The Role and the Nature of Repetition in Jasper Johns’s Paintings
in the Context of Postwar American Art

by

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Abstract

From the beginning of his artistic career, American artist Jasper Johns (b. 1930) has used various repetitive means in his paintings. Their significance in his work has not been sufficiently discussed; hence this thesis is an exploration of the role and the nature of repetition in Johns’s paintings, which is essential to better understand his artistic production.

Following a thorough review of his paintings, it is possible to broadly classify his use of repetition into three types: repeating images and gestures, using the logic of printing, and quoting and returning to past artists. I examine each of these in relation to three major art theory elements: abstraction, autonomy, and originality. When Johns repeats images and gestures, he also reconsiders abstraction in painting; using the logic of printing enables him to follow the logic of another medium and to challenge the autonomy of painting; by quoting other artists, Johns is reexamining originality in painting. These types of repetition are distinct in their features but complementary in their mission to expand the boundaries of painting. The proposed classification system enables a better understanding of the role and the nature of repetition in the specific case of Johns’s paintings, and it enriches our understanding of the use of repetition and its perception in art in general.
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The American artist Jasper Johns was born in Augusta, Georgia, in 1930. He was drawn to New York and pursuit of the artistic career which he had believed since childhood was his destiny.¹ His only formal education consisted of three semesters at the University of South Carolina at Columbia and one semester at the Parsons School of Design.² In the early fifties, he returned to New York after a military service in the Korean War and tried to find his way into the New York art world. The year 1954 was a critical year in his career; he moved to the southern tip of Manhattan and established a studio on Pearl Street. His first act was to destroy almost everything he had made until that point, as he could not stand the idea that his collages were similar to those of Kurt Schwitters.³ “If it comes to his notice that someone else had one of his ideas before he did,” wrote John Cage in an essay about Johns, “he makes a mental or actual note not to proceed with his plan.”⁴ Reflecting on the events of that year almost four decades later, Johns described it as a turning point in his life, the moment when


he stopped trying to do what the others were doing or what people expected of him and started being “what I was.”

Despite Johns struggles to differentiate himself from his artistic forerunners and peers, both European and American, his art was described as representing the new American version of the European Dada movement that positioned itself against the Abstract Expressionists and opened the way to Pop Art. Johns was never satisfied with such classifications of his art as “Neo Dada,” and indeed, this characterization dismisses many aspects of his works and works by other artists. The genealogy of “Abstract Expressionism – Neo Dada – Pop Art” in American art does not reflect the diverse scene in the decades that followed the Second World War. According to this genealogy, Neo Dada is understood as a reaction against the emotionally charged paintings of Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art is considered an exaggeration of the usage of mundane materials in art. The postwar American art scene, however, also included Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Land Art, Performance Art, Video Art and much more; and it is in this context that Johns’s art has developed.

This diversity of artistic methods in the American art scene is part of a process that turned New York into the new cultural centre, after “stealing the idea of

5 “At some point during this time I made a decision to try to establish my own values and not to be what others were but to be what I was. That was reflected in my work.” Jasper Johns in an interview with Kay Larson, “Acts of Negation,” ARTnews 95, no. 9 (October 1996): 111–12.

6 Ian Chilvers and John Glaves-Smith, A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art (Oxford University Press, 2009), 503.

modernity” from Paris. Up until that point in time, American art had been considered a secondary influence in the Western art tradition, but following various socio-political events related to the Second World War – it came into its own. For example, the German invasion and occupation of much of Europe between 1939 and 1941 produced an exodus of people, among them, many European modernist artists, who tried to rebuild their lives in the United States. The Nazi party was hostile to modern art, which it perceived it as a decadent, Jewish-inspired assault on traditional art forms. As a result, the cultural center of modern art moved to New York.

The exodus from Europe specifically to the United States was also due in part to the renewed American economic scene following several years of depression. The end of the Second World War left Europe in turmoil and the United States one of two new, global two superpowers, fighting for primacy with the USSR in the Cold War. The US emerged as the economic powerhouse of the world in a period that is also characterized by far-reaching American patriotism.

The newly arrived immigrant artists brought with them artistic styles and methods from Europe. American artists became familiar with various forms of avant-garde art already in 1913. The Armory Show gave them the opportunity to see modern

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art as it had emerged in Europe.\textsuperscript{10} Works by the Impressionists, Post Impressionists, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso were included in this exhibition. It was not until the mid-twentieth century, however, that Americans became deeply involved with the aesthetic innovations and nontraditional practices of European avant-garde artists and began to translate them into their own.

Among the artists that moved from Europe to the United States were also artists from the “Paris School” and from the Bauhaus, which had been shut down by the Nazis in 1933. Josef Albers, like many others Bauhaus faculty members, was there. He was invited to run the art program at Black Mountain College, the school where John Cage and Willem de Kooning taught, and Robert Rauschenberg studied. Marcel Duchamp lived in New York during the Second World War and had a show at the Philadelphia Museum in 1954 that shaped the artistic approaches of Conceptual Art and Neo Dada in the United States. Duchamp was considered the spiritual father of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns.\textsuperscript{11} His ironical gestures and the incorporation of everyday materials in the ready-made influenced the younger generation, whose works were eventually seen as adaptations of Duchamp’s artistic approach into the Cold War context.\textsuperscript{12} Johns’s ready-made images, for example, were described as “a warehouse of Cold War metaphors.”\textsuperscript{13}

Furthermore, Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dalí, and many


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 43.
Surrealist artists remained in the United States during the Second World War. Max Ernst and André Breton brought along working methods such as spontaneity and automatism – methods which were adopted by the painters of the New York School.

Another meeting point for the New York School and Surrealists was Atelier 17, a fine art print studio founded by the English painter and printmaker Stanley William Hayter (1901-1988). Atelier 17 had originally been established in Paris in 1927, and artists such as Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti had frequented the place. In 1940, Hayter joined the exodus of artists that moved from Europe to the United States, and Atelier 17 found its new location in New York City, where Jackson Pollock, Marc Rothko, Willem de Kooning, André Masson, and Joan Miró worked next to each other. Hayter taught printmaking at the New School and invited professional painters to make prints, encouraging independent experimentation with various print media.14

Hayter’s workshop played a main role in the renewed interest in fine art printmaking in those years, leading to a post-war print renaissance in America.15 Following the success of Hayter’s workshop, fine printmaking became more appreciated as an art form and other workshops were opened. The atelier Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), which specialized in lithography, and the Pratt Graphic


Art Center were opened in 1956, encouraging the younger generation of American artists to work side by side with the older generation. Johns, who was deeply devoted to this medium already at an early stage of his career, worked next to Barnett Newman, a central figure of Abstract Expressionism.

The developments of fine art printmaking did not achieve the attention given the medium of painting. In particular, special attention was dedicated to the abstract paintings of the New York School. Abstract Expressionism was the leading style in the flourishing and diverse New York art scene in the middle of the century; other artistic practices were considered mere background noise. The abstract paintings of the New York School received more attention than other paintings and dominated the thriving artistic market. Clement Greenberg, who contributed to the national and


17 Serge Guilbaut is concerned with the reasons that the various forms of abstraction, particularly the abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock, achieved a special status in American art around 1948. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1985).

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international status of abstract painting, considered them “American Type Painting” (1939).\(^\text{19}\)

Greenberg (1909-1994) was an American essayist and art critic. Born in the Bronx, New York City, as a son of Jewish middle-class immigrants from Lithuania, he knew many languages, including Yiddish, Italian, German, French, and Latin. In his childhood he already showed an inclination towards art, sketching compulsively and reading literature.\(^\text{20}\) He started writing art criticism in the late 1930s and was closely associated with American modern art, particularly with the Abstract Expressionists. In his writings, he developed a formalist approach to visual art, in which the concepts of abstraction and autonomy are of significant importance. These concepts are built upon theories from the Age of Enlightenment, which he adapted to modernism.

Greenberg’s doctrine put forth one of the most influential readings of Abstract Expressionism. His canonical essay, “Modernist Painting” (1961), was

\(^\text{19}\) Greenberg was referring to six or seven painters who had their first one-man shows at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery between 1943 and 1946, among them: Pollock, de Kooning and Still. Clement Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting” (1939), in Art and Culture: Critical Essays, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 208-229.

His text is considered a response to Harold Rosenberg, who argued that there was no antecedent to American action painting in Europe, and emphasized the differentiation of the New York artists from the Western tradition. Harold Rosenberg, “Action Painting: A Decade of Distortion,” Art News, no. 61 (December 1961): 42-44.

distributed in a radio broadcast, and his ideas spread across the entire country.  

21 His many critical essays were published in several books, making him easily the most famous American formalist. Greenberg’s legacy of formalism was a great influence on the American art historian, Michael Fried. In 1958, while studying English at Princeton, Fried came across some of Greenberg’s writings. He was very impressed by them and expressed his admiration in a letter to the essayist. They met for the first time in the spring of that year, and discussed contemporary American art and art criticism in general.  

22 Among their points of agreement was tracing the roots of modernist painting to French painter Édouard Manet. They considered Abstract Expressionism the best contemporary manifestation of painting and associated themselves very closely with particular American artists; Greenberg focused on de Kooning and Pollock, and Fried on Stella and the sculptor Anthony Caro. Both writers were hostile to Minimalism and Neo Dada, accusing the artists of subverting the specificity of the medium and the uniqueness of art.  

23 Greenberg and Fried

21 In a 1978 postscript to “Modernist Painting” (1961), Greenberg wrote: “The above appeared first in 1960 as a pamphlet in a series published by the Voice of America. It had been broadcast over that agency’s radio in the spring of the same year.”


23 The problems with Minimalism and Neo Dada, according to Greenberg and Fried, were that the making is neither a separate form of activity, nor does it provide an experience that requires a separate form of appreciation. Clement Greenberg, “Recentness of Sculpture” (1967), in Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and
emphasized the autonomy of the artistic domain and outlined an artistic development
that is specific to the medium of painting. The context in which they discussed
paintings was visual, rather than socio-political.

In my thesis, I follow several aspects of the modernist logic according to
Greenberg and Fried. I focus on one specific medium – the medium of painting. This
is not a decision that should be taken lightly in researching the work of Johns, an artist
who is associated with Neo Dada and combined various techniques and media in his
works. A premise of my research, however, is that Johns as a painter reconsiders
abstraction, autonomy, and originality in relation to this medium. In contrast to the
doctrines of Greenberg and Fried, Johns’s art demonstrates the flexibility of issues of
abstraction and autonomy in painting. I propose here a perspective varies from
Greenberg and Fried. Furthermore, the analysis of the work also takes into account
other approaches to art of American writers in the second half of the twentieth
century, among them Harold Rosenberg, Rosalind Krauss, and Mark Rosenthal. This
theoretical background is not the focus of my thesis, but a tool by which to consider
the artistic context of postwar American art. Johns, who chose to be “what he was”
and stopped doing what everybody else was doing as an artist, was not a theoretician;
his paintings are most of all a response to what was happening in the art scene.

In order to characterize the role and the nature of repetition in Johns’s
paintings, I will also look at other manifestations of repetition in the artistic context in
which he started working and compare these to his art. The first two chapters are
dedicated to the artistic and theoretical context; the following three chapters comprise
comparisons between the specific usages of repetition in order to characterize the

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*Criticism*, vol. 4, edited by John O’Brian, (Chicago and London: The University of
unique case of Johns. Chapter one focuses on abstraction and autonomy in the aesthetic approaches of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried and in the artistic practices of Abstract Expressionism, Neo Dada, Minimalism, and Generative Art. I discuss the manifestations of repetition in these artistic practices in relation to abstraction and autonomy as these values were articulated in the theories. In addition, I point to several alternative approaches to the approaches of Greenberg and Fried, which outline different developments in postwar American art and theory. The second chapter discusses the relation between repetition and originality in postwar American art. In order to analyze central instances of repetition in Dada, Neo Dada and Abstract Expressionism, I refer to several texts, among them Harold Rosenberg’s “The American Action Painters” (1952) and Rosalind Krauss’s “The originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition” (1981). To discuss originality as creativity and innovativeness, I rely on Paul Crowther’s “Creativity and Originality in Art,” (1991).

This theoretical and artistic background enables me to address Johns’s unique position in his context, especially, in Neo Dada. Although his work was used to represent this movement on the cover of ArtNews, Johns is not a typical Neo Dadaist. He is associated with Neo Dada because he revived some of the principles of the European Dada movement; however, unlike Duchamp who abandoned painting for the ready-made, in John’s art it was the other way around: the ready-made

24 In 1958 the American journal ArtNews dedicated an issue to the new phenomena in art – the Neo Dada. On the cover of this issue was Johns’s “Target with Four Faces” (1955).

became a painting. The primacy of painting in his work has been discussed by several researchers, who claim that even when Johns worked in other media, painting remained his main target of investigation. Thus, a main premise of my research is that Johns was primarily a painter who explored the possibilities of the medium of painting.

Johns frequently drew on various modes of repetition in his explorations of the possibilities of painting. In order to demonstrate the significance of repetition in his paintings, I have classified three forms of repetition.

The first is his repeated use of ready-made images, such as the image of the American flag. This kind of repetition enabled him to focus on the process of creating art. As part of this process, he was able to develop his working techniques using different materials, allowing him to observe the interplay between image and medium. Johns’s concern with the medium of painting is also expressed through his work in other media. In his prints, plaster casts, and drawings, he keeps on returning to images and issues that first appeared in his paintings, exploring them from different angles.

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In 1972, a new form of repetition emerged in Johns’s art. He started painting a pattern of diagonal lines after he saw a similar pattern on a passing car.\textsuperscript{28} This abstract given-design, the so-called “crosshatch motif,” was quite unexpected in the New York art scene. Among the various reactions were interpretations that pointed to an inner logic disguised behind it,\textsuperscript{29} a logic that provides the paintings with a systematic abstract structure. \textit{Scent}, the first painting created entirely with the crosshatches, was considered a new approach to abstraction in painting.\textsuperscript{30} Chapter three is dedicated to Johns’s challenges to Greenberg’s conception of abstraction. As a result of my analysis of the American flag image and the crosshatches, I suggest a flexible notion of abstraction that differs from Greenberg’s notion.

Between 1970 and 1977, Johns achieved mastery in printmaking.\textsuperscript{31} He became deeply devoted to this medium\textsuperscript{32} and considered it to be a source of inspiration for his painting.\textsuperscript{33} Scholars in recent years have attributed “the logic of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{33} Geelhaar, “Interview with Jasper Johns,” 68-9.
\end{flushleft}
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printing” to the crosshatch paintings. Accordingly, Johns’s painting *Corpse and Mirror* was interpreted in relation to the various printing procedures. Relying on these readings, I argue in chapter four that Johns challenges the autonomy of painting through the logic of another medium.

In his work, Johns constantly quotes famous artists of the past such as Pablo Picasso and Edvard Munch and artists that he considered to be his predecessors or belonging to the previous generation, such as Marcel Duchamp and Barnett Newman. Repainting their images in new compositions is part of his dialogue with art history, and the artistic action of quoting was considered a working method by which he could


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“speak” indirectly. Accordingly, in *Ventriloquist* Johns “throws” his voice into images of other artists and “makes the dumb speak.”

Finally, chapter five discusses the original way in which Johns rendered the thus acquired images in a new composition; the reversal and simultaneous temporality are embodied in the visual elements of the painting, implying a metaphorical return in time. The suggested analysis of quotations is essentially different from poststructuralist or thematic readings.

Based on the aforementioned, I developed a classification system that divides the various appearances of repetition into three types as follows:

a. Repeating Images and Gestures
b. Using the Logic of Printing
c. Quoting and Returning to Past Artists

These types of repetition underscore three corresponding aspects of the repetition: the first pertains to its influence on the perception of painting; the second deals with the ways in which repetition becomes a crucial element in the artistic practice; and the third refers to quoting as an act of repetition. These aspects of repetition in art, which are at the core of the proposed classification, offer an organizational structure for analyzing forms of repetition. Each is examined in relation to three major components in art theory: abstraction, autonomy, and originality. When Johns repeats images and gestures in his work, he is also reconsidering the role of abstraction in painting; his use of the logic of printing challenges the autonomy of painting; his quotation of other artists allows a reexamination of the role of originality in painting. These three cases exemplify

Johns’s unique position as a painter who energetically strove to redefine and expand the medium of painting.

In order to understand the role and the nature of repetition in Johns’s paintings, and to analyze the ways in which he expands the boundaries of painting through repetition, various methodologies drawn from art theory and philosophy are employed. I interpret Johns’s paintings using an aesthetical analysis of their technical and material support and compare them to other artistic practices that shaped the transition from modernism to postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century. My particular focus is on the medium of painting and the artistic practices relying on the use of repetition. The term ‘repetition’ is used in the fields of art history and aesthetics in many ways. For the purpose of this study, my treatment of repetition deals with three major topics in the theory of art of the second half of the twentieth century: abstraction, autonomy, and originality in painting. Johns contended with all three of these in his application of repetition. As a part of my research, I developed a system of classification in which each type of repetition addresses one issue and focuses on one or two paintings of Johns.

A. Johns’s Flag (1954-5) and Scent (1973-4)—Reconsidering Abstraction in Painting Through Repetition.


C. Johns’s Ventriloquist (1983)—Reconsidering Originality in Painting Through Repetition.

My analysis of these paintings is based on background material regarding the role of repetition in postwar American painting and developments in practice and
theory in relation to the idea of medium specificity. I refer to the formalist approaches of Clement Greenberg\(^{38}\) and Michael Fried,\(^{39}\) who emphasize the role of abstraction in achieving artistic autonomy and promote the separation between the media. These perspectives show that while some formal aspects of repetition in painting contribute to artistic autonomy, others contradict autonomy. To address the notion of originality in art and its relation to repetition, I refer to specific texts of Harold Rosenberg\(^{40}\) and Rosalind Krauss,\(^{41}\) who demonstrate central conceptions of originality in the postwar years and the following decades. Krauss’s theory also provides tools to analyze artistic practices that exceed the conventional media.\(^{42}\)

The conceptual framework of my research is the premise that repetition leads to change; it arises out of recognition of difference within sameness. Even though repetition is associated with sameness and standardization, it is not mere replication of the same and can meaningfully contribute to the creative process. Repetition, in the


\(^{39}\)Fried, “Art and Objecthood,”: 12-23.


sense of the power of difference, is an ongoing premise of the current research.\textsuperscript{43} I describe repetition as a creative activity of transformation leading to innovation in the realm of art and aesthetics.

Repetition in Johns’s paintings becomes a technical and conceptual tool by which to explore the medium of painting. I analyze the structure of repetition in the paintings, consider repetitive artistic practice and characterize repetition metaphorically as a \textit{return in time}. These different manifestations of repetition and the theoretical background that relates to the various roles that repetition plays in art—particularly in painting—enable me to maintain the premise that through repetition Johns is pushing the boundaries of painting.

\textsuperscript{43} This conceptual framework brings to mind Gilles Deleuze’s \textit{Difference and Repetition} (1968), according to which, the only thing that returns is difference, which returns eternally. Deleuze’s treatment of repetition is highly idiosyncratic and offers more interpretative problems than explanatory material; thus I do not delve into the nuances of Deleuze’s philosophy, but take his concept as simply as possible. Gilles Deleuze, \textit{Difference and Repetition} (1968), trans. Paul Patton, (Columbia University Press, 1994).
Chapter One

Chapter One: Repetition, Autonomy and Abstraction

The aim of this chapter is to consider the different roles that repetition plays in relation to autonomy and abstraction in art. It relates to the aesthetic approaches of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried and how they interpreted specific instances of repetition in relation to autonomy and abstraction. In addition, I will indicate several alternatives to these approaches, which consider the artistic values in question from other perspectives.

The first section traces some of the conceptual links between autonomy, abstraction, and medium specificity, and thereafter I consider the role of repetition in relation to medium specificity as it was formulated in the writings of Greenberg and Fried and in various works of art in the American postwar context. In particular, I relate to paintings by Abstract Expressionists, and works by Neo Dadaists, Fluxus artists, Minimalists, and Conceptualists. In the final section, I briefly discuss the role that repetition plays in relation to Abstraction and Subject Matter according to Greenberg, ending with Mark Rosenthal’s approach to abstraction, which provides an alternative to Greenberg’s. Building on the different conceptions about the relation between repetition, autonomy, and abstraction, repetition in Jasper Johns’s paintings will be further discussed in the final chapters.

1.1 Autonomy and Abstraction in Medium Specificity

Autonomy and abstraction became trademarks that relate to each other in modernism. They were considered the compass that gives art its direction in the
American formalist approach of medium specificity in the years following the Second World War. The idea of medium specificity became an analytic framework in the writings of Greenberg and Fried, providing tools for explaining and evaluating works of art. The guiding principle was that one must pay special attention to the “unique or distinctive properties of the medium” when analyzing a work of art. Greenberg revived the idea that each medium should be specific to itself, linking modernism to the Age of Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, with the constitution of aesthetics as a branch of philosophy and the articulation of the aesthetic judgment, theoreticians aspired to discover the uniqueness of each form of art. The premise was that each art form has an essence that should be revealed through the artwork; when an artwork imitated the modes of expression of another art, however, there was the risk of subversion. This premise leaded Greenberg and Fried to emphasize artistic autonomy and to consider it a constituent element of medium specificity.

The term “autonomy” has political meaning of self-governance or self-determination and only subsequently was extended to characterize the realm of art. Literally, autonomy is the capacity to give the law to oneself, and was used to assert the independence of a city-state from external political interference in ancient Greek. Immanuel Kant’s identification of aesthetics as a separate field of enquiry


alongside epistemology and moral philosophy encouraged modernist theoreticians to attribute autonomy to art, and the idea of aesthetic autonomy became a fundamental principle in modernism.

The word autonomy carries a range of meanings in the field of art. One meaning relates to the idea that the evaluation of art rests on exclusively aesthetic criteria and that the realm of art is separated from the everyday world of social and political praxis. Accordingly, art is only fully autonomous when it is free of subservience to extra-artistic social functions. Another meaning of artistic autonomy is related to the former, and yet, its emphasis is quite different. Based on the concept of self-legislation, autonomy in art also can mean that the history of art may be characterized in terms of an internal logic of development. With this approach, the production of art becomes a stand taken against previous forms of art, an engagement with prior conventions and expectations. Accordingly, the medium of painting has its own history and contemporary painting relates to this history. Both senses of autonomy can be found in Greenberg’s doctrine; he considered advanced art a


49 This idea is closely tied to the concept of *disinterestedness* as articulated by Kant and other eighteenth-century philosophers. Ibid, 79.

50 Ibid, 78.

51 Ibid, 82.
separate and “pure” domain and attributed specific laws of development to the medium of painting.

Greenberg argued that the avant-garde is autonomous because it rejects the anecdotal, sentimental, and illustrative preoccupations of nineteenth-century academic art practice. The avant-garde painter found it necessary to escape from subject matter and ideas because these are the province of literature. The distinctive property revealed by a comparison with literature consists in the autonomy of painting as an independent medium and not merely a “vessel of communication.” In order to revolt against the dominance of literature and to achieve autonomy, painting emphasizes form. The emphasis upon form was translated to abstract art — the art of “pure form.” The pure forms of abstract art communicate only a sensation and do not try to represent or imitate an external subject matter.

Greenberg linked abstraction to autonomy in painting, and saw them as part of the modernist tendency of self-criticism. He pointed to Kant as the first modernist. Kant’s critical project, particularly his book *Critique of Pure Reason*, was considered a main source of inspiration to the modernist method. Modernist painters established the boundaries of painting in a way comparable to the pure speculative reason that measures its own capacity; in both cases a discipline questioned its own foundation.

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within itself. This method enabled painting to be true to its nature. Greenberg saw formalism in art as necessary for medium specificity.55

The strategy by which painting can block outside influences is through an emphasis on its procedures; only practice will differentiate painting from the other arts.56 The goal of the procedures was to call attention to the physical limitations of painting: the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment, and the flatness of the surface.57 Thus, the emphasis upon forms and the avoidance of any subject matter are two sides of the coin of abstraction, the means by which modernist painting bought its autonomy in the world and among other arts.

Greenberg elaborated upon the idea of autonomy in his article “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940).58 He was inspired by the Age of Enlightenment, and specifically referred to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s essay “Laocoon: An essay on the limits of Poetry and Painting” (1767).59 Lessing differentiated between the arts that extend through time and the arts that occupy space. He was worried about the tendency of poetry to be descriptive in the manner of painting and insisted that each remain true to its own unique devices; poetry should present duration by means of words and painting should present the specific moment through still visual image. It sounded reasonable to Greenberg that each art form should explore its own specificity

55 Barbara Haskell, Donald Judd, (Whitney Museum of Art, 1988), 22.
57 Ibid., 6-7.
59 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry (1767), translated by Ellen Frothingham, (Boston: Roberts Brothers Press, 1887).
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by means of its own devices, and in his text of 1940, he focused on the distinction between painting and literature. Since the devices of literature and painting are essentially different, literature was considered the main threat to the autonomy of painting and abstraction became a desired value.

According to Greenberg, the development toward a pure and abstract art was the reasonable next step in the evolution of painting. Surprisingly, it was encouraged by another medium outside the territory of painting: music, an art of sensation and “pure form,” inspired painting to borrow its methods and to become more abstract.60 This external influence did not threaten the identity of painting, but exposed its true nature. Painting became more abstract and thus emphasized its unique forms.

Greenberg outlined a genealogy of modernist painting leading toward abstraction. He linked it to the intensification of pictorial flatness. The first painter to “flatten foreground and middle ground objects systematically” was Édouard Manet, who used sharp color contrasts that lock the outlines of the objects and bring the background forward.61 The Impressionists studied Manet but challenged the linear perspective in another way; they avoided the illusion of solid, three-dimensional forms by inducing an appearance of a “floating, cottony, ambiguous flatness.”62 Following the Impressionists, Cézanne concentrated on the main masses and shapes

60 Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 41. Greenberg argued that although Aristotle was right about music imitating the state of the soul, it is clear today that there is no art “[with] less reference to something outside itself than music.”


62 Ibid.
of a theme; in his paintings, however, the details were not erased by a “floating” texture but by the relationships between the planes that he created with his brushstrokes. Cézanne opened the way to the Cubists, who took his “solid flatness” as their point of departure. They completed what he had begun and the final result, Greenberg noted, was abstract painting, the “flattest” of the pictorial arts.

Greenberg considered this pictorial flatness (and not the physical flatness) as the unique property of the medium of painting. He remarked that the first mark made on the canvas destroys the “literal and utter flatness” of the painting. The Modernist painting is essentially flat in terms of its appearance to the spectator and not as an object. Greenberg argued that flatness is the unique characteristic of painting that it shares “with no other art.” Greenberg, however, was not pointing to the unique property of painting, but to the distinctive property that was based on a comparison with sculpture. Since “three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture,” painting needs to emphasize its flatness.

While Lessing included painting and sculpture in the same group of the plastic arts that extend into space, Greenberg pointed to the new tendency of painting to distinguish itself from sculpture. This unique characteristic of painting became more concrete and pictorial flatness was upgraded from being just a

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63 Ibid., 72.
66 Ibid, 6.
67 Ibid., 7.
68 Lessing, Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry, preface xi.
physical property of the canvas to the essence of painting. By emphasizing its essential flatness, painting entrenches its autonomy among the arts.

Autonomy and abstraction thus play a central role in the formulation of medium specificity in the writings of Greenberg and Fried. The following sections address the various roles that repetition plays in relation to the theoretical framework of medium specificity. In some artistic practices, repetition contributes to the abstractness and autonomy of the work of art; in others, it subverts these artistic values. The analysis of Johns’s paintings in chapters three and four is built upon these different functions of repetition in art.

1.2 The Role of Repetition in Medium Specificity

Greenberg and Fried developed the idea of medium specificity into an analytic framework by which a work of art could be evaluated with respect to its degree of abstraction and autonomy. This included instances of repetition. Where repetition was found to promote abstraction and autonomy, as in the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella, two central figures of Abstract Expressionism, it is regarded positively. In the Minimalist work of Donald Judd, on the other hand, repetition subverts autonomy and specificity and thus was viewed negatively.

Greenberg characterized Pollock’s drip paintings as accumulations of repetition, in which “every element and every area of the picture [is] equivalent in accent and emphasis.” The intensification of the pictorial flatness was achieved through a kind of formal repetition, with the repetition of the abstract elements

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playing a central role in achieving autonomy. The paintings were titled “all-over” pictures, because the repeated “identical or closely similar elements” were spread evenly from one edge of the canvas to the other. The result is a painting that is entirely “decentralized” and “polyphonic” in nature, responding to a contemporary sensibility that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted. Pollock eliminated all points of focus, creating a picture of “sheer texture” and “sheer sensation.” This loss of focus is dramatic in relation to the tradition of the illusionistic Western easel picture, as it threatens to do away with one of its main conventions—the fictive depth. Greenberg addressed the danger that this new spatiality represented in his essay “The Crisis of the Easel Picture.”

Pollock brought to the fore the autonomy of painting by isolating the painting’s plasticity and liberating it from the representation of three dimensions. Greenberg pointed to the emphasis upon pictorial flatness through abstraction, arguing that this new tendency of modernist painting would ensure its autonomy.

70 Greenberg also suggested here that music was a source for inspiration, particularly Schönberg’s twelve-tone music. Ibid., 155.

71 Ibid., 157.

72 Ibid.

73 The role of pictorial flatness in achieving autonomy has slightly changed over the course of time. Greenberg already argued for the importance of emphasizing the pictorial flatness in “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940); however, in that essay he considered flatness the result of abstraction. In “Modernist Painting” (1960), on the other hand, abstraction becomes the result of flatness: “Abstractness, or the non-figurative, has in itself still not proved to be an altogether necessary moment in the self-criticism of pictorial art.” p. 6. His text, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” (1948)
The autonomy of modernist painting is one of the points of agreement between Greenberg and Fried. Both emphasized the autonomy of the artistic domain and outlined an artistic development specific to the medium of painting. They shared the belief that Pollock was creating by means of abstraction something valid on its own terms and that abstraction is the emphasis upon the unique visual forms of painting. Fried also argued that the autonomy of the painting is based on independence from the viewer. The homogenous visual fabric in Pollock’s painting “invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives the eye nowhere to rest once and for all”—the painting resists the focus of the viewer. Instead, its lines and colors “function as wholly autonomous pictorial elements.”

In his essay, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Fried elaborated on the autonomy of painting, arguing that it is achieved when the painting distinguishes itself from other objects in the world. A painting, as a unique object, has a level of independency from the viewer and its surroundings due to its forms. By emphasizing its unique forms, the painting negates the fact that it is an object in the world; asserting the pictorial shape is the painting’s method to “defeat or suspend its own (literal) objecthood.”

Art and objecthood are two modes of experience characterized by Fried. In order to describe what it means to experience art, particularly modernist painting, can be considered a step toward the emphasis on flatness as the essential characteristic of modernist painting.

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75 Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 12-23.

76 Ibid., 13.
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Fried referred to the opposite condition of experiencing non-art. He regarded the
Specific Objects of Donald Judd as non-art, accusing them of objecthood. Judd
“objected” the established categories of painting and sculpture and presented an
object in space instead. This led Fried to consider the works as lacking artistic
autonomy and contradicting the modernist sensibility.

Frank Stella, on the other hand, challenged the fact that his painting was an
object in the world, and suspended its objecthood by emphasizing the internal formal
relations within the work. His paintings are to be experienced in their entirety and
exemplify the contribution of repetition in achieving this level of autonomy. The
aluminum stripe paintings that Stella created in the 1960s include a kind of formal
repetition that emphasizes their independency. The stripes reiterate the shape of the
canvas, revealing the formal relations within the painting. The “shape of the support”
and the “depicting forms” are two types of formal elements and echo each other inside
Stella’s painting. This repetition creates the impression that the framing-edge has
generated the stripes, and thus, the painting seems to have the capacity for self-
determination. The suspension of objecthood through an assertion of the internal
formal relations within the work was considered by Fried to be a response to an
internal obligation, a “self-imposed imperative.”

Both Greenberg and Fried considered strict separation between media as a
preliminary requirement for self-definition; autonomy was perceived as necessary for

77 Ibid., 12-23.


79 Michael Fried, “Frank Stella’s New Paintings,” Artforum, no.5 (November 1966):
18-27.

specificity. In particular, Greenberg’s search toward the irreducible property of painting led to artistic autonomy. He understood the logic of modernism as deductive and reductive; thus, the development of the modernist painting was perceived as a process of discarding unessential conventions. Greenberg applied a methodological reductionism in his writings in order to find the essence of modernist painting.

The premise that each medium has an a-priori truth that risks subversion when an artwork imitates modes of expression from another medium was also challenged in the American postwar context. Artists and theoreticians focused on the exchanges between mediums and suggested that these interactions contribute to the development of art. The limitations of Greenberg’s theory as an explanatory framework were mostly exposed by artists who combined several mediums or avoided traditional forms. Artistic tendencies in the postwar US opened up new possibilities that were not limited to the given modes of expression, and working in the “in-between areas” turned out to be a fertile ground for artistic practice. The interest in intermedia perspectives can be considered as a certain reaction to the theory of medium specificity.

1.3 Neo Dada


Despite Greenberg’s postulations, there were many artists who did not work in one medium but combined various mediums and techniques. Sculpture, ready-made, painting, and theatre might appear in a single work of art, which consequently was not limited to a specific object but extended to its entire surrounding. Artists experimented with the fusion of mediums and created works that called for interaction with the audience, a development that critics defined as “Neo Dada.” Nonetheless, it was a very eclectic group of artists from Europe and the US that included Pop Art, Nouveau Realism, Fluxus, and Happenings. The source of inspiration was the European Dada movement (between 1916 and 1922), with its radical methods and use of “anti-art” materials. The younger generation was particularly influenced by the conceptual approach of Marcel Duchamp in the ready-made and the incorporation of everyday materials in Kurt Schwitters’s collages and installations.

Duchamp’s influence in New York was widely regarded as an important one. When he first arrived to New York in 1915, he was already a prominent figure; in 1954 his work became publicly accessible when the Philadelphia Museum of Art displayed its huge Arensberg collection of his work. He was considered the spiritual father of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Roberts Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, whose new aesthetic was characterized by tones of neutrality, passivity, irony and

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84 Ibid., 63.
negation\textsuperscript{86} and whose works were interpreted as adaptations of Duchamp’s artistic approach to the Cold War context. According to Moira Roth, the American artists were particularly inspired by Duchamp’s indifference to aesthetic values and to the artist’s personal “touch” and taste in the ready-made.\textsuperscript{87} Duchamp himself, however, argued that he was misinterpreted by the Neo Dadaists, since they found aesthetic beauty in the ready-mades.\textsuperscript{88}

Schwitters also influenced the New York artists. In his first installation titled \textit{Merzbau} (fig. 1), he articulated a new environmental approach to art. He filled eight rooms of his house at Waldhausenstraße 5 in Hannover with “low” materials such as grottoes and found boxes, converting his personal living space into a work in progress that combined collage and architecture. This approach found its American interpretation in works such as Allan Kaprow’s \textit{Yard}. In 1961 Kaprow created a public, interactive work by filling the sculpture garden of the Martha Jackson Gallery (his “yard”) in New York with old tires. Kaprow encouraged visitors to walk on the

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 38.
tires, and to throw them around as they pleased. *Yard* was repeated about seven or eight times in different locations in Europe and America, and on each occasion the work was change to fit the particular spaces and contexts.\(^\text{89}\) He called these repetitions “reinventions,” since the work intentionally changed each time it was presented not least through the interaction of the spectators who became active participants.\(^\text{90}\) Kaprow reflected on his decision to open the work to interactions with the audience and to the environment, describing this decision as being the “polar opposite of the traditional belief that the physical art object—the painting, photo, music composition, etc.—should be fixed in a permanent form.”\(^\text{91}\)

The idea of a permanent form in art had already been challenged by John Cage in 1952. He showed that a composition of a musical piece does not necessarily direct each and every performance to be the same. He problematized the ontological condition of performance in his work titled *4′33″*. Each performance becomes not a not copy, but an individual work of art. They are directed by the composition, but are not expected to be identical.

Cage exposed the individuality of each performance through the repetition of a thinly drafted and open composition. According to the very open-ended instructions of Cage’s composition notes, the iconic work can be performed by any instrument or combination of instruments, as long as none of them play even a single note. What might be considered four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence is actually a


\(^{90}\) Ibid., 23.

\(^{91}\) Ibid.
piece consisting of the environment that the listeners create and hear while the work is being performed.\textsuperscript{92} This exposes essential features of the traditional roles in a concert, calling them to question or taking them to extreme. As a rule, it is the audience that listens to the musicians performing a work, but in \textit{4'33"} this encounter becomes an almost mutually equal experience. The audience actively influences the content and meaning of the work as well as its experiences of the piece. The composition itself is never “repeated,” but rather recreated in every performance, taking account of each specific time and place. Cage’s experimental work further emphasized the independence from the written instructions of the composition and from the composer.\textsuperscript{93}

This independence is exposed through repetition of the composition and it emphasizes some sensual characteristics of the performance. Whether Cage’s conceptual work is considered music or not,\textsuperscript{94} “playing” the piece is still located in the medium of sound, including silence, and their shared element of temporal duration. Comparing the performances of \textit{4'33"} to Robert Rauschenberg’s series of white paintings\textsuperscript{95} brings up the shared ground that the absence of certain sensual aspects in

\textsuperscript{92} Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), \textit{Conversing with Cage} (Routledge, 2003), 69–70.

\textsuperscript{93} In \textit{4'33"}, neither artist nor composer has any influence over the execution of the work, thus Cage has no way of determining the ambient sounds that will be heard by the audience. Richard Taruskin, \textit{The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays}, (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 55.


\textsuperscript{95} Cage pointed to Rauschenberg’s paintings as a major influence on creating \textit{4'33"}.  

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the repeated works gives a greater weight to other sensual aspects. In 1951, Rauschenberg painted canvases with white house paint, letting the light conditions in the exhibition spaces and the shadows of the spectators contribute additional visual aspects of the otherwise “white” pieces. Thus, it turns out that much like the absence of music emphasizing ambient sounds, the color white can account for endless visual nuances. Even though the viewer or listener might have felt cheated, each work would seem to have stayed faithful to at last some of the sensual features typical of the respective medium.

About a decade later, a different approach was suggested by George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus. In his *12 Piano Compositions for Nam June Paik* he wrote twelve instructions, for example: “paint with orange paint patterns over [the] piano.” The instructions treated the piano as an object to be carried back and forth, painted and sawed, waxed and polished; the actual musical instrument turned out to be a box that happens to make sounds. Here the piano functions as a table (on which a vase with flowers was installed), a cage (in which animals were put), and a model of a painting. In May 2008, Maciunas’s instructions were adapted and re-interpreted at the Tate Modern, London, as part of a weekend dedicated to “States of Flux.” While repeating the instructions several decades later, the performers adjusted them to the changing context and did not follow the original order. Rather than copying previous performances, their interpretation of the composition became a unique instance.

See Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 71.

In the spirit of Maciunas, George Brecht and Robert Filliou wrote instructions for creating a painting,\footnote{See \textit{Mystery Game I–V} (1967) in: George Brecht and Robert Filliou, \textit{Games at the Cedilla, or the Cedilla Takes Off} (New York: Something Else Press, 1967).} which shows that the medium of painting can be basically a set of procedural operations to create an object that may be realized with varying materials.

“Take (\textit{a colored material}) / add to it (\textit{a material which dries}) / and place it on (\textit{a flat surface}) / by (\textit{an action}).”

These instructions are very operative and specific, but they are open enough to invite many choices of action. On this basis, Rauschenberg’s \textit{Monogram} (fig. 1.1) is a legitimate painting. Rauschenberg explored the combination of two objects, or two initials as the title implies, which were transformed into a single new thing. He placed a stuffed goat, spattered with paint and with a rubber tire on its middle on a square plane full of images, and thus introduced a new concept to the art world —the “combine”—which is neither a painting nor a sculpture, nor a proper ready-made in the Duchampian sense.

Most of the practices mentioned above were connected to Black Mountain College, an experimental school in operation between 1933 and 1957, which had been founded in North Carolina by John Andrew Rice, Theodore Dreier, and others. Influenced by John Dewey’s principle of education, the ideology of the school emphasized holistic learning and viewed art as a whole rather than separate domains.
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Among the faculty were Joseph Albers,\(^{98}\) Roberts Motherwell, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Willem de Kooning; its students included Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg.

Other artistic practices that pushed the boundaries of art and reconsidered the idea of medium specificity were attributed to another group of American artists that began working in the 1960s. I will discuss them in more detail in the next section.

1.4 Minimalism

The artistic movement variously referred to as “Literalist Art,” “ABC Art” or “Minimalism,” suggested a new objective approach to art. Roberts Morris, Tony Smith, Frank Stella, Richard Serra, and Donald Judd challenged the metaphysical aspirations associated with some of the Abstract Expressionists: “logic and clarity replaced ambiguity and inconclusiveness.”\(^{99}\) Their art, which was considered neither painting nor sculpture, involved repetition; they employed modules as the basis of design or construction. The modularity in their work has connotations of standardization and mass production and allowed them to emphasize the literal facts and concrete physical properties of the art object. In addition, the use of repetition enabled them to explore the relation between the art work and its surroundings. By taking the specific exhibition space into account in their investigations of the formal

\(^{98}\) Albers, who was a leading teacher at the Bauhaus in Germany, left Europe for the US, like many faculty members, after the Nazis shut down the school in 1933. He was selected to run the art program at Black Mountain College.

\(^{99}\) Haskell, *Donald Judd*, 22.
aspects of a work that positions itself somewhere between sculpture and painting, the artists were also reconsidering abstraction and autonomy in their art.

Donald Judd described the new three-dimensional works as neither painting nor sculpture: “the use of three dimensions isn’t the use of a given form.” He saw these works as an alternative to conventional forms that opened up new possibilities for making art; these so-called Specific Objects were thus a solution to the condition of modernist painting, which Judd viewed as a restricted art, because the possibilities of emphasizing the shape of the support were limited. The question of how to organize the surface of a painting had been fully exhausted; the solution would be to abandon the pictorial plane in favor of three dimensions.

Although the new works were three dimensional, they were something other than sculpture. “Most sculpture is made part by part, by addition, composed,” Judd noted, but the new work is “seen at once and not part by part.” This wholeness creates a powerful presence, a “real space,” that “gets rid” of the problem of illusionism and of literal space of European art. The final artwork is more “open and extended, more or less environmental.”

Judd distinguished his work from previous modes of expression and emphasized its unique property of unity. He pointed to a new specificity in the materials and in the relationships between shapes and planes, which took into account

100 Judd, “Specific Objects,” 79.
101 “The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements possible within it.” Ibid., 77.
102 Ibid., 78.
103 Ibid., 79.
104 Ibid., 78.
the space where the work was being presented. Although this specificity is based on formalistic relations, it contradicts the modernist sensibility according to Greenberg and Fried, because it is not restricted to any given medium.

Greenberg criticized the non-specificity of this approach and even claimed that it does not belong to art. If all the objects that include “relations and interrelations of surface, contour, and spatial interval” are to be considered art, then everything is art. “Minimal works are readable as art as almost anything is today—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper.” Greenberg saw these new works as leading to a paradox that contradicted the common-sense and threatened established artistic definitions.

Fried had invented the term “objecthood” in order to grapple with the condition of non-art. Like Greenberg, he saw the new works as presenting themselves as ordinary objects. The new territory of Specific Objects was excluded from art because it could not be classified as belonging to either of the given mediums. Fried referred to the makers of such works as “literalists,” contrasting their output to the modernist painting. By emphasizing the formal relations within the picture, modernist painting identifies itself as a painting and suspends the fact that it is also an object in the world. The literalist, on the other hand, brings objecthood to the foreground, producing works that intentionally appear as real objects. The literalist focuses on the actual form, a single and simple shape, which gives the impression of wholeness. This, in turn, created a unique presence that Fried described as “a kind of a stage presence,” theatrical in its effect or quality. And since theatre was the contemporary enemy of art, the literalist works were thus non-art. This “war” between the theatrical

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and the pictorial is a war of experience, conviction and sensibility. Objecthood, from the perspective of recent modernist painting, is antithetical to art, according to Fried.

Theatre is not only the enemy of painting, but the enemy of the concept of medium-specificity: “The concepts of quality and value are meaningful only within the individual arts. What lies between the arts is theatre.”\footnote{Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 21.} Fried argued that while some works create the illusion that the barriers between the arts are in the process of crumbling, “the individual arts have never been more explicitly concerned with the conventions that constitute their respective essences.”\footnote{The artistic distinctions are not “towards some kind of final, impulsive, hugely desirable synthesis.” Ibid.}

The synthesis that Fried warned against was both the fusion of the mediums and the extension of the art work into its surroundings. The formalistic aspects of Judd’s work are not limited to the object, but include its exhibition or installation site. Judd considered his art-specific objects in a specific space, and emphasized the formal relationships inside and outside the work. Along with the material and color, space was a principal constituent of the visual—a work could be “harmed” or “helped” by where it was placed.\footnote{Donald Judd, “21 February 1993,” in Donald Judd: Large Scale Works, exh. cat. (The Pace Gallery, New York 1993), 9, in Nicholas Serota, “Donald Judd: a sense of place,” Donald Judd, (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 103.} Judd saw the installation of the work and its relation to the surrounding space as crucial to its meaning: “Too often, I believe, the meaning of a work of art is lost as a result of thoughtless or unsuitable placement of the work for display. The installation of my own work, for instance, as well as that of others, is contemporary with its creation, and the space surrounding the work is crucial to it.
Frequently as much thought has gone into the placement of a piece as into the piece itself.\(^{109}\)

While the modernist painting or sculpture emphasizes the formal relations within the work in order to suspend the fact that it remains an object in the world, Judd intentionally created works that insisted on taking their place in the world. Fried found it problematic that the circumstances and spatial relationships between the viewer and such objects were themselves being engaged to convey the meaning of the work. The results are objects with no internal domain in the world—they are part of the world. One problem with this is that it introduces the role of duration. This, in turn, positioned another difference between the *Specific Objects* and the modernist painting. Fried argued that the objects provided an experience that persists in time. Such a temporal experience is characteristic of theatre but contrasts with the timelessness of painting and sculpture. To a certain extent, Fried returned to Lessing’s distinction between the arts that extend through time and those such as painting and sculpture that occupy space and whose temporality has no duration. They existed in “a continuous and perpetual present,” because “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.”\(^{110}\) By contrast, Judd’s objects created an effect of temporality. He attributed infinity to their presence, although their configuration was manifestly finite,\(^{111}\) and linked this to the fact that the objects are repeated. The possibility of endless repetition stands in stark contrast to the autonomy of art. Fried referred to the repetition of identical units in Judd’s work as carrying “the implication that the units


\(^{110}\) Ibid.

\(^{111}\) Paul Crowther has pointed to this difficulty in Fried’s interpretation.
in question could be multiplied ad infinitum.”\textsuperscript{112} The experience of these works is inexhaustible “not because of any fullness… but because there is nothing there to exhaust.”\textsuperscript{113}

It would seem that Greenberg and Fried’s analytic framework of medium specificity successfully dealt in part with the characteristics of \textit{Specific Objects}, but failed to evaluate them as art. One theoretical framework that had filled up this gap revolves around the idea of “post-medium condition,” and challenged medium-specificity. In what follows, I will refer to this alternative.

Rosalind Krauss criticized Greenberg’s theory of medium specificity for limiting the possibilities of art.\textsuperscript{114} She rejected the concept outright and even refused to use the word “medium” because of its dogmatic associations. Instead, she suggested a more pluralistic idea, the idea of “differential specificity,”\textsuperscript{115} which set artistic practice free from any formal attachment to a given medium.\textsuperscript{116} This “post-medium condition,” she noted, is a result of the age of television and broadcasting, which opened up new possibilities for artistic practice. Artists did not need limit themselves to a specific materiality of the art object, but were able to experience and themselves articulate the artistic medium.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{112} Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 22.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{114} See Krauss, \textit{A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition}.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 56


\textsuperscript{117} Krauss, \textit{A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition}. 
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Krauss pointed to a logical continuation in art that extended beyond any possible divisions between mediums: Serra was influenced by both film and painting when creating his sculpture; Michael Snow’s film, *Wavelength* (1967), inspired him to consider the various aspects of the work when articulating his medium. In *Wavelength*, the articulation of the medium is not reduced to one aspect of the film; the material elements, the artistic practice, and the experience of the work are all taken into account. Like the specificity of Snow’s film, the specificity of Serra’s work also derives “from the medium’s aggregate condition.”

Serra was also influenced by Pollock’s all-over paintings, and like him, he aspired to create art that would be experienced in the horizontal plane. When he implanted steel planes in the field, he placed his work on the ground, similar to Pollock. Doing so, he translated the progressiveness of Pollock’s painting into sculpture. Serra linked the abandoning of the pictorial object not to the emphasis upon the pictorial flatness, but to the placement of his canvases on the floor. This reorientation, rather than the size of the painting, is what eventually transformed “the whole project of art from making objects, in their increasingly reified form, to articulating the vector that connect subjects to objects.” Serra saw this vector as “the horizontal field of an event,” and tried to find the inner logic of the event in order to articulate this field as a medium. He understood the conventions of his artistic practice to be in the form of a series like a periodic flux, in which “sets of serial repetitions converge on a given point.” With Serra, Krauss demonstrated how the

118 Ibid., 24-26.

119 Ibid., 26.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid., 27.
different mediums could influence each other and how practice itself, rather than *a-priori* rules, created conventions in art. In her view, the established categories of art were no longer relevant.

Krauss’s differential specificity expands the concept of self-legislation and challenges the notion of autonomy. The work of art is created according an internally logical path of development, but this logic is not bound to a specific medium. In the following example, the work is not even bound to the field of art, but combines several external domains.

1.5 Generative Art

The main idea of generative art is that the artist uses a system of rules and principles that can function autonomously.\(^{122}\) The system does not have to be totally autonomous, yet, it does not require “moment-to-moment decision-making,”\(^{123}\) since the artist cedes some control to it.\(^{124}\) Rule-based art is considered generative art only if the rules are gathered into a system with some level of independency.\(^{125}\) The system can include digital and mechanical procedures, chemical reactions, living plants, arithmetic series, alphabetic sequences, and any given set of rules chosen in advance,


\(^{123}\) Ibid., 152.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 154. Galanter pointed to the problem of authorship that should be taken into account when interpreting generative works of art. Ibid., 166-167.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 154.
which determine the internal development of the work. It generates an artistic practice and puts the practice itself in the foreground.

The development of generative art overlaps conceptual art and minimalism.\textsuperscript{126} Artists, such as John Cage, Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Mel Bochner and Sol LeWitt, used methods that are associated with these approaches to art. In \textit{Wall Drawing 797}, Sol LeWitt wrote instructions for drawing on a wall. The instructions say that the first drafter is supposed to create an irregular horizontal black line near the top of the wall. Following him, the second participant copies this line but draws it in red. The third person looks at the second line and remakes it in yellow, and the fourth uses blue. This repetitive order begins again with the first drafter, who copies the last blue line in black, and continues until the bottom of the wall is reached. The final result suggests one mass of accumulative lines, which looks like waves in three dimensions. The simple elements are combined into a very rich and textural drawing. A closer glance exposes the endless nuances between the lines, due to the fact that they were made by various hands and with different colors. This second and more careful observation shows the systematic order that determined the work, where each line depends on the previous line. LeWitt’s instructions bring to mind a recursive procedure, in which each step calls for a new instance of the very same procedure. The procedure of

\textsuperscript{126} Galanter traced the beginning of generative art to the beginning of art itself, pointing to the use of visual symmetry, pattern and repetition by the most ancient known cultures; however, use of the term became wide-spread only in the twenty-first century, especially after the first conference on generative art held in 1998 in Milan. Ibid., 146.
drawing the lines relies on the results of previous lines that were drawn; the system seems to “run itself.”

To a certain extent, the application of recursive procedures in a work of art generates a system that is capable of self-determination and develops according to an internal logic. This makes generative art an interesting alternative to formalist approaches to art such as Greenberg’s. While autonomy in Greenberg’s theory requires the separation of art from other domains, generative art creates something valid on its own terms using systems that are external to art. Whereas Greenberg linked abstraction to the exploration of forms, which are the “essential” features of art, generative art investigates the action of creating art using abstract mathematic principles. Philip Galanter considered generative art a kind of dynamism that overcomes formalism by moving attention from objects to processes and celebrating “the aesthetic of creation as activity.”

Generative art suggests notions of abstraction and autonomy that are not limited to visual shapes and include external procedures as part of the creative production. The following section discusses an approach that, similar to Greenberg, associates abstraction with the emphasis on forms; however, the abstract forms in this case function as a filter for the subject matter.

1.6 Abstraction and Subject Matter

Galanter associated LeWitt’s wall drawing with combinatorics, since the system uses a smaller set of elements to create a larger set of combinations; however, a comparison between the shared drawing and recursion might be more relevant. Ibid., 153.

Ibid., 174.
The modernist abstract painting was described by Greenberg as emphasizing its forms, communicating only a sensation and not trying to represent or imitate an external subject matter. Like previous modernist theoreticians, Greenberg saw abstraction as the avoidance of subject matter and an emphasis upon forms. He distinguished “subject matter” from “content.” While the former stands for ideas and ideologies that infect art, and cannot be found in an art of pure form, the latter is inevitable. Greenberg claimed that the modernist painting did not abandon the representation of recognizable objects in general, but the representation of three-dimensional space and the representation of subject matter. As with the illusion of space, subject matter is considered external to painting and only interrupts the viewer from focusing on the essential formalistic aspects.

The distinction Greenberg makes between content and subject matter is exemplified by his interpretation of Willem de Kooning’s series of women. Greenberg described de Kooning’s “Women” pictures (1952-1955) as “homeless representation”—“a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract

129 Clive Bell described the aesthetic judgment as an ecstatic feeling above life that can be expressed only in form; other aspects of the work, such as the representation of a subject matter, were thus pushed aside in favor of the visibility of the work. Clive Bell, “The Aesthetic Hypothesis” (1914), in Art (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 16, 25.


131 Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon”, 39, 41.
ends but continues to suggest representational ones.”¹³² The use of representation was necessary for creating coherency in the pictorial space, but it does not involve subject matter.¹³³ To follow Greenberg’s logic, de Kooning repeated the image of a woman not in order to explore femininity or to deal with political issues of regarding the representation of a woman by a male artist, but in order to examine the pictorial space. Accordingly, the repetition of the content (the woman) shifts attention to the form (the coherent pictorial space).

The case of interpreting de Kooning is typical of Greenberg’s formalist approach to abstraction, which is essentially different from a thematic approach to abstraction, such as that of Mark Rosenthal. While the former enables the representation of content as long as it does not refer to subject matter, the later focuses on shapes that represent neither objects nor other content and attributes subject matter to them. Rosenthal’s alternative approach to abstraction has become widespread in recent decades.

Rosenthal is an art historian and curator who has held curatorial positions in significant museums in the US, such as the Philadelphia Museum and the National Gallery of Art. One of his concerns is abstraction in the twentieth century. His agenda


¹³³ Greenberg argued that the Abstract Expressionists’s aim was to create a coherent illusion of three-dimensional space and therefore they used representation. This might seem to contradict to what he considered the avoidance of representing a deep space (1960); however, it would seem that the “coherent illusion” distinguishes itself from the linear perspective illusion, creating a denser space, in which figure and ground are squeezed together.
is to highlight the human agent in the abstract work. This can be seen as a reaction against Greenberg’s formalism, because the emphasis upon form is not understood in contrast to subject matter, but rather as a strategy for implying subject matter. It seems that Rosenthal took sides in the rivalry between Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg and was influenced by emphasis on existential drama characterizing Rosenberg’s notion of “Action Painting.”

In 1996, Rosenthal organized an exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum entitled “Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline.” The title of the exhibition is a quote from the sculptor Eve Hesse. To Rosenthal, her statement closely reflected the belief of many artists throughout the century in regards to abstract art. In this vein, abstraction was to be understood in relation to psychological states and working habits. The extensive show included works by artists from Europe and the United States, ranging from pioneers of abstraction in 1912 to contemporary American artists. The first abstract paintings of Kandinsky (fig. 1.2), Malevich, and Mondrian were interpreted as non-objective paintings that evoke a spiritual experience, or used geometry and modern industrial materials as metaphors for order and stability in a society. These artistic


revolutionaries were presented as the foundations of an abstraction that shows its desire to communicate subject matter and messages to the viewer. The gestural abstractions of the Abstract Expressionists were interpreted as an intensification of the shift from exterior to interior approaches to art. The artists found the solipsism of early abstraction irrelevant and dealt in their paintings with the tragic condition of humanity. While Greenberg interpreted Pollock’s method of dripping paint as an emphasis on pictorial flatness, Rosenthal focused on the act of painting, describing it as improvisational, a movement of free-wheeling spirit and unbridled, heroic energy.

Rosenthal emphasized the emotional and spiritual aspects of abstraction and the literary meanings and moods evoked through color. He considered abstraction to be a rejection of specific events in history—not for the sake of artistic autonomy, but rather “in order to concentrate on heightened emotions…. The best abstract art can even provide the viewer with a transcendent experience simply through the contemplation of the sensuous appearance of its materials, forms and colors.”

Rosenthal’s essay depicts abstraction as emotional, transcendental, liberatory, universal, self-expressive, romantic, ineffable, spiritual, and ahistorical. His approach shows that abstraction is not exclusive to formalism.

137 Ibid., 93.
138 Ibid., 2-3.
139 Ibid., 235.
140 Katy Siegel, “Art since 1940: Strategies of Being by Jonathan Fineberg; Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline by Mark Rosenthal; Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’
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Unlike the aforementioned formalism, Rosenthal’s approach does not see the use of shapes and colors as a strategy for achieving autonomy, but interprets it in relation to subject matter.

In this chapter I have considered the different roles that repetition can play in relation to autonomy and abstraction in art. I have particularly focused on the role of repetition in modernist painting as espoused by Greenberg and Fried and then pointed to several alternative approaches such as can be found in Neo Dada, minimalism, and generative art. These diverse conceptions about repetition enable me to relate to the case of repetition in Jasper Johns’s paintings in chapters three, four and five, and to analyze his use through comparison to other instances of repetition in art.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two:

Repetition and Originality

Chapter Two discusses the relation between repetition and originality in postwar American art. I discuss practices of ready-made, quoting and printing in Dada, Neo Dada and Abstract Expressionism, with a special focus on instances of repetition in the work of Barnett Newman. Johns’s approach to originality will be compared to Newman’s approach in Chapter Five. In particular, I will argue that by quoting Newman, Johns deals with primacy as an aspect of originality.

2.1 Originality in Art

While the notion of seeking originality is usually attributed to Romanticism, this desire can be traced back to antiquity, when it was already possible to point to specific artists or workshops that produced art in a creative and innovative way. Original artists would establish paradigms that opened up possibilities for other artists, which followed them stylistically and thematically. By initiating a pattern from which a copy or translation could be made, their work became “original”—the origin, the point of beginning for succeeding works. The etymology of “originality” carries with it the meaning of primacy, of being the first. Primacy distinguishes originality from creativity in the sense that originality also implies an order of occurrence. The


original artist is not only creative, but also creates something that is paradigmatic and innovative in its context for the first time.

Originality and primacy, however, are not necessarily linked to each other. Even though the followers of an original artist would work within established paradigms, they could also be considered creative and original as long as they refined existing rules or traditions of production. In his text “Creativity and Originality in Art” (1991), Paul Crowther considers innovation and refinement as two ways by which an artefact can be considered original. It can break, for example, with the existing rules of production for artefacts of that kind, or it can embody new features that enable it to fulfil its function more efficiently than other artefacts.\footnote{Paul Crowther, “Creativity and Originality in Art,” \textit{British Journal of Aesthetics}, (October 1991): 302-3.} Thus, originality assumes innovation and creativity, yet it can also rely on a given convention.\footnote{Another sense in which originality and primacy are not necessarily linked to each other was also mentioned by Crowther in the same text. He distinguished between subjective and objective originality: “it may be that a work stands out and engages us positively because it is something the likes of which we have not personally experienced before.” Thus, we can potentially experience something as original even if it is an exact copy of something else. Ibid, 307.}

When it comes to aesthetic objects in art, the evaluation of originality also requires that a particular work will be perceived: “to enjoy art \textit{qua} art, the starting point for appreciation or enjoyment must be direct perceptual acquaintance with a particular art work. This is because \textit{qua} aesthetic objects we are concerned with the...
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formal relation between parts and whole in the object’s entire phenomenal fabric.”

This concept was challenged by the ready-made at the beginning of the twentieth-century.

2.2 Ready-Made, Repetition and Originality

The ready-made is a provocative statement that breaks several rules and artistic conventions, among them the need for aesthetic appreciation. Appreciating the originality in Duchamp’s works is possible without even viewing them. Instead of aesthetic originality, these works suggest a theoretical originality. Placing a mass-produced urinal in an art gallery, signing it with a pseudonym and calling it “Fountain” is innovative as a declaration about the status of art. Its significance is to make a theoretical statement rather than producing a new formal configuration or making “sensuous or imaginatively intended material into original symbolic form.”

It does not require immediate perception and its materiality disappears in its referential function as a statement about art.

Another criterion of originality in art challenged by the ready-made is related to the question of who created the work. An “original work of art” is the unique product of the singularly creative artist, the person “who did in fact produce the work.” On the contrary, the ready-made is an object created by a machine or by another person that is not the artist; only later does the artist anoint it as a work of art.

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145 Ibid., 303-4.
146 Ibid., 305.
147 Ibid., 308.
148 Ibid., 305.
The ready-made shows that an artwork is not necessarily the exclusive product of the artist’s physical act of making. The artistic values of skill and autographic uniqueness turn out to be unnecessary to originality, and the ready-made questions the conventional “making” of art by detaching the making from the artist. In a later essay, Crowther interprets the appropriation of found objects, made by others, as the beginning of the contingency thesis—the idea that the artist does not have to physically make the work and that the relation between the artist and its physical making is thus contingent.149

Fountain, as an artwork based on a mass-produced urinal, also challenges the value of uniqueness. Duchamp chose an industrial object, which brings to mind the seriality and remoteness in the process of industrial production. For Duchamp, the ready-made exists as an idea and the selected object is simply its carrier. From his proposition that “it was always the idea that came first, not the visual example,” he drew the logical conclusion that he should make multiple copies of his artworks in order that these may be disseminated throughout the museum world. He reproduced Alfred Stieglitz’s photograph, which is the only remaining visual trace of the actual object and thus issued more than one “Fountain.”150 This, of course, served to emphasize the means by which the urinal was produced in multiples of the same in

149 Paul Crowther, “Contingent Objects, Permanent Eclecticism,” in Geneses of Postmodern Art: Technology As Iconology, (Routledge, 2018).

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the first place. Consequently, the original work of art is not necessarily one of a kind—its uniqueness is questionable and its originality conceptual.

Duchamp forces reconsideration of associations of artistic originality and aesthetic appreciation, skills, and uniqueness. He proposed a conceptual originality that does not follow the hierarchy of origin and mechanistic repetition; the one-of-a-kind object is not superior to its copies, and they are not considered “second-hand,” inferior translations. Accordingly, the ready-made provides an alternative to some aspects of originality associated with the medium of painting.

2.3 Neo Dada, Quoting and Originality

Duchamp’s ready-made was a source of inspiration for the American Neo Dadaists who took the idea of contingency in a different direction. Despite Duchamp’s discouragement of aesthetics, the younger generation of artists, among them Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, found beauty in ready-mades. They combined found materials in their works and placed mundane objects and images from their surroundings into the aesthetic domain. Much like the avant-gardists such as the Cubists, the Neo Dadaists also included manifestations of various features of mass culture and its technological base; however, while the Cubists absorbed these sources as “compositional features within some broader aesthetic,” the Neo Dadaists presented mass culture content in its own right.

The borrowing images from mass production and inclusion in their original design is essential to the Neo Dadaists. This working method is also exemplified in

151 Crowther, “Contingent Objects, Permanent Eclecticism.”

152 Ibid., 49.
the way they quoted other artists, treating such quotations as if they were found objects. The artists transformed the known activity of referencing within the art world into an explicit act of “taking.” The image was not invented by the artist but was appropriated from another cultural source, as a “second-hand” material. Like the Dadaist ready-made, the starting point of choosing and taking emphasized the concept in art and the role of the context. Explicit “collaborations” with other artists or craftsmen and the use of mechanistic reproduction had already appeared in Duchamp’s work at the beginning of the twentieth century; however, the general practice of quoting that became common in the fifties resembles ready-mades only to a certain extent, and the two practices are different in several aspects. The ready-made is an invention of the last century, associated with Duchamp; the term is associated with specific works of art. Quoting, however, is a diffusive tool whose history in the visual arts can be traced back to the Renaissance and earlier periods; the term has been widely applied to describe essentially different levels of reference.

The over-use of the term “quoting” and the revived theoretical interest in quotation in art is part of the linguistic turn. Language-centered theories assume that visual artwork can be read as a text and justify this approach by pointing to instances of quotation. This usage is associated with the adaptation of “intertextuality” from

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literature\textsuperscript{154} to “interpictoriality” in the visual arts;\textsuperscript{155} it emphasizes the semantic and semiotic implications of references in art. The problem with some language-centered theories is that quoting is treated as a general, conceptual activity, and the unique ways in which the appropriated images are rendered are overlooked.

When analyzing the practice of quoting in Rauschenberg’s work, for example, the mechanistic repetition should be taken into account. Rauschenberg combined expressive gestures along with printed photographs that included images from other artists. Signs from the street, calendars, photographs of Buddha, and copies of odalisques from earlier masterpieces are gathered together into a painting that refutes any sort of hierarchical classification. In \textit{Persimmon} (fig. 2) he combined a silkscreen of \textit{Venus at Her Toilet} (1615) by Peter Paul Rubens along with printed photographs of cans, oranges and street signs. Low materials are as important as high materials in a composition in the spirit of a Dadaist collage. Rauschenberg’s use of found imagery as the basis for his printing operations “placed his relationship to print under the rubric of the ready-made.”\textsuperscript{156} Like the ready-made, his prints were related to the

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
notion of deskillling, because the process of creating them was not completely handmade and based on already existing imagery.

The “combines”—a term Rauschenberg invented to describe works that combine aspects of painting and sculpture—were interpreted as part of the “poststructuralist critique of the liberal-humanist artistic values of originality, uniqueness, authorship, technique, and expression.” The poststructuralist reading viewed his work in negative terms with respect to these values, as can be seen in Rosalind Krauss’s book, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition” (1981). Krauss focused on the modernist myth of originality associated with the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century and pointed to Rauschenberg’s silkscreen canvases as the beginning of a critical practice on the myth of originality. Rauschenberg “acted out the discourse of reproductions without originals” by reusing photographed images. His practice was considered as a repetition of a repetition; the image on the canvas is a silkscreen copy after a photograph. This working method included the use of given codes of representation and demonstrates that the artistic action never begins from scratch and has no single source. According to Krauss, this practice exposed the fictitious condition of the modernist originality.

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159 Ibid., 64.

160 Ibid., 66.
Krauss’s “originality” is limited to the aspect of primacy and dismisses other aspects such as creativity and innovativeness. In addition, the idea of the single author is more a part of her argument against the modernist avant-gardist obsession with originality than a real parameter defining artistic originality. She described the modernist notion of originality as the myth of creating from scratch: “avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth.”161 This myth is rooted in the conception of the self as origin: “with his own self as the origin of his work, that production will have the same uniqueness as he (the artist); the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes.”162 The artist as a singular individual, a single author, is a preliminary requirement to create original and innovative art. Krauss contrasted this idea with Rauschenberg’s use of silkscreen.

Beyond its challenges to the concept of originality in art, Rauschenberg’s work emphasizes the enduring centrality of originality, which originated centuries before modernism. Rauschenberg’s original constructions, which include repetitive materials made in mechanistic reproduction procedures, take the role of originality to an even greater level of significance. The question is not about who invented the image or physically made it, but how it was rendered in the work. In the case of Rauschenberg, the urgent question is about the combinations provided in his paintings.

Rauschenberg applied brushstrokes to his printed canvases and gave his autographical handwriting no primary importance over the appropriated and printed images. The gestural marks function as a reference to the expressive style of the New

161 Ibid., 53.

162 Ibid., 56.
York School painters. In *Factum I* (fig. 2.1) and *Factum II* (fig. 2.2) Rauschenberg played with the notions of expressiveness and spontaneity and dealt with the model of autographic authenticity. These twin paintings invite comparison; both have similar expressive white drips above the red “T” in the lower left corner. The gesture in each painting seems to be spontaneous, but one of the gestures is the copy of the other, and thus is not so. This comparison invites us to question our ability to identify primacy through perception. Rauschenberg does not reveal which gesture was the first and which one is an imitation, which is the original and which is the repetition. And these hypothetical questions are, of course, meaningless when thinking about the printed photographs of the trees, the buildings, and the portraits glued on the canvases, which no one expects to be “original.”

The accumulation of images, reproductions, photographs, and gestures, taken from differing contexts by means of cut-and-paste, creates an inconsistency of style. Their combination emphasizes that the artist is not committed to a single artistic vocabulary, and chooses instead to express himself through various sources. This point is crucial to the strategy of quoting in many other postmodernist works.

Quotation is a tool that conveys a dialogue between artworks and artists. The consequences and significance of the use of quotation changes dramatically from one

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work to another. Artists employ quotation as a form of homage, reference, paraphrase, and to enable manifestations of influence, exchange, and negotiation in art.\textsuperscript{165} Quotation connects them to earlier artists. Tami Katz-Freiman described the postmodern quotation as “a practice characterized by endeavors to blur the original handwriting and the encounter with the work quoted.” She considered the usage of images from earlier masterpieces by postmodern artists a demotion of the sanctified presence of the quoted work.\textsuperscript{166} What in one context can be considered homage, may, in another context, become a subversive action of parody or appropriation. The quotation can be explicit, when it is obvious that a specific piece was taken from another source and the source is relatively known; it can also be implicit and take part in the composition without harming its hermetic structure. Since the range of quoting is so wide, this tool requires a description that defines its uniqueness in each specific case.

\textsuperscript{165} Mieke Bal, \textit{Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History}, (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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In *Persimmon*, Rauschenberg explicitly uses an image taken from a Flemish Baroque masterpiece. Even if the spectator is not familiar with Rubens’s specific painting, it is quite obvious that such an image cannot “belong” to a contemporary artist. Rauschenberg creates a dissonance by reproducing an image taken from a seventeenth century oil masterpiece and placing it next to photographs depicting everyday objects of the mid twentieth century. The work follows no specific style and includes elements of both high and low art. Such eclecticism is typical of Rauschenberg; it also exposes something essential about the use of quotation in the works of other contemporary artists.

Louis Marin compared the use of quotation in Johns’s work to a surgical intervention; the “quotation marks” are the scars testifying the artist’s re-sectioning and implantation.167 In his painting *Ventriloquist* (fig. 2.3), for example, one finds once more Johns’s use of the American flag, a trade-mark of sorts for him. The flags are essentially self-quotations that point to his previous works and revive old concerns; they are part of a collage in which several images referring to various styles are depicted adjacent to another, momentarily attached to a wall with thick bits of tape, their margins and sharpened edges giving them the appearance of screen prints or lithographs. The framing, together with the pieces of tape emphasize the cut-and-paste sourcing of the flag images; Johns might be also referencing here the late nineteenth-century *trompe l’oeil* work of artists such as John F. Peto (fig. 2.4). In their new context, the pieces of tape also serve as visual quotation marks; the flags are a part of the composition as a whole, but at the same time set off from it.

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This use of quotation by Rauschenberg and Johns recalls its use in written discourse, where quotation marks serve to define and transplant the referenced material into the new text. And indeed, both artists planted the taken imagery in fragmented compositions. This is also related to the emphasis the artists put on the multiple sources by using familiar images from known artists. The familiarity of the images is connected to quoting in academic writing, in which the source of the reference should be mentioned by rule.

Quotation has been interpreted as an attack against the modernist myth of originality. In his 1967 essay, “The Death of the Author,”\textsuperscript{168} Roland Barthes argued that any given written work is a tissue of quotations and never original; it neither originates from a single author, nor is it limited to the person who wrote it, but is produced in a wider cultural context, a multidimensional space that includes a variety of writings.

Barthes dismissed the originality and creativity in the very act of quoting. He viewed the artist as a passive element in a cultural context and quoting as a general tool that stands in contrast to originality. Even the personal pronoun “I,” he suggested, stands for a syntactic position rather than a specific referent (the speaker). Accordingly, the focus in text analysis shifts from the author as an individual expressing his personal voice to the “Author” as a product of a culture and conventions who is working within a given structure. The language, rather than the author, conveys the meanings of the text and “speaks” through it.\textsuperscript{169}


\textsuperscript{169} Barthes emphasized one side of the use of language. A more accurate conception of the use of language, particularly in art, is provided in Crowther’s discussion of
to liberate the text from a specific authorial voice, to detach it from a single source and to open an indefinite range of possible interpretations. In each reading, the text is rewritten, because the act of reading enunciates the text and unpacks its structure. At the same time when the author “dies,” the reader is born. But by emphasizing the role of the reader, Barthes ignored the fact that the author, too, is not only a result of a context.

Barthes’s philosophy, together with those of other European poststructuralists, has shaped in good part the American discourse on repetition, for example the writings of Rosalind Krauss. She elaborated on the subversive function of repetition, and considered repetition a challenge to the notion of originality in art, particularly the aspects of originality that are associated with the artist as an individual. I would suggest a different view on repetition in art and show that the usage of repetition in the works of Johns and Rauschenberg underscores the original and creative artistic action. The repetitious materials were rendered in a unique way as part of the entire composition; they emphasize the enduring centrality of originality in art.

Other instances of repetition in postwar American art emphasize the aspect of primacy in originality. The hierarchy between what came first and its translations or adaptations is put to the fore in Barnett Newman’s *oeuvre* and intensified in his approach to printing. The following is dedicated to this approach to originality associated with Abstract Expressionism. Originality in the sense of chronological priority will be contrasted with Johns’s approach to originality in chapter five.

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iconology. The human agency (in art) is dependent on reciprocity between individual choice and the background knowledge of the artist based on personal history and social experience. Paul Crowther, “Introduction – Technology AsIconology,” in *Geneses of Postmodern Art: Technology As Iconology*. 

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2.4 Abstract Expressionism, Printing, and Originality

Developing a new artistic vocabulary, both thematically and formally, was Newman’s lifelong endeavor. He believed that the only way to continue painting was to start at the very beginning with a “Cartesian tabula rasa and build from there.”\textsuperscript{170} The Greek concept of beauty and European abstract painting were both traditions that he aspired to leave behind for the sake of a fresh start. He rebelled against the “objective attitude toward art” and promoted an abstract approach, which enabled him to transmit ideas and subjective feelings.\textsuperscript{171}

In his book \textit{The Tradition of the New}, Harold Rosenberg argued that the New York School painters (the Abstract Expressionists) provided original art by distinguishing themselves from the European tradition. He attributed morality to their working method and perceived their paintings as an accumulation of “right” gestures that assert authenticity.\textsuperscript{172} The directness and expressiveness of their brushstrokes attested not only to the authenticity of the artist but also to the painting’s autographic status. The physical connection between the artist and the artwork became a condition for creating an original work of art and the autographical handwriting point clearly to


the painter as the absolute author of the work. This directness was differentiated from the “old mental conception of a sketch”; it was a working method that embodied authenticity.\textsuperscript{173} Rosenberg also pointed to a psychological element of self-creation in this new approach to painting; in an effort to distinguish themselves from the European painters, the New York School painters tried to create their own personal myth.\textsuperscript{174} Abandoning the past was considered necessary for “enacting origins.”\textsuperscript{175}

In 1948, when Newman was 43 years old, he abandoned not only the Western tradition of painting but also his own artistic past; he destroyed most of the work he had created, erasing almost twenty years of his artistic career. This was interpreted as a personal declaration of artistic maturity and a true beginning.\textsuperscript{176} Newman articulated his rupture from the past as a theme that is embodied in a new form and pointed to a moral crisis—what to paint—that followed the Second World War. The subject became once again important, though something essentially different from neutral subjects such as flowers and abstractions that depict a world of sensation.\textsuperscript{177} “The

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{174} See ibid., 29–30.


self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject-matter of painting and sculpture.”\footnote{178} This required a new approach to pictorial space, which he achieved in *Onement I* (1948). Eliminating the distinction between figure and ground, Newman created an image that “was identical with the field, with no background left over,”\footnote{179} and described it as an image that unites the painting and creates totality (fig. 2.5).\footnote{180}

The emphasis which Newman placed on the titles of his works is connected to the importance he placed on the theme, which in many cases, referred to a new start. Titles such as “The Beginning” (1946), “Genesis – The Break” (1946), “The Word I” (1946), “Day One” (1951-52), “Primordial Light” (1954), and “Onement I” (1948) indicate the possibility that a true beginning had guided him in creating art. He related


\footnote{180} In an interview with Emile de Antonio, Newman said, “I feel that my zip does not divide my paintings. I feel it does the exact opposite. It does not cut the format in half or in whatever parts, but it does the exact opposite: it unites the thing. It creates a totality.” Barnett Newman, “Interview with Emile de Antonio” (1970), in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 306.
the aesthetic act to the human origin and the biblical story of Genesis.  

His spiritual concern with primordial myths exemplifies the modernist obsession with originality, and his search for a fresh beginning is part of his self-originated approach to art. To a certain extent, Newman was the origin of Newman.

_Onement I_ was his artistic origin. The totality of this painting was considered innovative in relation to past aesthetic traditions in painting, and Newman himself described it as his first painting. It was followed by works that tried to recreate its achievement by other means of expression; Newman considered _Onement I_ to be the origin of the _Cantos_ portfolio. He struggled to translate the totality of the painting into his prints and searched for a composition that would unite the imprint and the paper without eliminating the paper frame. He considered the frame of the paper to be “the inevitable intrusion” that should be overcome for creating totality. This de facto characteristic of lithography was a source of creativity and variety. Newman continued to explore the balance of proportions between imprint and margin and deal with the challenge of “[giving] the imprint its necessary scale so that it could have its fullest expression.”

He compared the portfolio to a musical piece in which the theme develops in variations. Riva Castleman borrowed the music metaphor from Newman’s _Preface to 18 Cantos_ (1964) to elaborate on the “visual variation on a

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182 Ibid, 305

theme.”184 The portfolio, too, has a melody that “takes on varied degrees of ‘color’ depending on its accompanying pattern of notes.”185

Understanding that the series of prints are variations on a theme and the technique of lithography was an “instrument”186 is fundamental to Newman’s artistic approach. His oeuvre revolves around a repeated subject that functions as an organizing principle, similar to a leitmotif in music. The variations of the repeated motif provide the impression of development and create a sense of growth and movement. At the same time, the motif unites the entire composition;187 thus, the recurrent element helps to bind the work into a coherent whole. Each print is unique in its colors and proportions, but all share the same goal and mediate the same meaning—to achieve totality, like their origin, Onement I.

The Cantos portfolio was one of the three ventures Newman conducted into printing.188 He did not remain dedicated to making prints,189 but his approach to printing exposes a fundamental aspect of his artistic approach in general: printing was an instrument to express totality that was discovered first in painting and is, accordingly, inferior to painting, being “only” a form of repetition that tries to translate the effect of painting into another means of expression. This is reflected in

185 Ibid., 26.
189 Castleman, “Making the Prints,” 23.
the relation between the painting *Onement I* and the prints of the *Cantos* portfolio. The eighteen lithographs try to recreate the effect of the painting, which serves as a metaphorical matrix to them. In this respect, Newman’s artistic approach maintains the hierarchy of the original and its repetitions.

Newman’s venture into printing should be considered in the context of the postwar renaissance in print, which saw a revived interest in fine art printmaking and its increasing appreciation as an art form in its own right. In 1956, both the Pratt Graphic Art Center and the atelier Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) opened and encouraged established artists, Newman among them, to create prints. For artists such as Rauschenberg and Johns, printing opened up new possibilities for working creatively; printing, as a medium based on repetition, enabled the artists to investigate further aspects of originality.

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Chapter Two

We have considered differing notions of originality in specific cases of repetition in art. It turns out that repetition is not necessarily the opposite of originality, but can serve as an artistic tool that intensifies originality. Repetition can entail creativity and innovation, as exemplified by specific cases of ready-made, quotation, and printing. The unique case of originality in the ready-made is linked to a theoretical statement and distinguished from aesthetic appreciation. American Neo Dadaists, on the other hand, located the ready-made objects in the aesthetic domain. They treated quotations in a similar way, emphasizing the rendering of the “second-hand” material. On the basis of these examples, I have suggested that rather than challenging the notion of originality, as Krauss suggested, the different usages of repetition testify to the enduring significance of the original and creative artistic action. Newman insisted on the need for primacy and uniqueness. In chapter five, I will argue that Johns provides an alternative to Newman’s approach to originality.

The current chapter, together with chapter one, discusses the various functions of repetition in art and the diverse conceptions about them. These two chapters provide the relevant background for chapters three, four and five, which analyze the unique case of repetition in Johns’s paintings.
Chapter Three

Chapter Three:

Repeating Images and Gestures:

Reconsidering Abstraction in Painting through Repetition

Throughout his career, Johns repeatedly made use of the same or similar images and gestures in an almost obsessive way. This kind of repetition enabled him to examine the concept of abstraction in painting. Drawing on Clement Greenberg’s concept of abstraction in painting, I will elaborate on two complementary strategies of repetition by which Johns reconsidered abstraction. The starting point of the first approach is his use of the American flag image; the second begins with the patterns of crosshatching. In the first case Johns aimed at transforming a meaningful symbol into a structure _per se_; in the second, he incorporated his subject matter into a “meaningless” abstract pattern. Both cases exemplify the ways by which Johns challenged the contrast between abstraction and subject matter, carefully avoiding the limitation of “either or.” These are part of Clement Greenberg’s concept of abstraction in painting.

3.1 The Flag-Painting—From a Symbol to a Structure

At about the same time that Johns was painting his first flag painting in the mid-twentieth century, Greenberg saw abstraction as the avoidance of subject matter and an emphasis upon form. So-called “subject matter,” representing the ideas and ideologies that infect art and cannot be found in an art of pure form, was to be distinguished from “content,” which is inevitable. Greenberg suggested that the modernist painting had abandoned the representation of subject matter because it is
external to painting and only interrupts the viewer from focusing on the essential formal aspects of the painting.\textsuperscript{191} Johns’s repetitive use of the flag image—the very embodiment of “subject matter”—in his abstract paintings, however, would suggest that abstraction and subject matter can coexist in the same work.

I specifically focus here on appearances of the American flag image in Johns’s paintings rather than other repeated images and signs such as the target, numerals, and the letters, because of its peculiar symbolic meaning as representative of the American nation. Its geometric structure was designed to represent aspects of American history as well as the country’s political structure. The thirteen horizontal stripes, alternating in red and white, represent the thirteen British colonies that became the first states after declaring independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain. The fifty (originally forty-eight) white stars in alternating horizontal rows of six and five on the blue canton represent the individual states.\textsuperscript{192} Johns created his first flag painting between 1954 and 1955 (fig. 3), the era of McCarthy and the height of the Cold War, a time of heightened tensions with respect to questions of loyalty and patriotism; the flag, representing the nation’s pride, was displayed in private residences and public spaces. It is thus almost impossible to ignore the question of subject matter and political context when considering the flag-paintings.

Four decades later, when asked about whether his painting could or should be interpreted as a provocative political gesture, Johns denied any such intentions.


\textsuperscript{192} The flag paintings to which I refer were created in the mid-1950s. Since Johns created these before Alaska and Hawaii entered the Union, they include 48 stars.
Reflecting on his decision to paint this specific symbol back then, his explanation emphasized the practice of painting itself rather than any external subject matter:

I wanted to make a painting. I dreamed I was painting a flag. I very quickly acted on this and began it. There was no thought, no space between it. I felt I could make a painting and I began to do it. When you work you learn something about what you are doing and you develop habits and procedures out of what you’re doing. Having made one painting I was able to see what I’d done, and to relate it to something else and extend the thought—if thought is a good word—to something that would allow me to go on working.\(^{193}\)

By describing his decision as something automatic, with “no thought” between the dream and the action of making the painting, Johns transformed the American flag into a structure *per se*, purified of ideas and ideologies. The well-known symbol of patriotism became a “neutral” image that led him to make art. He insisted that painting this image taught him that there is the possibility of making something without judging it.\(^{194}\) Although the idea of painting the American flag came to Johns in his dream, he negated any mystic or psychoanalytic interpretation; this “subconscious vision” that gave the start to his career was of the same priority as his


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decisions to remake other images, such as the target and the numerals.\textsuperscript{195} They gave him the “same opportunity to feel removed from the work, neutral toward it, involved in the making but not involved in the judging of it.”\textsuperscript{196}

This might recall Marcel Duchamp’s indifference toward his readymade objects. Indeed, Moira Roth pointed out that the new American aesthetic of the 1960s was rooted in Duchamp’s art, and she included Johns in this aesthetic.\textsuperscript{197} However, while Duchamp spoke of visual indifference,\textsuperscript{198} Johns’s indifference was directed


\textsuperscript{196} Features interviews with Johns and with Leo Castelli, in \textit{Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews}, 123.

In another interview, Peter Fuller argued that the targets and the maps belong to iconography of American imperialism. Johns, however, denied that this was his intention when making those paintings.

Peter Fuller, “Jasper Johns Interviewed I” and “Jasper Johns Interviewed Part II,” both in \textit{Art Monthly} (London), respectively no. 18 (July-August 1978): 6-12, and no. 19 (September 1978): 5-7. Published on the occasion of Johns’s traveling retrospective at the Kunsthalle Köln, in \textit{Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews}, 180.

\textsuperscript{197} Roth singled out Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns. These artists responded to the paranoid and hyper-patriotic environment of the McCarthy period. Their response expressed the paralysis of the US in the Cold War atmosphere through art that included passivity, irony and negation. See Roth, “The Aesthetic of Indifference,” 33-48.

\textsuperscript{198} Duchamp as quoted in \textit{The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium}, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961

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toward political meanings; he manually repeated mundane images, exploring their visual possibilities in their new status as paintings. Duchamp disdained manual skills as part of his dissatisfaction with art that is mainly for the eye.\(^\text{199}\) These essential differences between the approaches of Duchamp and Johns, however, did not discourage critics from comparing Johns’s flag painting to a readymade. Comparisons of Johns’s painted transformation of the familiar symbol to a Dadaist gesture began long before Roth developed her perspective. In 1957, critics first discussed the work following the *New Work* group exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery. Robert Rosenblum, describing Johns’s flag painting as representing “a vital Neo Dada spirit,” saw this new American version of the European Dada movement as a contradiction to the New York School.\(^\text{200, 201}\) Leo Steinberg, in his essay “Jasper Johns: The first Seven Years,” rejected the notion of classifying the flag and other symbolic themes in Johns’s paintings as Dadaist.\(^\text{202}\) He pointed to their shared features, stating that they were chosen for common reasons and not in the typical Dadaist arbitrary way.

I would suggest that identifying Johns’s art as the American version of Dada diminishes his unique artistic action for another reason. While Dadaists such as Kurt Schwitters and Duchamp took everyday objects in their actual physical form and converted them into art, in Johns’s case the magic happened when the familiar image

\(^{199}\) Roth, “The Aesthetic of Indifference,” 40.


\(^{201}\) This was the common approach in the January 1958 issue of *ARTnews* and “Trend to the Anti-Art,” *Newsweek*, March 31, 1958, in Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, 142–43. Also see Hapgood and Berger, “Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958–62,” 63–70.

\(^{202}\) Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 44.
was redepicted and the readymade idea found itself in a painting. Johns took the symbolic image of the American flag, a type rather than a thing, and transformed it into an individual painting. Unlike the actual American flags that even today are still to be found displayed in the streets of New York—as physical objects that potentially could be transformed into ready-mades—the image that Johns incorporated is a symbol, a type. Despite this, the painting itself is neither type nor token and does not fall into these ontological categories. The flag painting is a unique and concrete object, an individual work of art that has a type/token content. Johns rendered the image of the flag in his painting in such a way as to emphasize the painterliness and the painting’s own individuality. The term “painterliness” is taken from Greenberg’s “After Abstract Expressionism” (1962), in which he attributed this characteristic to the paintings of de Kooning and Pollock, among others. He defines it as the “loose, rapid handling, or the look of it: masses that blot and fuse instead of shapes that stay distinct; large conspicuous rhythms; broken color; uneven saturation or densities of paint; exhibited brush, knife, finger, or rag marks.”

Flag (fig. 3) is an encaustic painting, composed of three panels, made with oil and collage; it depicts the American flag in its original proportions and geometrical shapes. At first glance and from a longer distance, the image appears as if it was a real flag and not a painting, and to this extent, Johns “baptized” the found image as an artwork. A closer look exposes the brush strokes and the transparency of the wax. The layered, rich surface also includes headlines of newspapers that Johns applied in the

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203 Paul Crowther had pointed to the type/token content in Johns’s paintings in our correspondence.

204 Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” 361. Since the vast majority of these features appear in Johns’s flag painting, I decided to use the term “painterliness.”
collage underneath the wax. The choice of these two options, of seeing the work as an actual American flag or seeing it as a painting—seeing it as a token of a type or seeing it as an individual aesthetic object—has confused many art critics: “Is it a flag or a painting, is it patriotic or anti-patriotic”? 

Ben Heller, the first critic to address the flag painting, argued that its patriotic message and status is diminished by the painting’s unique surface work; however, others disagreed. MoMA curator, Alfred Barr, considered purchasing the painting in 1958, but eventually did not do so because of its political associations. MoMA’s acquisitions committee felt that the painting disrupted the “patriotic message of the American flag,” and was perhaps even a violation of “the flag law and the flag code.” The discussion revolved around the fact that the American flag image, a symbol of the far-reaching patriotism of the McCarthy era, was here being treated as a structure. Subject matter and form in this painting are in competition, struggling to win the viewer’s attention.

205 When Johns had to repair the work, he used current newspapers of a later date than the painting is dated. This led to some confusion at the Museum of Modern Art, until he explained what had happened. Milton Esterow, “The Second Time Around,” *Artnews* 92 no. 6 (Summer 1993): 148-9, in *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, 284.


207 Ibid, 145. Eventually the painting was given as a gift to the Museum of Modern Art by Phillip Johnson.

208 Steinberg suggested a certain “solution” to this competition, arguing that the subjects determine the formal aspects of the paintings. In his view, the distinction
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There are two points in these discussions, however, that have been overlooked. The first is that Johns drew on the image of the American flag repeatedly, almost obsessively, from the beginning of his career in the fifties until the nineties and beyond. This repetition is crucial to our perception and interpretation of these paintings. The second point is related to the first and concerns the concept of abstraction in painting. The researchers mentioned above—Roth, Rosenblum, Steinberg, and Heller—dealt with this in one way or another, but they did not explore this issue in relation to repetition. In the following, I examine how Johns reconsidered abstraction in painting through his repeated use of the image of the American flag.

To date, Johns has created approximately thirty so-called flag paintings. Viewing the succession of images of the American flag in these numerous paintings brings its own revelations. This is not only because, as Heraclitus said, you cannot step in the same river twice, but also because Johns intentionally created differences between the various paintings that encourage one to focus on the materiality of the works. For example, when comparing the painting White Flag (fig. 3.1), which

209 Johns has made approximately thirty flag paintings and fifty drawings since the mid-1950s, and he continued to use this motif at least through the 1990s. In addition to red, white and blue single flags, he has produced single flags set within larger fields, multiple flags set within a single field, and background or vertical flags. Notably, of the eleven known monochrome flag paintings, seven are gray. James Rondeau, “Jasper Johns: Gray,” Jasper Johns: Gray, editors: Douglas W. Druick, James Rondeau, (Art Institute Chicago, 2007), 52.

210 Ibid.
followed *Flag*, the monochrome and the texture in the later work shift our attention from the familiarity of the image to the way in which it was made. Repetition of the image enabled Johns to create this difference.

*White Flag* was created soon after *Flag*; both paintings are divided into three-panels and include the image of the American flag, but in the later painting, it was rendered in various hues of white. *White Flag* is a rich and large painting, almost three meters across, full of gradations in tone and created using a combination of several techniques and materials: encaustic, oil, newsprint, and charcoal. The monochromatism and texture emphasize the “making” of the work. The stars and stripes are pieces of newsprint and fabric, dipped into molten beeswax and adhered to the surface in a technique resembling collage. Johns worked on each panel separately, and then joined them together. The quick drying encaustic allowed him to work without pause and to preserve each stroke. Above the wax and collage layers, he added highlights in white oil color.

The massive work emphasizes the tactile features of its surface, which in his work was linked to the experience of looking at an object.\footnote{211} Johns transformed the symbol of the flag in this work into an individual aesthetic object in which weight, texture, and substance are even greater than in the first flag painting. In this sense, *White Flag* is closer in spirit to Judd’s minimalist work than to Rauschenberg’s Neo Dadaist series of white paintings. Johns emphasized the specific materiality of his work in a manner similar to the emphasis that characterizes Judd’s *Specific Objects*.\footnote{212}


\footnote{212} I elaborate further on Judd’s emphasis upon materiality and the specificity that involves with it in the following chapter.
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*White Flag* heightens the paradox of transforming the two-dimensional sign into a dense and tangible object. This transformation can be interpreted as a reversal of the usual process of representation, by which a three-dimensional object from the real world is represented as a flat object.\(^{213}\) Subverting the convention of representation, this painting was at least once actually confused with a real object. Johns recalled that someone visiting him in his studio leaned by accident against the work, convinced that it was part of the wall.\(^{214}\) If one takes this anecdote as a metaphor, then clearly a painting can be much more than a window into the world—it can also be a wall.\(^{215}\) A painting is an ordinary object, rather than a representation of something else, and Johns suggested seeing it as such: “I decided that looking at a painting should not require a special kind of focus like going to church. A picture


Greenberg articulated this paradox in the following: “Everything that usually serves representation and illusion is left to serve nothing but itself, that is abstraction [referring here to the hues created by the wax layers and to the common use of hue in creating shading]; while everything that usually connotes the abstract or the decorative – flatness, bare outlines, all-over or symmetrical design – is put to the service of representation [referring here to the schematic design of the American flag].” Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” 365.


\(^{215}\) The 15\(^{\text{th}}\)-century architect, artist and theorist, Leon Battista Alberti, described painting as the construction of an image that resembles a window, a metaphor fundamental to naturalistic representation.
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ought to be looked at the same way you look at a radiator.”\footnote{Jasper Johns quoted in “His heart belongs to DADA,” Time 73, 4 (May, 1959): 58; Also in Jasper Johns, Writings, sketchbook Notes, Interviews, 82; Also in Druick, “Jasper Johns: Gray Matters,” 85.} Looking at a picture as if it was a mundane object could have been possible if pictures and the conventions involved with pictures were not part of our life, and if Johns would not create this fascinating texture that attract the attention. Rather than understanding his provocative declaration literally, one should take into account its implicit meaning. With the “radiator,” Johns objected a spiritual approach to art (that is the church) and representation.

Johns aspired to create a painting that is not about anything else, in which the specific materiality stands in contrast to the subject matter. The rendering in a monochrome scale seems to diminish the pictorial presence of the painting and to heighten other abstract and materialistic qualities. These abstract qualities are not part of an emotionally charged artwork that relies on the expressive power of colors and gestures. Johns’s aspiration to minimize the differences between looking at art and the mundane object was understood as a reaction against his predecessors.\footnote{Rose, “Johns and Newman: An Encounter in Art,” 2-6.} This is not the abstraction of American Expressionists but a different kind of abstraction. Although Johns emphasized the gestures by separating them in the different layers of wax, his painting can hardly be regarded as an “action painting.” The heroism and self-revelation that is associated with Harold Rosenberg’s terminology, which sees the canvas as “an arena in which to act”\footnote{Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 24.} is only partly relevant to Johns. The questions

216 Jasper Johns quoted in “His heart belongs to DADA,” Time 73, 4 (May, 1959): 58;

Also in Jasper Johns, Writings, sketchbook Notes, Interviews, 82; Also in Druick, “Jasper Johns: Gray Matters,” 85.


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that do arise have to do with the kind of abstraction that is suggested in Johns’s *Flag* and *White Flag* and the role of repetition in this abstraction.

Johns’s flag paintings began with an image that can be reproduced and realized in multiples. The large number of actual flags shows the potential to produce an infinite number of tokens of this type; however, Johns chose to make a singularly concrete, one-of-a-kind object—a painting. And then he repeated the image of the American flag in additional paintings. Unlike the reproduction of an actual flag, the repetition cannot be regarded as mechanistic and the paintings are far from being copies. In each instance, Johns emphasized the autographic gestures and specific materiality of the surface, focusing on the differences between the paintings, thus contradicting the concept of exact repetition.

James Rondeau articulated the individuality of the paintings as “thingness.” According to Rondeau, the act of repetition, as with the monochromatism of *White Flag*, mitigates the “flagness” of the flag imagery: “To paint the flag is to efface it. The more it is represented, the less it is.”219 Each new iteration calls attention to itself and consequently shifts the attention away from the flag. This effect is compounded, not only within the action of painting, but also with each different material incarnation.220

The flag paintings are individual objects possessing a type-token content that recalls artworks in other media considered to rely on a type (such as a written or composed piece) and to exist in tokens (copies of the text or performances). Dance, film, literature, and music are among these art forms since “there is no particular


physical “thing” that one can plausibly take to be the artwork itself.” There is no single artwork in music, only a written composition and its performance. A painting is a unique and tangible object, but musical performances are instances of the composition and can be performed by various persons on various occasions. Nonetheless, the ontology of the musical performance may illuminate hidden aspects of the repetition in Johns’s flag paintings.

Performances of a musical composition are not copies. Their outcome is directed by the composition but they are not expected to be identical. Each performance is different and can offer a different interpretation of the work. There is even a hierarchy between interpretations; some are regarded as more original or authentic than others. For example, a performance of a piece written in the seventeenth-century would be considered more authentic if it is played on an instrument characteristic of the time.

This unique ontological aspect of the performance became even more complex with John Cage’s 4’33” (1952), due to the minimalist nature of the composition. The performer or performers are instructed to remain silent and not to play a single note, thus emphasizing any background and audience sounds. Obviously, this specific impromptu background sound cannot be repeated from one concert to the other, thus, the work is created anew with each performance. Cage took the uniqueness of the singular performance to an extreme. This uniqueness, a part of any musical performance, is due to the fact that a performance takes place in time and space. Cage

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did not want music to become an object that persists in time; he saw music as a process that is never twice the same.\(^\text{222}\)

The differences between performances of 4'33'' rely on some essential, sensual aspects of music: sound, silence, and duration. Like Rauschenberg’s series of white paintings,\(^\text{223}\) the absence of certain traditional aspects of Cage’s work highlights other aspects. Rauschenberg’s “empty” and “neutral” paintings are filled with light, shadow, and other visual effects; Cage’s lack of “music” emphasizes other sounds.\(^\text{224}\) Even though the audience might have felt cheated because the works of Rauschenberg and Cage did not fulfill their expectations, the works, it would seem, stayed faithful to the medium in which they exist, with the paintings conveying various visual effects and the musical performances presenting a sound landscape.


\(^{223}\) Cage pointed to Rauschenberg’s paintings as a major influence on creating 4'33''. Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), Conversing with Cage (Routledge, 2003), 71.

\(^{224}\) Cage said the following about the premiere of 4'33'': “They missed the point. There’s no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they didn’t know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.” Ibid, 70.
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Unlike Cage and Rauschenberg, Johns did not evoke such a “the-emperor-has-no-clothes” feeling. In his flag paintings, he maintained many of the aspects of painting that we conventionally expect, among them the use of brushstrokes, hue, and layering. But much like Cage’s musical work, the flag paintings also began from a “composition,” in this case, the form and pattern of the American flag. Johns brought to the foreground the formal and material aspects of each painting, emphasizing their individuality through varied repetition of the source image.

To conclude, the transformation of subject matter into the sort of self-referential painting that is concerned with its means is a process typical of abstraction in painting. The repetition of the image affirms the individuality of the paintings and the means by which they were produced. Repeating the image emphasizes not only the formal features of the paintings, but also their common motif, the American flag. Together with the specific materiality, there is still an element of “flagness” in the paintings—abstract, yes, but embodying a specific subject, as their titles testify to. The emphasis upon form that Greenberg attributed to abstraction is also possible in a painting that delivers subject matter.

3.2 The Crosshatches—From “Contentless” Pattern to Subject Matter

Another strategy of repetition that Johns explored in an ongoing reconsideration of the opposition of abstraction and subject matter is the use of crosshatching. The strategy to which I point here is in some aspects complementary to the strategy discussed previously. Johns’s crosshatch paintings did not start from a symbol loaded with political meaning, but rather from a geometrical pattern used for decoration. While in the previous example a powerful symbol was transformed into
an abstract painting, in the case of the crosshatch paintings we see how the abstract design itself embodies the subject matter.

Johns calls the abstract design in these works “crosshatches.” Hatching and cross-hatching originated as drawing and print-making techniques. Crosshatch lines are drawn at an angle to one another to create tonal or shading effects; they were used by master printers in etching and engraving to create shading and thus represent three-dimensional objects. Johns incorporates them simply as an element of an abstract painting.

The qualities that convinced Johns to use the crosshatch pattern seem to fit the definition of abstraction in art: “repetitiveness, an obsessive quality, order with dumbness, and the possibility of complete lack of meaning.”\textsuperscript{225} The lines of the pattern resonate with the flat canvas and represent nothing but themselves. In addition, Johns’s description of the patterns sheds light on his entire oeuvre involving repetition by exposing some aspects of the aesthetic qualities that interested him and informed his working methods.

In earlier images that Johns used, we already find repetitiveness and obsessiveness: the stripes and the stars of the flag, the series of numbers (0 to 9), the alphabet, and the rings in the target—all have a repetitive and exact sequence. Johns’s decision to keep them as complete entities emphasizes their repetitive qualities.\textsuperscript{226} The numbers and letters, for example, were rendered in grids and rows. Repetition also characterized Johns’s working habits and his tendency to obsessively remake the same images for many years. This method enabled him to observe the interplay between the image and the medium and to develop his working techniques using

\textsuperscript{225} Kent, “Jasper Johns: Strokes of Genius,” 5-12.

\textsuperscript{226} Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 35-36.
different materials. In the crosshatch paintings, Johns focused on the gestural mark and carefully observing the nuances between them.

The crosshatch patterns in Johns’s paintings are equivalent to indexical traces of movement. Their handling transformed them from being geometrical predetermined shapes into marks indicating gesture. In the flag paintings, the gestures were implicit as part of the geometrical structure. Conversely, in the crosshatch paintings, the gestures take the lead. Johns enjoyed the artistic richness resulting from the many manifestations of almost straight lines. In most of the paintings, none of the lines is perfectly straight, nor are they strictly parallel to their neighbors. Their tremulous variations and differences in thickness and size lead them to resemble a visual embodiment of the human breath. Johns’s concern is with their endless nuances, a result of being made by hand, and with the variety of materials and

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227 “I like to repeat an image in another medium to observe the play between the two: the image and the medium.” Jasper Johns in Geelhaar, “Interview with Jasper Johns,” 191.

228 Steinberg described the gestures inside the geometric pattern: “It is as though Johns had decided to draw on both modes of non-representational painting – Geometric Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism – though their common tendency is to exclude one another.” Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” 30.

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techniques that he used. It is the inevitability of difference and variation rather than a
desire for exactitude that interested him.  

*Scent* (fig. 3.2), created in 1973-74, is Johns’s first painting that is filled with
a pattern of diagonal lines. The pattern is spread from one edge of the canvas to the
other, in a very large painting (like *White Flag*, almost two meters by three meters).
The patterns seem to be laid down in accordance with a specific systematic order;
parallel hatch lines are grouped into bundles of red, green and purple, and bundles of
the same color are never adjacent. The painting consists of three panels, each made
using a different technique. The left panel was painted in encaustic, the center in
unvarnished oil on raw canvas, and the right one in varnished oil on a sized canvas.
Thus each panel conveys fully different visual effect; the division into panels and
colors and the repetitive pattern serve to emphasize the visual nuances of the materials
and the gestures.

The repetition of visual elements in *Scent* generates variety in another way,
through a structural pattern within the painting. Johns created subdivisions in each of
the three panels. These subdivisions were intentionally camouflaged, but their secret
was revealed by Thomas Hess. He noticed the vertical subdivisions within each

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230 Kirk Varnedoe, “Introduction: A Sense of Life,” in *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective*

231 A seized canvas means a canvas that was covered with a layer of acrylic polymer
or glue in order to reduce the absorbance of paint to the canvas.

232 In his article, “On the Scent of Jasper Johns,” Hess showed that what might seem
at first to be an “allover” composition of casually arranged cross-hatch marks actually
follows actually a rigorously structured, highly systematic distribution. Hess, “On the
panel, which are approximately 30.5, 44.5 and 30.5 cm respectively in width. He found that these subdivisions repeat and labelled them accordingly. In particular, Hess discovered a system that could be represented by the following pattern: \( a b c, c d e, e f \) and \( a \) (fig. 3.3). The two slices labeled \( c \) are almost identical, as are the slices labeled \( e \) and the slices labeled \( a \). Since the painting includes a set of elements that can be represented by the letters \( a, b, c, d, e \) and \( f \), which are combined in three different ways, it may call up an association with the mathematical field of combinatorics; however, the formula that Johns used is not the same as mathematical combinations, series or permutations, but follows instead his own invented rules. The formula includes three combinations, each composed of three elements. The adjacent combinations are linked to each other by a shared element that appears at the end of one sequence and the beginning of the next. In addition, the entire sequence begins and ends with two similar elements.

The system of rules that created this sequence is not immediately perceivable. At a first glance, the painting looks like an arbitrary accumulation of bundled lines, as if a giant had doodled schematic shapes on a two-by-three-meter canvas and let the structure grow from within itself without paying attention to the final result. It looks like a sketch that simply fills up the canvas and could be repeated infinitely in additional panels. The underlying rules, however, indicate that what seems arbitrary at first glance is actually rigorously structured.

The internal logic in Scent is reminiscent of the autonomy that Philip Galanter attributed to generative art.\textsuperscript{233} Having chosen his “system,” based upon a pattern or formula of his choosing, he cedes some of the decision-making control.\textsuperscript{234} Thus to a certain extent the work has generated itself. Other generative systems include digital and mechanical procedures, chemical reactions, living plants, alphabetic sequences and most any given set of rules chosen in advance that determines the internal development or structure of a work. Like the formula in Scent, these systems concentrate on the procedures of art-making and are neither bound to the artist nor to the domain of art.

Scent recalls Gray Alphabet (fig. 3.4), which was “officially” categorized by Galanter as generative art.\textsuperscript{235} It is an encaustic painting structured as a grid, with a color palette of greys and browns,\textsuperscript{236} in which Johns used the order of the alphabet for the first time, creating sequences between the rows, the columns and the diagonal axes (fig. 3.5). The rows start with various letters in the alphabet in such a way that the alphabetic order also maintained in the vertical axes; in the diagonal axes, the same letter is also repeated. We can speculate as to whether this system truly was self-generative. Unlike generative art based on chemical reactions or digital procedures, Johns’s work did not develop itself. The artist painted each and every letter and its


\textsuperscript{234} Ibid, 154.


\textsuperscript{236} The colors, scale, signs, and the structure of the pictorial plane of Gray Alphabet recall analytic cubism.
background by hand; his autographic gestures are expressed in every cube of the schematic grid. This creates a tension between the pre-determined system and the hand-painted gestures\(^\text{237}\) between Johns “the conceptualist,” who creates remote art and Johns “the painter,” who attends to the action of painting. Thus, geometrical structure and gestural marks coexist in a painting that combines two different approaches to abstraction.

*Scent* is similar to *Gray Alphabet* in another aspect, it creates the impression of limitedness. In both cases, the painting is built using a set of limited elements and following predetermined rules. Since the set of elements is limited, the possible combinations are also limited. In order to further push the sense limitedness and the internal domain of his painting, Johns also implied that each of the two paintings could be curled around and joined at the edges to form a cylinder. He started and completed the sequence with similar sections in *Scent*, (see fig. 3.6)\(^\text{238}\) and with sections that can follow each other in *Gray Alphabet*.\(^\text{239}\)

\(^{237}\) Galanter pointed to the seriality of the system, which cedes some degree of control to an external source and creates a tension in Johns’s work. He described *Gray Alphabet* as a system that calls into question the “moment-to-moment intuitive decisions of the artist.” Galanter, “Generative Art and Rules-based Art.”

\(^{238}\) Hess labelled the sections of *Scent* with the letters a to f. He showed how each panel provides a different combination of these elements, and pointed to the fact that the painting begins and ends with similar a sections.

\(^{239}\) The first column in *Gray Alphabet* begins with a and the last one begins with z, rolling the painting into a cylinder shape could continue the sequence of the same letter in the diagonal axes.
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As a geometrical shape, the hypothetical cylinder is one of the formal abstract features of the painting, generated by an autonomous abstract system that seems to be taken from the field of combinatorics. At the same time, the cylinder shape also embodies the subject matter.

In his interpretation of *Scent*, Mark Rosenthal focused on the hypothetical cylindrical shape that Hess had discovered and linked it to the painting’s title, which implies something hidden in the painting—hidden but sensed, like a scent. The hidden element is the internal repetitive structure. But this structure is not self-sufficient according to Rosenthal, who saw a standing figure in it. The bodily presence also exists in the comparison that Johns drew between a skin and a canvas and between the crosshatches and the outer covering of a figure. Rosenthal linked the crosshatches to “something human.” This interpretation is part of Rosenthal’s effort to highlight the human agent in the abstract work and to merge the human realm with the pictorial realm. His approach to abstraction is different from

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241 Ibid, 22.

242 Ibid, 22.


244 The idea that the crosshatches might be a metaphor for a skin was reinforced in conversations between the artist and Jill Johnston. See Jill Johnston, “Tracking the Shadow,” *Art in America*, vol. 75, no. 10 (October 1987): 132, in Rosenthal, *Jasper Johns, Work since 1974*, 19.

245 Ibid, 16.
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Greenberg’s formalism, because he views the abstract shapes as references to objects that bear likeness to appearances in the external world.

Rosenthal developed this interpretation in the exhibition that he curated for the Venice Biennale in 1988, where Johns represented the United States. The American Pavilion was dedicated to a survey of Johns’s work since 1974. There was a particular focus on the crosshatch paintings, which Rosenthal regarded as abstract works that highlight the human agent. Rosenthal interpreted the crosshatches as an abstract pattern that has the capability of dealing with the human modern condition, and Johns’s decisions to refer to existential content through images and quotations attest that Rosenthal was not wrong. The abstract shapes function as a filter for dealing with issues external to the domain of art, and even justify themselves through these themes.

Rosenthal outlined a development in Johns’s work in which “Formalism, whether manifested as abstraction from reality, non-objectivity, or commitment to the physical characteristics of the work of art, remains a dominant issue for him.” Rosenthal divided the period between 1974 and 1988 into two groups of paintings, the first was of the crosshatch paintings, the second the series of figurative paintings called “The Seasons.” The crosshatches are part of a step towards a more personalized form of expression, in which Johns refers to themes and utilizes conventional iconographic images of vanitas, mortality, and the stages of life, as in The Seasons.

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247 Ibid, 10.

248 Ibid, 11.
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The painting Between the Clock and the Bed (fig. 3.7), the first of a series that Johns created between 1981 and 1983, is another step in the development that Rosenthal outlined. Rosenthal demonstrated how meaning external to formalism is embodied in the abstract pattern and the systems of repetition. The first clue is in the title. Johns was making reference to a painting by Edvard Munch; Rosenthal built his interpretation around this metaphorical encounter.

In 1943, Munch completed a portrait of himself standing between a faceless clock and a bed (fig. 3.8), a painting that Johns came across in the early eighties, after about a decade of use of the crosshatch pattern. He was amazed to find an almost identical pattern in the quilting of Munch’s bed. Following this discovery, he decided to create a painting after Munch’s self-portrait.249 Johns’s painting is divided into three panels. The left panel includes yellow lines on top of a purple-blue background. The lines continue into the middle panel and turn into blue lines above orange. The pattern in the right panel mirrors the left one, reflecting the yellow bundled lines with red lines above green. At the bottom right of this panel, there is an accumulation of crosshatches with the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue, which resonate with the tiny lines in the left panel. It is a rich and layered painting with a sophisticated play on complementary colors and reflections. The masses of paint, peeking through behind the pattern, resemble a reflection through an obscure window. When comparing these masses to Munch’s painting, they imply an awaiting fate. Johns translated the drama

249 “Johns had been struck by the coincidence between the quilting on the bed in Munch’s painting and his crosshatchings.” Richard Francis, “the Voice Seems to Come from Some Other Sources 1977-1984,” in Johns, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990), 100.
into a painting that lacks the figure of a man. He also eliminated the self-portrait reference from the title, as if to refer to a more general condition than his own.

Rosenthal considered Johns’s painting “an abstract analogue for the situation that is present in Munch’s painting.” It is a situation between the clock and the bed, between time and death. He pointed to visual similarities between the two paintings in order to demonstrate that the abstract structure is analogous to Munch’s symbolism. Like the bed and the clock in Munch’s painting, the outer sections in Johns’s triptych complete each other, whereas the central section is unique. In addition, the red, yellow, and blue hatches in Johns’s work are located in a similar place as the coverlet in Munch’s painting.

Rosenthal’s approach to abstraction in painting provides an alternative to Greenberg; it is a reaction against one of the dominant views on abstraction in postwar America. In his 1996 exhibition, “Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline,” at the Guggenheim, Rosenthal links abstraction to psychological states and working habits of the artists. He emphasized the emotional and spiritual aspects of abstraction and the literary meanings and moods that are evoked through color. Abstraction could be considered a rejection of specific events in history, but not for the sake of artistic autonomy—“in order to concentrate

on heightened emotions.” Rosenthal’s essay depicts abstraction as emotional, transcendental, liberatory, universal, self-expressive, romantic, ineffable, spiritual, and ahistorical. He showed that abstraction is not exclusive to formalism. This approach became quite popular, as evidenced in the dual exhibition of Johns and Munch in the Munch museum in 2016, in which the crosshatches were analyzed in relation to subject matter. With respect to the two works under discussion here, Rosenthal’s thematic approach is more viable for analyzing a painting such as Between the Clock and the Bed and less so for Scent.

To conclude, Johns’s crosshatch paintings represent one approach to a reconsideration of abstraction in painting. As with his images of the American flag, Johns reconsiders the opposition of abstraction and subject matter through his use of

253 Ibid., 235.
254 Ibid.
256 “Jasper Johns + Edvard Munch,” at the Munch Museum, Oslo, between June 18 and September 25, 2016. In this dual exhibition, the curators based the encounter between the painters on Rosenthal’s interpretation.
the crosshatch pattern. Disregarding Greenberg’s either-or proposition with respect to abstraction and subject matter, Johns’s paintings include both.
Chapter Four

Chapter Four:

Using the Logic of Printing:

Reconsidering Autonomy in Painting through Repetition

In this chapter I consider Johns’s 1974 painting *Corpse and Mirror* (fig. 4), which exemplifies the painter’s reconsideration of the question of autonomy in painting through use of the medium of printing. Through his use of printing techniques in his painting Johns was able to subvert the medium’s autonomy and yet maintain its specificity—a contradiction of Greenberg’s concept of the autonomous medium and its role in establishing specificity. I argue that in Johns’s painting, autonomy is reexamined and turned out to be detached from specificity.

My argument builds upon scholarship on printing and theories about the artistic medium. Particularly, I examine the process of printing and the way in which the printing procedures occupy space. These procedures are implied in *Corpse and Mirror* as part of Johns’s strategy to suggest his own version of medium specificity, which challenges the coupling between specificity and autonomy.

Johns’s strategy to reconsider autonomy in painting is unique in relation to other artistic practices because he was still dealing with inherent issues of the medium such as the pictorial flatness. Here a comparison of *Corpse and Mirror* to Donald Judd’s *Specific Objects* (fig. 1.1) is helpful. Judd articulated the specificity of his works about ten years before Johns created his painting, and it seems that Johns not only dealt with the theories of Greenberg and Fried when shaping his own approach to specificity, but also took Judd’s conception of specificity into account. The

differences between the approaches to specificity of Judd and Johns bring up the way in which Johns manages to create art that is not autonomous and yet, it is specific to a given medium. While Judd rebelled against the separation between media by suggesting a new category—the “object,” Johns’s *Corpse and Mirror* challenges artistic autonomy but also falls into the category of painting.

4.1 Using the Logic of Printing in *Corpse and Mirror* (1974)

In the early 1960s, Johns began creating lithographs at the atelier Universal Limited Art Editions (fig. 4.1). Printing has gone on to play a central role in all of Johns’s art, particularly in his paintings. The “logic” of printing, which derives from the printmaking procedures and material support, influenced him already in a very early stage of his career. He became deeply devoted to this medium and considered printing a source of inspiration throughout his career, stating some two decades later that lithography had affected all of his thinking. This influence can be regarded in both positive and negative terms. While the orthodox approach to medium specificity sees the borrowing of procedures from one medium by another as a

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contamination of the medium’s purity, other approaches interpret these same phenomena as a fertile ground for new developments. Johns’s 1974 painting Corpse and Mirror can be viewed from both perspectives. On the one hand, it looks like a “pure” abstract painting; on the other hand, it includes the logic of another medium.

His use of abstract visual elements in the painting emphasizes the flatness of the canvas; Johns has seemingly created an autonomous painting that follows Greenberg’s doctrine. It is a large painting (127 x 172.5 cm), full of repetitive diagonal lines and divided into two mirrored panels, each containing three horizontal subsections. The left panel was made with oil paint and it is brighter than the right panel, which includes collage overlaid with wax. The most prominent marks on the rather pale half of the painting are a large X, which is partly obscured by a pinkish-beige gesture and, below these, the triangular impression of an iron. These marks are on top of black-grey lines, covering a white surface. The lines are uneven in their appearance and density and have the feeling of gesture. Each group of four to six parallel lines is oriented in a different direction. The hatches do not depict figures or space and do not function as contour lines; they also do not provide any illusion of depth, but are instead distributed evenly across the canvas and seem to represent nothing but themselves.

Greenberg saw the avoidance of subject matter and the emphasis upon form as the two interrelated strategies of abstraction that were necessary in order to achieve autonomy in art. Artistic autonomy can refer to a separation from the everyday world.\footnote{The comparison between abstract art and music is an exception in Greenberg’s writings. Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” (1948), in Art and Culture: Critical Essays, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 155; Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” 41.}
of social and political praxis as well as to the concept of self-legislation and internal logic of development. I focus here on the second sense, which sees the production of art as taking a stand towards earlier work by engaging with prior conventions and expectations. In Greenberg’s writing, this principle is linked to the separation of media: the medium of painting has its own history and contemporary painting relates to this history.

Greenberg outlines a development of painting and attributes internal laws to it as follows: When the avant-garde painters rejected the illustrative preoccupations of nineteenth-century academic art practice and began to avoid any references to subject matter, they did so in accordance with the logic of painting, which is different from the logic of literature. When they emphasized the flatness of the surface, it was in order to distinguish painting from sculpture. The autonomy of painting was shaped by the history of painting and the medium’s struggle to differentiate itself from other dominant artistic practices.

The pattern of repetitive lines in Johns’s painting emphasizes the flatness of the canvas, as if to ensure the painting’s autonomy. Like the modernist grid, this geometric pattern can be considered a declaration of pictorial shape. In addition, it

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262 This concept is closely tied to that of disinterestedness as articulated by Kant and other eighteenth century philosophers. Jason Gaiger, “Value Conflict and the Autonomy of Art,” in Aesthetic and Artistic Autonomy, ed. Owen Hulatt, (Bloomsbury, 2013), 79.

263 Ibid., 78.

264 Ibid., 82.

seems to fulfill some of the characteristics that Greenberg attributed to Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings (fig. 1). Johns’s pattern is also an accumulation of repetitions and aside from several marks (such as the large X on the right panel), and the division into two panels, it constructs a picture in which “every element and every area… [are] equivalent in accent and emphasis.”266 It is a unique version of the “all-over” picture, because the repeated “identical or closely similar elements” spread evenly from one edge of the canvas to the other and result in a decentralized, polyphonic work, to use Greenberg’s terms.267 Johns’s painting, like the modernist grid and Pollock’s drip-paintings, responds to a contemporary sensibility that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted.268 This sensibility is translated to a flatter painting.

Another aspect of the repetitive lines in Corpse and Mirror subverts the idea of autonomy in painting and opens it to printing. Johns insists on referring to “the crosshatch pattern,” even though the lines do not cross each other. This insistence testifies to the importance of printing in analyzing this painting; crosshatching is a traditional technique that was used by the master-printers in etching and engraving in order to create the illusion of three-dimensional space (fig. 4.2).269 The differences...
between Johns’s “crosshatches” and the shading technique of the Renaissance printmakers, however, are greater than the similarities. The parallel marks in Johns’s paintings are much larger and more widely spaced than the almost invisible shading we see in Renaissance prints. Johns’s gestures are almost straight, underscoring the nuances between them; by contrast, the lines in the prints are part of a perfectly-controlled texture (fig. 4.3). In addition, Johns’s pattern maintains a fixed gap between the lines that do not cross each other, while in the classical prints, the density of the lines can vary and they cross, yielding a stronger impression of volume and shading.

Then there is the question of modernist pictorial flatness—the context of printing also enables Johns to question the flatness of his painting. He refers to the way in which printing occupies space by creating a division between the two panels, which mirror each other. Almost all printing methods include a similar mirror relationship as such an image reversal is inherent in the printmaking process by which an image is transferred from the printing plate to the paper (fig. 4.4). The image on the print and the image on the plate mirror each other in the relief techniques of woodcut and linocut, in the planographic technique of lithography, and also in intaglio such as etching and engraving.

Jennifer L. Roberts, who in 2012 curated an exhibition on Jasper Johns and the materiality of print, has worked on this issue of reversing and mirroring as meaningful elements in Johns’s art. In her book accompanying the exhibition, *Jasper Johns/In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print* (Harvard Art Museums, 2012), she focuses on the influence of printing on his entire *oeuvre*. Roberts argues that Johns is modelling printmaking procedures when creating image reversals and mirroring in his painting. In addition, she suggests that the most profound element
Johns adapted from printmaking is a different way of thinking. The printmaker needs to “think backwards, upside down, inside out” when planning a print, and Johns applied this principle to his painting. In her approach to reversal, Roberts strives to overcome any sense of division between the various media. She regards reversal as endemic not only to printmaking but also inherently a part of casting, photography, ornament, and pattern. Focusing on reversal as a technique or procedure in art is essentially different from focusing on each singular medium as the art history has traditionally done. Roberts’s reading of Johns’s art is influenced by Rosalind Krauss’s notion of the “post-medium condition”; the specificity she attributes to the artistic process is also not bounded to a specific medium.

Robert’s cross-medium approach illuminates certain aspects about the use of reversal in Johns’s paintings. He uses image reversal to “add space and still keep it an object painting.” The printing process provided him with a solution to a specific aspect of painting, because it involves the transfer between two surfaces of “flipped, hinged and mirrored forms.” In Corpse and Mirror Johns refers to these spatial procedures through the division into two panels, and he implies that the flat painting was once folded and thus is not that flat anymore. This solution is unique because it does not involve the use of the traditional illusionistic system and relies on procedures...


272 Ibid.


from another medium. It turns out that the referential use of what is a feature of printmaking is specific to painting but also subverts its autonomy.

4.2 Specificity Beyond Autonomy

_Corpse and Mirror_ is specific to its medium because it deals with the pictorial flatness, and shares this feature with the modernist painting that Greenberg promoted. According to Greenberg, the most crucial characteristic of painting is its inherent flatness, which the modernist painting brings to the foreground, so to speak. By dealing with this aspect, Johns locates his painting in the context of modernism, as if to follow the logic of Greenberg’s formalist approach; however, Johns also turns this logic on its head because specificity appears to be detached from the autonomy of painting. Another example of specificity detached from autonomy can be found in the case of Donald Judd’s _Specific Objects_. Judd employed specificity in his art and subverted the separation between media; his works are specific to themselves in their physicality and they are neither painting nor sculpture. Unlike _Corpse and Mirror_, which presents itself as a painting, Judd’s _Specific Objects_ do not easily fall into any given categories. Along the same line of Judd’s approach to specificity and autonomy, it is possible to argue that in _Corpse and Mirror_, Johns did not challenge the established category of painting but in fact remained specific to it.

In 1965 Judd wrote an essay in which he suggested a concept of artistic specificity that exceeds Greenberg’s medium specificity. His article, “Specific Objects,” which became a manifesto of Minimalist art, describes a specificity that subverts the modernist demand for purity and separateness of the media. Judd stated that “half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting
nor sculpture.”275 This ambiguous position was attributed to his own works and the
work of his peers, among them Roberts Morris, Tony Smith, and Frank Stella. Judd
argued that the common ground of these works is that they are specific to themselves
and they exist outside any artistic categories.

Judd is associated with the generation that rebelled against the Abstract
Expressionist painters.276 He and his peers emphasized the concrete physical
properties of the artwork; logic and clarity replaced ambiguity and inconclusiveness.
Frank Stella’s declaration “what you see is what you see,” summarizes their
viewpoint.277 This principle became in Judd’s work “objectivity.”

The term “objectivity” has various meanings in art. In the case of Judd’s
Specific Objects, objectivity plays a central role in creating an autonomous and
specific work of art. It is linked to factuality and concreteness, features which
emphasize the specific materiality of the object; Judd related objectivity to the
obdurate identity of a material,278 and believed that only empirical facts can be
credible.279

The concept of objectivity with respect to Judd’s work also refers to the
quality of being an object in a space. Judd was eager to explore the relation between

275 Judd, “Specific Objects,” 74.

276 See Barbara Haskell, Donald Judd, (Whitney Museum of Art, 1988), 22.

277 Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” Art News, 65 (September 1966), 58,
in Haskell, Donald Judd, 22. Stella is associated with Abstract Expressionism;
however, his art is essentially different from the spiritual and expressive approach that
is attributed to other Abstract Expressionists.


279 Haskell, Donald Judd, 22.
the features of an object and its surroundings. He considered his art to consist of specific objects in a specific space and emphasized the formal relationships inside and outside each work. Already by the 1960s, he was dedicating special attention to the installation of his work and started taking specific locations into account when planning future works. He would calculate the number of units and adjust the intervals between them according to the given size of the wall, such that the work of art fits the space. In 1969-70, he presented a work which was created for a specific space in the Castelli Gallery: a wall of steel boxes stacked three meters high, that fully occupied and dominated the exhibition room. Repetition of a similar unit and interval was a strategy by which Judd could link an object to its surroundings and yet at the same time to ensure a level of independency. His concern for creating the proper relationship between the work and its environment led him to further explore the use of proportion, subdivision of space, and relationships between objects. Judd explored the relationship between work, wall, floor, and room and aspired to create a direct connection between the sculpture, the viewer, and the space in which both were standing. The interval and size of the original vertical stack of 1965, for example, was determined in part by the height of the ceiling. Judd was a significant influence on the development of site-specific art in the United States.

282 Ibid., 101.
283 Ibid., 104.
According to Michael Fried, this emphasis on the relationship between object, installation space, and viewer contradicts our understanding of sculpture and painting. Fried was critical of Judd’s emphasis on the “objectivity” of his work, referring to it instead as “objecthood”—the condition of non-art. Fried claimed that Judd subverts the specificity of the visual arts because he invokes an experience that is essentially different from sculpture and painting. In Fried’s opinion, Judd’s objections to the given media hinder artistic autonomy and exclude artistic autonomy because the works contradict the specificity of the given media. While works of modernist painting and sculpture emphasize the formal relations within the work in order to suspend our sense of them as objects in the world, Judd intentionally created works that appear as real objects. He focused on the literal shape, a single and simple shape, giving the impression of wholeness. The unity of a work is crucial to experiencing it as an object, “open and extended, more or less environmental.” This, in turn, creates a unique situation that Fried described as “a kind of a stage presence,” theatrical in its effect or quality. Fried claims that this experience persists in time, and thus contrasts with the spatial condition of painting. The art forms that extend in time and the art forms that extend in space are considered by Fried to stand in opposition. He attributed the experience of endless duration to the repetition of an element in Frie...
Judd’s work; the identical elements carry “the implication that the units in question could be multiplied ad infinitum.”

Greenberg and Fried shared the belief that autonomy is possible only with specificity, and specificity is always in relation to a given medium. From their perspective, a work of art can be specific only if it strictly differentiates itself from works that belong to other categories. Moreover, the work should not even be considered as art if it pushes the boundaries between media. Greenberg compared the minimal works to regular furniture, and Fried argued that evaluating works is possible only within the individual arts. Works which cannot be classified as belonging to either one of the given media cannot be specific.

Unlike Greenberg and Fried, I would argue that Judd and Johns were attending to a specificity that is independent of autonomy. They created works that are in fact specific, but subvert the autonomy of the medium. Judd believed that every material possesses formal properties associated with it alone that should not be concealed. Surface, color, thickness, and weight of an artwork should all speak to the specific formal properties of the material from which the object was made. In a work he created in 1966, six 34 x 34 inches cubes made of stainless steel and yellow plexiglas, Judd decided to keep the steel and the Plexiglas not covered by any other material, so they are shown as they are (fig. 4.5). Thus, the role of the artist is to work with the formal properties of a material and to limit him- or herself to the form that best allows


289 “Minimal works are readable as art as almost anything is today—including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper.” Greenberg, “Recentness of Sculpture,” 250-256. Also see Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 15.

the materials to be fully expressed.\textsuperscript{291} Only then, will the integrity of color, shape, and surface not be violated, and the materials will be truly autonomous.\textsuperscript{292}

The autonomy in Judd’s work relates to the materials he used and not the medium. It is derived from the capability of art to create something valid on its own terms. By emphasizing materiality and concentrating on formal properties, the work avoids representing something beyond itself; it exists with a degree of independency from visual references in the world. This is also evident in Judd’s exploration of the formal qualities of his work, which he dedicated to the study of materials. His decision to make repeat use of specific materials in differing combinations suggests the presence of an internal system.

In Judd’s work, structure is determined by the material. Judd insisted that the structure of the work will be compatible with the nature of its component materials. In his work using acrylic panels, the fluorescent nature of the transmitted light is intrinsic to the material itself.\textsuperscript{293} In order to “abolish ambiguity” about the volumes and the thickness of the metal materials, he exposed the edges of his sheet metal sculptures through the use of open-sided tubes, flanges, perforated surfaces, and recessed tops, for example in \textit{Untitled} (1963), in which the iron pipe is visible (fig. 4.6).\textsuperscript{294} This also enabled him to fully reveal the structure of each work, thus contributing to its specificity.\textsuperscript{295}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{292} Haskell, \textit{Donald Judd}, 73.
\bibitem{293} Haskell, \textit{Donald Judd}, 47.
\bibitem{294} Ibid.
\bibitem{295} Haskell, \textit{Donald Judd}, 57.
\end{thebibliography}
he saw it as allowing the artwork to be true to itself. This “truthfulness,” he assumed, was possible within the limits of empirical knowledge. Accordingly, he considered it an ethical responsibility of the artist to not attempt more in a work than was allowed by its formal limitations. Judd identified with the Abstract Expressionist aspiration to create work that was “a reality not a picture of it.” He believed that art should be posited as a thing in itself rather than as a representation of or a metaphor for something else.

4.3 Reconsidering Autonomy through Repetition—Comparing Johns and Judd

Johns and Judd reconsidered the concept of autonomy as it was articulated in the theories of Greenberg and Fried. Both artists subverted the doctrine of medium specificity by suggesting artworks that are specific but not autonomous in relation to a given medium. Their strategies to challenge the boundaries between media, however, were very different. While Judd was proposing a specificity exceeding the given media, Johns’s was solely with respect to the medium of painting. The one artist was dissatisfied with the established categories, so he invented a new one—the object; the other considered the coupling of autonomy-specificity as too limiting, and thus

296 See Donald Judd, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Maeght Lelong, Paris, as Repe’re: Cahiers d’Art Contemporain, no. 36 (1987), 9, in Haskell, Donald Judd, 17.
detached specificity from autonomy. The repetitive method of working and the repetitive structures in the final work enabled Judd and Johns to provide their work with specificity while reconsidering artistic autonomy.

Judd developed a repetitive method of working inspired by scientific inquiry. Like a scientist, who insists on the repeatability of his results when proving a hypothesis, Judd applied repetition in an effort to discover the intrinsic quality of the materials he was working with. He assumed that knowledge is based on experience and observations and examined various combinations of materials for a given structure. His premise was that it is only possible to estimate and evaluate things that can be seen with one’s eyes. His investigations of materials therefore involved a process of trial and error, which is the same method that he used looking for a structure to best express a material and also in selecting an appropriate location for siting a work. He aspired to locate his work such that it would respond to its site while still retaining its own status as an autonomous object. This involved a repetitive process of trying various elements, viewing the result, and then trying another option, time and time again, until he was satisfied. The fixed units and intervals Judd relied on were calculated for a specific location, but their position in space distinguished them from the architecture of the room. When a work was installed in a new place, it would needed to be adjusted, and he would once again arrange and rearrange the elements in various combinations until he was satisfied that all conditions had been met. Judd considered his works to be specific and autonomous objects in specific spaces. The new category of “objects” enabled him to suggest a specificity and autonomy that exceed the given media.

Johns’s situation is different. His dissatisfaction was not with the established categories as such, but with the boundaries between them; the autonomy of the
medium, he felt, was not necessary for creating a work specific to a medium. Judd articulated the specificity of the “object”; Johns was searching for a specificity that relied on a given category, on painting, such that painting could be specific to itself while incorporating the procedures of another medium. *Corpse and Mirror*, for example, follows the procedures of printing in order to deal with an intrinsic issue of the medium of painting—pictorial flatness. The pattern of repetitive lines in the painting emphasizes the flatness of the canvas, ostensibly to ensure the autonomy of the painting. Meanwhile, his repetitive lines, his so-called “crosshatches,” also touched on printmaking by referencing the crosshatch technique of the early printmakers. When comparing traditional crosshatching and Johns’s crosshatch pattern, clearly the later creates a flatter impression. In Johns’s painting, the hatch marks underscore the subtle differences between them and the flat surface on which they are applied, a very different effect from the perfectly-controlled shading of the engraver’s crosshatching, which creates the illusion of space in a print. The print context, however, also enabled Johns to question this flatness. He made reference to the process of pressing the paper onto the plate thus creating a mirror relationship between the two panels, implying that the painting was once folded and thus not flat.

In Johns’s painting the interaction between media contributes to the specificity of the work; borrowing the procedures from printing was a fertile ground for him. *Corpse and Mirror* is not a pure and autonomous painting, but neither is it an example of a work caught between two media. Johns ensures the specificity of his painting, but this specificity is detached from autonomy.

To conclude, these two works, Johns’s *Corpse and Mirror* and Judd’s *Specific Objects*, serve well as case studies to expose the limitations of the theoretical framework described above. Medium specificity turns out to be too restrictive in its
insistence on linking specificity to autonomy. The approaches of Judd and Johns to artistic autonomy were essentially different and more flexible than the approach articulated in the writings of Greenberg and Fried.
Chapter Five:

Quoting and Returning to Past Artists:

Reconsidering Originality in Painting through Repetition

Toward the end of the 1970s, a retrospective tendency that entailed a return to images of past artists began appearing in Johns’s work. Johns repeated his own imagery and quoted from other artists, repainting their images in new compositions. Two examples are Ventriloquist (fig. 2.3), an encaustic painting created in 1983, and the series of four paintings titled The Seasons (figs. 5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3), which were also made using wax and created between 1985 and 1986. These works are filled with quotations, even though some of them are concealed or only implied. In this chapter I will analyze these paintings and the original way in which Johns quotes other artists. Subsequently, I analyze how Johns reconsiders artistic originality in Ventriloquist, and argue that his approach includes repeating, returning, and reversal, as evident in the quotation of Barnett Newman. I rely on the theoretical background about originality in postwar American art discussed in chapter two and compare between Johns’s and Newman’s approach to originality. I argue that through quoting Newman, Johns dealt with primacy, as an aspect of originality. While my analysis of this quotation focuses on the rendering of the borrowed image, other interpretations of quotations in Johns’s art emphasize the transformation of thematic meanings. Thus, the last section of this chapter is dedicated to a thematic approach to the quotations in Johns’s The Seasons which is different than my own.

An argument can be made that the densely interwoven composition of quotations in Johns’s paintings invokes an impression of simultaneity. Johns draws on images created by artists at other times and assembles them in layered arrangements,
in which one image conceals another, and in collage arrangements, in which the images are placed beside or above one another. His use of these images implies a unique temporality, a metaphorical joining of the past with the present.

Johns’s approach to quotation is original and essentially different from more thematic approaches to quotation. The use of quotation in his painting is not as a mere tool for delivering subject matter, because the way in which he renders the taken images is meaningful in itself. Johns combines the various images into a collage-like structure. This structure emphasizes the simultaneous aspects of the painting and is a reflection as well on the procedure of “cut-and-paste” that is typical to quoting. It turns out that the originality in the quotations is thus less connected to the transformation of the original subject matter of the quoted image and more to the “autographic uniqueness” of the paintings.\(^{299}\) Johns reconsiders the thematic approach to originality through quoting and returning to past artists. This strategy of reconsidering originality is the focus of the following analysis, which is dedicated to the painting *Ventriloquist*. I connect the unique temporality in this work to the specific quotation of Newman, and show that they play a central role in reconsidering originality.

5.1 *Ventriloquist* (1983) — A Painting about Originality in Art

\(^{299}\) “Autographic uniqueness” is a phrase taken from Paul Crowther’s *Geneses of Postmodern Art: Technology As Iconology*, (Routledge, 2018). It is related to the idea that the work of art must be physically created by the artist.
Chapter Five

The painting *Ventriloquist* is a fine example of Johns’s use of quotation as a strategy to explore the complex concept of originality. The various means of repetition are linked to a return in time and to simultaneity and challenge the chronological development that begins from a singular origin. This section begins with Barnett Newman’s use of quotation, which I consider a form of image repetition. Newman is in many respects Johns’s contemporary; however, since he belongs to the previous generation of artists, he will be considered in this case as an artist of the near past.

*Ventriloquist* is a fragmented painting that resembles a collage, in which Johns combined images and styles of at least six different artists: Barry Moser, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, George Ohr, John F. Peto, and Barnett Newman. By depicting faucets and pipes in this painting, Johns situated the viewer “at in-tub” level. These elements, located in the lower corner of the right half of the diptych, are placed next to a straw basket, on which there is a vase set against a dark background. The silhouette of the light-colored vase creates a figure-ground illusion—we see two faces in profile. The profiles are an indirect reference to Picasso, because they resemble a lithograph that Johns created in 1973 that included two profiles of the artist (fig. 5.4). On the edge at the right is a small nail, similar to the nails that at times appeared in Braque’s analytic cubism (fig. 5.5). Braque created an ironic gesture through his depiction of an illusionistic nail at the top of a Cubist painting and Johns is likewise contrasting two different modes of representation. Next to the nail is what appears to be a sheet of print paper imprinted with two reversed-color American flags in green, orange, and black is taped to the wall, like a nineteenth century *trompe l’oeil* painting of Peto (fig. 2.4). The pieces of tape resemble quotation.

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300 Goldblatt, “Epilogue: Two Ventriloqual Paintings,” in *Art and Ventriloquism*, 171.
marks, indicating that the insertion was taken from somewhere else. The bright colors of the flags, the sharp-edged shapes, and the white margins give it the appearance of a screen print or lithograph. To the left is another print, only partly visible, probably of a similar composition of two flags, but in this case with the more familiar red and white stripes. The two reversed-color flags contain differing numbers of stars; the upper flag has forty-eight and the lower one fifty. They cover the meeting point between the wooden half of the background and the gray wall, like a patch. The vertical axis created by the hinged wooden panel divides the painting into two parts that resonate with the “zip” of Newman’s lithograph (fig. 5.6) and imply a relation between the plate and the print in woodcut. In the wood texture we see the figure of a whale with an open mouth. Johns took this image from Barry Moser’s *Moby Dick*, a wood engraving created to illustrate Herman Melville’s book. On top of the whale, there are seven floating pots. The American ceramic artist George Ohr made the originals, and they are part of Johns’s collection. Below the pots, Johns signed and dated the painting using stencils (“J. JOHNS 1983”) as if to complete his appropriation of the images. While most of the images can be considered as belonging to Johns, in the case of his quotation of Newman, he emphasized the fact that the image was borrowed by re-depicting its actual size and colors. Putting his stenciled signature on the other half of the painting was his way of “deliberately play[ing] himself off” against Newman.³⁰¹

The reference to Newman’s lithograph is at the core of the following analysis. It is possible to interpret the entire painting and the several embedded clues referencing printing as setting the stage for an encounter between Johns and Newman.

in which originality is to be considered. Johns planted implicit references to the print
 technique of reversal that he also used when reproducing Newman’s lithograph (fig. 5.8). He painted images of prints, images from prints, and images that point to
 printmaking processes, and he also printed his own images. Woodcut, screen printing,
 lithography, and stencil appear as imagery, objects, materials, and procedures.
 Woodcut is a relief technique; the other printing techniques are planographic. Johns
 also makes reference to a third category of printmaking: intaglio. His painted nail on
 the wall makes reference to the intaglio process, which involves scratching a prepared
 surface with a sharp tool (fig. 5.7). In addition, the floating pots and the hypothetical
 bather call to mind the dampening of a print sheet in a water bath or the dipping of a
 copperplate into an acid etching bath (fig. 5.8). Perhaps the most profound element
 that Johns has adapted from printing to painting is a different way of thinking.302 The
 printmaker, he wrote, needs to “think backwards, upside down, inside out” when
 planning a print, and Johns applied this principle to his painting.303 The reversed
 version of Newman’s lithograph follows this logic, as do the figure-ground reversal of
 the profiles created by the silhouette of the vase, which appear as negative space.
 Thus, it seems that the material and technical means of printmaking, including
 reversal and mirroring, have been transformed into an idea in painting.

 Johns linked the role of reversal in printing to the idea of returning to an
 earlier time, a topic I will address in the next section.

 5.2 Repeating, Returning, and Reversal in Ventriloquist

 302 See Roberts, “The Printerly Art of Jasper Johns,” 14; Geelhaar, “Interview with
 Jasper Johns,” 63-72.

Returning is not repeating. To return is to go back to a previous place or state; to repeat something is to say or do it again. These two terms, however, are intertwined in *Ventriloquist*, in which repetition in reversal implies a return in time. This returning and repeating are connected to each other through reversal, and Johns uses the link between these conceptual and visual elements in order to reconsider originality in art.

The visual element of reversal in *Ventriloquist* entails a perceptual and symbolic return in time, as exemplified by the two American flags at the center of the painting. They resemble screen prints printed in complementary colors and imply a contrast reversal— the sort of complimentary-color afterimage that appears after staring for a minute or so at the American flag in its true colors and then looking immediately at a white surface—a ghost from the recent past. This is a perception-related form return. Another kind of return associated with the flags is symbolic and involves the number of stars. Their numbers here, 48 and 50, allude to the historical development of the flag, which had only 48 stars before Alaska and Hawaii joined the Union. Johns thus joins the past with the present. The older artist encounters the young Johns and like him, is still struggling to differentiate himself from other artists.

Besides the flags, the other framed picture in Johns’’s painting is the reversed image of a lithograph by Newman, who was a main figure of the New York School painters. Newman’s lithograph, one of the first that he made in 1961, is owned by

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304 *Cambridge English Dictionary*, accessed May 6, 2018

https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/return; *Cambridge English Dictionary*, accessed May 6, 2018

Johns. Both the flags and Newman’s image involve repetition, reversal, and returning. The reversal in Newman’s image makes reference to the reversed image on the printmaker’s plate. By quoting Newman’s lithograph and creating a reversed version, Johns is hypothetically suggesting an additional plate, as if to return in time to the origin of Newman’s print. In order to refer to this aspect of originality in printing, Johns used reversal and differentiated himself from the ethos of originality associated with Newman’s art.

Originality in printing, as in art in general, has various aspects. One parameter that defines the original work of art is uniqueness: a work of art is expected to be a unique object. Fine art printmaking, with its limited signed and numbered series, distinguished itself from reproduction by ensuring that each print is one of a kind. In mass production, the products are multiples of the same; in fine art printing, each is a single and original piece. Elaborating on the unusual ontological state of prints, Karen E. Gover argues that they occupy an intermediate position between pure multiples, of which there can be an unlimited number, and singular works of art, which consist of a single physical object. This complexity is derived from the fact that each sheet is

305 Newman’s first venture into printing was in the three black lithographs Untitled that he made in 1961 at the Pratt Graphic Art Center. The lithograph in question is one of the 30 prints of the second lithograph.

306 “The paradigm example of an artwork is the single, unique, tangible object (a painting or sculpture, say) that serves as the embodiment of a particular artwork.” Jerrold Levinson, “What a Musical Work Is,” Journal of Philosophy 77 (1980): 5-28.

printed individually from the same plate; nonetheless, the prints are similar but never identical. Even though the naked eye may not notice the nuances, there are many factors that differentiate one print from another: the spread of the ink, the absorption capacity of the paper, and even the weather—factors that don’t even take account of the handmade part of the process. This view of the print as an “impression” emphasizes the variations created in one edition. Nonetheless, these inherent characteristics of printing did not satisfy the demand for originality at the art market and art institutions. Thus, a series of procedures, guidelines, and parameters was developed to ensure the originality and uniqueness of the printmaker’s work. The “solution” was found in the paradoxical ontology of the “original copy,” and printing seemed to provide an alternative to the conventional concept of originality. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the original as the earliest that serves as a pattern from which a copy or translation is made, the limited edition of prints shows that both of these components can be found in one object.

An “original copy” is a modernist invention. At the beginning of the twentieth century, creating a finite edition of numbered and signed prints became more common. An integral part of the limited edition is the “cancellation proof.”

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308 Nissim Gal, “From Oedipal to (Anti-) Oedipal Telling,” in *American Prints after World War II*, exh. cat. (Tel Aviv: Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University, 2002), 75-76.


311 Gal, “From Oedipal to (Anti-) Oedipal Telling,” 72.
role is to prove that the plate used to print the edition was defaced and cannot be used again. This dramatic action, which is usually achieved by drawing crossed lines on the plate or grounding the stone, was derived from the need to adjust the elusive status of printing to fit the conventional definition of originality. If there is no potential copy to threaten the singularity of the print, then the print becomes an original. This practical procedure of defacing or destroying the plate was interpreted metaphorically in the scholarship about printing: the “matrix” represented a womb, and the eradication was considered a symbolic action of “murdering the origin.”

The origin in printing is thus metaphorically and practically eradicated. This meaningful action is central to the print chronology, which points to one origin and ensures the singularity of the prints, which are derived from the single plate. The principle of a single origin had guided Newman in most of his works after 1948, which were linked to his new start in Onement I (fig. 2.4). The new totality of this painting embodies the elimination or eradication of past aesthetic traditions; it includes a new approach to pictorial space and a new theme—“the self.”

Onement I


also functions as an origin in Newman’s *oeuvre*; it was followed by works that try to recreate its achievement in other means of expression. Newman considered *Onement I* the origin of the *Cantos* portfolio (fig. 2.5). He struggled to translate the totality of the painting into his prints. Since prints usually have paper frames, Newman searched for a composition that would preserve this frame and yet unite the imprint and the paper it is on. Each print is unique in its colors and proportion but all prints share the same goal and mediate the same meaning—to achieve totality, like their “matrix,” *Onement I*.

By contrast, in Johns’s prints the emphasis is on the process rather than a specific theme. He characterized his printing method as repetition of an image in order to observe the interplay between the image and the medium.\(^{314}\) This can be traced back to his first flag paintings of the 1950s, and it became even more evident in his prints. Richard Field differentiated between Johns’s working method in printmaking and the organizing principle of variations on a theme. He described Johns’s practice as an exploration of process, in which he is “constantly reworking, refocusing, and inverting.”\(^{315}\) Johns is interested in the procedures or printmaking and considers the act of mediation as meaningful in itself. Print is not a secondary medium to painting in his art,\(^{316}\) and the prints are not adaptations of painterly qualities into other means of expression. This can be seen in the lithographs that followed *Ventriloquist* (fig. 2.3). About three years after he completed the wax painting, Johns


\(^{316}\) This was the curatorial premise of the exhibition *Jasper Johns/In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print* at the Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 22–August 18, 2012.
decided to produce a similar composition lithographically and created an edition of 69 lithographs at Universal Limited Art Editions. The technical means of lithography enabled him to shed new light on his encounter with Newman. He doodled and splashed on the stone, giving his work a sketch-book look to emphasize the artistic process. The transparency of the colors provides the scene with a watery appearance and contrasts with the black contours. Parts of the original composition were pushed to the foreground (e.g., the profiles in the cup, the whale, and the gesture on the frame of Newman’s work), while others were mysteriously omitted. The disappearance of Johns’s signature is not accidental. Through the use of the signature in the painting, Johns implied that he was appropriating the images of others; the absence of the signature in the print was his way of reaffirming that he is not the sole origin of his work. This affirmation does not contradict the originality of his work since seeing the artist as the absolute origin of the work, the point where it begins, is a simplification of the complex concept of artistic originality.

The idea of a single author is more part of Rosalind Krauss’s argument against the modernist avant-gardist obsession with originality than it is a real parameter defining artistic originality; however, this idea is relevant to the discussion about originality in art, because some artists emphasize the need to abandon the past for the sake of originality and avoid relying on previous imagery and styles. Newman’s approach exemplifies the importance of abandoning the past. He believed that the only way to continue painting is to start at the very beginning with a “Cartesian tabula

rasa and build from there,” and he distinguished his abstract painting from the European abstract painting for the sake of a fresh start. In 1948, Newman also abandoned his own artistic past and destroyed most of the work he had created up until that time. Jeremy Strick interpreted this rupture from the past as a personal declaration of artistic maturity and a true beginning. He noted that Newman was not the only contemporary artist “to have chosen, at a particular moment in his career, to destroy his earlier work,” and he mentioned Johns as another example. Indeed, both artists aspired to distinguish themselves from other artists and from their own history. However, their conceptions of the possibility of true beginning are essentially different. Newman related the aesthetic act to the beginning of humanity and to the biblical story of Genesis. His spiritual concern with primordial myths exemplifies the modernist obsession with originality and his search for a fresh start is part of his self-originated approach to art. To a certain extent, Newman was the origin of Newman. By contrast, Johns starts his artistic action with borrowed designs or images from others. He positioned himself against the ethos of creating from nothing and expresses himself indirectly, like a ventriloquist.


This metaphor of ventriloquism was viewed as a deconstruction of the unity of the voice and the body in art.\textsuperscript{321} Similar to the elusive situation of the ventriloquist, in which “the voice seems to come from some other source,”\textsuperscript{322} Johns underscored the discrepancy between voice, self-expression, and a single origin. He references ventriloquist’s dummy with the open-mouth figure of the whale, taken from Barry Moser’s \textit{Moby Dick}. This resemblance is based not only on the open mouth, but also on the artistic means that Johns used, like the author of \textit{Moby Dick}, Hermann Melville. Melville, a central figure in American Romanticism literature, attributes human characteristics to the whale. In Melville’s novel, the whale represents feelings of revenge and cruelty; in the context of Johns’s painting, the personification of the whale brings to mind the personification of the ventriloquist’s dummy. Johns also used the notion of indirect expression in a way that questions the origin of the voice. By means of the metaphor of ventriloquism and multiple forms of quotation, he reconsiders the idea of authorship and the attribution of the work to a single author.\textsuperscript{323}

Ventriloquism and quoting are linked to each other through the etymology of the word “citing.” Considering quoting as reviving is rooted in the Latin word \textit{citare},


\textsuperscript{323} Goldblatt pointed to the ambiguity of using images from works of others as Johns’s way to deny that he is the absolute point of origin to his work. See Goldblatt, “Epilogue: Two Ventriloqual Paintings,” 175.
which broadens the meaning of citing to include setting in motion and enacting objects; these multiple meanings are reflected in Johns’s painting. Like a ventriloquist, Johns throws his voice into the images of the artists he references and “makes the dumb speak.” Whether it is the artist-as-dummy or the image that is the figure of the ventriloquist, Johns is negotiating and thus collaborating with past artists by reviving and revising their images.

Johns “speaks” indirectly, and his originality is expressed by the artistic decisions he makes as to how to render the borrowed images. In Ventriloquist the reversal and simultaneous temporality are embodied in the visual elements of the painting, suggesting a metaphorical return in time. The following section is dedicated to thematic readings of quotations in Johns’s paintings, which are essentially different from the suggested reading. I address the thematic approach in order to contrast it to my approach.

5.3 Quoting—Thematic Readings

A thematic approach to art revolves around the topics, motifs or subjects that appear and reappear in works of art. It focuses on the thematic variations and how these are represented in the various contexts. For example, art critic Jill Johnston in her essay “Tracking the Shadow” (1987), closely traces a thematic development and


326 See Goldblatt, ibid., 175; Rosenthal, Jasper Johns: Work Since 1974, 74.
use of quotation in Johns’s paintings.\textsuperscript{327} She viewed her role as that of the detective in an investigation; suspecting that the artist may have concealed some or all of the evidence and the art critic’s task is to expose an image’s true origin. Johnston traced a mysterious repeated detail in the four *The Seasons* painting (figs. 5, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3). The detail, which looks much like a jigsaw puzzle piece, is based on a figure of a dying man in Matthias Grünewald’s sixteenth century masterpiece, the Isenheim Altarpiece (fig. 5.9). This detail reoccurs in disguised form in many of Johns’s works of 1983 and 1984; according to Johnston, Johns emotionally identified with this figure, a “projection of both victim and witness, overcome by death, or by dark forces.”

Johnston emphasized Johns’s biography; accordingly, the dying man represents the artist himself, and his suffering is linked to elements of Johns’s private life.

Johnston also conducted a study of Johns’s iconography. In her interpretation of Johns’s quotations, she focuses on the thematic meanings of his dialogues with past artists. The art historian Roberta Bernstein views Johns’s references to Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Barnett Newman as a part of his “ongoing inquiry into how images carry meaning, and how meanings shift in changing contexts.”\textsuperscript{328} Like Johnston, Bernstein also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the quoted works of other artists and the exact details that Johns appropriated.

One of the reasons why these interpretations and many others follow a thematic approach to analyzing Johns’s quotations is that they largely focus on *The Seasons*, Johns’s entry on behalf of the United States in the Venice Biennale of 1988.

\textsuperscript{327} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{328} Bernstein, “Seeing a Thing Can Sometimes Trigger the Mind to Make Another Thing,” 39.
The *Seasons* series seems to call for a thematic, symbolic, or allegorical analysis. The four prints in the series, identified as “Fall,” “Winter,” “Spring,” and “Summer,” symbolize the cycle of life and the passing of time, an allegorical cycle familiar in Italian Baroque music, not least in Vivaldi’s well known composition of the same name. Johns used them to reflect on stages in his life and artistic career; as part of a densely interwoven composition of quotations, Johns incorporated numerous images from his previous paintings, thus alluding to his own past work. The *Mona Lisa*, the American flag, the clock hands, and the pots are all images that appeared earlier in his work.

The most prominent figure and quotation, repeated in each of the four paintings, is the raked, pale gray, nearly life-size silhouette of a man—the artist himself. Its source is attributed to Picasso’s painting *The Shadow* (1953), in which Picasso’s figure is represented in the front of the canvas. Johns translated Picasso’s cryptic self-portrait into an almost autobiographical four-scene narrative. In “Fall” the figure is divided into two parts in a collapsing surrounding; in Winter it appears on the right side with snowflakes on it; in Spring it is centrally placed and slightly blurred by diagonal lines; in Summer the figure appears on the left side of the canvas. The other motifs attributed to Picasso include the ladder, the rope, the branch, and the yellow stars from his painting *Minotaur Moving His House* (fig. 5.9.1). The passing of time, which Johns implied by converting the images in the four paintings, is literally embodied in the hands on top of the circles. Johns had used this previously to

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329 This theme is connected to Johns’s personal life, as *The Seasons* was painted at a time of transition in the artist’s life when he was moving into a new studio and home.
refer to the hand of the painter or to a dramatic situation of calling for help. In the context of the series in question, the image includes a temporal dimension; it resembles the hands of a clock. The hands have also been interpreted as the hands of Jesus in the Crucifixion scene, with the ladder functioning as a symbol of the cross, and the semicircle of the clock as the nimbus. The crucifixion of Jesus has been depicted in art since the fourth century CE, and Johns created his own version to this repeated theme. In the context of the allegorical cycle of The Seasons, the loaded scene of the Crucifixion represents mortality.

Bernstein addressed temporality in relation to the quotations in The Seasons:

“Johns examines the passage of time through the lens of his own experience. The references in these works to both his own art and that of his predecessors encapsulate his artistic history. The imagery of each painting reinforces the series’ overlapping themes – the four seasons, the stages of life, and particularly the activity of the artist, which is seen in the context of a cyclic view of existence.” Bernstein describes a conceptually “cyclic view of existence” derived from images that were used in the past by Johns or other artists. It is important, however, to focus on the way temporality is embodied in the structure of the paintings, and to analyze the unique way in which the images were rendered and the visual effect created by their

330 Jasper Johns, *Periscope (Hart Crane)* 1963, oil on canvas, 67 x 48 inches (170.2 x 121.9 cm), collection of the artist ©1996 Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.


accumulation. In my perspective, the structure is not cyclically whole or complete; on the contrary, the composition of the paintings seems to fall apart. The collage-like accumulation, in which the appropriated images are placed beside or above one another, seems to be temporary. Through his juxtaposition of images from the past and present, and their assembly into the four fragmented compositions of the series, Johns creates the impression of a simultaneous temporality. Bernstein argues that Picasso’s influence on Johns was mainly in terms of the iconography, but I would emphasize the influence of composition in Picasso’s Minotaur on Johns’s precarious placement of the objects, provisionally one on top of the other. Each of the seasons here seems as if it could topple to the ground at any moment, much like the overburdened wheelbarrow of the Minotaur.

The fragmented structure of The Seasons, as well as other paintings of Johns from the 1980s, stands in contrast to the unifying system of earlier paintings. The later arrangement of the picture plane represents a shift in his career. From single, familiar images, depicted as complete entities (i.e., the flag, the numbers, the letters, the target), he turned to multiple, cut, and partially seen images. Imagery that essentially was all drawn from the public domain was replaced by recognizable icons from the field of art.

Both Johnston and Bernstein interpreted his use of quotation in light of Johns’s famous declaration, “not mine but taken.” The references to other artists

334 “What’s interesting to me is the fact that it isn’t designed but taken. It’s not mine.” Jasper Johns, quoted in Edmund White, “Enigmas and Double Visions,” Horizon 20
were viewed as a part of his method of taking and concealing, once inspired by Duchamp. Both authors also described the shift in the way this method functions in later paintings. While the re-use of found imagery in the early works is considered a strategy to create remoteness, quoting other artists is Johns’s way of indirectly expressing emotional content. Johnston maintained: “Johns’s subject remains concealment. But what was once a kind of game—an intellectual expose-and-seek with objects captures from the public domain—has become more seriously personal.” In other words, the significance of the quotations, according to Johnston, is due to the relationship between the emotional content of the motifs and the artist’s private life. In this reading, quoting is perceived as a tool for delivering subject matter rather than as a meaningful action in itself that is embodied in a certain structure. Johnston and Bernstein both were searching for a thematic origin and attributed creativity to Johns’s actions in relation to the original meaning of the image; they associated originality with origin. I have emphasized the association of originality with creativity and with autographic uniqueness. Concentrating on the “making” of art rather than the thematic meanings of the symbols places the emphasis on a different aspect of originality in art.

Johns chose to approach painting like a collage; he accumulated his quotations side by side, creating an impression of simultaneity. This cut-and-paste strategy is a reflection of a creative process that begins with borrowed imagery. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that these decisions enabled Johns to reconsider originality in light


\[\text{335 Johnston, “Tracking the Shadow,” 135.}\]
Chapter Five

of the original thematic meaning of the images and to emphasize the originality in the rendering of the images and the structure of the painting.
Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the role and the nature of repetition in Jasper Johns’s paintings, arguing that Johns uses repetition in order to reconsider different aspects in painting and, eventually, to push the boundaries of this medium. In the course of my research, I narrowed its scope, focusing specifically on its contribution to the fields of art history and aesthetics. With respect to the methodologies employed, I reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and also summarize my findings and arguments, considering them in their broader context.

This study focuses on a single artist and medium, thus implying a main premise of my research, that Johns is foremost a painter. By specifying the context of “postwar American art,” I am referring to the artistic milieu in which Johns’s art developed. As the title of my dissertation notes, I focused on the role and the nature of repetition in Johns’s paintings. Accordingly, I have characterized the nature of the various manifestations of repetition in Johns’s paintings and argued that their role is to expand the boundaries of painting.

The specified scope of my research influenced the methodologies that I employed. Rather than discussing repetition as a more general and conceptual term, I have focused on manifestations of repetition in the postwar American context, thus restricting my attention to an analysis of the works of John Cage, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Roberts Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, Soll LeWitt, and others and comparing them to Johns’s paintings. Furthermore, I focused on the art theories that had a significant influence on postwar American art, especially the formalist theories of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, and on their differing interpretations of repetition in art.
Conclusion

The work of the American artist Jasper Johns is typical for the transition from modernism to postmodernism. His “crosshatch” patterns offered him the opportunity to engage with abstraction, the primary tradition of modernism; his use of quotation of other artists can be regarded as a postmodern practice of underscoring the discrepancy between voice, self-expression, and a single origin. Johns’s unique position in the second half of the twentieth century is evident in the way he uses repetition in his paintings. In my thesis, I have examined the functions and the nature of repetition in his paintings and described his unique position as a painter who reconsiders the medium of painting. Drawing on previous writings on Johns, I have pointed to the significance of repetition in his paintings and shown that he used repetition as a tool to push the boundaries of the medium of painting. My thesis sheds a new light on his position in art history, in particular in relation to Abstract Expressionism, Neo Dada, Minimalism, and Conceptualism – art forms that dominated the postwar American art scene.

In the flourishing and diverse postwar American art scene, the medium of painting, and particularly the abstract paintings of the New York School, received more attention than other modes of expression. American art critics, though each pursuing a different agenda, have generally agreed on the significance of these paintings. In his canonical text, “The American Action Painters” (1952), Harold Rosenberg argued that Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock provided original art by distinguishing themselves from the European tradition. Artistic originality, in this case, is linked to uniqueness and to primacy in the sense of chronologically priority. Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, on the other hand, emphasized the European roots of this American style and linked it to Édouard Manet and the cubists. Greenberg
Conclusion

and Fried attributed aesthetic autonomy to the abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella, distinguishing their paintings from ordinary objects in the world and from works created in other media.

In this context, the abstractness of the paintings that Johns created becomes questionable; they are not autonomous and their originality does not derive from chronologically priority. As made clear in my thesis, Johns is using repetition in order to reconsider abstraction, autonomy, and originality in painting.

In order to characterize the role and the nature of repetition in Johns’s paintings, this interpretation is derived from primary sources—the paintings themselves and Johns’s reflections on his art. By carefully tracing his artistic procedures and analyzing the structure of his works, I realized that Johns is using repetition in order to reconsider some aspects of painting. The rendering of the images plays a central role in this reconsideration. The various renderings of the American flag image, for example, highlight the differences within sameness; every flag painting is a unique and tangible object. Thus, the conceptual framework for exploring the work of Jasper Johns indicates that repetition leads to change.

Repetition, as a creative activity of transformation, takes part in a meaningful creative process and encourages innovation in the sphere of art and aesthetics. In Johns’s paintings, repetition is a technical and conceptual tool to explore the medium of painting and to push its boundaries.

The core of this study has been the close analysis of Johns’s use of repetition, which I discussed in terms of its contrasts with the work of other artists in the same context. To a certain extent, this focus on the analysis of the paintings is on account of the theoretical background, perhaps the weakest point in my research. In the first two chapters, I have only briefly introduced the various art movements, artists, and
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theoreticians that are relevant to my thesis; of necessity these introductory chapters thus include some theoretical generalizations and even simplifications of complicated ideas. It must be noted, however, that the theoretical background is not the primary focus of my thesis, but rather a tool for reflecting on the visual artistic context of postwar American art. Johns’s paintings are first and foremost a contemporaneous response to the American art scene rather than to theories or ideologies, and accordingly, I have focused on an analysis of the works of art.

The analysis I suggested is clearly innovative in relation to secondary sources such as other interpretations of repetition in art. In the literature on repetition in the postwar American context, the idea of repetition as a central notion in art is usually discussed from a poststructuralist perspective, which emphasizes its subversive function. In the writings of Rosalind Krauss, for example, repetition stands in contrast to artistic originality and to the idea of so-called medium specificity. On the other hand, in my analysis I have emphasized the role of repetition in relation to the medium of painting. I contend that quotations in Johns’s paintings are a practice which originality derives from the rendering of the images in painting, rather than issues such as authorship, which are the concern of poststructuralist theories.

Johns’s use of repetition is related to the medium of painting, thus medium specificity is the framework of my research. However, when I speak of medium specificity, it is from a somewhat different perspective than that of Greenberg and Fried. As we have seen in Johns’s work, it is fully possible for specificity to exist as a property detached from artistic autonomy. This more flexible notion of medium specificity has potential for further elaboration in the field of aesthetics. In addition, the system of classifying repetition is based on the specific case of Johns’s painting and offers a viable structure for organizing repetition and facilitating their analysis.
Conclusion

Each type of repetition is examined in relation to three major components in art theory: abstraction, autonomy, and originality. When Johns repeats images and gestures, he is also reconsidering abstraction in painting; by employing the logic of printing he is able to challenge the autonomy of painting; his quotation of other artists allows a reexamination of originality in painting. These three types underscore three corresponding aspects of repetition: the first pertains to the influence of repetition on the perception of painting; the second deals with the ways in which repetition becomes a crucial element in the artistic practice; and the third refers to quoting as an act of repetition. I have focused here on a small number of Johns’s paintings and described each painting in detail. A follow-up study that includes a consideration of additional work by Johns or extension to instances of repetition in the work of other artists, may further strengthen my argument. Such studies would allow us to validate the viability of the suggested system of classifying repetition and to consider Johns’s unique position in art history.
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A List of Publications and Conference Contributions

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<td>2017</td>
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List of Publications and Conference Contributions

When Johns quotes Newman in the painting *Ventriloquist* (1983),” Conference on Detachment and Rootedness in the “Glocal” era, Oranim Academic College.

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