

Johns's *Scent* (1973–1974)

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Abstract

Various conceptions fall under the topic of artistic autonomy. Drawing on articulations of autonomy by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried and Philip Galanter, the author analyzes Jasper Johns's *Scent*, and argues that this painting inhabits different categories of artistic autonomy. Due to the pattern in the painting, and consequently, its hypothetical cylinder shape and generative system, *Scent* is suggested to examine the concept of autonomy, an aspect of Johns's work not fully developed in previous scholarship. By comparing Johns's *Scent* to Sol LeWitt's wall drawing, the author also characterizes the painting as Generative Art that interestingly keeps the artist's autographical touch.

Artistic Autonomy

The concept of "autonomy" originates in the notion of political self-governance or self-determination and only subsequently

was extended to characterize the sphere of art [1]. Literally, autonomy refers to the capacity to give the law to oneself, i.e. self-government, and was used to assert the independence of the city-state from external political interference in ancient Greece [2]. 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 [3].

The term carries a range of meanings in the field of art. One relates to the idea that the evaluation of art rests on exclusively aesthetic criteria and that the realm of art is separate from the everyday world of social and political praxis [4]. Drawing on the concept of self-legislation, autonomy in art can also refer to our characterization of the history of art in terms of an internal logic of development [5]. Thus, the production of art can be viewed in the context of prior artistic developments, i.e. as an engagement with earlier conventions and expectations [6]. Accordingly, the medium of painting has its own history, and contemporary paintings relate to this history. Both senses of autonomy can be found in the doctrines of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, who considered advanced art to be a separate domain, differentiated between works of art and other objects in the

world, and attributed specific laws of development to the medium of painting.

While these notions of artistic autonomy rest on the internal logic of development in a specific medium, other notions focus on the autonomy attributed to individual works of art in various media. When analyzing works of art, Philip Galanter emphasized the impression that the systems the works employ determine their structure. These generative systems led him to define “Generative Art” as artistic category in which the autonomy of the work is based on its separateness from the moment-to-moment decision making of the artist [7]. This kind of autonomy seemed to be on account of another kind of autonomy by diminishing the “aura” of the work of art [8]. The separateness from the artist detaches the art object from time and space, and problematizes traditional notions of authenticity, uniqueness, authorship, and in particular, the notion of autographical touch.

In what follows, I aim to show that Jasper Johns’s *Scent* inhabits different categories of artistic autonomy—an aspect of Johns’s work that has received limited attention thus far.

The Pattern of *Scent* and Artistic Autonomy

Scent, a painting that its title challenges the primacy of sight in aesthetics and opens it to smell also reconsiders the concept of autonomy in art through its patterning. In the early 1970s, Johns caught sight of a pattern of diagonal lines on a passing car. Although it was just a brief glimpse, he knew immediately that he would use such a pattern in his next

painting [9]. The lines are called “crosshatches”, even though they do not actually cross, and in *Scent*, completed in 1974, Johns had filled the entire canvas with this pattern for the first time. He composed three panels made by three different techniques (encaustic; oil without varnish on unseized canvas; varnish on seized canvas), and grouped the lines into bundles of red, green and purple, so that bundles of the same color are never adjacent.

The emergence of abstract found-design in Johns’s work was something unexpected considering the New York art scene, and particularly, Neo-Dada, the group to which Johns “officially” belonged. The American Neo-Dadaists worked against the idea of formal purity, and were associated with the shift from painting to the combining of various techniques and media [10]. Artist such as Robert Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow chose to break away from the then dominant conventions of painterly abstraction and preferred the “in-between areas” of art. By contrast, a first glance at *Scent* might make it seem that Johns created an excellent example of modernist painting. *Scent* apparently fits with Greenberg’s definition by emphasizing its flat pictorial plane and avoiding the representation of subject matter. Furthermore, it meets the requirements of “all-over” pictures, in which “identical or closely similar elements” are repeated and spread evenly from one edge of the canvas to the other [11]. These should not be taken lightly in a work by a Neo-Dadaist. A second glance, however, exposes that *Scent* manages to cautiously move the boundaries of painting within the medium itself while at the same time reconsiders

its autonomy. This is due to the inner logic disguised behind its pattern.

The painting, more than three meters long, is composed of three panels, each subdivided into three parts. These subdivisions, which are essentially invisible to the casual observer, were discovered and worked out by Thomas B. Hess [12]. They are approximately 30.5, 44.5 and 30.5 cm wide. Hess found that the subdivisions followed a pattern: *a b c, c d e, e f a*. Accordingly, the two slices he labeled *c* are almost identical, as are the two slices labeled *e* and the two slices labeled *a*. Since the adjacent combinations are linked by a shared element appearing at the end of one sequence and the beginning of the next, one can imagine that the left edge (that starts with *a*) could be joined to the right edge (that ends with *a*), so that the sequence of elements fits together (Fig. 1).

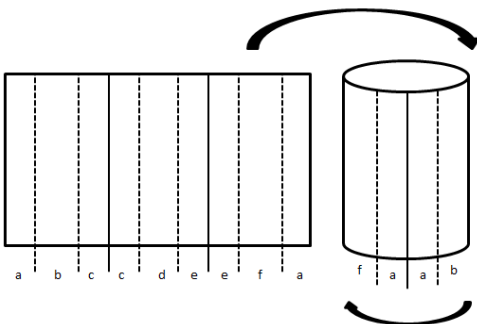


Fig. 1. This schematic drawing of the subdivisions in Scent illustrates how the patterning would allow the work to be curled around and joined at the edges to form a cylinder.

This discovery led several authors, such as Michael Crichton (1994) and Jennifer L. Roberts (2012), to discuss the hypothetical cylinder in the context of Johns's entire art. Crichton pointed to other works in which the flat canvas that is seen on the wall encompasses curved space represented by the structural logic of the work [13], and Roberts considered cylinder to be one of the topologies that characterize Johns's "printerly" art [14].

The proposed perspective is in line with these interpretations to the extent that it focuses on the unique spatiality of the work. However, it examines this cylindrical extension into the third dimension with respect to the modernist painting in the writings of Greenberg and Fried, particularly focusing on the role of the surface and the support in achieving artistic autonomy. The pre-determined system in the work that interestingly includes autographic uniqueness is discussed in relation to Galanter's notion of autonomy in Generative Art.

The Cylinder Shape in *Scent* and Artistic Autonomy

Scent can work as a cylinder due to the systematic distribution of its crosshatch marks. The cylinder shape provides the link between the 1950s and the 1970s in Johns's career, between the Neo-Dadaist hermetic images and the abstract pattern of diagonal lines. In both periods, Johns was concerned with maintaining a careful balance between the realms of flatness and volume and between art and reality. *Scent* is thus connected with his question of "how to add space and still keep it an object painting" [15], which I will discuss

in relation to American formalism and the topic of autonomy.

According to Greenberg, the strategy by which painting resisted outside influences was through an emphasis on the procedures that call attention to the medium's physical limitations: the flatness of the surface, the properties of the pigment, and the shape of the support. [16]. The support in painting is an essential aspect of the concept of artistic autonomy also to Fried, who stated that acknowledging the shape of the support was crucial to the development of modernist painting. In Frank Stella's aluminum stripe paintings of the 1960s, for example, there is "an unprecedented continuity" between the depicted shape and the shape of the support [17]. By emphasizing these internal formal relations, Stella managed to distinguish his paintings from other objects in the world, suspended objecthood, and responded to an internal obligation, a "self-imposed imperative" [18]. The continuity within the painting thus, takes a central role in the continuous development of the medium of painting, "supporting" the self-determinative sense of what makes a painting. With these considerations of the pictorial flatness and support, Greenberg and Fried developed the idea of medium specificity into an analytic framework for evaluating a painting in relation to its ability to distinguish itself from its surroundings, in other words—its autonomy.

The support of the painting also recalls its frame. As a convention specific to pictorial art, the frame marks the boundaries of the work, establishing the physical context in which the painting is perceived and discussed and

symbolizing its wholeness and separateness from the world. This makes "framing" an important procedure in defining painting a unique object among others.

The question that arises is, does Johns's painting *Scent* fulfill the requirements for autonomy in accordance with this agenda?

In many respects, yes. Through this confrontation with the issue of pictorial flatness vs. three-dimensional objecthood, Johns's triptych can be situated squarely in the internal development of painting, particularly in the modernist phase, in which flatness is considered a convention and expectation of the medium. In addition, one can say that Johns only referenced the cylinder and his painting actually asserts its flatness, reminding us that as a two-dimensional medium; it cannot truly depict real volume. Furthermore, at a certain moment, the cylinder – an enclosed object – becomes a parody on the autonomous modernist painting that "protects" its domain. Meanwhile, the hypothetical cylindrical painting speculates on its ontological status (as a cylindrical object or a painting), and consequently, casts doubt on its autonomy. Another aspect that should be taken into account when considering the level of autonomy in *Scent* is the generative system in the cylinder.

The Generative System in the Cylinder

Relevant to Johns's reliance on the cylindrical motif to position *Scent* in the realm between flat painting and three-dimensional object is his previous use of

this motif, which can be traced back to the mid-1950s, when it first appeared in *Gray Alphabet* (1956) [19].

Gray Alphabet, a work that was categorized by Galanter as a form of Generative Art [20], is an encaustic painting structured as a grid consisting of repeated sequences of the alphabet letters so ordered that we perceive their repetition in the rows, columns and diagonal axes. The first column begins with *a* and the last one with *z*; rolling the painting into a cylinder shape would continue the same sequence of letters in the diagonal axes. In *Scent*, the cylinder is imagined due to the combinatorial rules that Johns invented. Combinatorics, an area in mathematics, includes the acts of arranging members of a set into different sequences.

By combining members of a limited set (*a--f*), positioning them in three ways, Johns applied a mathematical system on simple components and created a complex work. Galanter pointed to the sense of autonomy in combinatorial rules [21]. Having chosen a system built upon a pattern much like a mathematical formula, Johns cedes some control to it. In this respect, the pattern provides an autonomous logic inside the work.

Both *Scent* and *Gray Alphabet* create a tension between the pre-determined system and the hand-painted gestures, conveying the impression of separateness from the artist but also emphasizing his physical act of making and the unique presence of the works in specific time and space. The set of rules that were chosen in advance—be it the choice of crosshatch patterns or the alphabetical sequences—determine the internal structure of the work, while

Johns's autographical touch is expressed in individual gestures of the pattern and the letterpress blocks of the schematic grid. Unlike generative art forms based on chemical reactions, living plants or digital procedures, *Scent* and *Gray Alphabet* did not independently come into being. And in contrast to other artists that employed autonomous systems and stressed the independency of the work from themselves by letting others execute their plans, for Johns a hands-on approach was always important.

The formula that Johns employed with his own hands clarifies his position in the genealogy of American art. Dedicating an entire painting to gestural marks, Johns followed some of the methods of the abstract expressionists, and was not really responsible for the collapse of the autographic heroism in American art (as the story usually tells). His paintings convey the effect of both aura and systematic division, forming a bridge between the previous generation of painters and conceptual artists – between two of the most prominent tendencies in American art in the 1950s and the 1970s.

A comparison of *Scent* to the work of conceptual artist Sol LeWitt demonstrates Johns's unique usage of patterning and generative system. In his wall drawings, LeWitt conceives and plans the drawing, which is later drawn by draftsmen working independently. He believed that the artist must allow for various interpretations of his plan and thus intentionally let the draftsman to interpret the instructions in his own unique way [22]. By initiating art that designed to be executed more than once and not in the form of an object, LeWitt challenged not only the traditional notion

of authorship but also disdained the effect of aura and the sense of authenticity and uniqueness that comes with it.

In his *Wall Drawing 797* [23], which represents a return to the linear repetition that the artist explored in his wall drawings of the late 1960s and 1970s, LeWitt invokes a recursive system, in which each step calls for a new instance of the very same procedure. The first draftsman begins with an irregular horizontal black line near the top of the wall. Following him, the second draftsman copies this line but draws it in red. The third one looks at the second line and remakes it in yellow, and the fourth uses blue. This repetitive order begins again with the first draftsman, who copies the last blue line in black, and continues until the bottom of the wall is reached. The final result suggests a singular mass of accumulative lines, appearing much like waves in three dimensions. The simple elements combine to create a very rich and textural drawing. A closer look exposes the endless nuances between the lines, made by the different hands and colors, thus revealing the systematic order of the seemingly self-run system that determined the outcome of the work.

Johns and LeWitt provided strong alternatives to the then dominated approaches to autonomy of Greenberg and Fried. LeWitt reacted against their doctrines by destroying the support-pictorial art coupling, removing the frame from the image and installing his work in a site-specific manner. Johns, who left the actual frame intact, implied that the painting could be extended into the form of cylinder, casting doubt on its flatness and the necessity of the support. While

LeWitt opened up the execution of his work to involve others who carried out his instructions, thus defining the singular role of the artist as the conceiver of ideas; Johns insisted on creating every gesture with his own hands. By conserving the autographical handwriting in *Scent*, and, at the same time, employing a pre-determined system, Johns created a work that inhabits several categories of artistic autonomy.

Conclusion

The writings of Greenberg, Fried, and Galanter provide different categories of artistic autonomy. While autonomy according to Greenberg and Fried is related to a specific medium and the autonomy of modernist painting relies on the painting's flatness and support; Galanter suggests autonomy of a particular work of art that derives from its generative system and separateness from the artist. As shown above, the pattern of *Scent* that involves autographic uniqueness and hypothetical cylindrical shape exemplifies a work that inhabits these categories. This not only establishes *Scent* as a painting that has a unique status, but also reveals that the aforementioned categories are not mutually exclusive.

References and Notes:

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2. Gaiger [1], 65.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), first part, edited

- and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), in Gaiger, "Dismantling the Frame: Site-Specific Art and Aesthetic Autonomy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, No. 1 (January 2009) p. 52.
4. This concept is closely tied to the concept of disinterestedness as was articulated by Kant and other 18th-century philosophers. Gaiger [1], 79.
 5. Gaiger [1], 78.
 6. Gaiger [1], 82.
 7. Philip Galanter, "Generative Art and Rules-Based Art," *Vague Terrain* 3 (June 2006).
 8. Galanter, "Generative Art Theory," in *A Companion to Digital Art*, ed. Christiane Paul (John Wiley & Sons, 2016) pp. 166-69.
 9. Sarah Kent, "Jasper Johns: Strokes of Genius," *Time Out*, (December 1990) p. 14-15. Jasper Johns, *Scent*, 1973–1974, oil and encaustic on canvas, 182.9 x 320.6 cm, Collection Ludwig, Aachen
 10. Susan Hapgood and Maurice Berger, "Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958–1962," *Performing Arts Journal* 17, no. 1 (January 1995), pp. 63–70.
 11. Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" (1948), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) p. 155. Considering Johns's *Scent* an all-over picture makes it a paraphrase to Pollock's *Scent* (1955), an interpretation that Johns denied in different occasions.
 12. Thomas B. Hess, "On the *Scent* of Jasper Johns," *New York Magazine* 9 (9 February 1976) p. 67.
 13. Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns*, (Harry N. Abrams Press, 1977), p. 55.
 14. Jennifer L. Roberts, "The Printerly Art of Jasper Johns," in *Jasper Johns/In Press: The Crosshatch Works and the Logic of Print*, (Harvard Art Museums/Hatje Cantz, 2012).
 15. Walter Hopps, "An Interview with Jasper Johns," *Artforum* 3, No. 6 (March 1965), pp. 32–36.
 16. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (London: Harper and Row Press, 1982) pp. 6–9.
 17. Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (1966), in *Art and Objecthood* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998) pp. 88–89.
 18. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, No. 10 (Summer 1967), p. 15.
 19. Among other works by Johns that imply a cylinder shape are *Fool's House* (1961–1962) and *Cicada* (1979).
 20. Galanter, [7].
 21. Galanter, [8], p. 152.

22. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years – The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973), (University of California Press, 1997), p. 200.
23. Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing 797*, executed in 1995 at the Mead Art Museum, Amherst College.