‘A heuristic event’: reconsidering the problem of the Johnsian conversation

Amy K. Hamlin

Does it mean anything?
-Leo Steinberg, ‘Jasper Johns: the First Seven Years of His Art’, 1962

It is one of the great idées reçues in the history of contemporary art that Jasper Johns is difficult to interview. Despite his otherwise affable rapport, he is alleged to stonewall his interlocutors by blocking their efforts to find meaning in his artworks and intentions. He has given many interviews in the course of his career.1 These dialogues contain plenty of parry and joust that, at first glance, appear to yield very little insight. In what Michael Crichton dubbed the ‘Johnsian conversation’,2 the reader routinely encounters the sort of exchange that the late Leo Steinberg fictionalized in his now canonical essay on Johns in 1962.3 The interview, as Steinberg later acknowledged, was not transcribed from an actual dialogue, but

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rather was ‘patched together’ from conversations between artist and critic. Steinberg noted: ‘The made-up answers were shown to Jasper, and when he agreed, “Yes, I could have said that”, the catechism was sealed’. This exchange is tucked into the essay and follows Steinberg’s reflection on the crisis at the time in modernist criticism induced by Johns’ ordinary subjects such as targets, flags, alphabets, and light bulbs. In his subsequent discussion of those subjects, Steinberg pressed his faux interview with the artist into service. He wrote:

When you ask Johns why he did this or that in a painting, he answers so as to clear himself of responsibility. A given decision was made for him by the way things are, or was suggested by an accident he never invited.

Regarding the four casts of faces he placed in four oblong boxes over one of the targets:

Q: Why did you cut them off just under the eyes?
A: They wouldn’t have fitted into the boxes if I’d left them whole.

He was asked why has bronze sculpture of an electric bulb was broken up into bulb, socket, and cord:

A: Because, when the parts came back from the foundry, the bulb wouldn’t screw into the socket.

Q: Could you have done it over?
A: I could have.

Q: Then you liked it in fragments and you chose to leave it that way?
A: Of course.

The distinction I try to make between necessity and subjective preference seems unintelligible to Johns.

Noteworthy here are tone and substance. Steinberg’s doubt is as rhetorically strategic as the exchange is contrived. He later admitted that he played the part of the ‘slightly bewildered stooge’ so as to convey a sense of Johns’ far-out position. This send up of the artist’s apparently rote method reveals Steinberg’s unspoken premise that Johns is, in fact, fully conscious of the ways that meaning operates in his work but reluctant to engage in the interpretive enterprise that it invites. If Johns’ failure to directly respond to the question ‘Does it mean anything?’ (posed twice in the opening paragraphs of Steinberg’s essay), then the

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4 Brundage, ed., Jasper Johns, not paginated, and Varnedoe, ed., Jasper Johns, 84. Indeed most published interviews are highly edited exchanges that are likely not all that different from the ‘fiction’ of Steinberg’s dialogue with Johns.

5 Brundage, ed., Jasper Johns, not paginated, and Varnedoe, ed., Jasper Johns, 84.


exercise of interviewing Johns is a dead end. Or is it? If the interviewer’s intended quarry is insight into the meaning of Johns’ art, then what is to be learned from Johns’ interviews?9

Quite a bit, I would argue, provided the reader is prepared to countenance meaning that is both explicit and elusive in Johns’ work and that it often emerges out of processes that attend both the making of the work and the manner in which it is viewed.10 For his part, Steinberg offered a useful model of inquiry. In his essay he identified a discrepancy in the critical reception of Johns’ work. Some critics argued that Johns meant for his ordinary subjects to be visible whereas others believed that they were chosen for their invisibility. Steinberg declared this critical discrepancy ‘a heuristic event’.11 He thereby invoked an empirical method by which a problem could be explored rather than explained. In this case, it sent the viewer back to the work of art to dislodge the discrepancy. Articulated in this way, Steinberg identified an opportunity for the viewer to re-think a critical impasse by checking back in with the artwork that generated it.

But what if we were to declare the idée reçue of the Johnsian conversation as itself a heuristic event? Sending us back to those notoriously intractable passages in the interviews, this heuristic event could create new questions with the potential to yield new insights into how meaning operates in Johns’ art. To paraphrase Steinberg: What in the interview, you ask, invites our frustrated response? In what follows, I have selected four passages from interviews spanning the artist’s career. Because it is a highly selective, and therefore a subjective assortment, it constitutes a speculative exercise that aims to open up avenues of interpretation in the interviews and, ideally, also in the artworks. Arranged chronologically, these passages challenge the myth of a recalcitrant Johns and are of hermeneutic consequence for the study of Johns’ work.

In June 1965, some three years after Steinberg’s staged conversation with Johns, art critic David Sylvester interviewed Johns in a long, wide-ranging dialogue.
Amy K. Hamlin  ‘A heuristic event’: … the Johnsian conversation

about the artist’s creative processes. This line of inquiry about process would become the most fruitful for Johns’ interviewers in years to come. Indeed, another critic later succinctly observed: ‘[Johns] talks in terms of making rather than meaning’. The passage from Sylvester’s interview that interests me is one in which he pursued the question of the picture’s motif – namely the flag motif that dominated Johns’ early career – as a possible source of meaning (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Jasper Johns, Flag, 1954-55. Encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood, three panels, 107.3 x 153.8 cm. New York: Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Artwork © 2011 Jasper Johns / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Sylvester: In other words, the painting is not about the elements from which you have begun?
Johns: No more than it is about the elements which enter it at any moment. Say, the painting of a flag is always about a flag, but it is no more about a flag than it is about a brush stroke…
Sylvester: But the process which is recorded as it were in the finished object – this process has an analogy to certain processes outside painting?
Johns: You said it.

Sylvester: I’m asking you.  

This sort of hedging is not uncommon in the available interviews. The exchange here suggests something about the way in which meaning operates in the Flag that is consistent with the work itself. Johns retreated at the suggestion that meaning evolves independent of the painting, outside of it, as Sylvester implied. The retreat may strike some readers as disingenuous, however, when discussing a painting, whose subject is loaded with extrapictorial meanings such as patriotism, political hegemony, and commercialism. It suggests that there is something arbitrary about the relationship between the title and the painting’s formal qualities, as if the former activates the latter through historical circumstance rather than the artist’s intention. But there’s more. Spurred on by Sylvester’s insistence, Johns famously replied in this way:

Johns: Well, it has this analogy. You do one thing and then you do another thing. If you mean that it pictures your idea of a process that is elsewhere I think that’s more questionable. I think that at times one has the idea that that is true, and I think at times one has the idea that that is not true. Whatever idea one has it’s always susceptible to doubt, and to the possibility that something else has been or might be introduced into that arrangement which would alter it. What I think this means is that, say in a painting, the processes involved in the painting are of greater certainty and of, I believe, greater meaning than the referential aspects of the painting. I think the processes involved in the painting in themselves mean as much or more than any reference value that the painting has.

DS: And what would their meaning be?

JJ: Visual, intellectual activity, perhaps; ‘recreation’.

Johns’ recourse to philosophical ‘if, then’ constructions and tautologies about truth contains a whiff of impertinence that recalls Frank Stella’s minimalist mantra: ‘What you see is what you see’. Reading the passage again and in the context of the interviews over time, however, affirms Johns’ belief that creative and material processes are inherently dubious – even playful – and thus more dynamic and meaningful than the painting as fixed referent. Revealing his sensibility as a modernist painter, he understands the motif less (not not) as a sign than as a cipher, a nonentity that allows the sensual content of Flag to gradually eclipse its

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eponymous subject. Put another way, Flag is an extroverted painting whose meaning slowly turns inward. In part by adopting the artist’s own rhetorical strategies, Sylvester successfully pursued this idea through to the end of the interview.

Sylvester: In other words, if your painting says something that could be pinned down, what it says is that nothing can be pinned down.

Johns: I don’t like saying that. I would like it to be that.17

The prickly question of the artwork’s referential value combined with the interviewer’s ability to let the referent roam in conversation emerged again in December 1980 when the artist and curator Katrina Martin interviewed Johns about his printmaking activities at Simca Print Artists studio in New York. She had observed and filmed Johns in the studio for several months prior to their conversation; the resulting footage and interview became the basis for her 1981 documentary Hanafuda.18 Portions of their conversation overlay silent footage of Johns at work on silkscreens including Usuyuki (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Film still from Hanafuda, 1981, directed by Katrina Martin. 35 minutes, sound, DVD from Super-8mm film. Film Still © 2011 Katy Martin.

Amy K. Hamlin ‘A heuristic event’: … the Johnsian conversation

The silkscreen repeats imagery from an earlier painting by the same title that appears in the background of the film still. Intrigued by the titular repetition, Martin inquired:

KM: How do you come up with a title?
JJ: Well, the Usuyuki – I came upon the word in something I was reading – and the word triggered my thinking. I can’t do it in a kind of cause-and-effect relationship, but I know that’s what happened.
KM: Do you know what ‘usuyuki’ means?
JJ: I think it means something like ‘thin snow’.19

The paradox embedded in his first response in this excerpt is typical of Johns’ interviewing style and, by way of analogy, his images. It is candid in its almost documentary quality (‘…I know that’s what happened’) and also reluctant in terms of his willingness to engage in questions of meaning (‘I can’t do it in a kind of cause-and-effect relationship…’). His second response offers another kind of heuristic event. In it he gave a cautious and provisional translation of the term ‘usuyuki,’ a translation akin to his understanding of the way meaning works in these pictures. There is a consistency in the mark making accompanied by slight deviations that together conjure the paradox of translation; it is at once precise and inaccurate, conventional and idiosyncratic. Johns’ responses here foster a procedural understanding of the pictures rather than an illustrative one. Martin continued the exchange in this way:

KM: Why was that interesting?
JJ: (Laughs.) I don’t know why anything is interesting, Katy. I think it has to do with a Japanese play or novel, and the character, the heroine of it, that is her name. And I think it was suggested that it’s a kind of sentimental story that has to do with the – what do you call it? – the fleeting quality of beauty in the world, I believe. At any rate, I read this and the name stuck in my head. And then when, I think, Madame Mukai was here once, and Hiroshi [Kawanishi] was here, and I had just read this, I’d been in Saint Martin and read it, and I came back and I had dinner with them one night and I said, ‘Hiroshi, if I said to you, “usuyuki”, what would it mean?’ And he said, ‘I think – very poetic – a little snow’ (laughs). So I kept on and made my pictures using this title.20

Keeping with the by turns candid and reluctant sensibility of his earlier responses, Johns here resorted to anecdote as a way to explain his appropriation of the term ‘usuyuki’ without directly participating in the interpretive exercise. I am tempted to linger on his recitation of the story being about ‘the fleeting quality of beauty in the world’, but the personal story that follows opens a more interesting interpretive space. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an anecdote is ‘the narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself interesting or striking’. The private dinner conversation that Johns described constitutes an apposite adjunct to the pictures because it has everything and nothing to do with the Usuyuki images. It may reveal the images’ conceptual point of origin, but it ultimately has nothing to do with the material evidence and intelligence of their forms. Like anecdotes, meaning in these images operates like ‘secret, private, or hitherto unpublished narratives or details of history’. On the heels of this exchange and at the end of the published interview, Martin tentatively introduced the question of meaning:

KM: And then I wanted to talk something about meaning but…
JJ: About what?
KM: Meaning. In the work. But I wasn’t sure how far to go with that. But I can’t help thinking about meaning to some degree.
JJ: Well, you mean meaning of images? I don’t like to get involved in that because I – any more than I’ve done – I tend to like to leave that free….

The problem with ideas is, the idea is often simply a way to focus your interest in making a work. The work isn’t necessarily, I think – a function of the work is not to express the idea…. The idea focuses your attention in a certain way that helps you to do the work.

Johns repeated here his conviction regarding the disposable nature of the idea and its ultimate irrelevance to meaning in the work. For Johns, meaning grows in the processes that attend the work’s creation. But however evident those processes are in the final product, the meaning to which Johns referred remains elusive to the viewer. In this respect, his response reminds the reader not to invest too much interpretive capital in the artist’s intentions. Indeed, it offers a lesson that surely proved useful to Johns’ interlocutors in the years to come.

Beginning in the early 1980s, Johns moved away from the crosshatch patterns that dominated his work in the 1970s to compositions that contained disguised references to the works of other artists as well as to private, largely

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21 Oxford English Dictionary, 2011, s.v. ‘anecdote’.
22 Oxford English Dictionary, 2011, s.v. ‘anecdote’.
autobiographical motifs. Among the first was *Perilous Night* of 1982 with its de-contextualized, flattened abstraction of the fallen soldier in the *Resurrection* panel of Matthias Grünewald’s magisterial *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Figures 3 and 4).


The truffle hunt among critics that ensued after the picture debuted on January 28, 1984 in Johns’ solo show at Leo Castelli Gallery lasted about a week.²⁵ It began anew, however, on January 31, 1987 when Johns debuted (again at Castelli) the painting *Fall* as part of his four-part series entitled *Seasons*. Therein he quoted another passage from Grünewald’s altarpiece. This time it was the green, diseased creature prone in the lower left corner of the panel depicting the *Temptation of St. Anthony*.²⁶

Johns was increasingly asked about these Isenheim quotations in interviews, among them a conversation in January 1989 with art critic and curator Ann Hindry. She flanked her inquiry with pointed questions about the interpretation of Johns’ work:

AH: How do you feel about all the interpreting that has been offered of your work?
JJ: I think it’s overdone. It seems to me that something is made to be interesting in a way that it really isn’t. I don’t know what I would like them to do. You have to let them do their job. I don’t want to become an art critic, so!
AH: There are a lot of ‘riddles’ in your painting, though... For instance, how did the Grünewald reference come about?
JJ: I am interested in the ways in which forms can shift their meanings. I had marvelled at the Grünewald painting when I saw it in Colmar; and later, I was given a portfolio containing large-sized details from the work. Looking at these, I became interested in the linear divisions, the way the forms were articulated, and I began to make tracings of the configurations. It was a little like my work with the flag – the work one does with a given structure alters its character.
AH: Do you think your work actually needs interpretation?
JJ: I don’t think so, but often it is interesting to talk about things, you can sometimes draw ideas from that. I am quite sure that occasionally I have read something that has given me ideas for future work.²⁷

That Hindry couched her question about the Grünewald reference in an inquiry after interpretation is bold because it calls out the elephant in the room of so many Johnsian conversations. She recognized the hermeneutic challenges posed by those

²⁶ Jill Johnston was the first to identify this source, having narrowed down the possibilities and, finally, pressing Johns for the answer. See Johnston, ‘Tracking the Shadow’, *Art in America* 75 (October 1987): 129-142.
references that initially appeared quite arcane to the viewer. And whereas Johns’ belief that interpretations of his paintings are exaggerated may strike the reader as disingenuous, it is in keeping with his responses to such queries in previous conversations. Indeed, his response to Hindry’s questions about the Grünewald reference not only demonstrates the constancy of his interviewing style but also his creative method, of selecting specific (loaded) motifs that he attempts to drain of extrapictorial meaning. In Perilous Night and Fall, those abstracted motifs culled from Grünewald’s altarpiece inevitably, pace Johns, carry with them a sense of violence and suffering. This exchange also begins to articulate anew the impossibility of interpretive closure in Johns’ work along with an awareness of how the viewer’s perception shapes her interpretation of Johns’ work.

Apparently dissatisfied – irritated even – with the way in which all this motif sleuthing limited the way in which the viewer perceived his work and understood it to make meaning, Johns created an organic, horizontal motif in 1990 whose source he deliberately withheld (Figure 5). As an autobiographical reference, and therefore opaque to even the most informed viewer, this motif was referred to as simply “X” by Jill Johnston. In February 1991, Johns disclosed his stratagem, if not his source, in an interview with another art critic and curator Amei Wallach. He stated:

…I got tired of people talking about things that I didn’t think they could see in my work – from some of the Grünewald tracings. It interested me that people would discuss something that I didn’t believe they could see until after they were told to see it. And then I thought, What would they have seen if they hadn’t been told about these things, because the same painting is there. And when I decided to work with this new configuration, I decided I wasn’t going to say what it was or where it had come from. One of the things that interested me was that I knew that I couldn’t see it without...

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29 In this way, Johns appears to have reversed an earlier position in which he aimed to evacuate himself from his art. In his interview in 1978 with Peter Fuller he stated: ‘The concerns that I have always dealt with in picture-making didn’t have to do with expressing my flawed nature, or my self. I wanted to have an idea, or an image, or whatever you please, that was not I…I don’t know how to put it. I wanted something that wouldn’t have to carry my nature as part of its message. I think that’s less true now’. Fuller, ‘Jasper Johns interviewed Part II’, Art Monthly 19 (September 1978): 7, and Varnedoe, ed., Jasper Johns, 187. I would like to thank Charles Haxthausen for bringing this particular passage to my attention.

seeing it, seeing that, because I knew, and I knew that someone else wouldn’t know and wouldn’t see, and I wondered what the difference was in the way we would see it. And, of course, I’ll never know. ( … )

Figure 5 Jasper Johns, *Green Angel*, 1990. Encaustic and sand on canvas, 190.8 x 127.4cm. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, anonymous gift in honor of Martin and Mildred Friedman. Artwork © 1996 Jasper Johns / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Johns’ response strikes a cynical note that might seem resentful were it not for his recourse to perception. Paul Taylor, in his 1990 conversation with Johns for Interview magazine, pursued this dualism further. Following several testy exchanges, Taylor observed: ‘The hidden motifs in your work these days seem to be in marked contrast to your paintings of flags’, to which Johns replied: ‘No, they aren’t. In all cases, the outlines of particular forms are followed rather faithfully, but not entirely faithfully, and filled in with some variation in colour and texture’. From Johns’ perspective, whether or not the motif is hidden is beside the point. It is the translation of the motif – the perception of the translation – that counts. To be sure, Johns’ engagement with the rote nature of his processes and methods is a customary reply to questions regarding his symbolic language, and one that some interviewers have pressed for insight into where meaning resides or, rather, emerges in his pictures. As Thomas Crow has observed of Johns’ work: ‘…meaning arises unbidden from recognition rather than announced intention’.

As a system, the chronological structure I have chosen to organize these passages is consistent with Johns’ tendency to impose systemic restrictions on his working process as a way to generate images and, therefore, meaning. These restrictions can be iconographic where their recourse to popular icons (the American flag), literary subjects (usuyuki), art historical quotations (Grünewald) and secret autobiographical referents (“X”) creates for the artist and viewer alike an interpretive point of departure. Amid the changes in his ideas and his imagery, this structure also highlights the consistency in Johns’ ambivalent attitude toward meaning and in his interviewing style over the course of his career. His most recent published interview, conducted in the summer and fall of 2010 with the artist Terry Winters, is a particularly rich exchange that is familiar, but also surprising. In it, they discuss a large drawing in Johns’ studio that features recycled (stars, letters, silhouettes, outline of Picasso figure) and new imagery (American Sign Language gestures) (Figure 6).

Winters: Handprints are a familiar device for you, but you haven’t really used them like this before. Previously, the handprints seemed iconic and frontal, and here they’re much more gestural. In the large drawing, the arrangement of the imprints reads almost like a narrative, a developing

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34 It is unclear that the drawing illustrated here is the one that Winters and Johns discuss in this exchange, but it was the largest drawing that was featured in his exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery from 7 May – 1 July 2011. See Jasper Johns: New Sculpture and Works on Paper (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2011).
series of shapes. So one’s perception is different than if one were seeing the full, flat handprint.

Johns: Sure, but that’s the nature of language, and the gestures here imitate sign language, where meaning is conveyed by gesture.

Winters: Like any painted gesture or mark?

Johns: If you see it that way.

Winters: Do you see it that way?

Johns: Well, I’d say yes, if I’m talking with you.35

Winters begins the gambit with an astute observation about the differing perceptions of iconic forms versus gestural forms that approach a narrative sequence. Johns responds in kind by conceding, ‘meaning is conveyed by gesture’.

Seizing the opportunity, Winters takes that statement to the next level. If sign language communicates meaning through visually transmitted patterns that read like gestures, then, at least in theory, any mark in the visual field has the same potential. Resorting to familiar hedging tactics, Johns turns evasive at the suggestion that mark making of any kind could be subject to the laws that limit the possible meanings embedded in sign language. It is, I would argue, a tacit admission of the ambivalence that is fundamental to how meaning operates in his work. The imagery he employs – both familiar and arcane – is subject to different sets of rules that, when the imagery collides, generates meaning that is simultaneously predictable and elusive. Fred Orton, leaning on Derrida, put it rather more succinctly when he observed that in Johns’ work “meaning is always an effect that can never be fixed.”

But the more significant lesson of this passage materializes in the exchange as it continued to play out:

Winters: [Laughs.] I do see them as painted gestures. The large drawing has an abstract quality whereby the sign language is made ambiguous and pictorial. I suppose legibility is always a question of degree. This drawing seems very rich to me, both in terms of references to things you’ve done before and for its implications with respect to things you’re thinking about now.

Johns: Well, things usually have more than one meaning. These hand gestures have been organized into a system to represent our alphabet, and we probably realize that a particular meaning is intended, even without grasping it. There can be an ambiguity of meaning when things are used in different ways. You may see something and think that it must have a meaning that you don’t understand, or that you do understand. And some things escape us, have meanings that escape us but which strike us as lacking meaning.

Winters: What is lacking meaning?

Johns: That’s a wonderful question. Faced with some things from other cultures, which have very clear meaning in those cultures, we may dismiss them as meaningless. Perhaps meaning becomes invisible.

In other words, there are three primary ways in which meaning emerges, often all at once, in Johns’ work: a) perceptible meaning that is understood, b) perceptible meaning that is not understood, and c) imperceptible meaning that is not understood. Although this might be said of all visual information, when applied to

the study of Johns’ work it can have a profoundly liberating effect. Thus refined, this exchange offers a heuristic event for any viewer-cum-interpreter of his pictures and sculptures because it imagines interpretation without closure.

I argue that there is an essential paradox and utility to the myth of Johns as an obstinate raconteur, one that Irving Penn captured in 2006 in an extraordinary portrait of the artist (Figure 7).

![Figure 7 Irving Penn, *Jasper Johns*, 2006. Gelatin silver print, 24.6 x 24.3cm. The Irving Penn Foundation. Artwork © The Irving Penn Foundation](image)

Johns looks at the viewer with eyes wide and mouth shut – a septuagenarian sphinx. His head lurches over broad shoulders hunched but a little and cloaked in a loose black shirt buttoned up to the neck. His skin – slack but still sculptural – articulates features that have shifted slightly southward over the years. Age is registered elsewhere in his receding grey and white hair and in the sunspots that articulate his forehead. The wide-eyed frontality of his mien is disarming, as he appears to draw in close, leaning into the space between himself and the lens of Penn’s camera. As a document of a dialogue between photographer and sitter, this portrait visualizes the sort of exchanges discussed above. Penn depicted an artist totally engaged with and available to the viewer. At the same time, Johns’ face is
utterly inscrutable, apparently lacking meaning. It is a telling portrait that represents the paradoxical condition potentially so constructive to understanding and using Johns’ interviews. On the one hand, they contain productive exchanges that contradict the image of Johns as an obstructionist interlocutor. On the other hand, they reveal that the harder he is pressed for specific answers, the more he retreats behind an expressionless mask. Yet even those instances of noncooperation can be sites of heuristic events that work to break familiar habits of seeing and interpreting Johns’ work. He conceded as much when he continued his exchange with Winters:

Winters: Is it possible to find meanings that weren’t intended?
Johns: Yes. Meaning is difficult to control, and I think that much art allows us to find or invent meanings of our own.38

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