 'work' – remains an undecidable issue. How can such a simple-looking work be so complicated to interpret? How can a work which evokes flatness (via its subject matter, the flag*ness*) can contain so many layers on its surface (see Figure 1)? Even though Johns continues producing other works that question notions of abstraction and representation – such as *False Start* (1959a), *Target* (1958), *Map* (1961), *Jubilee* (1959b), etc. -, this paper studies that initial work which shocked the nation and brought Johns fame and recognition.

Figure 1. *Flag*, Jasper Johns, 1954a.

The realism of *Flag* raises some other issues regarding the historical context of the United States and the artistic environment of the era. For this reason, it is important to first delineate the socio-political context and the artistic background which enabled him to flourish as an artist and make *Flag*. Having emphasized the Greenbergian approach to painting and the dominance of abstract expressionism, the paper will focus on Johns' deviance from the mainstream conception of art and suggest how *Flag* may be interpreted as a revival of ready-mades on the one hand, and evoke the postmodern sublime on the other.

Johns was an unexpected and extraordinary figure in the landscape of the New York avant-garde of the 1950s. This era is particularly interesting in terms of signifying a time in which conflicting theories and trends regarding modernism and postmodernism reveal themselves in artistic expressions of Johns. In this era, critics often attempted to associate Johns with a certain artistic category; especially with neo-Dadaism and Pop Art even though he always rejected those categories. For this reason, instead of succumbing to such crude categorizations, this paper will aim at conveying the artistic and theoretical significance of his *Flag*. Rather than belonging to any specifically established trend, Johns bases his artistic career on the idea of not doing anything that has already been done before and not being anyone other than himself. His basic standpoint in art has always been quite simple, as he states: "I am just trying to find a way to make pictures…" (Johns, as cited in Crichton, 1976, p. 9).

2. The Political, Cultural and Artistic Climate Surrounding Flag

In 1955, the time when Johns 'suddenly sprung from nowhere', the avant-garde of New York was very much under the influence of the Cold War aesthetics. David Hopkins notes that critics occasionally hinted at parallels between Pollock's psychic outpourings and the forces unleashed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as America's governing elite saw the advances of psychoanalysis and nuclear technology as means of harnessing anarchic forces (Hopkins, 2000, p. 11). The government was promoting Abstract Expressionism as a cultural imperialist trend.

Clement Greenberg was the most influential art critic in the United States, dominating the art community of New York in particular in the 1950s and 1960s, in terms of defining and interpreting the crucial aspects of modernism, avant-garde, representation, and abstraction. On many issues regarding Modernist Art, he was the point of reference for identifying concepts and critical positions. Inevitably, his position as an authority figure for art criticism eventually established certain 'norms' for Modernist Art regarding issues of representation and abstraction.

One of the crucial aspects of Modernist Art has been the construction of the binary opposition between the subject matter and the surface. According to Greenberg (1992), this opposition stems from anxiety over the 'purification' of arts – separating painting from sculpture, literature or music – which demands clear, secure, legitimate boundaries concerning each art's identity. Since the 17th century onwards (till the early 20th century) both sculpture and painting were largely exposed to the oppressive influence of literature; almost to the point of losing their identities. However, this influence was undone by Modernist Art owing to its emphasis upon the medium itself as opposed to the subject matter. Pertinent to subject matter, Greenberg distinguishes between the actual 'content' and 'ideas' and associates subject matter with ideas rather than with content – the latter is merely the effect; the immediate sensuality an artwork evokes in the viewer. As for painting, what constitutes its essence is the visual experience rather than any concern for the representation of nature (p. 562).

In 1948, Greenberg chauvinistically asserts that "the main premises of Western painting have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power" (as cited in Hopkins, 2000, p. 12). According to Hopkins' claim, Greenberg argues that Abstract Expressionist painting manages to overcome the pictorial challenges raised by the European artistic precedents such as Post-Impressionism, Analytic and Synthetic Cubism, and various forms of abstraction (p. 28). His ideas are very much in line with America's Cold War ideology. The government's advocating of Abstract Expressionism is an attempt to reinforce American cultural values; hence abstraction becomes associated with the New American Painting and embodies the notions of experimentation, self-expression, freedom and individualism. Contrary to abstraction, realism gets associated with socialism and conformism (p. 13).

Fred Orton (1994) notes that the time Johns painted *Flag* (1954-5) was a year of extreme hysterical patriotism in which McCarthy was influential with his policy of anti-communism. The Stars and Stripes symbolized national feelings and the American flag and Flag Day were vivid issues of the day (p. 101). Thus, when exhibited in 1958 in the Modern Museum of Art, New York, some people in the Committee of the Museum Collection wondered whether buying *Flag* could leave the Museum open to attacks from groups like the American Legion. Alfred H. Barr Jr., the Director of the Museum's Collection had to defend Johns by claiming that he was an "elegantly dressed Southerner" who had "only the warmest feelings towards the American flag" (p. 93). Yet still, Barr agreed on seeking the opinion of the Board of Trustees, which decided that buying *Flag* could 'offend patriotic sensibilities'. Only after 1973 could *Flag* enter the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art (p. 94).

So, unlike abstraction which was largely promoted, realism was very much disfavored by the mainstream culture of the Cold War America, based on political reasons – associating the latter with socialism whereas the former, with the 'free world'. However, the irony strikes us here: although abstract expressionism had the impression of being wholly individualistic, self-expressive and a-political, it had already been intensely 'politicized'. Even critics like Greenberg who insisted on the purity of art - excluding any verbal language and associating mixing of the media with kitsch and propaganda – could not disguise the chauvinistic mainstream ideology of the Cold War in his own discourse. Yet, this is exactly how ideology works: hidden in the artistic discourse so thoroughly that it cannot be discerned without a considerable amount of effort – the notion of ideology will be discussed in more detail, below.

3. Abstraction, Realism and the Ambiguity of Identity

Flag is a striking work of art undermining the simplistic binary opposition of the abstract versus the realist. It *is* and *is not* abstract and realistic simultaneously. Andrew Benjamin discusses the abstraction of *Flag* by claiming that "*Flag* is only possible because it exploits the reality of abstraction" (Benjamin, 1996, p. 32). Even if it is not necessarily an abstract painting, it depicts an entirely abstract concept; the notion of identity, which defies any clear sociological boundaries or philosophical definition. According to Benjamin, this is what makes *Flag* so real; and what makes abstraction, the realism of *Flag*.

The realism of *Flag* puts the spectator in the place of "the birds fooled by the painted grapes of Zeuxis who flew down to them because seeing their shapes and vivid colors, they anticipated their cool, moist sweetness" (Summers, 1996, p. 6). Likewise, from a distance the spectator is drawn to the painting, mistaking it with the real flag. It looks so real from a distance that one may even feel compelled to treat it not as an artwork but as a commonplace 'object' (an actual flag) and salute it (Benjamin, 1996, p. 3). It is only when the spectator is close enough to the 'fabric' that she discovers the ambiguity of the work; the painterly brushstrokes, the collage, the bits and pieces of newspaper and magazine articles, pictures, overpainting, and so on (see Figure 2). Andrew Benjamin (1996) notes that the ambiguity of *Flag* is also inherent in the medium; encaustic, oil and collage on fabric. Its surface is not 'purely' constituted by 'paint' only – it has other 'stuff' too. As it is not mere painting, the simple identification of the work as a painting – surface-wise - is problematic; just as the emblematic aspect of the flag as a commonplace object we see every day (but do not think about) is problematic. Both *Flag* and what is signified by *Flag* – subject-wise, the flag - resist easy identification (p. 35).

Figure 2. *Flag* detail, Jasper Johns, 1954b.

We can extend Benjamin's idea of the abstraction of identity – made concrete in *Flag* – to the construction of 'Jasper Johns' as well. 'Jasper Johns' is an abstract concept signifying the artistic persona of Jasper Johns. According to Orton (1994), even though Johns has absolutely no property rights over the Stars and Stripes – as a design it belongs to everyone -, *Flag* has become an object so much associated with him that it even seems to function as his signature – even though he never signed it. *Flag* achieves this status not only by becoming established as the work that instigates 'Jasper Johns' but also by being repeated by Johns himself (p. 97). He continually returns to it and retrieves it, makes another *Flag* or paints another Stars and Stripes, to mark the progress of the changing surface appearance of his art. He ends up making several variations of the initial work indexed to him - such as *White Flag* (1955a) (see Figure 3), *Flag above White with Collage* (1955b) (see Figure 4) - and to the 'Jasper Johns' who produced it and whom it produces. That is to say, the dynamic repeating of the different versions of *Flag* keeps 'Jasper Johns-ness' present.

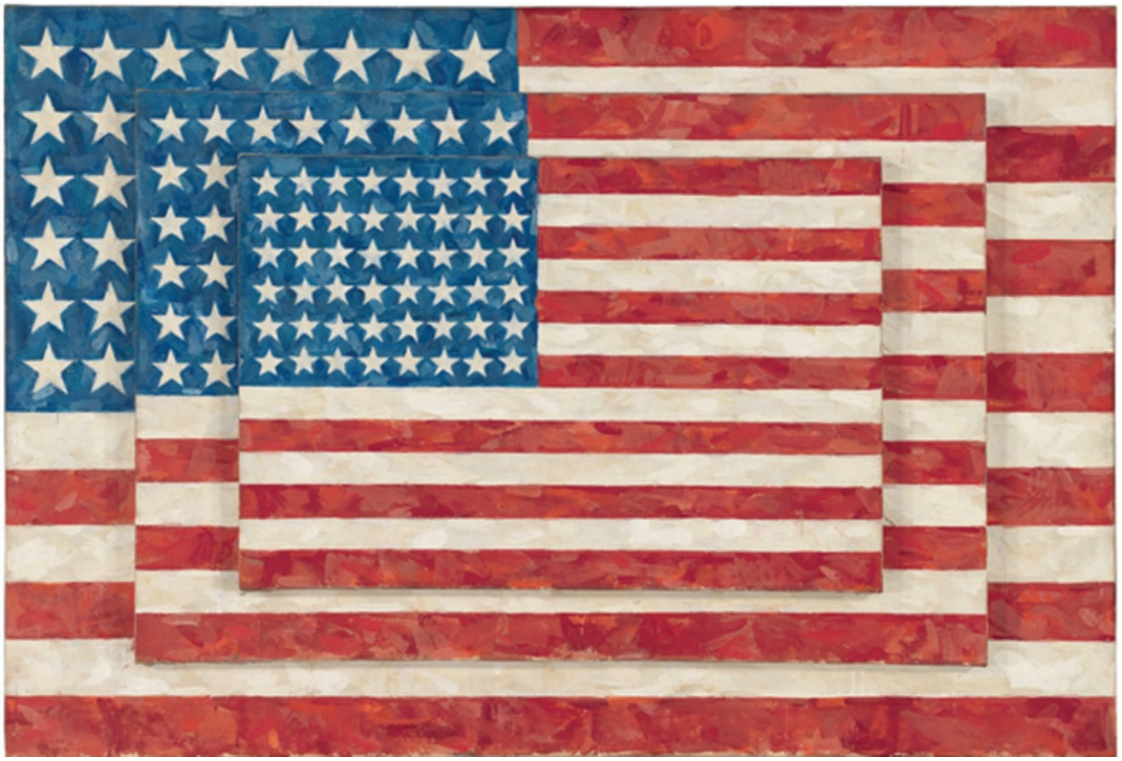

Figure 3. *White Flag*, Jasper Johns, 1955a.

Figure 4. *Flag above white with collage*, Jasper Johns, 1955b.

On the one hand, Benjamin considers *Flag* as a work that problematizes the identity of the flag as a social construct in society. Orton, on the other hand, regards it as a work that creates the identity of 'Jasper Johns', which is another – a microcosmic – social construct in society. Yet, what both of these interesting approaches have in common is that *Flag* raises the issue of identity which is never a fixed concept but is in constant flux; always being attacked, exploited, reinterpreted and reevaluated. Identity is an abstract fictive concept whether applied to Johns or the flag, reminiscent of the empty signifier. In this respect, *Flag* and its variations evoke the artificiality of identity.

Different from Johns, Abstract expressionists, on the other hand, had cultivated a very different notion of identity which is surprisingly vulnerable to criticism. We often presume an immediate and direct relationship or continuity between our consciousness and expression. Hal Foster (1983) notes that likewise, abstract expressionists also naively believed in the notion of the transparency and immediate continuity between a conscious self which they believed they could express through visual paint (p. 80). Yet they failed to see abstract expressionism's gradual evolution into a 'language' of its own and naturalizing that language to the point of forgetting its own conventional status – such as the established notion of the 'expressionistic brushstroke'.

Foster (1983) conveys that the notion of the inner experience does not coincide with the act of finding a language to translate it (p. 81). Since those two do not happen simultaneously, there is already a gap; a discontinuity between consciousness and representation. Because of the constant deferral of this overlap, the very idea of transparent self-expression through pure visuality is an illusion. Also, it is crucial to emphasize Foster's point about the 'need' to find a language to translate or familiarize the experience of the consciousness; the need for communication. He indicates that any expression is eventually a 'conversion' that needs a language; a signifying system – which is bound to be conventional.

While attempting to create a visual space where verbal language does not apply, Abstract Expressionists presumably intended to avoid the ordinariness and the dullness of verbal communication. However, even if it were ever possible to create a purely visual language, it would still have to function with the same rules and regulations of the verbal language. It would have to be repetitive and commonplace; hence end up establishing its own norms and discourse. In short, any mode of expression cannot avoid the concern for communication and thus conventionality. Yet this situation leads to ironic results when we consider Abstract Expressionists who were searching for unique expressions channeled through their idiosyncratic selves. Utterly differently from Abstract Expressionists, in his works Johns 'subtracts' himself from what he does:

> I have attempted to develop my thinking in such a way that the work I have 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 counts for the separation. (Johns, as cited in Castleman, 1986, p. 18)

As for the reception of *Flag*, the shock it caused in the audience is multi-faceted. Many critics have argued that *Flag* signified the end of abstract painting by displaying its obsolescence. Among them, W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) suggests that by *Flag*, Johns violated the traditional discourse that abstraction depended upon such as the metaphysical purity, flatness and the absolute exclusion of verbal language (p. 236). Abstraction was supposed to provoke silence due to the repression of verbal discourse. Johns, on the other hand, brought materials from the concrete, ordinary world; reintroduced figure and most scandalously, used a totemic image (the flag) from the mass culture that Greenbergian Modernism vehemently associated with chauvinism and hence, with 'kitsch'. Thus, Mitchell claims that Johns in some ways signals the beginning of postmodernism by bringing forth mundane objects from mass culture, and by mixing media and turning his art into a heterogeneous space in which the "eruption of language into the aesthetic field" can take place (p. 239). So, partly by reintroducing the recognizable figure and partly by literally embodying written pieces under the paint, *Flag* challenged the silent mysticism of abstraction.

4. The Many Layers of *Flag*: What its Surface Hides, Reveals and Suggests

The notion of 'the end of abstraction' evokes the sense of the postmodern sublime Jean-François Lyotard (1989) theorizes about based on appropriating the ideas of seventeenth and eighteenth-century European intellectuals, Kant and Burke. Lyotard roughly associates the postmodern sublime with the possibility of

reaching an end and not being able to go any further and the feeling of strong anxiety due to the blockage of artistic production (p. 196). Yet, this anxiety can also be accompanied by a pleasurable feeling of suspension or excitement for the unknown. These mixed contradictory feelings of pain and pleasure refer to the 'sublime'. The postmodern sublime is centered not so much on the artist but rather, upon the addressee. The pain caused by the sublime is crystallized in the shock of the beholder and makes one ask 'and what now?'. Essential to the feeling of sublime is the notion that despite futile efforts, it alludes to something that can never be represented (p. 196-198). It is a moment of privation of expression, akin to witnessing the inexpressible.

With reference to Benjamin's observation that the reality of *Flag* is what makes it abstract - that it is not *Flag* (the painting) but the idea it alludes to that is abstract -, we witness that *Flag* becomes even more enigmatic when we consider its relation to ideology, by way of revealing or hiding it. Instead of the indirect and implicitly patriotic messages hinted at by Abstract Expressionists, Johns makes the point in the most blatant way, almost in a ridiculing manner. The flag is an undeniably ideological symbol; a substitutive sign for something which cannot be represented. The painting similarly points at something hidden, reminiscent of the postmodern sublime.

In the painting, the idea of hidden-ness exists both in terms of surface and subject. The surface seems to hide the collage of texts underneath whereas subject-wise, it is a figurative work; a very realistic depiction of a flag, which is an object as unrepresentable as ideology itself. Moreover, just like ideology, *Flag* is fragmented too; from a distance, it seems like a unified whole. It is only when one closely approaches and looks into it that she notices the construction at work. The heterogeneity of the painting - the collage, the articles, the comic strips, the under-painting and the over-painting – is hidden under the stillness of the homogenizing, well-measured, impersonal brushstrokes.

Due to the illusionary tranquility of the surface, one can never see the flag and its construction at the same time: one sees the fragmentary underneath at the expense of missing the whole or misses the parts when looking at the whole surface from a distance. When one looks closely, it is too difficult not to be distracted by the complicated fabric and the intricate parts; the lively layers underneath almost have a hypnotizing effect on the viewer. The tension between the surface and the underneath of *Flag* is reminiscent of ideology: one can never detach oneself enough to see it as a whole; and if one attempts to focus on the parts, then she gets lost in the details. Ideology is unseeable and unrepresentable; one can feel it but cannot quite point at it; it is hidden within the present or present within the hidden.

However, it is not only its immediate surface that stirs so much controversy. *Flag* is also open to other kinds of ambiguities and diverse interpretations. Some critics such as Isabel Wallace (2002) have argued that the work hints at the obsolescence of abstraction also by reintroducing the idea of the ready-made (p. 137). Ready-made's challenge to the authenticity of the art-object had first been discovered by Duchamp. It undermined the artwork's conventionally essential qualities such as originality, immediacy and unity. In Werner Hoffman's view (1975), with his ready-mades, Duchamp separates the object from the useful and the practical; and through this alienation, he lays the foundation for an 'emblematic realism' (p. 58). This emblematic realism at work at Duchamp's ready-mades may also be noted in John's *Flag*. *Flag*, as alienated from its political context via 'aestheticization' by being re-constructed, re-contextualized and exhibited in a museum, has undergone this alienation. To recall Benjamin's interpretation of *Flag*'s emblematic realism, *Flag* is very realistic because the flag, as an emblem, is a commonplace object. As a matter of fact, the very question "Is it a flag or is it a painting?" basically arises from this realism.

Wallace (2002) notes that after Duchamp, ready-made was suppressed under high Modernism (p. 137). Abstract Expressionists reclaimed the authenticity of art experience and the transcendentalism of art and self-expression. Yet, all the time, the impact of the ready-made was being held in suspension, deferred. Johns seems to have recognized 'the return of the repressed' and re-activated the impact of the ready-made partly by incorporating objects onto the surface of the canvas and partly by turning words or notions of colors into ready-mades by objectifying colors and words in works such as *False Start* (1959a) (see Figure 5), *By the Sea* (1961) (see Figure 6) or *Fool's House* (1962) (see Figure 7). He recognized the possibility of painting *as* ready-made. However, this discovery is most striking in the ready-made-ness of even the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke itself. That de Kooningesque brushstroke, just like a symbol of expressionism, ended up turning into a ready-made of expressionism through self-repetition (p. 138). And Johns' use of that brushstroke in works like *False Start* (1959a) and *Jubilee* (1959b) (see Figure 8), are also suggestive of this mutual tension between expressionism's resistance to ready-made and ready-made's attempt to assimilate the expressionistic brushstroke.

Figure 5. *False start*, Jasper Johns, 1959a.

Figure 6. *By the sea*, Jasper Johns, 1961.

Figure 7. *Fool's house*, Jasper Johns, 1962.

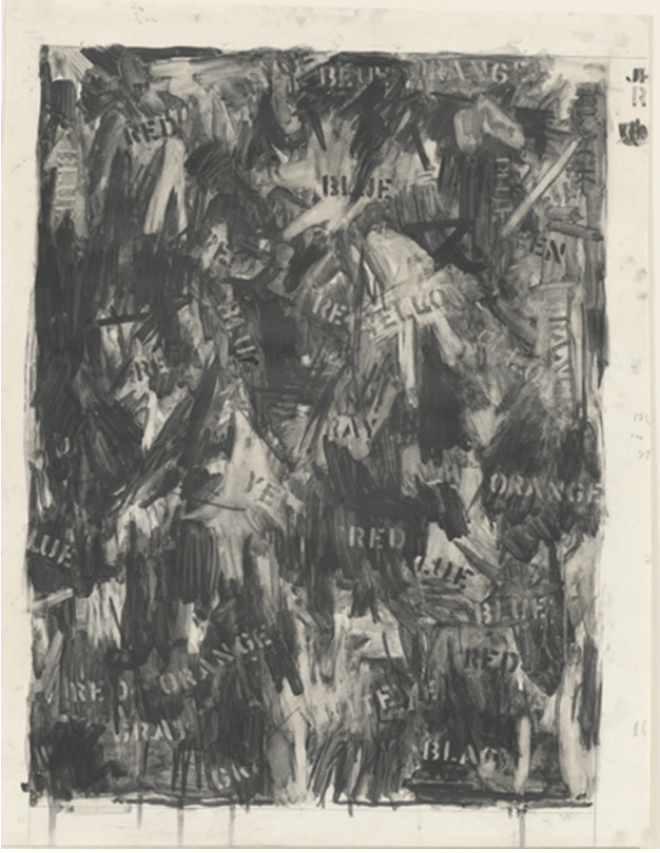

Figure 8. *Jubilee*, Jasper Johns, 1959b.

Wallace (2002) emphasizes that what was so notorious about *Flag* was partly the fact that it returned to the culture the repressed fact of the readymade. It made the abstract expressionist brushwork and ready-made imagery indistinguishable aspects of the same image; "an image that was at one and the same time the sign of the readymade and the sign of high-modernist aesthetics. *Flag* revealed that the story of high-modernism *had always been* the story of the ready-made" (p. 140). She stresses the point that *Flag* demonstrated how high-modernist paintings were themselves assortments of ready-made signs and that any sign, whether abstract or representational, inevitably falls into the logic of readymade once repeated and exploited enough.

Johns confesses that the idea for *Flag* came to him in his dream, and as a found object, it saved him from a lot of work relating to originality. He explains this in his statement:

> 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. That gave me room to work on other levels. (Johns as cited in Steinberg, 1972, p. 31)

This quote reveals the practicality of the idea of the ready-made for him. Even if not necessarily emphasizing or critiquing industrialized mass consumption, objects like flags, maps, targets, signposts, etc. are nevertheless mass-produced, familiar items in our daily lives. Yet unlike Duchamp, Johns does not use commonplace objects directly. For him, even if not the actual objects themselves, the ideas stemming from the subject matter of those objects function as ready-mades. And upon those things, he can build on his ideas and make his own statements questioning the very status of those objects and enrich the repertoire of his pictorial language.

In the quote, as for those other levels', Johns seems to be referring to the issue of authorship and the modernist notion of the artwork having a dyadic relationship with its maker. Wallace (2002) remarks that a crucial issue that the ready-made undermines is that of authorship; and when we consider *Flag*, it is an emblem that belongs to everyone; or no one in particular. The authorship, in this case, is multiplied or it may just as well be regarded as wholly diminished (p. 141). Besides, the disillusionment of authorship has even more crucial consequences such as the impossibility of a unified visual field. In a situation where the authorship loses its relation to the work, the work itself loses its own integrity as well – because our conventional habits of seeing associates the unity of the visual object with a single author. As a result, our cultural notion of a unified visual field is seriously challenged. Contrary to high Modernism's claim of the dyadic ties between the artist and the artwork – reflective of the artist's unique vision and inner world -, the ready-made manifests that such a relation does not exist, and the visual object is incoherent and the visual field we encounter is de-centered and fragmented. Hence a last curious 'level' Johns explores might be this fragmentation of the 'unified visual field'.

5. Conclusion

All in all, there is more than just a superficial shock in *Flag*; even if the first painting, *Flag* (1955) did shock; the others, other paintings of the flag series, did not. Peter Bürger (1984) notes that the problem with the aesthetics of shock is that it is impossible to make this effect permanent; nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock. And repetition kills it since there is no such thing as an expected shock. Dadaists relied on exploiting the public's reactions to shock, but as a result, even the newspaper reports prepared the public for the shock. Thus ironically, because of this 'institutionalized' shock, works had a minimal effect on the audience (p. 81). Johns knew about this and his interest in repeating his imagery may also suggest his deviance from Dadaism, with which he had wrongly been associated with, by the critics. The shock effect was not something Johns depended on to produce his works. The fact that Johns repeated the flag theme suggests that he did not attempt to reduce his work to an easily consumable feeling. Rather, through repetition, he meant to explore other levels of visual expression.

As one of the most influential and idiosyncratic contemporary artists, Jasper Johns is neither a Dadaist nor an Abstract Expressionist nor a Pop Artist. As a matter of fact, 'identity', whether of his microcosmic self as an artist nor of a nation at a large scale, has always been something he calls in question. For this reason, his *Flag* maintains its status as an undecidable work; as neither an abstract nor a realist piece, it transcends easy categorizations. Displaying hints of sublime and hints of the ready-made, the work continues to captivate and inspire its viewers and generations of artists by defying boundaries. Was that something Johns had intended all along, from the beginning? We cannot tell. Perhaps he was humbly, "just trying to find a way to make pictures…" (Johns as cited in Crichton, 1976, p. 9).

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