Michael O'Rourke, March 2022

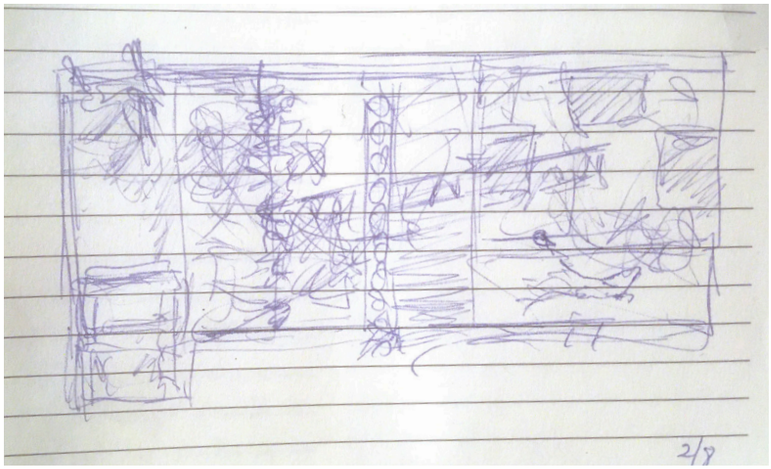
Jasper Johns, meaning & Matthias Grünewald

Jasper Johns, *Mind/Mirror,* Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC.Sept 2021-Feb 2022

This Whitney retrospective of Johns' work was a very densely packed exhibition. After two hours of hard looking I felt overwhelmed, stepped outside, and rescheduled my next days so I could return to the Whitney for two more consecutive days of viewing. For three straight days, I looked and looked and looked. Two aspects of the work especially struck me — the complexity of his artwork, and Johns' use of recurring visual motifs, with the latter leading me unexpectedly to connections between the work of Johns and the German Renaissance painter, Matthias Grünewald.

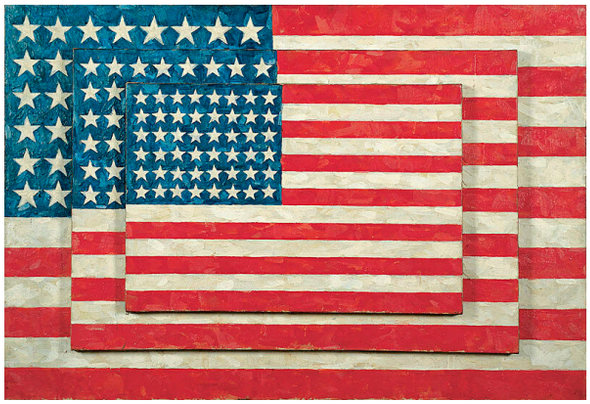
Jasper Johns' large-scale1964 *According to What*, 7'x16'. The second layer of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece,* 1512-1516. 11'x15'. (I have added human figures to help convey the scale of each.) How unexpected to find Johns referencing Grünewald and the two artists, centuries apart, sharing significant concerns.

All Johns' work is conceptually very, very complex and subtle. All his artwork is extraordinarily smart. Whether the imagery is relatively spare and simple visually (e.g., an early target image) or compositionally complex (e.g., *According to What*), there is a great deal going on at a great many levels. We see, variously: the challenging of the then-prevalent Abstract Expressionism and gesturalism; the probing of how we perceive and conceptualize and categorize; references to art history; the merging and mixing of media (encaustic, oil, pastel, charcoal, found objects, cast objects)....

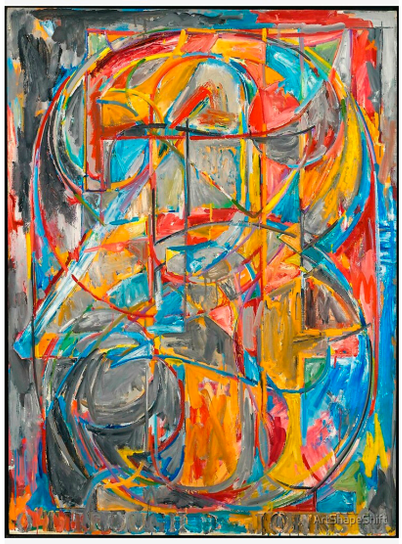


A sketch I did to help myself see the compositional structure of *According to What*. I did several of these, each time leaving the room and sketching from memory to see if I had understood the structure. It took me three tries before I did so.

In much of his early work the compositions are far simpler — a target image, a numeral, a map, a flag. But these deceptively simple images are conceptually quite packed. By using and modifying known symbols, the paintings prod us to ask all sorts of questions about art, how we see, and how we conceptualize.



The simplicity of the symbol belies the conceptual complexity of the image.



In the early imagery, Johns made heavy use of recurring known motifs. He produced dozens of paintings and prints of flags, dozens of targets, scores of numeral images, and map after map after map. But as his work progressed, he began to use more personalized recurring motifs of his own devising — small stick figures, the silhouette of a leaning man, the floorplan of a house, squares of cross-hatching, and, for me most intriguing of all, the outline of a knight figure from Matthias Grünewald's 1512 – 1516 *Isenheim Altarpiece*. It is of course not uncommon for an artist to reuse a motif over many artworks. Bach did it frequently in his Cantatas. Robert Motherwell produced numerous *Elegy* painting with similar motifs and structure. But Johns' use of recurring motifs is unusually frequent and prominent, and given how intelligent his work is, we can assume it was not done simply to save time or effort, but is worth investigating.

Usuyuki. 1982.

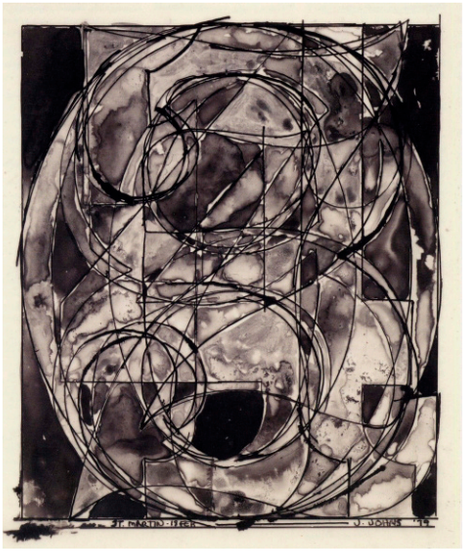
Johns is reported to have said of the cross hatches he used so often that he liked them because they were repetitive and meaningless. Part of what Johns is doing in all his work is questioning how we make meaning out of imagery.

Semiotics. How do we make meaning, conceal meaning, modify meaning in our imagery? Take a symbol (flag, map), modify it but leave it recognizable. The original meaning of the symbol is still there but has now changed. It is diluted and modified. The “map” can now be seen as a mere collection of colors, reminding us that *au fond* that’s what it always was anyhow. Or it can become enriched with our associations and emotions. The map remains known and recognized as symbolic of “United States of America”, but is now also — dark and somber; or, pale and deathlike; or, vibrantly and playfully and joyfully colorful. The modification of the image, of the known image/symbol, both subtracts from its presumed meaning and adds to it.

Three maps of the U.S.A.

And it is also possible to remove all (or very nearly all) the symbolic content to make us see what used to be “meaningful” as a mere collection of lines. Numerals can be repeated and overlaid on themselves until we have to work quite hard to “read” them as numbers, but now instead see them as a mass of interlocking lines and shades.

Meaning is shown to be hidden, changeable, malleable, unstable and obscure — unstable and obscure to the point where it can be lost entirely. What we see when we look is not always what we think we see. Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*.



Having used known symbols in the earlier work, Johns more and more frequently creates his own library of unstable symbols as his work progresses. These include the floorplan of his childhood home, an outline of the Grünewald knight, a threesome of stick figures, a silhouette of a leaning man, a silhouette of a boy, a ladder, an outstretched hand.

Cross hatches, here echoing the shape of paint brush handles.

A triplet of tiny stick figures.

A leaning man in *Summer.* 1985.

Spring and *Fall*, 1986, are both replete with recurring motifs — leaning man figures, little boy silhouette, cross hatches, arm & hand, a vase/faces optical illusion, a duck/rabbit optical illusion. All of these recur over and over in subsequent paintings and prints.

Each motif has its own apparent meaning — “floorplan”, “leaning man”, etc. — but when embedded in the context of a larger composition, the meaning is changed, or diluted, or enriched. This is part of the Post-Modern concept that an artwork has meaning only relative to a context, for example the social or art-historical context within which the artwork lives. Here in Johns, the meaning of the sub-image changes depending on the image within which it resides. The floorplan is hard to perceive, to extract from the composition, to see apart as floorplan. Like the repeated numeral, it becomes merely a set of abstract lines. But we can also see it as a floorplan. It is now/can be both. It is both “Ceci est un floorplan” and “Ceci n’est pas un floorplan”. And when we see it as “floorplan”, it carries with it all sorts of associations and emotions, associations of and emotions about houses, homes, planning, building,.... And when we see it as “floorplan of his childhood home”, those associations and emotions can become yet richer and more complex.

Numerous recurring motifs in the large 78” x 118” *Untitled, 1992* painting. To the left, Grünewald’s knight superimposed over two floorplans. In the central section, cross hatches below a field of dots, with lettering of the word “RED” seen through some of the dots. To the right-center, a stick figure, a small silhouette of a boy, a ladder. Upper right, a barely decipherable recurrence of the Grünewald knight.

The same image motifs recur in 1993 *Mirror’s Edge*. Far left, three tiny and one larger stick figures, all upside down. Center bottom, an upside down boy and a ladder. Wrapping around the perimeter, overlapping floorplans and the Grünewald knight.

The Grünewald knight is the most intriguing of these examples. When I first noticed it in the 1992 *Untitled,* (cf. previous page), it took me quite a bit of looking to see it and decipher it. (It can be much harder to decipher a large painting's marks when you are up close. Distance, and photography, make them easier to see.) I gradually saw eyes, head, ax, sword, and something — what are those swirly lines? — and I finally realized I was seeing an outline of some sort of warrior figure. (As is my custom, I had not read about this painting or the knight figure before my visit. I prefer to react to the artwork without prejudice, and only read commentary later.) Once I saw the figure, I found it recurring in other paintings — for example, *Mirror's Edge* (previous page), where it is even harder to see.

I then read in the museum's commentary that it is from Grünewald. I diligently looked online, but could not find the knight figure anywhere in Grünewald's work. Finally, after much looking at photos of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* I saw the recumbent knight in one panel. In the Grünewald painting, the knight is easy to miss because the panel is so thoroughly dominated by the brilliant image of the risen Christ. And Johns' extremely simplified outline representation of the knight made the search even more challenging. One might easily not see the lines as "knight", and if one does, one might readily not realize it references Grünewald, and if one does understand that, one might not be able to find the reference. Like so much of Johns' imagery, the knight motif floats between "concealed", "meaningless", and "packed with meaning".

So now the knight lines of the Johns' painting serve both as abstract lines within a composition and point to Grünewald's painting. Is there any meaning to this? Is the choice of imagery random? Does it matter that these nearly hidden, easily overlooked lines point to a particular artwork from the past? Given how smart and complex Johns' work is, the answer is probably Yes. So why choose *this* reference? Why Grünewald's *Altarpiece*?

Part of one's answer could lie in Johns' comment about the meaningless cross hatches: There is no meaning. The Grünewald outline does not have to be taken as a reference to anything. It can be seen as just a goofy collection of lines that contributes to an engaging visual composition. End of story. As Frank Stella, one generation behind Johns and of course aware of Johns' work, said of his own work, "What you see is what you see." No more than that.

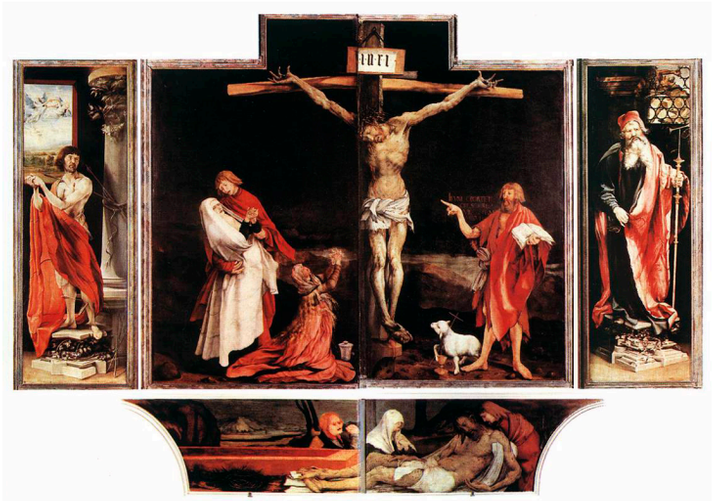
But when we do add the Grünewald reference, our perception of the Johns painting becomes much richer, more complicated and more complex. First, Johns reminds us that all this painting and mark-making he is doing and that all artists do is part of a tradition, even when we forget or are unaware of that tradition. No artwork is *ex nihilo*.

Further, by pointing to the Grünewald altarpiece, Johns reminds us of the complexity of extremely good artwork. The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is extremely complex. Its physical construction is complex, its imagery and themes are complex, and the relationships between and among its images, themes and panels are complex.

The altarpiece consists of three distinct physical layers, only one of which is visible at any one time. As exhibited today in its museum, these layers have been separated so each can be viewed at any time. But in its era, the panels and layers of the altarpiece were opened or closed depending on the significance of that day in the Christian holy calendar. This was common for altarpiece compositions of the era, but normally those altarpieces consisted of just two layers, offering two possibilities — closed (layer A) or open (layer B). In the Grünewald altarpiece, there are three layers. On any given day of the Christian Church calendar, one would be open and the other two closed and hidden.

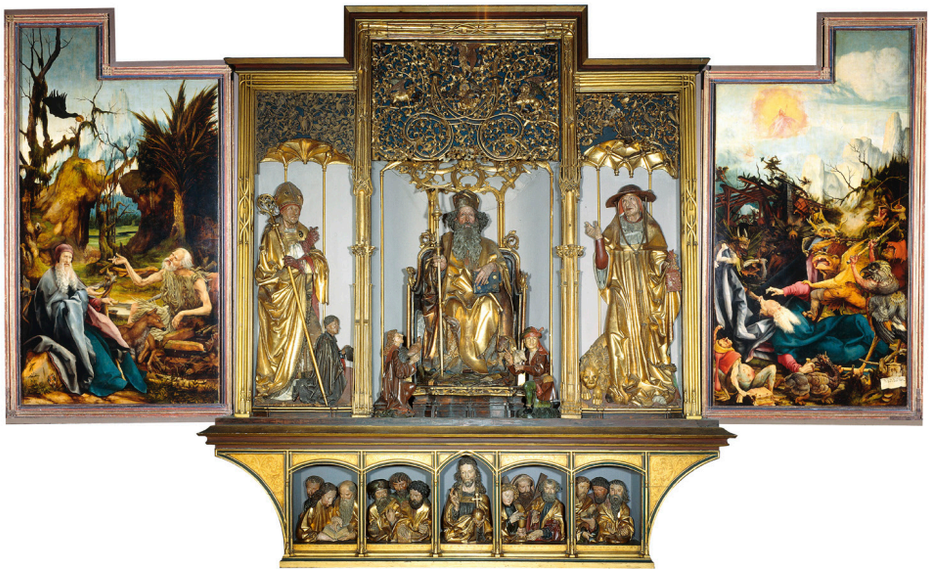
The Grünewald Isenheim Altarpiece as displayed today in the Unterlinden Museum, where the three layers/sections are separated to make them viewable at all times by visitors. During the 16th century, however, two of the layers would be closed and hidden on any given day of the Church calendar. If the outer layer A were visible, layers B and C would be hidden. If panels were opened to reveal layer B, layers A and C were hidden and invisible. Etc.

Within each physical layer there are several compositions, each within its own panel: the very gory crucifixion of Christ, the tender birth of Jesus, the glory of the Risen Christ, the patron saint St. Anthony, and the benefactors of the altarpiece. The altarpiece consists of painting and sculpture combined into one artwork (as do many of Johns' works). The *Isenheim Altarpiece* is a very, very complex artwork. With the simple act of pointing to it with his outlined borrowed knight, Johns says, "Let's think about complexity."



Outermost section: St. Sebastian, the crucifixion of Christ; St. Anthony.

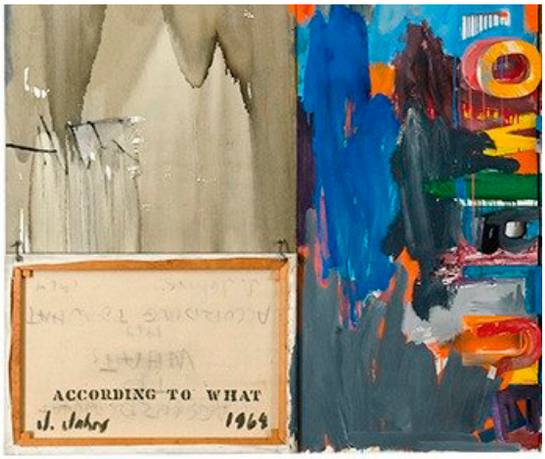
Interior section: Annunciation; birth of Christ; the risen Christ.



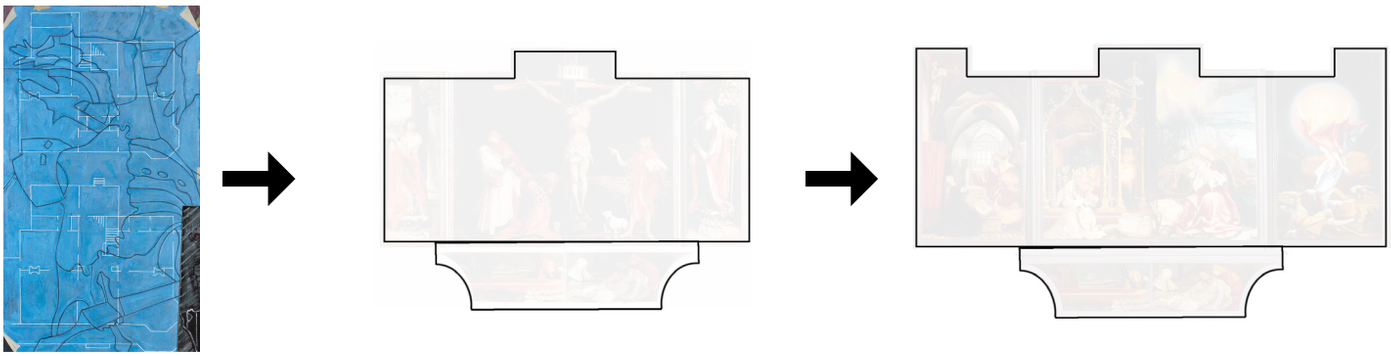
Innermost section: St. Anthony and St. Paul the Hermit; St. Anthony flanked by saints and donors; the temptation of St. Anthony.

And what about the knight that Johns specifically references? In Grünewald's painting the knight is overwhelmed by what is happening before his eyes. What he is experiencing is so far beyond his comprehension, he has fallen backward and is shielding his eyes with his uplifted left arm. The helmet that is supposed to protect him has fallen off and is further obscuring his vision. What he is seeing is beyond his ability to make sense of it. A primary theme of Johns' *oeuvre* is: How do we make sense of this complexity we see?

Furthermore, Grünewald's altarpiece is, as are many of Johns' paintings, a structure of deliberately secret imagery. In its sixteenth century installation many of the panels and much of the imagery would not have been seen by most visitors to the church on most days. In pointing to the *Isenheim Altarpiece* with his simple outline figure, Johns reminds us that the visual world is far more complex with more hidden meaning than we normally like to admit, and that other artists in the tradition have thought of and addressed this issue before him and along with him.



The lower left corner of *According to What* consists of a picture frame which is attached to the main painting. When hooked and closed, the inner imagery and text are invisible. When unhooked and opened, certain things become visible but in doing so they conceal others. All, very like a 16th century altarpiece. In the Johns work, part of what becomes visible is a distorted profile in negative space of Marcel Duchamp, another artist of importance to Johns. The reference to Duchamp is hidden entirely (when closed) or hidden partially (when open, but distorted and an absence rather than a presence).



Outlines and their absence of information pointing to and referring to outlines inside of which resides a wealth of information.

Johns' use of a line-drawing outline to reference all this allows him to more readily hide or make ambiguous his referent image. His outline drawing of the knight makes us conscious also of the importance of outlines in Grünewald's artwork. When closed the *Isenheim Altarpiece* has one very memorable outline. When its panels are opened, it takes on a different, equally memorable outline. Within those outlines, a great, great deal is contained. Within Johns' use of a simplified outline drawing of a Grünewald figure, a great, great deal is suggested.