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INSTABILITIES OF VISUAL PERCEPTION IN THE 'BATH SERIES' OF JASPER JOHNS (1983-1988)

Susanna Margrietha Smit

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Fine Arts

Johannesburg, 2012

ABSTRACT

The 'Bath Series' (1983-1988) of Jasper Johns shows the artist's meditation on his oeuvre of the past thirty years, and the examples of his previous works demonstrate his interest in instabilities of visual perception. The latter are activated when the viewer's expectation to see conventional representational strategies are destabilized, and figure/ground pictorial space, particularly, becomes ambiguous. This first recorded academic study focusing exclusively on the series as a unit, discovers that figure/ground switching, an 'Ur-Gestalt' (Gandelman 1989: 209), appears to be a core energy motivating ambiguous pictorial space in Johns' art, and constitutes the theoretical component of the research.

The practical component is a site specific installation which shows some visual and verbal processes and meditates on the perpetual interaction between the eye and the mind, which is a fundamental concern of Johns (Varnedoe 1996b: 245, 257), as well as of myself. The work invites viewers to experience destabilized conventional visual perceptions and to explore, as Johns said, 'something new' (Varnedoe 1996a: 17).

Key words visual perception, metastability, spatial ambiguity, figure/ground, verbal/visual processing.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

_____

Susanna Margrietha Smit.

_____day of _____, in the year 2012.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Colin Richards for his expert guidance during the initial stages of this research, when a solid foundation for the subsequent inquiry into the art of Jasper Johns was constructed. On his departure Professor Jeremy Wafer took over as my supervisor. I am most fortunate to have benefitted from his experience and insight, as he prodded me to take leaps in my art making which I would not have dared to take on my own. I am most grateful for the confidence he instilled in me regarding my work. Mr. Walter Oltmann's assistance during the concluding phase of the programme is much appreciated. I am indebted to Ms. Natasha Christopher for giving precious time to develop my photographic skills. I commend Mr. Leonard Russell, who provided technical assistance for installing the examination work, for seeking to understand what the student is aiming to achieve, and for striving to create the best possible conditions for showing the work.

To the many family members, friends and colleagues who have helped, encouraged and tolerated me during this project I say a very big thank you.

Lastly, there are not words to express my gratitude to my parents for their unfaltering care and support.

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LIST OF FIGURES

1. LIST OF 'BATH SERIES' WORKS, WITH MY NUMBERING

Due to the stringency and the complexity of copyright laws I have not included reproductions of the works of the 'Bath Series'. Instead I have given references to the sources in which they appear. Empirical data is given according to the available source, as it appears in the source[1].

'My numbering' is explained in the introduction and in chapter 4, on methodology.

{1} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1983). Encaustic on canvas (2 panels), 30½ x 45¼". Signed and dated, top middle: "J.J. 1983". Collection of the artist. (R&F 286).

{2} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1983). Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 48⅛ x 75⅛" (122 x 191 cm). Mr. and Mrs. S. I. Newhouse, Jr., New York. (Rosenthal 1988: 71. Plate 19).

{3} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1983). Ink on plastic, 24¾ x 36¼" (63 x 92.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Rosenthal 1988: 77. Plate 21).

{4} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1983). Ink on plastic, 26¼ x 34½" (66.5 x 87.5 cm). Collection the artist. (Rosenthal 1988: 78. Plate 22).

{5} Jasper Johns, *Ventriloquist* (1983). Encaustic on canvas, 190.5 x 127 cm (75 x 50"). Signed and dated, lower left: "J.JOHNS 1988". The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. (Crichton 1994: Plate 197).

[1] In this I follow Anderson (2011 unnumbered blank page at the beginning of her doctoral thesis, submitted to Boston University, U.S.A.), 'Copyrighted materials have not been filmed at the request of the author. This material is available for consultation at the university library', as well as the advice of Mrs. Denise Nicholson, the Copyright Services Librarian of the University of the Witwatersrand and of Mrs. Dawn Taylor of the Legal Office of the same University.

{6} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1983). Charcoal and pastel on paper, 19¼ x 24¼" (48.9 x 61.6 cm). Signed and dated upper right: "J. Johns. Aug. 83". Collection of Leonore S. and Bernard A. Greenberg. (R&F 287. Plate 92).

{7} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1983). Charcoal and plastic on paper, 33 x 45¼" (83.8 x 114.9 cm). Signed and dated lower left: "J. Johns/'83". Collection of the artist. (R&F 289. Plate 93).

{8} Jasper Johns, *Study for Racing Thoughts* (1983). Watercolour, gouache, ink, ink and graphite on paper, 22⅛ x 29⅞" (56.2 x 75.9 cm). Signed and inscribed lower right: "J. Johns/AUG.'83/RACING THOUGHTS". Collection of Jean-Christophe Castelli, New York. (R&F 291. Plate 94).

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{10} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1983-4). Ink on plastic, 26⅛ x 34½" (66 x 87.5 cm). Signed and dated, lower right: "J. JOHNS ST. MARTIN. DEC. '83 – JAN. '84". Collection of the artist. (Rosenthal 1988: 80. Plate 27).

{11} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1984). Graphite pencil on paper, 8½ x 11". Signed and dated, lower right: "J. Johns. 1984". Collection of the artist. (R&F 17).

{12} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1984). Pencil and water colour on paper, 25 x 26" (63.5 x 91 cm). Signed and dated, lower left : "J. Johns 1984". Collection of David Whitney. (Rosenthal 1988: 82. Plate 26).

{13} Jasper Johns, *Racing Thoughts* (1984). Oil on canvas, 50 x 75" (127 x 190.5 cm). Signed and dated, upper left: "J. JOHNS 1984". Collection of

Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Phoenix, Maryland. (Rosenthal 1988: 87. Plate 28).

{14} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1984). Encaustic on canvas, 127 x 190.5 cm (50 x 75”). Collection of the artist. (Crichton 1994: Plate 206).

{15} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1984). Encaustic on canvas. 161.3 x 190.5 cm (63½ x 75”). Signed and dated, upper left: “J. JOHNS 1984”. The Eli and Edythe L. Board Collection. (Crichton 1994: Plate 205).

{16} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* 1984. Watercolour and graphite pencil on paper, 27 x 35⅛” (68.6 x 89.2 cm). Signed and dated, lower right: “J. Johns/Nov 1984/STONY POINT, NY”. Collection of the artist. (Rosenthal 1988: 297. Plate 97).

{17} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1986). Watercolour and pencil on paper, 24⅛ x 35½” (62.5 x 90 cm). Signed and dated, lower left: “J. Johns [illegible] + St. Martin’s”. Collection of the artist. (Rosenthal 1988: 83. Plate 27).

{18} Jasper Johns, *Ventriloquist II* (1986). Lithograph, 73.7 x 104.8 cm (29 x 41¼”). Signed [and dated?], lower right: “J. Johns [?]”. Universal Limited Art Editions. (Crichton 1994: Plate 219).

{19} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1988). Watercolour, ink, graphite pencil on paper, 31⅛ x 47⅜” (79.7 x 120.3 cm). Signed and dated lower left: “J. Johns/Feb. 1988 N.Y.C”. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Irving Mathews. (R&F 301. Plate 99).

{20} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1988). Encaustic in canvas, 60¼ x 68¼” (122.6 x 153 cm). Signed and dated, upper right: “J. JOHNS 1988”. Collection of Joel and Anne Ehrenkrantz. (Va 355. Plate 221).

{21} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1988). Encaustic on canvas, 26 x 38”. Signed and dated, upper right: “J. J. ‘88”. Collection of the artist. (R&F 304).

{22} Jasper Johns, *Untitled* (1988). Charcoal and pastel on paper, 26¾ x 38¾" (68 x 98.4 cm). Signed and dated, upper right: "J. Johns./JAN 1988/ST. MARTIN". Collection of the artist. (R&F 305. Plate 101).

{23} Jasper Johns, *The Bath* (1988). Watercolour and graphite pencil on paper, 29⅛ x 37¾" (74 x 95.9 cm). Signed and dated, upper right: "J. Johns./MARCH 1988/ST. MARTIN, F.W". Collection of the artist. (R&F 307. Plate 102).

2. LIST OF MY WORK

The numbering is done according to the numbers of the works on the plan of the installation in the Substation. 'Figure' refers to the illustrations of the work at the end of the study.

Figure 1. *Night Notes i* (9). Paper, ink, cotton wool and tulle, 100 x 139 cm.

Figure 2. *Night Notes ii* (4). Paper, ink, staples, cotton wool, acetate and tulle, 58 x 85 cm.

Figure 3. *Ticks.* Pencil on paper, 1.5 x 2 m. approx.

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Figure 5. *The Trees of the Fields*, i and ii. Paper, cardboard, acetate, tulle, rope, papier mâché, staples and other mixed media, 150 x 232 cm. Two sided.

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Figure 12. *Night Notes with Roots*. Ink, pins, cotton wool, paper and stretchy silver tulle (?), 40 x 103 cm.

Figure 13. *Night Notes with Black Velvet.* Paper, ink, pins, velvet, satin varnish, iridescent medium and silver grey transparent material, 107 x 150 cm.

Figure 14. *Ode to the Switch*, i and ii. Ink and cotton thread on paper, 115 x 150 cm, irregular shape. Two sided.

Figure 15. *Poincaré Quote.* 360 x 660 cm. Pen, ink and water colour on paper.

Figure 16. *White Rabbit.* 30 x 40 cm. Water colour paint on paper.

Figure 17. *More Puppy Experiments.* Three sheets, 30 x 40 cm each. Pencil, coloured pencil, ink on paper.

Figure 18. *Trying Out (Verf van Vettewinkel).* Cartridge paper and mixed media, 65 x 101 cm.

Figure 19. *sinistra/dextra*. Negative shapes of 'conflict', letters used in *Trees of the fields*. Card, paint, cotton wool, masking tape and beige tulle, 78 cm x 3 m.

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Figure 21. *Huxley Quote.* 20 x 150 cm. Gouache on paper.

Figure 22. *Ongoing Process, bouquet for* J. J.. 9 x 30 x 30 cm approx. *P* circular flat found object with raised concentric circles, and dried roots.

Figure 23. *Thank U J. Johns*, i and ii. Tippex on blackboard paint on canvas, 26 x 126 cm. Two sided.

Figure 24. *Textur/if you could read my mind*, i and ii. Blue tulle, cotton wool, glove, paint and iridescent medium, 57 x 57 x 61 x 62 cm. Two sided.

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Figure 27. *Nox est … .* 30 x 149 cm. Mixed media on paper.

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Figure 29. *Skin.* Papier mâché and mixed media, four pieces, 70 x 95 cm. in total, approx.

Figure 30. *Can of Worms Notes.* Pencil, ink, masking tape, cotton wool, cartridge paper, tracing paper, photocopies, plastic and tulle, 135 x 140 cm.

Figure 31. *Caterpillar of Consolation Notes.* Pencil, ink, cotton wool, pins, masking tape, cartridge paper, tracing paper, photocopies, acetate and tulle, 60 x 85 cm.

Figure 32. *Play.* Paint and ink on paper, 150 cm x 2 m.

Figure 33. *P.* Shimmering pinkish objects in varying dimensions. Found objects, paint, newspaper, flour, iridescent medium.

TABLE 1. FREQUENCY OF OBJECTS AND MARKINGS IN THE 'BATH SERIES' WORKS

Frequency	Object	Work(s) in which the object appears
24	Total metastable images, including *Mona Lisa*	Profile/goblet vase 14, wife/mother-in-law 6, *Mona Lisa* 3, duck/rabbit 1 (see below)
22	Frames and borders	1-5, 7-23
20	Striated jigsaw pattern/'Stella lines'	1-5, 7-20
20	Total bath taps	With running water 16, not showing water 4 (see below)
18	Wicker basket	2-6, 8-20
17	Bath taps with running water	2, 4, 6-7, 9-10, 12-14, 16-23
16	Profile/goblet vase	4-6, 8--20
15	Isenheim plague victim, sometimes with spots	2-4, 7-10, 12-14, 16-17, 19-20, 23
15	Rim of bath tub	5, 7, 9-11, 13-14, 16-23
13	Mirror road sign with skull and *chute de glace*	1-4, 7, 9, 11-16, 19
13	Total nails	With shadow 10, without shadow 3 (see below)
10	Mirror surface, misted over, and similar	1-4, 7, 10, 16-19
10	Nail(s) with shadow	9, 11-13, 15, 17-19, 21-22
9	Masking tape	5, 9, 11, 13-16, 18, 20
8	American flag	4-5, 10, 12 16-19
8	Ohr pot(s)	5, 8-9, 13-15, 18, 20
8	Wood grain strip/wall cover	9, 13-15, 20-23
7	Thumbnails, red, white, blue, black/grey	9-11, 13, 16, 18-19

6	Barnett Newman print	5, 9, 13-15, 18
6	Wife/mother-in-law image	10, 11, 14-17
5	*Straw hat* … Picasso	19-23
5	Writing/lettering units, excluding signatures, titles and *chute de glace*	9, 11, 13-15
4	Bath tap not showing water	1, 3, 8, 15
4	Door hinges	5, 9, 13, 18
4	Leo Castelli portrait puzzle	8-9, 11, 13
3	Moby Dick	5, 11, 18
3	*Mona Lisa* iron on	9, 11, 13
3	Nail(s) without shadow	4, 21-22
2	Cloth, veil, handkerchief	21-22
2	Corduroy trousers	9, 13
2	Hatchings	1, 2
2	Isenheim Roman soldier	1, 15,
2	Newspaper clipping, collage	2, 19
2	Reversed writing (FACE …, included in 'writing/lettering…')	14, 15
2	Savarin brush holder	1-2
1	Clothes pen	1
1	Dismembered arm with flagstones	2
1	Duck/rabbit image	16
1	Spiral galaxy	20

ABBREVIATIONS

I refer to three sources and a painting frequently, therefore I use an abbreviation rather than a complete reference each time they occur in the text. They are,

R&F : Rosenthal, N. and Fine, R. 1990. *The Drawings of Jasper Johns.* Washington: National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Va: Varnedoe, K. 1996a. *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective.* New York: Museum of Modern Art.

Vb: Varnedoe, K. 1996b. *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook, Notes, Interviews.* New York: Museum of Modern Art.

V&CSA: *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* by Leonardo da Vinci (1510).

JOHNS' and JOHNS'S

When writing the possessive form of 'Johns' some authors use 'Johns' and others use 'Johns's'. According to Cutts (2007: 108-9) there must an apostrophe *s* directly after the possessor, except when the singular form already ends in *s*. Then either an apostrophe *s* or only an apostrophe is correct. Although adding an apostrophe *s* may follow the rule more closely, 'Johns's' seems unnecessarily cluttered to me, and therefore I use 'Johns' in my writing. However, when I quote an author who uses 'Johns's' I write 'Johns's'.

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Opening remarks

Research into instabilities of visual perception is an inquiry into the ongoing interactions between the eye, the brain and the mind, and the interpretation and the meaning of these exchanges. I will argue that this appears to be a crucial question that preoccupies Johns in his meditation of the 'Bath Series' (1983-1988). My own work grows out of and continues Johns' meditation on seeing, and, indeed, my interest in the 'Bath Series' was first spurred by my ongoing interest in how we see, and the meaning of this.

There is an extensive literature on Johns, for example the Johns bibliography of the Museum of Modern Art of New York lists only articles and interviews from 1951 to 1996 and is one hundred and thirty eight pages long. Anderson confirms that 'the quantity and quality of primary and secondary sources on Johns's work is outstanding' (2011: xi). However, I have not yet found a recorded academic study devoted exclusively to the 'Bath Series', therefore this study will contribute to the scholarship on Johns.[2]

1.2 How I became interested in the research

My first under- and postgraduate studies were in language and literature, and I went on to teach mainly French at high schools for ten years. From an early age I had also been very interested in visual art, and went to extra mural lessons without making noteworthy progress. I experienced the practice of drawing and painting as a closed book, briefly opening from time to time, but never long enough for me to come to grips with its contents. In 1986 a friend told me about

[2] It is the third study on Johns by a South African at a South African university that I am aware of, after Morley (1998) at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg and Richards (1994) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

the book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1979) by Betty Edwards , which sets out a particular method by which to improve one's drawing skills. The book was a revelation to me, and I did all the drawing exercises exactly as prescribed. The author claimed that our brain processes information in at least two different 'modes', namely a visual or 'right mode', and a verbal or 'left mode'. The exercises[3] put me more consciously in touch with the part of my brain which deals with processing visual information and specifically with drawing. My drawing and art making improved with practice as I understood better what I was doing and was able to more consciously help the process of exploration and improvement along. I explored and experienced the processes of the eye, the brain and the mind working together and manifesting in visual art. I became keenly aware of the different types of drawing made when 'left mode' was dominant, as opposed to 'right mode'. 'Left mode' drawings were tense, schematic, underdeveloped and childish, while 'right mode' drawings were freer, more complex and detailed, and visually more dense and satisfying.

In her method of teaching drawing Edwards applies various techniques to make the 'left mode' of the brain 'bow out' of a task, 'to give up on it' because it finds it too complex, so that 'right mode' can get a chance to take over the task and enable the person to draw better (1986: 23 and *passim*). One such strategy is to show the student the well known duck/rabbit, vase/goblet and old/young woman metastable images, which I will define and discuss further on. The switching aspects, when introduced as part of a sequence of drawing exercises, can help, by processes which are not fully understood, the brain to switch from a predominantly 'verbal mode' to a predominantly 'visual mode' (1986: 171-5 and *passim*).

[3] Such as copying an upside down drawing or photograph (1979: 50*ff*), and drawing your hand while looking at it uninterruptedly, without looking at your pencil and paper (1979: 84*ff*).

I emphasize that I am not arguing for or against the validity of Edwards' theories but explaining which experiences and notions drove me to choose the subject of the present research, which is about the relationship between the eye, the brain and the mind and our experiences of their ongoing interaction. Instabilities of visual perception are a result of this ongoing interaction, most blatantly, perhaps, when we experience the switching aspects of metastable images such as the duck/rabbit. For me these partially understood processes of seeing are profoundly interesting and significant, and the meditations in the 'Bath Series' and in my own work question and investigate these processes.

Why did I decide to study the 'Bath Series' specifically? On a visit to the United Kingdom in 1990 I went to see an exhibition called *The Drawings of Jasper Johns* at the Hayward Gallery in London. At the time I knew very little about Johns: he painted American flags and targets, was a Pop artist, and did not interest me. I went to the exhibition thinking that I may nevertheless learn something and that it is a good mental exercise to sometimes engage with something in which you are not interested. Walking though the exhibition I rapidly passed by the uninteresting flags, targets and similar works. As I approached the last , very large works of the exhibition I saw … the duck/rabbit, the old/young woman, the vase/profile, and the Mona Lisa with her mysterious smile - the switching images asking questions about the way we see! These images, forming part of what was probably one of the *Seasons* series (1985-6), absorbed me intensely[4], and I mentally 'surfed' from one object and pictorial space to the next. It seemed to me that Johns was asking the very questions about how the eye, the brain and the mind work which so interest me. There were other paintings similar to the

[4] This 'recognition' is an example of when the eye, the brain and the mind work together at great speed. Althusser's theory of interpellation addresses this phenomenon, but it lies beyond the scope of the present enquiry.

first one[5], and I spent more time looking at these paintings and exploring and enjoying them than I have ever before or since done when looking at art works.

When I had to find a topic to research for this course I was reminded that I should chose a subject about which I care deeply, which is in line with whom I am and my aspirations. I care deeply about the discovery and the development of the human potential, especially about learning more about the little understood visual 'right mode' of our brains, as Edwards calls it. I remembered the duck and the rabbit, the old and the young woman, and the vase and the profile, and that all three appeared together in Johns' *Untitled* (1984 {16}[6]), in the catalogue of the exhibition I had visited almost twenty years ago. The work was relatively fresh in my memory because I had used it as source material for a work I had done a few years previously, a 13m x 3m mind map, showing mental processing. I had included small, hand drawn copies of Johns' renderings of the duck/rabbit, the old/young woman, and of his references to Duchamp, Munch and Picasso. These elements from the practical component of the previous project now form part of the theoretical component of the present one, and in turn they contribute to the meditations of the practical component on the subject of seeing of this project. My choice of a topic for research is therefore in line with my lifelong interests and endeavours.

Furthermore, I have been teaching visual art at high school level for ten years, and studying mechanisms and questions of seeing and visual art make me better qualified to teach the subject.

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[5] The exhibition catalogue shows that there were twenty-six works on show containing 'perceptual iconography' such as the duck/rabbit drawing. I do not recall whole individual works in detail, only various elements and the thoroughly absorbing effect of the group.

[6] This is my numbering of the works solely for the purposes of the present study. I explain this further on in this introduction, and then in the chapter on methodology.

Lastly, the account of motives for the research would not be complete if I did not mention that at the age of twenty-four I had a mental breakdown and was put into a sanatorium. My general practitioner had diagnosed me with 'acute endogenous depression'. I asked him what it meant and he said,

'It means we don't know what's wrong with you'.

I was grateful for his honesty. The psychiatrist at the sanatorium was also reluctant to put a label on what was 'wrong' with me. A few weeks after I left the facility I had a very profound spiritual experience, thanks to which I have remained sanatorium- and medication-free to this day. My engagement with not entirely understood mental processes, and the interpretation of what is seen by the eye, the brain, the mind and even the soul are, in fact, in the first place motivated by these personal experiences. In exploring these matters I am helping myself, and this is of some benefit to others when I teach and, far more rarely, when viewers engage with my art works.

Cone … cone … fitting so well into the triangle, by the sphere, the circle, the lines in Picasso's drawing *L'Indicatif Présent* (1938) in Rookmaker's *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1971: 155), which one of my fellow inmates at the sanatorium, an art student, had given me. I hoped that when the psychiatrist saw that I could copy exactly, precisely, the geometric forms into the block, with all the relative sizes and angles correct, he would see I am not mad, because I could think so logically and clearly, and because I was very obviously in touch with the world around me. When I showed him my drawing he said, 'My son-in-law is an art teacher and he doesn't think much of what I'm doing here'. I was unable to say anything to that. I could not understand why he could not ***see*** what I was trying to tell him with my drawing, since it was so obvious.

1.3 Definitions and terminology

I shall define terms which require clarification as they appear in the discussion so that the meaning of the term can be applied immediately in the context that it is being used. This seems preferable to providing a list of meanings of terms on a separate page because it avoids unnecessary paging back and forth while following the argument. For now I shall only give some clarification of how I shall use terms which have already appeared in the introductory remarks, namely instabilities of visual perception, and metastability. I shall not define them in detail, but rather provide further elaboration later, during the course of the discussion, as it is required.

'Instabilities of visual perception' was chosen at the outset of this research as the title because it spreads a wide net over a large field of inquiry. This was necessary because the 'Bath Series' covers a very wide range of examples and ideas which relate to seeing, and it remains appropriate. 'Instability' is the opposite of 'stability', which derives from the Latin *sto, stare, steti, statum,* and means 'to stand, stand still, remain standing' (Simpson 1977: 571). If something is *sta*ble it simply does not move. If something is un*sta*ble it continually tips over or moves around. If a chair is unstable it is subject to in*sta*bility. We speak of mental instability, which carries a sense of threat, danger, and even uncontrollable and overwhelming chaos. On the other hand, instability can also be part of a vital process of change and transformation which works against stagnation, inertia and death. The 'Bath Series' and my own work meditate on various instabilities specifically in relation to visual perception.

When we encounter the term 'visual perception' in the course of everyday life, we usually understand 'beholding, seeing, perception by means of the eyes'. It is, for example, Princeton University's online dictionary's definition[7]. However,

[7] Accessed 05.06.2011 at wordnet.web.princeton.edu/perl/webwn.

> [f]or Johns, the eye is an extension of the mind: the sensory organ for seeing is for him … the central vehicle for thinking and feeling as well (Bernstein 1985: xv).

The 'Bath Series' shows how Johns questions the 'relativity of perception from a psychological, emotional as well as optical point of view' (Rose 1987: 259), therefore in this study 'visual perception' also refers to what is 'seen' by the 'mind', as an extension of the eye and the brain. 'Mind' is defined by the Oxford Dictionaries Online as,

> the element of a person that enables them to be aware of the world and their experiences, to think, and to feel; the faculty of consciousness and thought … a person's ability to think and reason, the intellect.[8]

Although 'mind' has a broad application I have found that the above definition is adequate for this study.

Lastly, Yau says that 'Johns' definition of seeing … includes dreaming' (2008: 14).

The meanings of 'seeing' in this study therefore include what is seen by the physical eye as well as the mind's workings with this, and also what is seen in a semi-conscious state and in dreams. It also applies to my practical work which grows from Johns' meditations.

Finally I shall briefly explain what 'metastable' or 'multistable' images are. They are recognized by their switching aspects, such as the drawing which switches between a duck and a rabbit profile, a vase/goblet and a human profile, and the three quarter views of the faces of an older and a younger woman[9]. There are one or more such images in the majority of the 'Bath Series' works, that is in

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[8] Accessed 05.07.2011 at http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mind?view=uk

[9] Gandelman 1979: 160*ff*, Mitchell 1994: 45*ff.* The latter is a drawing by W. E. Hill called 'My wife and my mother-in-law', first published in *Puck* in 1915 (R&F 249).

fifteen out of twenty-three[10], and they testify to Johns' ongoing questioning of how we see.

I shall next describe how Johns' preoccupations unify the group of works under discussion into a series.

1.4 The 'Bath Series' as a series

There is no evidence that Johns consciously developed the 'Bath Series' as a series[11]. Rather,

> [i]t periodically becomes necessary for him to make a studio painting as an index of his practice in order to sort it out, to find out what he is doing and why and whether he should go on doing it. (Orton 1994: 24)[12]

In 1982 Johns painted *In the Studio* which accumulates references to his previous work, such as both a drawing and a plaster cast of a dismembered arm, hatchings, illusionistic nails and a wall. They appear again in the subsequent 'Bath Series' works, and I will discuss them further on. *In the Studio* serves as a prelude to the 'Bath Series', when Johns shifts his consideration of his work to the bath[13]. One of the first works of the series, *Untitled* (1983 {2}) 'exhibits the

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[10] {4}-{6}, {8}-{19}.

[11] as he did, for example, *The Seasons* (1985-6) (R&F: 41-3).

[12] Orton mentions Johns' *Field Painting* (1963-4) and *Untitled* (1972) as further examples of this type of work (1994: 24-5), while Rosenthal and Fine refer to his *Edisto* (1962) as a 'kind of taxonomy of modes of representation, and his *According to What* (1964) as 'an encyclopedia of means of representation' (1990: 25) in which he also considers his practice.

[13] 'Several writers have noted that Johns had seen at this time a work by Frida Kahlo, *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) which depicts her in a bathtub gazing at scenes from her life that float on the water's surface' (Rothfuss 2003: 10), although when Yau asked Johns if the work had inspired him he answered 'I doubt it, but at some point I saw and enjoyed the painting. I visited the Grey Gallery exhibition with Nick, Paula Cooper's teenaged son' (2007).

view of a person sitting in a bathtub' (Rosenthal 1988: 71) and this remains the case throughout the group of works under discussion. Furthermore, the works form a group in as much as they are an '*inventory* of images in a succession of paintings and drawings' (R&F: 33) (my italics) which shows 'the soliloquy of someone's *waking dream* as he lies in his bathtub' (Rosenthal 1988: 72) (my italics). The works form a unity in that they are parts of the same 'waking dream' in a 'realm of speculation' (Yau 2008: 135) with 'a sense of quiet isolation with one's own psyche' (Rothfuss 2003: 10). The artist is 'sorting out' (Orton 1994: 24) his practice, of which it can be said that 'in perceptual terms … he enjoys creating an "unstable … visual field"', as the discussion which follows will show (Rosenthal 1988: 67). Mechanisms of the creative process at work are demonstrated as they take place in a semi-conscious state, when only partly understood functions of the brain are at work, and this simultaneous processing of everything together further unifies the works into a group or series. My practical work also considers and shows this processing, as I will explain further on.

Rosenthal speaks of the group of works as a

> *series*, begun in 1983, [which] uses the bathroom of Johns' house in Stony Point, New York, to set the scene for imaginary combinations of Johns' possessions, his art, and a variety of found pictures.' (R&F: 32) (my italics).

There is, to my knowledge, no list or compilation of works which specifically belong to this 'series'. From the works of the 'series' at my disposal[14] I decided to select, for this study, the works which have *bath taps* in them, usually in the lower right corner of the format. This precludes any discussion as to whether they are part of the 'Bath Series' or not, since the bath taps place them firmly in the bathroom. I discuss this further in the chapter on methodology.

[14] I return to this in chapter 4, when I discuss the methodology I employ.

I have taken 1983 as the beginning of the series since I have not found any works with taps before that date, and 1988 as the year of completion since I have not found any works with taps after that date. I also discuss this further in the chapter on methodology.

I am working with twenty-three works in various media, and there is a list of these works, each with full empirical data, at the beginning of this writing. The title of seventeen of the works is *Untitled*, and there are mostly more than one *Untitled*s per year, therefore it is not possible to distinguish them from one another on this basis. To avoid clogging up the text with details of dimensions, media and ownership to differentiate the works from each other, I have given each work an individual number, starting from 1 and following to 23, including, purely for convenience, four works which have different titles, which includes two *Racing Thoughts.* I have placed these numbers in curling brackets, {12}. When referring to a work I sometimes give its title, date and my number, for example *Untitled* (1985 {14}), and at other times, for example when it is part of a list, I simply give the designated number, for example {14}.

I refer to the group of works of my study as the 'Bath Series', and have placed the unitalicized title in inverted commas to emphasize that it is not a term sanctioned by Johns scholars. Yau, for example, speaks of 'at least a dozen paintings [completed] between 1983 and 1988' (2008: 133) which show 'a room with a bath, its rim and faucet visible in the lower-right corner' (133) and various motifs. The term is merely a convenience to use for the twenty-three works I am discussing, and I shall motivate this further in the chapter on methodology.

In my own work I directly acknowledge my link with the meditation of the 'Bath Series' with a papier mâché mould that I made of my own bath taps, which I painted with 'soft violet', then 'touch of lilac' acrylic paint, and then iridescent medium over it (a 33 *P* in the list of my work). The effect suggests the unknown, 'magical', 'alchemical' processes which take place in our minds when not entirely

understood creative processes change and transform something into something else. The taps are part of a collection of everyday objects which have been coated and engulfed by the unknown 'magic' which makes all things new. The papier mâché gives the objects an organic, processing look and feel, as if they are being melted. This is an example of how my work has developed iconographically as well as conceptually out of my engagement with Johns' 'Bath Series'. I shall discuss my work further after discussing the works of the 'Bath Series'.

Chapter 2. SCOPE

2.1 Introduction

In an interview with Johns in 1989, just after the last works of the 'Bath Series' were completed, Hindry said that a 'striking feature' of his work is, 'all along, its extraordinary compactness' (Vb: 231). This compactness is particularly true of the 'Bath Series', which is an 'inventory' (R&F: 33) of his work covering about thirty years[15]. Johns' meditation on his oeuvre compacts many more issues than are possible to investigate in this study. I shall briefly review six topics which are evident in the 'Bath Series' that could be related to instabilities of visual perception, and which I shall not elaborate further because it will make this writing far too long. They can be pursued in separate studies. The topics are an auto/biographical theme combining with a liminal state, a detailed positioning of the series in art historical discourse, the incubation phase of creativity, verbal and visual interaction, skin and the 'ambiguous verbal/visual encoding of race in the binary system of black and white '"identity"' (Mitchell 1994: 74), and the idea that the sense of sight is superior to the other senses.

2.2 Auto/biography and liminality

An auto/biographical[16] strain seems to show something of what was happening in the artist's life at the time of the making of the works of the 'Bath Series'. Rosenthal says that since 1982, just before the 'Bath Series', Johns' work becomes 'less reserved than ever before' (1988: 60). As early as 1978 Johns had said that,

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[15] From the beginning of the 1950's, when he made his first *Flag* paintings, which feature in the 'Bath Series', up to the 'Bath Series' which begins in the early 1980's.

[16] This study does not focus on either on autobiography or biography. I will deal with both at the same time in this summary of themes which are beyond the scope of this inquiry.

> In my early work … I tried to hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions … Finally, one must *simply drop the reserve*. I think some of the changes in my work relate to that (Rosenthal 1988: 60) (my italics).

In the 'Bath Series' he depicts his personal space with objects from his private environment such as his bath taps and the wicker laundry basket standing next to the bath in his house at Stony Point, New York (R&F: 286). Previously he had made a point of using familiar, impersonal, mass produced images which 'the mind already knows' (R&F: 15) such as flags, targets, maps and stencil letters of the alphabet. A study of the series as auto/biography would research the motives for a change from a less to a more personal mode which (perhaps) took place when Johns was in his early fifties[17]. The study will be more complex than the initial evidence, that is that he 'simply' dropped 'the reserve' (Rosenthal 1988: 60) suggests, since there are personal elements in his work before 1983, and even before 1978[18]. Furthermore, is the very choice to depict mass produced, overly familiar objects not already a personal choice[19]? Lewis, during an interview with Johns in 1990, notes that,

> *he keeps boxing with the fact that his art has become more personal and autobiographical*. "Of course it's about me," *he says, though that question had not been asked.* "But it's not a *story* about me, for heaven's sake!" (Vb: 241).

The differences between narrative ('*story*') and non-narrative ('not a *story*') qualities in Johns' present and previous work would also have to be investigated

[17] He was born in 1930.

[18] and before 1978. '*Passage* (1962), one of his earliest works to include autobiographical associations' is mentioned by Bernstein (1985: 238).

[19] Johnston (1996) has made a study of Johns' work as auto/biography, and she scrutinizes these and other personal, auto/biographical questions. Johns refused to give permission for his art to be published in her book, and this would have to be taken into account if the 'Bath Series' were studied as auto/biography.

and accounted for in a study of the 'Bath Series' as auto/biography. All of the above is beyond the scope of the present study. My focus is his preoccupation with the instabilities of visual perception, which seems to span his whole career as an artist, in spite of possible fluctuations in more or less 'personal' modes.

Furthermore, if the 'Bath Series' *were* considered as a transitional phase in Johns' personal development, the work could be examined as a rendering of 'the liminal stage[,] as a 'betwixt and between[20]'' (Gandelman 1989: 208) one phase of development and the next. Multistable images, which are plentiful in the 'Bath Series', as Table 1 shows, are characteristic of liminality (Gandelman 1989: 209 and *passim*). My study does not focus on auto/biography and will therefore exclude examining liminality and metastable images in this context.

2.3 Modernist or postmodernist

Art historians have debated Johns' place in art historical discourse and whether his work is modernist or postmodernist. Morley, for example, argues that it

> can be regarded as either modernist or postmodernist depending upon the various interpretations of modernism and postmodernism (1998: 72).

In as much as the 'Bath Series' is a summary of Johns' work it can be used as a point of reference to gage whether Johns better fits with modernism or postmodernism. The destabilizing of sanctioned ways of seeing is characteristic of the change from one artistic mode or style to another. Johns' work evidently (from the above) participates in such a change, but this study does not investigate this question.

[20]Here 'a 'betwixt and between'' is the space and the time of a transitional phase and state.

2.4 The 'incubation' phase of creativity

Thirdly, it seems to me that the 'Bath Series' would be an interesting case study showing successive stages of the 'incubation phase' of creativity (Edwards 1986: 30 and *passim*). As one pages through the chronologically arranged[21] reproductions of the works of the series'[22], one notices that from the first until the nineteenth work the format is divided down the middle into two equal halves. Indeed, the earliest example of the 'Bath Series' that I have found, *Untitled* (1983 {1}), is recorded as consisting of '2 panels' (R&F: 286), and there is a large, vertically dissected paper clip painted close to the joining line of the two panels, suggesting they should be joined. {2} to {19}, with the exception of {10}, {11} and {16}, are painted on a single format with a dividing line down the middle.

The left side of the works are covered by striated, jigsaw-like interlocking organic forms, while the right side presents a more uniform, wall-like surface. In front of this static, interlocking ground Johns ambiguously attaches/'attaches' and floats/'floats'[23] various examples of art works and objects. They appear and reappear in shifted places in and on the format, sometimes (partly) behind and sometimes (partly) in front of other 'members' of the group, as the shifting and sorting Orton spoke of (1994: 24) takes place. The artist has all the 'information' he needs, all his work, knowledge and experience from the past, but he does not seem to find anything new or satisfactory to do with it. In 1988 he said of this time,

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[21] By year of production (see chapter 4, Methodology).

[22] Readers may want to challenge my grouping of the series of 'tap works' into the 'Bath Series'. I address this further in Chapter 4.

[23] Are the objects really attached or floating, or do they only seem to be attached or floating? Johns questions how we see. I return to this in chapter 6.2, on the problematization of space.

> I had had a period of a kind of anxiety … where when I was trying to get to sleep images, bits of images, and bits of thought would run through my head *without connectedness that I could see* (Vb: 224) (My italics).

He therefore reviews '[t]he gathered bits of information, like a jigsaw puzzle[24], spread out on a table'[25] (Edwards 1986: 43) or the wall/'wall' of a bathroom in front of him. They do not reveal anything new, and this could be part of the reason for the sense of frustration and 'brooding pessimism' (Francis 1984: 101) and depression, the 'melancholy aspect' (Vb: 217) that is sometimes regarded as the psychological mode of the series.

But it does not end here. In the latter part of the series, that is in *Untitled* (1988 {20}), the two sections of Johns' dissected reworking of Picasso's *Staw Hat with Blue Leaf* (1936)[26], now[27] slide away from each other and reveal, behind them, a deep blue surface into which the clearly outlined 'jigsaw' pieces from the previous works are dissolving. Static spots of the diseased skin of the Isenheim plague victim from the previous works are swirling, metamorphosed into many dots which become flickers of spiral galaxies {20}. The claustrophobic, static, grid-like compositions of the previous works are starting to open up and to move. At the same time, {21}[28] and {22}s' grounds are becoming unified, and are not 'jigsawed' and divided anymore. In both paintings Johns' reworked Picasso is

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[24] A jigsaw puzzle appears in the jigsawed photo of the face of Leo Castelli in four of the 'Bath Series' works, {8}, {9} {11} and {13}. Johnston sees the left panels of most of the works of the series (except {6}, 16}, {19}, {20} {21} and {22}) as an 'an expanse of jigsaw motif' (Johnston 1987: 132).

[25] I have not found any record of specific personal interaction between Johns and Edwards.

[26] which first appears in the 'Bath Series' in *Untitled* (1988 {18}) on the left side, 'growing out' of the 'expanse of jigsaw motif' (Johnston 1987: 132) .

[27] Implying that they were previously joined into one, whole image.

[28] Completed in January 1988 (R&F: 305).

the *only* work shown behind the bath taps, replacing the shifting collection of images of the previous works. It seems that a new field of interest is opening up to the artist: '[a]ccording to Johns, he associated the rectangular [Picasso] face with the "first images or forms of a child"', and in addition, the 'inspiration for his distortion of the Picasso was a drawing he had seen[29] … [by] a schizophrenic girl' (Yau 2008: 144). He seems to interrogate the location of the awareness of childhood, of Picasso and of schizophrenia, as if they were analogous, existing in the same space of awareness. Also, there was a photo of a spiral galaxy in Johns' grandfather's house where he stayed for a while as a child (Va: 66 and *passim*), and it is as if these images and their associations are leading him into a new[30] area of interest, namely that of a pre- or non-verbal[31] type of childhood consciousness.[32]

I have outlined very simply how the 'Bath Series' progresses from shifting conglomerations of a variety of previous works to a new theme, namely childhood, or 'innocent', non-verbal consciousness. I suggest that the series provides an interesting possibility for a case study of the progression of the 'incubation phase' (Edwards 1987: 43) of the creative process, from a brooding conglomeration to the singling out of a new illumination, to a sufficiently qualified researcher, who would include destablilized visual perceptions in their research. I

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[29] In a 1952 issue of the *Scientific American* magazine, while he was in the army (Yau 2008: 144).

[30] Johns scholars would rightly object that '1984 is the year Johns began to use the "rectangular face"' (Rothfuss 2003: 27), and that to state that the schematic eyes of *Untitled* (1988 {18}) 'show the beginning of an interest in childhood consciousness' is simply incorrect. It seems to that after the 'Bath Series' he became more interested in childhood consciousness than before. A separate study would investigate this.

[31] I am merely suggesting this, as it seems to be a possible direction which a suitably qualified researcher could follow.

[32] When Johns was asked about his 'dealing with a lot of primal childish imagery in a primal way', he answered 'I'm probably regressing (laughs). I think of these things as representing my second childhood' (Vb : 266).

am not that researcher, and therefore such a study remains beyond the scope of the present dissertation.

> 'Suppose that the problem is … "handed over", so to speak, to the other, more obscure mode of the brain, the visual, perceptual, global, intuitive, pattern-seeking R-mode, which proceeds to deal *on its own*-that is, outside of conscious awareness-with information gathered during the L-mode-dominated Saturation phase[33]. This is the Incubation phase. And in its timeless, wordless, synthesizing fashion, R-mode perhaps manipulates the gathered information in imagined visual space, shifting positions of particles and chunks, trying for the "best fit", attempting to form coherent patterns even though parts of the puzzle may be missing' (Edwards 1987: 43).

2.5 Verbal and visual signification

This study will not emphasize the ongoing interaction between verbal and visual signification, which involves instabilities of visual perception. By 'verbal signification' I refer to the linguist de Saussure's proposition that,

> [l]inguistic signs are *arbitrary* in the sense that there is no relation between the sound of a word and its meaning other than convention, a 'contract' or rule. (Iversen 1986: 85) (my italics).

[33] The phase when information is being gathered, before it starts being sorted out. It precedes the 'incubation phase' which, I suggest, the 'Bath Series' illustrates.

On the other hand, visual signs are *not arbitrary* but 'motivated' (Iversen 1986: 85) in that the visual sign of the referent[34] *resembles* the referent. In the 'Bath Series', for example, the skull of the roadside warning[35] of falling ice resembles a human skull, and thus participates in a motivated, visual system of signification. It is associated with the words '*chute de glace*' ('falling ice') beneath it because of their close proximity. The letters and words do not *look like* falling ice, and stand, according to de Saussure, in an *arbitrary* relationship to the referent 'falling ice', participating in a verbal system of signification. The viewer/reader's eyes and mind shift between the skull and the words, and she thinks that the road sign must mean that falling ice could be deadly, because the skull indicates a dead person. In as much as seen images are shifted around and processed in the brain and the mind, and subjected to interpretation by its linguistic functions, the 'Bath Series', will provide a demonstration of an inquiry into these verbal/visual interactions because it is such an important subject for Johns: for him 'the eye is an extension of the mind' (Bernstein 1985: xv), and his work shows his 'commitment … to exploring the eyes in relation to the mind' (Bernstein 1985: 51). Furthermore, his 'juxtaposition of the ocular and textual modes within a single work' (Yau 2008: 17) are evident throughout the 'Bath Series'. It implicates instabilities of visual perception, yet is not the main subject of this study, since I emphasize *unstable visual aspects of perception*, rather than verbal and visual *interaction*.

2.6 The binary system of black and white 'identity'

Fifthly, the spots of the plague victim in the 'Bath Series' indicate his diseased

[34] that is the object to which the visual sign refers.

[35] which appears in thirteen of the 'Bath Series' works.

skin, caused by the ergotism[36] from which he is suffering. Taken with Mitchell's note that,

> [t]he problem of the Duck-Rabbit is exactly analogous to the question of the mulatto, the ambiguous verbal/visual encoding of race in the binary system of black and white "identity" (1994: 74),

the diseased skin made me think of the mind set or ideology by which people are categorized as black, white and 'coloured' (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet?). We see lighter and darker hued skins when we look at people, and then a strange effect of the mind destabilizes and obliterates what we saw and makes us believe people are black, white or coloured. I made a few rather unsatisfactory works about these thoughts, giving them the collective title of *A Political Aside.* However, within the South African as well as the global context skin 'colour' is such a sensitive issue that I felt I could not treat it as an 'aside'. Since it is only one of many issues that arose from my thoughts around the 'Bath Series', which is the subject of the practical component[37], I decided to exclude the subject, other than the 'hint' at it with the 'word-object' in the final installation using s, k, i, n, mirror-imaged, painted over in places with the range of basic skin colours (umbers and siennas), and also with a few small black and white grids on them (number 29). Also, 'skin' is 'written' in sewn cotton wool in and on my two-sided work *The trees of the fields* (number 5), although not very evident, and my thoughts on skin and binary movement will not be developed further in this study.

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[36] A disease caused by eating grain products contaminated with the fungus *Claviceps purpurea*. (www.botany.hawaii.edu/faculty/wong/bot135/lect12.htm, accessed 23.04.2011).

[37] That is, my thoughts arising from studying the 'Bath Series' is the subject of my practical component.

2.7 The superiority of the sense of sight

Lastly, I would like to dispel an impression that some readers may develop from my writing, namely that I regard the sense of sight as superior to the other senses. My study does not imply the superiority or otherwise of the sense of sight or any of the other five senses, that is of hearing, taste, feeling or smell. I mention this because there is a long tradition in the West which privileges the sense of sight (Jay 1993: 69 and *passim*), and my discussion of the 'Bath Series', as well as my practical component, may suggest that I am following in this tradition. I cannot compare the senses with each other because I do not know enough about any of them to make a valid comparison between them.

Johns was interested in the workings of the senses. He is known to have read J. J. Gibson's *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1964), Richard Gregory's *Eye and Brain: the Psychology of Seeing* (1966) and his *The Intelligent Eye* (1970) (Va: 71), as well as articles on seeing in the *Scientific American* magazine (Rothfuss 2003: 16*ff*). I have not found any evidence in Johns' own words or in commentary about his work which suggest that he thought that 'the visual' is superior to the other senses, in fact Yau confirms that he 'rejected an age-old hierarchy, which privileged vision above the other senses' (2008: 17).

There is therefore no intention in this writing to demonstrate the superiority of the sense of sight.

2.8 Instabilities of visual perception

This study *is* about the instabilities of visual perception in that it considers the perceived interaction between figure and ground, metastable images, traditional illusionistic representation, how the eye prises out recognizable forms from confusing visual information, (such as the Isenheim plague victim in most of the left sections of the 'Bath Series'), and how the mind can even use visual

information, which may at first seem confusing, to construct metaphysical concepts, for example in the Barnett Newman prints which appear in the 'Bath Series'[38] .

[38] {5}, {9}, {13-15}, {18}.

Chapter 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Primary sources: Johns literature

I set out on this research knowing very little about Jasper Johns. When teaching Pop Art at high school I used works of Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Tom Wesselman and Richard Hamilton as examples of Pop Art. Johns' flags, targets and beer cans did not interest me, so I hardly mentioned them. Once I had decided to focus my research on the instabilities of visual perception in Johns' 'Bath Series'[39], I had to start learning about Johns almost from the very beginning.

First I read the recognized standard works on Johns. They made me aware of the crucial role visual perception plays in his project, and of how his work participates in issues concerning visual perception. I also necessarily read up on the issues themselves, such as representation in art, starting with Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1984). The practical component, that is my work, continues Johns' meditation on seeing in the 'Bath Series', therefore a large section of the literature of the theoretical component also pertains to the practical component.

The literature on Johns is extensive, as I mentioned at the outset. I was initially guided in my choice of key texts by my first supervisor, who did his PhD on a series of works[40] by Johns completed five years before the 'Bath Series'. At the end of his research (Richards 1994: 237*ff*) he discusses the metastable images which gave the impetus to my research, although there is no direct follow on from his work to mine.

First I shall review the key texts on Johns I read, then works about visual perception, art criticism and art theory which pertain to the 'Bath Series', and finally, works on installation art and a few other matters.

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[39] for reasons discussed in the introductory chapter.

[40] *Foirades/Fizzles* (1977), in collaboration with Samuel Beckett.

I shall discuss the key texts on Johns in chronological order, starting with the most recent and then working further into the past. A desire to find out if the works of the 'Bath Series' still have anything to teach us today implicitly motivates this study, therefore I chose to start with the most recent studies.[41].

The most recent book length study on Johns that I am aware of at the time of writing is *A Thing Among Things - the Art of Jasper Johns* by John Yau (2008) which covers Johns' work from the 1950's to 2003. Yau is a credible authority on Johns because he has been working on Johns' art since the mid-1980's (Yau 2008: vi). He discussed Johns' work with him, and Johns 'often went to great lengths to explain something to me that I just didn't get' (Yau 2008: vi). He begins his inquiry by revisiting the incident which gave rise to the *Flag* paintings of the 1950's, when Johns claims he dreamt of himself painting an American flag, and did just that when he woke up (Vb: 124). Yau states that 'his goal was to reconstruct the *mental processes basic to all dreams*' (2008: 14) (my underlining and italics) and that *Flag* is 'about the nature of dreams' (2008: 25). *Flag* is a flag and at the same time represents a flag, thus confounding the clear distinction between figure and ground to which members of his culture were accustomed: a flag would serve as a national symbol and hang on a flagpole, while a painting would represent a flag and hang on a wall in an art gallery - the two could not be the same, yet here they were. Yau explains that Johns' 'basic project' (2008: 9) was that he must 'register and reconstruct his perception consisting of two interlocking modes' (2008: 9) of perceiving, that is the dreaming and the waking states. Yau follows out the complexities and the workings of these 'modes' in concert with each other in Johns' oeuvre, and thus sheds valuable light on the instabilities of visual perception which are considered in the 'Bath Series', which

[41] This does not imply that earlier studies cannot pose questions which are still pertinent. Starting with the most recent work nevertheless seems to promise the most recent thinking on the topics discussed.

contains flags as well as other figures which implicate unstable ways of seeing, which are enumerated and discussed further on.[42]

Jasper Johns - an Allegory of Painting 1955-1965 (2007), a collection of four essays edited by Jeffrey Weiss, concentrates on core issues in Johns' early work which are seen, in retrospect, to have persisted throughout his career. As such it is a very useful source for the 'Bath Series', which summararily reviews Johns' preoccupations over the past approximately thirty years, from the 1950's to the 1980's. For Weiss, Johns' work 'can be cast as a form of image-theory' (33), as 'art about art'. Kathryn Tuma's essay is devoted to Cézanne's investigations into seeing and the 'rotating point of view'[43] because Johns had indicated that 'it was Cézanne who had been the most significant all along' (171). Metastable images, after-images (201), the processes of perception (181) and spatial indeterminacy when figure/ground interchanges take place (172) are also discussed. Furthermore, Weiss presents a complex argument to show that Johns' images belong to the family of images of the 'sacred art of the premodern West' (29-38). His position supports, in a way, the conclusion of this study, which pertains to very ancient workings of human perception. Furthermore, the volume shows Johns' interest in themes of 'flux and instability' (181), and Barbara Rose observed that 'the mode of the work is not static but shifting' (181). There is extensive information on the instabilities of visual perception which are considered by the artist in the 'Bath Series'.

Joan Rothfuss edited the catalogue and curated the exhibition *Things Past and Present: Jasper Johns Since 1983* (2003). Johns started making the 'Bath Series' works around this time (1983) and this work bears directly upon the series. The catalogue comprises three essays which deal with aspects of visual perception which are evident in Johns' work, and pertinent to the present research.

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[42] especially in chapter 6.

[43] A form of visual instability.

The first essay by Richard Schiff singles out *Racing Thoughts* (1983) and *The bath* (1988) (with a few other paintings) to investigate Johns' optical interests and the relation between what is seen and the mind. He refers, for example, to the reversal of mirror images (16), reorientations (20), and the drawing by a schizophrenic child in the care of Bruno Bettelheim (16). This is a key essay in understanding the technical and scientific aspects of the instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series'.

The second essay is by Rothfuss and deals with the 'Green angel' motif which appeared just after the 'Bath Series'. It is about how viewers tend to 'know' what they see only after they have been told what it is, that is about how the textual manipulates and conditions the optical. I will refer to the 'Green angel' when discussing the lumpen looking trousers hanging against the bathroom wall in the two *Racing thoughts*, ({9} and {13}).

In the last essay Victor Stoicha discusses the 'three academic ideas' of Paul Cézanne, Marcel Duchamp and Leonardo da Vinci respectively which were important to Johns. All three 'ideas' relate to the instabilities of visual perception of the present research, and they will be discussed in due course.

Morley's *The Art of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg during the 1950's and 1960's: a Transition from Modernism to Postmodernism* (1998)[44] focuses on the wider art historical debate, rather than on Johns' interest in the relation between the eye and the mind, as mine does. It was helpful in situating Johns' work within art historical debates.

Jasper Johns: A Retrospective (1996) by Kirk Varnedoe is the illustrated catalogue that accompanied a retrospective exhibition of the work of Johns at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1996. The catalogue aims to present

[44] MA dissertation, the only other recorded study on Johns at the time of writing by a South African at a South African university other than that of Richards (1994) .

> more complete visual and textual documentation that will provide an enduring foundation for any future reckoning with Johns and his art (32).

The work contains two essays by Varnedoe and one by Roberta Bernstein which review Johns' oeuvre to date. Of interest to the present study is that the volume shows Johns' unremitting concern with 'relations between thought and sight' (16), and that his art deals with 'fundamental issues of seeing' (16). A companion volume, *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews* supplements the 'record' (32) of the retrospective with an 'anthology of the artist's own words, including many interviews and sketchbook notes' (32). The 1983-1988 'Bath Series' period is covered in two sections, 1982-1984 (319-336) and 1985-1989 (337-358). Examples from the 'Bath Series' are treated in the same thorough, well documented manner as the other works in the volume. The volume is indeed an excellent 'foundation' (32), as the author hoped it would be for the study of the work of Johns. The interviews and sketchbook notes have compensated significantly for my not having interviewed the artist personally[45].

In *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews* each of the three sections is presented chronologically and contain information which pertains to instabilities of visual perception and the 'Bath Series' (241*ff)*[46], for example Johns' idea of a 'spy' and a 'watchman' inside each of us (59 *ff*) which expresses some of his core ideas on different types of mental processing and visual perception which are compacted in the 'Bath Series'.

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[45] Richards met Johns after completing his PhD. He advised me that meeting with Johns is not easy. I did not pursue the matter further because I found enough information for my research in the available literature. I would have liked to ask him if he had a specific reason for putting taps in some works and not in others, since I have not found any reference to this in the sources which I consulted. I refer to this when discussing the 'Bath Series' as a series, in note 66 and its related text.

[46] Without necessarily referring only to the 'Bath Series'.

Jill Johnston's *Privileged Information* (1996) contains a substantial amount of biographical material, as well as a psychological interpretation of Johns' behaviours. The work provides interesting background material although, as I have said, auto/biography lies beyond the scope of the present study.

Drawing on words: Jasper Johns' Illustrations of Samuel Beckett's Foirades/Fizzles (1994) is Colin Richards' doctoral thesis. The title indicates that it deals with the relationship between Beckett's text and Johns' images - it focuses on *illustration and text*, which is not the topic of my research. The broader discussions of issues relating to visual perception have nevertheless been most helpful in elucidating the issues I am dealing with. There is, for example, a thorough discussion of the 'three academic ideas' (178*ff*) of Cézanne and the 'rotating point of view', Duchamp and the possibilities of memory[47], and da Vinci and the figure/ground relationship, which Johns claimed were important to him, and which I have already mentioned. When discussing the word/image relationship Richards covers much literary and art historical theory, for example semiotics (Orton and Derrida (246 and *passim*), Steiner, Bal and Bryson (22 and *passim*), and modernism (Greenberg (32 and *passim*)). This is very helpful in situating Johns within art critical and historical discourse, and necessary because the 'Bath Series' is 'art about art'[48].

The works of the 'Bath Series' were made fairly soon, that is about seven years after *Foirades/Fizzles* (1976), and many of the broader issues still apply to the 'Bath Series'. At the end of his study Richards discusses metastability briefly (238 and *passim*), and refers to two early *Untitled*s of the wider group (1983, 1983-4), without mentioning a 'Bath Series' as such.

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[47] Which is beyond the scope of the present study.

[48] Although the matter is not pursued in the present study, as I mentioned when discussing the scope of this inquiry.

The novelist Michael Crichton approached his book *Jasper Johns* (1994[49]), with whom he was befriended for approximately three decades, as a novelist: he writes in a narrative, story telling manner rather than in an art critical style. Crichton's work has corroborated my findings in art critical and historical writers that Johns' special interest is visual perception and the relation between the eye and the mind.

Richards advised me that Fred Orton is a highly regarded Johns critic, and that his *Figuring Jasper Johns* (1994) was highly recommended. Orton does not mention the 'Bath Series' specifically, although his book bears upon the series. At the outset Orton states that he finds

> the idea that Johns's paintings are about his studio practices a relatively uninteresting one, and also relatively uninteresting *per se* (24).

I am of the opposite opinion, in that I find the idea supremely interesting because I see in the 'studio practices' the concretisation of creative processes which are not fully understood by psychology, philosophy, religion, sociology, aesthetics, biology or any other recognized discipline, and this motivates my theoretical research as well as my personal practice.

In spite of his initial statement aspects of Orton's discussion does bear upon Johns' making processes, for example he states that Johns 'wanted the process and the history of the making of *Flag* to be part of its meaning and effect' (110)[50].

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[49] Originally published in 1977 in conjunction with an exhibition held at the Whitney Museum of Art, New York.

[50] In fact, it may seem as if Orton is contradicting himself, although he does not. A brief yet panoramic review such as the present one cannot follow out all the subtleties of the arguments of the reviewed authorities on Johns.

Reflecting on his 'essay'[51] (157) Orton states that he has 'come to the conclusion that it is necessary to see and understand Johns' work as allegory' (11), and Weiss' *Allegory of Painting* (2007) has followed[52].

The Drawings of Jasper Johns by Nan Rosenthal and Ruth Fine (1990) is the catalogue[53] of an exhibition of work extending over thirty-five years (13). It contains an essay by Rosenthal on Johns' drawing practice, one by Fine on how the drawings were 'physically made' (46), an interview with Johns by the two authors on drawing-related topics, and an approximately 250 page catalogue of the works of the exhibition, with thorough comments. The volume demonstrates Johns' primary interest in the making process of visual art works, and in exploring the possibilities of making: what is perceived visually must not remain static but must be continually destabilized. The visible signs of making left in encaustic wax, for example, also participate in the instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series'. In addition, the authors recognize 'the untitled "bath" subjects' (65 and *passim*) as a group, and the catalogue has been a valuable source of factual information for the present study[54].

Mark Rosenthal wrote *Jasper Johns: Work Since 1974* on the occasion of an exhibition with the same title at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1988, to show Johns' more recent works. It refers to 'Bath Series' works done to date, that is

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[51] Which is marked by Derrida's deconstructive method, for example he states that 'I have developed this way of explaining *Flag*'s effect [1994: 145-6] from reading the work of Jacques Derrida on signs that have an undecidable value' (235).

[52] I have not noted a specific 'genealogy' from Orton to Weiss, although closer study may well reveal one.

[53] I bought this catalogue after seeing the exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1990.

[54] In the first paragraph of her essay Rosenthal says that the exhibition focuses on Johns' 'most characteristic practice with respect to drawing: making highly finished works rather than sketches' (13). This may seem to contradict my focus on his interest in process. However, the alive, 'sensuous' (R&F: 46 and *passim*) making process is contained and still active (Orton 1994: 110) in 'his highly finished works' (R&F:13), and thus participates in visual instability.

1986, and characterises these as 'the soliloquy of someone's waking dream as he lies in the bath tub' (1988: 72). He argues that Johns is 'turning towards fundamental premises and art-historical conventions' (1988: 10), that he 'integrates and tests himself with regard to his forebears' while he 'retains a characteristic doubt and uncertainty that is, as well, part of the modern condition' (1988: 10). He treats this time when Johns 'represents his musings' (1988: 64) seriously, as a time of 'challenge' (1988: 64). Rosenthal discusses, for example, 'the Johnsian question' of 'whether to see the 2 parts as one or two things' (1988: 23), referring to metastable images, as well as other matters relating to instabilities of visual perception in Johns' work.

Rosenthal devotes a good deal of space to the purported psychological change which took place in Johns around 1982, after he had said, in 1978, that the time had come for him to 'drop the reserve' (1988: 60), at the inception of the 'Bath Series'. As I have stated, this fraught matter is beyond the scope of the present study.

Reeva Castleman's *Jasper Johns: A Print Retrospective* (1986) was prepared for an exhibition with the same title, during the time of the first part of the 'Bath Series'. Castleman discusses the development of Johns' printed oeuvre, describing his interaction with printers and the techniques he mastered, as well as 'the complexities of his vision' (front flap). Running parallel to her text, on the lower third of each page, are quotations of Johns which relate and add to her text. The importance that Johns attaches to exploring visual processes is again confirmed by this work.

Roberta Bernstein's *Jasper Johns: The Changing Focus of the Eye - Paintings and Sculptures 1954-1974* (1985) takes as its main theme, as the title indicates, Johns' primary concern with instabilities of visual perception, which occur as the eye adjusts it focus. She states that Johns' art is a 'microcosm of experience and a vehicle for examining the nature of perception' (xv). She examines Johns' art in

this light, and also endeavours to 'establish his connections with traditions of previous art' (xvi), for example with Cézanne and Cubism, René Magritte, Abstract Expressionism (and Barnett Newman), da Vinci, and Duchamp, who and which are all palpably present in the 'Bath Series'.

At the beginning of *Johns* (1984) Richard Francis alerts the reader to the 'complex and difficult ideas' that are generated by Johns' art where 'the mystery still [remains] resolutely locked up' (7) even after efforts to unravel it. The work suggests, for example, that in works from the 'Bath Series',

> 'Johns is cinematic in the presentation of his thoughts: … this sort of montage of images is, like dreaming, a subversive activity, where the "unthinkable" is permitted' (101).

He describes the initial 'Bath Series' works as 'uncomfortable in content and in palette' (101). The works are 'full of images "seen" with the eyes closed, images of thoughts of things "that the mind already knows"' (106). Francis' work has been helpful in shedding light on the complex considerations which come into play when studying instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series'.

This concludes the first section of the review which deals with literature exclusively on Johns. The next section focuses on *issues* relating to instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series'.

3.2 Secondary sources: art criticism and psychology

The clearest way to motivate the course of my reading is to start at the beginning and to show where it leads. The beginnings are very humble, as I have explained. I read Edward's *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1979) in 1987, before I had done any formal art studies. At the time I was preparing a Master's degree in Modern Literature at the Paris III – New Sorbonne University in Paris, France. The

main theoretical base of the study was Bakhtine's *Aesthetic of Verbal Creation* (1979). Semiology was omnipresent in the academic environment, but I preferred the approach of the Russian formalist[55]. I did the drawing as a break from the formal literary study in which I was engaged.

My theoretical point of departure for the present course was, as I have said, based on Edwards' *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (1979). My investigation had to follow a route from this book of popular psychology to an acceptable level of masters' research and presentation. My study of contemporary literature from 1986-7 had made me aware of some critical theories and methods, such as formalism and semiology. Later, as an undergraduate in Visual Art, my choice of theoretical topics were always the philosophical options since they related to language and literature, starting with de Saussure, whose notion of the arbitrary sign eventually developed into various strains of philosophy which have made themselves felt in art critical theory[56]. The most glaring vacuum in my knowledge relating to the present research was the absence of the most basic texts on visual perception, on 'seeing', and how it relates to the mind. The knowledge is crucial for this study since the eye/mind relationship continually occupied Johns, (Rose in Gamboni 2002: 229-30), and is clearly evident in the 'Bath Series'. I therefore read Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960/1984), Dario Gamboni's *Potential images: ambiguity and indeterminacy in visual art* (2002), James Elkins' *Why are our Pictures Puzzles?* (1999), W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), and *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994)[57].

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[55] I mention this to give the reader a sense of what background I come from to the present study, since it has affected the direction of the present research. However, the constraints of space do no allow me to explain my choices and preferences in more detail.

[56] This sweeping statement is explained, for example, in Foster's *Postmodern Culture* (1983).

[57] I have not yet read his *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images (*2005), of which I only became aware recently.

These works have all contributed to my understanding of the broader contexts as well as the finer mechanisms of the instabilities of visual perception reflected upon in the 'Bath Series'.

Regarding scientific information available on seeing and its relationship to visual art I read Margaret Livingstone's *Vision and Art: the Biology of Seeing* (2002), and sections of two works Johns is known to have read, namely Richard Gregory's *Eye and Brain: the Psychology of Seeing* (1966) and J. J. Gibson's *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966) (Va: 71), and a few articles from scientific magazines. John Onians applies recent discoveries of neuroscience to visual aesthetics in *Neuroarthistory: from Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki* (2007).

To become adequately aware of art critical approaches and methods I started by reading a summary of C. S. Peirce's system of signs in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and further explanations of it, as well as examples of how it is applied in visual art by authors such as Wendy Steiner, Norman Bryson, Mieke Bal and Margaret Iversen. I read Nelson Goodman's T*he Languages of Art* (1988) and his article *Routes of Reference* (1981), Steiner's *The colours of rhetoric* (1982), Bryson, Holly and Moxey's *Visual Theory* (1991), Bal's *Looking In - the Art of Viewing* (2001), Bal and Bryson's article *Semiotics and Art History* (1991), Meyer Shapiro's article *On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs* (1969), Iverson's article '*Saussure versus Peirce: Models for a Semiotics of Visual Art* (1986), Robert Scholes' *Semiotics and Interpretation* (1982), Sylvia Ferreti's *Cassirer, Panofsky, + Warburg* (1989), Michael Holly's *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (1984), Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927/1991), his *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955), and Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (1993).

Consequently I was more informed about issues and debates involving visual perception. The latter work, Jay's *Downcast eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (1993) explains the 'anti-visual discourse' (14) and the prevalence of 'theory' of the late twentieth century as a symptom of a profound, iconoclastic post-war pessimism. This may sound simplistic, but it is not. Jay traces the influence of the long Judaeo-Christian tradition's injunction against 'graven images' from its inception[58] up to the end of the twentieth century, and sees the 'denigration of vision' as a moment in an ongoing, binary verbal/visual switching process in the history of human consciousness. To me semiology represents a far swing into the verbal phase, and my interest in the visual may be an instinctive search for more balance between the verbal and the visual.

In spite of some aversion to semiology I have found Peirce's system of iconic and indexical signs to be a helpful tool for discussing the works of the 'Bath Series', and I return to it in the chapter on methodology.

Claude Gandelman's three articles on metastability and da Vinci (1977), primitive artifacts (1989) and the sign[59] (1979), have been most helpful in explaining and formulating what attracts me to ambiguous figures and the 'Bath Series'. In '*Leonardo and metastability* - Anna Metterza *as neo-platonic allegory'* (1977) Gandelman expresses the view that da Vinci consciously used the metastable phenomenon to show that human beings are metastable beings (164 and *passim*), ambiguous creatures by nature oscillating between states of being and awareness, 'symptoms' of an unknown. Johns stated that da Vinci was one of his three 'teachers', specifically in relation to da Vinci's injunction to painters not to

[58] Exodus 20:4,5 in the Bible, King James version.

[59] I have found Gandelman's work most helpful in spite of its semiological nature. I focus on visual processing and psychological aspects of metastability, rather than on philosophical signification. The issues, which are not mutually exclusive, are too complex to take further here, although they are not satisfactorily resolved.

surround their figures with lines which cut them from their ground, but to keep the transitions between figure and ground ambiguous by using the *sfumato* technique. Aspects of what is unexplained in the human condition, such as where exactly is a human being's place in creation, are thus expressed in instabilities of visual perception. In the 'Bath Series' the Mona Lisa iron-on conveys these musings, smiling what I suggest is a metastable smile. I discuss this further in chapter 6.3, which concerns figure/ground shifts and spatial ambiguity.

Duchamp's presence in the 'Bath Series' is evoked by the Mona Lisa iron-on[60] and the recurring 'chute de glace'[61] or falling ice warning sign. Johns named Duchamp as one of his three 'teachers' (Vb: 20), therefore his inclusion in the 'Bath Series' is significant as part of Johns' meditation on his art . I found that Linda Dalrymple Henderson's *Duchamp in Context* (1998) and *The Fourth Dimension and non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (1983) have been most helpful in elucidating Duchamp's thought as it pertains to the 'Bath Series'. Both works deal with the intellectual climate of turn of the century Paris in which Duchamp participated before his departure for the United States of America in 1915. His 'attack on … absolutes' (1998: 188) and his 'concern with the interplay of dimensions' (1983: 157) are characteristics of his thought which Johns shares, and which are included in the discussion of the works of the series.

Cézanne, the first named of Johns' three 'teachers' (Vb: 20), is present in the 'Bath Series' in Johns' permutations of Picasso's *Woman in a Blue Straw Hat* (1936) because Cézanne exercised a strong influence on Picasso (Roskill 1985 :

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[60] In {9}, {11} and {13}; '…the Mona Lisa, which makes reference to both Leonardo and Duchamp' (R&F: 315); and in his review of the Duchamp's *Green Box* Johns refers to Duchamp saying that one should use a Rembrandt as an ironing board (Vb : 20-21).

[61] in {1}-{4}, {7}, {9}, {11}-{14}, {16}, {19}. His *Large Glass* (1923) work was fissured during transportation in 1927 (Dalrymple Henderson 1998: 80). Johns was the artistic director of Merce Cunningham's danced interpretation of the *Large Glass* called *Walk About Time* (1968). 'Glace' (French for 'ice') evokes 'glass' in the 'bath tub meditation', which spreads a very wide net.

32 and *passim*). Figure/ground interplay is fundamental to the work of Cézanne, Cubism and Picasso, and the literature on each one is extensive. I have found Mark Roskill's *The Interpretation of Cubism* (1985), Dalrymple Henderson's abovementioned works on Duchamp and the 'fourth dimension', and related works noted in the bibliography to be adequate for understanding their roles in the 'Bath Series'.

There is, as I mentioned when discussing the scope of the inquiry, autobiographical content in the 'Bath Series' which I decided not to make part of my investigation. I was guided by Couillie, Lütge, Meyer, Ngwenya, and Olvers' *Selves in Question - Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography* (2006) and further articles on this topic, noted in the bibliography, while deciding on this. The works clarify the basic nature of and criteria for auto/biography, which typically involves a conscious decision on the part of the author to produce auto/biography, and which is not the case in Johns' 'Bath Series'.

The 'Bath Series' comprises a collection of Johns' personal items. Regarding collecting practices I looked at the work of Annette Messager (Bernadac 2006), and also at collections of items in 'summary paintings' such as Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1637-8), Velazquez's *Las Meniñas* (1656), Courbet's *The Artist's Studio* (1854-5), Blake's *The Meeting or Have a Nice Day, Mr. Hockney* (1981-3), Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918), Picasso's *Minotaur Moving his House* (1936)[62], Kahlo's *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), and Preller's *Collected Images* (Harmony of Themes) (1952).

The final form of presentation of the practical component is an installation. To develop my understanding of installation I read O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1999), De Oleivera, Oxley, Petry, and Archers' *Installation Art* (2004) and Berger's *Fred Wilson: Objects and*

[62] Both *Tu m'* (1918) and *Minotaur Moving His House* (1936) influenced Johns directly (R&F: 25*ff* and 312*ff*).

Installations 1979 – 2000 (2001). I have also attended many installation exhibitions, such as Dylan Lewis' *Recent Works* exhibition at the *Circa* gallery in Rosebank, Johannesburg, where he showed fragments of human forms being changed by the only partly understood processes of the mind, and Mieke Bal's *Nothing is Missing* at the Jozi Art Lab in Johannesburg, which presented ambiguous spaces of communication (both in March 2011).

These are the main works that I consulted when investigating my very wide topic. The list of references builds on these key works, and the investigation can be followed out much further.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 My first contact with the works of the 'Bath Series' was, as I have stated, when the metastable images in works on display at the *Drawings of Jasper Johns* exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1990 attracted my attention. I spent a long time examining them, but did not know at the time that twenty years later I would be doing academic research on them. This research is nevertheless informed by what absorbed me then, namely Johns' ongoing questioning of how we see, the effect of how and what we see on us, and the meaning of this for us as human beings.

When I had to tell my supervisor for this research which topic I would like to study I showed him Johns' *Untitled* (1984 {16}), which contains the duck/rabbit, the young/old woman and the vase/profile metastable images, as well as the 'falling ice' danger sign with a skull and crossbones on a mirror-like surface, as I have mentioned. He said I should find out if the work belonged to a series, as artists often work in series. In Rosenthal and Fine's catalogue of the Hayward exhibition (1990)[63] I read that,

> [a]nother series, begun in 1983, uses the bathroom in Johns' house in Stony Point, New York, to set the scene for imaginary combinations of Johns' possessions, his art, and a variety of found pictures … The tap and fixtures of the bathtub at the lower right reappear in many drawings[64] of the 1980s (32).

Rosenthal refers to the series as the '"bath group"' in inverted commas (32), the 'bath group', not in inverted commas (33), and the 'bath paintings and

[63] which I had bought after seeing the exhibition, and from which I copied *Untitled* (1984 {16}). The 'reversible vase' was introduced by Edgar Rubin in 1915, and the psychologist Joseph Jastrow used the duck/rabbit as an example of 'rival form ambiguity" (Edwards 1986: 172-3).

[64] and paintings (R&F: 35 and *passim*).

drawings', not in inverted commas (34). She also notes that the 'bath imagery' appeared in *Untitled* (1983 {6}), and 'between 1984 and 1988 … in six more paintings and at least fifteen drawings' (286).

It seemed that there was of series of 'bath' works, but not a specific name for it, nor a specific set of works that formed the group. Further investigation, using the university's library system, including the inter-library loan and electronic data basis services, confirmed this impression. Yau, for example, states that,

> Johns completed at least a dozen paintings between 1983 and 1988, in which he made specific reference to a room[65] in a house in upstate New York, where he lived at the time (2008: 133).

Rosenthal and Yau agree that the 'bath' works were made between 1983 and 1988, and my research[66] has confirmed this. I have therefore taken 1983-1988 as the dates of the series. However, neither Rosenthal, nor Yau, not any other recognized Johns critic specifies a specific number of works belonging to the group, nor did it seem that there is a specific name for the series. Feinstein (1997: 12), as a further example, speaks of the '"bathtub pictures"' in inverted commas, and further on the same page of the 'bathtub pictures', not in inverted commas. An anonymous contributor to the *Scholastic Review* magazine notes 'a series critics have called "bathtub pictures" - you see faucets in the lower right corner' (2007: 2).

Evidently I had come upon a group of works that belong together, but which did not have a generally agreed upon name, nor an exclusive list of members. Nor did I find any sign of debate or controversy over the name of the series or about which works should or should not be regarded as part of it. I suggest that the

[65] Further on the same page he speaks about 'a room with a bath, its rim and faucet visible in the lower right corner'.

[66] elaborated in the literature review.

reason for this lack of clearly demarcated limits is because the referencing of the series is so wide that, as a summary of Johns' ideas and practices, it ultimately touches on all his work, and it would therefore arguably be senseless to exclude some works as members of the series.

Throwing a closer net is also problematic. I found a proliferation of works with 'bath' iconography, but without taps, including the *Seasons* series of 1985-6. Should all of these be included in the discussion, I wondered. Lastly, my general impression when reading about the group was that critics and commentators did not find the works, *as a group*, all that interesting because they belong to a 'neither-here-nor-there', 'in-between phase', when compared with more finished individual works such as the first of the two *Racing Thoughts* {9}, which is discussed on their own, that is outside of 'the group', relatively frequently (for example by Yau 2008: 133 and *passim*, and by Shiff in Rothfuss 2003: 13*ff*).

The works of the larger 1983-1988 'group' are iconographically and compositionally closely related to each other, and to make my inquiry manageable I decided to single out all the works that I could find with clearly visible taps in them to exemplify the 'Bath Series'. I found twenty-three such works, and it is on them that I base my discussion. Occasionally I refer to 'untapped bath works', but for the most part the chosen works satisfactorily exemplify Johns' meditation on the instabilities of visual perception during this period.

In my research I did not find any specific suggestion as to why some works are 'tapped', and others not. I suggest it is because they are involved in the same shifting around of images which characterizes the group as a whole, and sometimes you see them, sometimes you don't. How arbitrary or otherwise

these shifts may be is a psychological question[67] which lies beyond the scope of this study.

After deciding to single out the twenty-three 'tapped' works for discussion I had to decide on a name by which to refer to this group for which no generally accepted name exists, to simplify the discussion. I decided to use the term 'series' to signify their unity as a group because I had found that the Sanskrit *sarat-* from which 'series' is derived[68] means 'thread'. In my research I followed the 'thread' of Johns' interest in instabilities of visual perception as it shows itself in the 'Bath Series'. I further decided to use capital letters for the 'Bath Series' to show that it is a descriptive name given to the set of works to be considered, albeit only a provisional title to be used exclusively for this research. To emphasize that the title is temporary I have not written it in italics, without inverted commas, as convention requires, but unitalicized, in inverted commas, to distinguish it from sanctioned titles such as *Flag, According to What* and *Seasons.*

For completeness' sake I must mention that Francis says that Johns 'does not work in series: rather he "reproduces" objects or images many times' (1984: 7). My understanding is that Francis emphasizes a generative quality of Johns' practice which supersedes the linear succession which 'series' implies. He is the only critic I have found who has specifically objects to using the term 'series' when speaking of 'groups' of Johns' work. I do not discount his view, but I do not think that further teasing out of the nuances of the term would be useful for the present study. I use the term 'series' to indicate the unity of the various

[67] A similar psychological operation, seemingly an unconscious, instinctive choice, is evident when Johns says, 'I had decided there should be two editions of the beer cans, one of the paintbrushes, and three of the other sculptures. *How I came to that decision I don't know.*' (Vb: 213) (My italics).

[68] Online Etymology Dictionary accessed 26/04/2011, via Latin *serere '* join, connect', 'row, chain', Oxford Dictionaries Online accessed 26/04/2011.

members of the group, 'threaded' together by the presence of bath taps in the lower section of their formats. Finally, Johns said that,

> [i]t was there [at the Gemini print workshop] that I developed a pattern of working in series (Vb: 218).

He seems comfortable with the idea that he works in series, therefore I felt that referring to the 'Bath Series' in this study would be acceptable.

I also had to find an efficient method by which to refer to the works of the 'Bath Series' during the discussion, since seventeen of the twenty-three of the 'Bath Series' works are called *Untitled.* In addition, two works have the same title, namely the *Racing Thoughts* of 1983 and 1984, and they differ in size, media and ownership[69]. The remaining works of the series are not all made in different years, however, and to differentiate between them using, for example, their dates plus a Roman numeral, as '1984i, 1984ii and 1984iii', would, I felt, too easily allow small mistakes to slip in. Distinguishing the works by size and/or by media would be too complex and demand unnecessary concentration from the reader. Distinguishing the works by ownership alone would, I felt, detract from the neutral, 'open ended' sense of *Untitled*, which affects one differently to, for example, *Untitled* (Greenberg), because one associates the name 'Greenberg' with the critic Clement Greenberg, and one wonders if he is the owner of the work, and if so which particular qualities of the work could have drawn the critic to purchase this particular work. Showing who the owners are could detract from the discussion of the instabilities of visual perception in the works, and in addition twelve of the works of the series are in the collection of the artist[70], which would necessitate another set of distinguishing markers.

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[69] as the list of works of the series, with empirical data, at the beginning of the dissertation shows.

[70] This suggests that the works lie 'close to his heart', and Lewis says that '*Johns has wisely held back many of his works over the years, hoping to form what he calls* "a comprehensive picture, a good indication of my work."' (Vb: 241). Speculating on the implications of this would make this

In view of the above, and for the sake of brevity an efficiency, I have adopted the following method of referring to the works of the 'Bath Series': I have given each work a unique number, from one to twenty-three, following the chronology[71] I was able to establish using the library sources available to me, and each number is enclosed in curling brackets, {}. My numbers appear with the list of figures at the beginning of this writing. When I refer to a work I give its title in italics, and then, in brackets, its date and my bracketed number, for example *Untitled* (1983 {1}) and *The Bath* (1988 {23}). As the discussion progresses the title and date of a work may not be immediately necessary anymore, and then I only use my own curling bracket numbering, for example {12}.

When I discuss the importance of the various objects in the series I refer to Table 1, showing the frequency of the appearance of objects and markings in the 'Bath Series', which I drew up.

I will discuss methodology further in the next chapter, in which I set out the theoretical framework of this investigation, since the methodology works with the theoretical framework.

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paper too long, and validating the speculation, especially, would probably require a personal interview with Johns in which he would have to be persuaded to give up his secrets, which does not seem very likely to me, and definitely not something which I intend to pursue at the present time.

[71] It appears to be very difficult to establish a faultless chronology of Johns' work, for example, 'Lilian Tone, who credits Johns for his help in supplying off-the-record information for the "Chronology" section of the MOMA retrospective catalogue, nevertheless feels obliged to point out that "Johns's own files were unavailable for consultation"' (Stuckey 1997: 39).

CHAPTER 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 In my research I want to discover which questions Johns asks about the relationship between the eye, the brain and the mind by studying the instabilities of visual perception in the works of in the 'Bath Series'. Francis has noted that,

> Johns's art is generated by complex and difficult ideas, and these cannot be avoided … Johns's art is treacherously difficult to write about. It is subtle, turned in upon itself, and hermetic. The allusions in the work are bound together in such a way that cutting the knot that ties them often leaves the critic with an unconnected bunch of ideas in his hands and the mystery still resolutely locked up (1984: 7).

I have found it very difficult to devise a theoretical framework for my inquiry. The theoretical framework must formulate the underlying assumptions of the study, and conduct and present the research using the terms of the underlying assumptions. I am approaching the series as 'art about art'[72], presented within the 'in the artist's studio[73]' topos, where the artist meditates on his art[74]. Questions and considerations about art are couched in art critical theories, and Johns' art has been put through the 'mill' of many of these, as the literature review shows. Not only does his art resist being neatly parceled into this or that art school, style, movement, or theory, but the terms of his art are precisely about the very complexity of the questions and issues involved in the art making

[72] In 1978 works by Johns were on the *Art about Art* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (Varnedoe 1996a: 69). Further examples of this genre are Johns' *According to What* (1964) and *Untitled* (1972), Magritte's *The Treachery of Images (This is Not a Pipe)* (1928-9), Blake's *The Meeting* or *Have A Nice Day, Mr. Hockney* (1981-3), Velásquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), and Poussin's *Et In Arcadia Ego* (c. 1630).

[73] Variants of this genre are, for example, Preller's *Collected Images* (Harmony of Themes) (1952), Kahlo's *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* (1855), and again Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656).

[74] In 1982 Johns' made a painting called *In the Studio*, showing some of his objects and preoccupations, and in 1983 he moved his space of meditation on his work to his bathroom.

process, and the nature and the significance of what is called 'art'. In addition to this he has said that he wants his art to remain in a state of 'shunning statement', (Castleman 1986: 44), which could mean that it should be impossible to write about. I suggest that Johns works with the ineffable expressed in visual[75] terms, and that his art is continually interrogating an undefined signified, asking questions for which there are no clear, or fixed, or any answers at all, and that instabilities of visual perception are representations or signs of these questions.

This provides a point of departure to investigate his work, that is if one approaches his art as *signs* of unanswerable questions, coming from an unknown, indefinable 'signified': Crichton says that his art is 'ultimately mysterious' (1977: 72). Treating 'painting as a system of signs' (Bryson 1991 : 61) allows the researcher or 'interpretant' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2006: 2) to translate the significance of the images and the other visual information present in visual art into a verbal or linguistic account of what the signs are communicating. This is of course exactly what Johns said he did not want to happen, but, on the other hand, he has given many interviews and talked a lot about his work[76]. Yau, for example, explicitly mentions what patience Johns exerted in explaining to him things in his work which 'I just didn't get' (2008: vi). One may therefore assume, it seems to me, that Johns agrees to his work being interpreted and even understood, up to a point, but facile meanings should not be attached to what he presents.

To approach Johns' art as a system of signs which signify an unknown speaks to the signification of his art in terms that are relevant to it. Peirce's system of signs is particularly apt for setting out the complexities of his art. Peirce identified three basic types of sign for which he used three terms namely,

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[75] as opposed to verbal.

[76] as the literature review shows, in Vb, for example.

> [t]he term "index" … to denote signs with a *direct or "motivated' link* to a referent; … "symbol" to denote those [signs] that were entirely *conventional or artificial*, and "icon" to mean those that *resembled* their referent (Jay 1993: 129) (my italics).

The resemblance of the icon to its referent, as well as the direct link between the indexical sign and its referent is defined as 'motivated' as opposed to 'arbitrary'[77], and this makes Peirce's system suited for use with visual art, where strong resemblances between the signs, or artworks, and their referents[78] often operate.

Instabilities of visual perception are present in Johns' art as icons and indexes, and they signify that which cannot be explained completely about seeing and the interactions of the eye, the brain and the mind. The *Flag*s of the early 1950's, for example, originating in a dream (Castleman 1986: 28), with their ambiguous figure/ground significations, recur in the 'Bath Series', ({4}, {5}, {10}-{12}, {16}-{19}), framed, on their own and doubled, whole and cut vertically, in primary and after-image colours. What do they signify in this 'waking dream' (Rosenthal 1988: 72) that is the 'Bath Series'?

Peirce's system of signs enables us to formulate some of the significance of manifestations of unstable visual perceptions in the 'Bath Series', and to gain more clarification about what we don't understand, without explaining it fully. That is as much as the present study can hope to achieve - it will confirm that the ineffability, the mystery of Johns' work, after all the interpretations of the signs, remains 'resolutely locked up' (Francis 1988: 7) because it involves workings of brain, the mind, and possibly of the soul, which are not entirely understood.

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[77] Arbitrariness is characteristic of the relationships between linguistic signs, and further elaboration of this theory, originated by de Saussure, is beyond the scope of this study.

[78] such as the real apples which Cézanne painted.

My inquiry is a thematic study which researches 'patterns (themes)' (Braun and Clarke: 2006: 3 and *passim*) of the instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series'. I shall start with the first works of the series, to set the tone, and then, as the inquiry progresses, focus on the more significant objects or signs of instabilities of visual perception which signify an unknown signified. My aim is to show that the 'Bath Series' confirms that Johns' art engages with 'fundamental issues of seeing' (Vb: 16), that it goes beyond the boundaries of western urban culture of the late twentieth century, and extends into the realm of what Gandelman calls the 'Ur-Gestalt' (1989: 209), the metastable switch that has appeared at various points of human history, and in varied cultures which have peopled the globe.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION OF THE WORKS OF THE 'BATH SERIES'.

6.1 Overview of the chapter

Johns made the works of the 'Bath Series' from 1983 to 1988, and the main drift of my discussion of the works follows a chronologic order, from the beginning to the end of the series. I start with a close, ekphrastic reading of {1}, {2} and {5} to show how pictorial space is problematized when visual perception is destabilized in the series. Then I discuss motifs which participate in this destabilization, first the metastable profile vase, then the Isenheim figure, and then other images. I show how figure and ground shifts are involved in the destabilization of the perception of pictorial space, and I suggest that these shifts are a very important factor in the series. Finally, I suggest that the significance of the unstable perceptual shifts could be that they are signs of an undefined signified.

6.2 The problematization of space in the 'Bath Series'

In *Untitled* (1983 {1}) the focal point of the painting is arguably the depicted side view of the slightly off-center white paper clip. It consists of the lightest lines of the work, against a dark ground, and thus tends to attract visual attention first. It is painted schematically as a paper clip, that is, it is recognizable as a paper clip, although it is not depicted in photographic detail. The representation of the paper clip looks like a paper clip, therefore the viewer[79], when entering into a reading of the work, at first has the expectation that the work will fairly accurately represent what is seen and registered by the brain and the mind, that it will be a fair approximation of what the artist was conscious of seeing before

[79] that is, a viewer coming to the work with conventional expectations. This dissertation does not examine the important matter of the construction of the viewer by the artwork because it is a topic of a separate dissertation.

him. But the paper clip, of which the function is to clip things together, is not clipping anything together. It seems to be suspended in mid-air, in front of the other depictions in the work, since no part of it is hidden by any of the other depictions. The initial expectation of the viewer to see a simple representational rendering is destabilized, and the indetermined space around the prominent paper clip makes the space of the work as a whole become ambiguous to the viewer.

Throughout the series Johns makes pictorial space ambiguous. In *Untitled* (1983 {2}), for example, a plaster cast forearm, with a few drips of red paint at the top and on the side, is suspended on a wire from a hook and hangs over a blackened surface. There is still some plaster from the casting process left on the side of the cast arm and hand. The left over bits of plaster are indexical of the figure, the arm, being ripped out of a ground, the plaster. The cast's irregular sides are from a previous space, where the casting was done, and are now introduced into the space of the present work as a figure while still signifying the ground of the previous space. To which space does the cast belong? To the previous space of which it still carries the indices, or the new space into which it is integrated? In this way the jagged sides of the plaster cast arm problematize the space of the work and make it ambiguous.

The forefingers of the hand of the plaster cast rest against a blue surface. The blue surface is part of a bordered work with an iconic Savarin coffee tin with paint brushes in, painted in blue, white and black, on a ground of hatch marks painted in the same blue, black and white, and using the same type of fairly hasty brush mark. The figure, that is the can with the brushes, and the ground, that is the surface with hatch marks, are rendered in exactly the same way. A representational rendering of the can of brushes and its ground would differentiate between them by using techniques such as a different colour and modeling (using light and dark) to make the figure stand out from its ground,

and the figure and ground spaces would thus be clearly differentiated. But figure and ground are rendered using the same colours, tone and brush marks, making figure and ground level with each other, and thus problematising the experience of the space for the viewer, as the initial expectations of a representational painting are destabilized.

Furthermore, the mainly black surface behind the plaster cast arm at first seems to be cutting into the 'blue' of the bordered work beneath it. We have just established that the 'blue' work appears to be flat, that is two dimensional, but now another surface cuts into it, lodging itself partially behind it. Logically, if the 'blue' surface were flat, there would be no space behind it for the black surface to cut into. However, an opaque blue swatch over/'over' the lower section of the black surface suggests that the black surface is behind it, in a space to itself. A spatial ambiguity is thus set up between what could be the black ground and the blue figure in this section of the work, although both palpably exist on the same flat surface.

In addition I suggest that the dried black dripping paint marks beneath the fingers of the plaster cast hand are indexical of movement on the presented surface. The eyes follow the downwards direction of the drips and arrive at the diagonal and then downward pointing hatch marks, which could be further indices of movement. To me it suggests slight folds formed by slight movement in a flimsy hanging cloth when it is disturbed by slightly moving fingers of the hanging hand. Thus, the ambiguity of the space of the painting is reinforced: are the images we see one behind the other, or all on the same flat surface? How solid is the surface that we see? Is it merely a flimsy veil which can easily be disturbed, behind which are other spaces, or nothing at all?[80]

[80] This questioning of the 'representation of representation' (Mitchell 1994: 63) may suggest René Magritte's work, such as *The Betrayal of Images (This is not a Pipe)* of (1929). Indeed, 'Johns's interest in Magritte is well known, and attested by his ownership of *the Interpretation of*

Such strategies reappear in the 'Bath Series' and problematize space, bringing home the instability and relativity of what is perceived visually, which is the theme being investigated in this study. Further examples of the problematization of space in the series are, for example, when one looks at the lower right section of *Ventriloquist* (1983 {5}). The illusionistically rendered vase of which the outline is the profiles of Queen Elizabeth II and of Prince Philip, standing on an iconically rendered wicker basket, indicates the experience of space outside oneself which is represented in a representational painting, the space in which the physical laws of gravity operate, keeping the vase standing stably on the wicker basket. But when one looks along the whole left section of the work there are seven iconically rendered Ohr pots[81] not standing on a stable surface, but seemingly floating in the air. The expectation of 'normal', 'outside' space, rendered in representational terms, is destabilized by the seemingly contradictory readings given by the floating and the stable pots and vase, which seem to exist in the same space in the painting.

Furthermore, the works of the 'inventory' (R&F: 33)[82], or the 'tackboard pictures', as Varnedoe calls them (a: 359) are seemingly attached to the bathroom wall by means of torn off masking tape, thumbnails and nails in the wall, on the *Mona Lisa* iron-on in *Racing Thoughts* (1983 {9}), for example. The iconic masking tape initiates the expectation of a conventional representational rendering of masking tape which glues the picture against the wall. However, the

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Dreams (1936)' (Orton 1994: 83). Varnedoe refers to '[t]he two artists' shared concerns with issues of reality and illusion' (a: 47).

[81] Pots made by 'the turn-of-the- century Mississippi ceramicist George Ohr, whose pottery Johns has collected' (R&F: 32).

[82] Crichton records that '[l]ooking through David Duncan's book of photographs *Picasso's Picassos*, he [Johns] was struck by a small 1936 painting, *Minotaur Moving His House.'* (1994: 68). Johns said of the painting that 'the catalog of things is very layered' (68). Johns' 'layering' is very evident in the commissioned *Seasons* series of 1985-6, and the 'catalog of things', or an inventory, bear a relationship with the inventory of the 'Bath Group' which he was making at the same time.

incompletely painted masking tape destabilizes the expectation because, on closer inspection, it appears to be swatches of paint with the 'wall' beneath showing 'through' 'tears' in the tape. It is paint and not masking tape, and cannot hold the pictures against the wall. The viewer now sees paint next to paint on a flat surface, and the initial expectation of a conventional representational rendering with figure and ground is completely destabilized. The 'reality', of what was perceived visually is destabilized, and the visual experience within the pictorial space has become ambiguous[83].

Lastly, the ways the artist uses his media signify the instability of what is seen, for example the dripping dried paint in *Untitled* (1983 {2}) and in *Racing Thoughts* (1983 {9}) indicate the instability of movement, as does the use of encaustic and dried ink on plastic the *Untitled*s {3}, {4} and {10}. When using encaustic wax to paint, the brush marks are left in evidence in the quick drying medium. Johns said that '[e]ncaustic keeps the character of each brushstroke, even in layers' (Vb: 216). The movement of the melted wax hardens and the marks signify the instability of the dynamic painting process which the eyes see and the brain and the mind interprets. The dried ink in {3}, {4} and {10} also signifies instability, because it retains traces of the movement of the medium, and indicates the only partially understood creative processes which take place during the creative process. This engaging use of media contributes to stimulating the viewer to engage with the instabilities of visual perception in the works, and this in turn contributes to stimulating the viewer to become more aware of the instabilities of visual perception which problematize space in the series, and to ask questions to which no generally accepted verbal answers seem to exist, questions such as, quite simply, 'why is this happening?'.

[83] Nevertheless, not all the masking tape in the series is incompletely painted, nor all the thumbnails and nails.

The ambiguous metastable vase/profile image, as well as the other ambiguous images of the series problematize space because of the figure and ground alternations. I shall discuss them in the next section, when I look more closely at the questions being posed about space by the instabilities of visual perception operating within the problematized space of the works.

In addition, '[f]or the entire group of paintings, a cinematic or dreamlike quality was noted by many critics' (Crichton 1994: 98). The artist as viewer as well as the viewer experience the ambiguous play between internal and external space throughout the series. This also contributes to the problematization of space, instigated by instabilities of visual perception in the series.

6.3 Figure/ground shifts and spatial ambiguity.

Sixteen[84] of the twenty-three works of the 'Bath Series' contain the vase/profile image, and some of them also contain the young/old woman and the duck/rabbit[85] images. Without exception the profiled vase is rendered representationally and stands firmly grounded on the wicker basket next to the taps in the lower right section of the works. The vase is usually[86] rendered in a very light shade of colour and white, although I would not say sufficiently so to attract enough immediate visual attention to it to make it a 'focal point' in the works. Other than the taps, which I have already discussed as 'markers' of the series, and the wicker basket upon which it comes to rest in {4}, the profiled vase image appears most frequently in the series. Its 'anchoring' on the wicker basket

[84] {4}-{6} and {8}-{20}.

[85] {10}, {11}, {14}-{17} and {16} respectively, 'an image [the duck/rabbit] that appears frequently in Johns' later art' (Shiff in Rothfuss 2003: 20).

[86] except in {5}, {9} and {20} the less light side is darker than the 'darker' side of the other vases.

in the lower right area of the works suggests to me that it is a pivotal point of the considerations of the 'Bath Series', in which instabilities of visual perception come into play to problematize the experience of space in the works. It seems to me that a questioning of the whereabouts of the line demarcating the 'border' between figure and ground is a crucial question concerning the instabilities of visual perception in the series.

A usual, everyday visual experience of figure and ground is when one looks at a representational work of, for example, a person standing in front of a tree. A relatively static image is transmitted from the eye to the brain and the mind of the beholder, and the beholder interprets the image as a rendering of the scenario. However long the beholder looks at the image it will keep on looking the same to the beholder[87]. However, when one keeps on looking at a metastable image such as the vase/profile, the image itself changes without any necessary conscious effort on the part of the beholder - it seems to happen automatically. One sees two profiles facing each other on a seemingly endless ground, and after a while the ground or space between the two profiles starts looking like a vase against a seemingly endless ground, and the profiles have disappeared. The brain and the mind see either the one or the other[88], in other words it switches the figure/ground experience of space back and forth seemingly of its own volition. At the time that Johns was making this series there was no generally accepted

[87] other than under unusual circumstances, such as if the beholder developed tears and looked at the image through the tears.

[88] Mitchell (1994: 74) quotes Gombrich who maintains it is not possible to see the two aspects simultaneously and Wittgenstein who maintains that it is. Gandelman says it is not possible (1979: 83); Johns said, '[m]y interest in optical illusions is such that I like to create an image that when looked at becomes something else and there's no in between.' (Vb: 257).

scientific explanation for why this happens, and to my knowledge, at the time of writing, such an explanation is still not available[89].

In an interview in 1990 Johns said 'I think in terms of understanding different types of space' (Vb: 259). An extract from a sketchbook shows an example of his thinking,

> 2 kinds of "space"
>
> one on top of the other
>
> and/or
>
> one "inside" the other (is one a detail of the other?)
>
> " "around" " "
>
> What can one do with "one includes the other"?
>
> "something" can be either one thing or another
>
> (without turning the rabbit on its side)
>
> (Sketchbook [n.d.] 1968-69) (Castleman 1986: 23).

The significance of these thoughts for the present study is concentrated in 'and/or', since it shows Johns' consideration of the ambiguity of the perception of space as it takes place in, for example, metastable images such as the duck/rabbit: the perceived relative positions of the spaces to each other shift continually - are they on top, inside, or around each other? Is one part of the other? Are they distinct from each other? These questions do not exhaust the possibilities suggested by Johns' notes to himself, but they do suggest to me how fundamental Johns' questioning of the perpetual unstable perception of space is,

[89] Gandelman (1979: 88) quotes Attneave (1972: 71) in this regard. I do not know what the current standing of Otero's more recent research of 2009, (mentioned on page 66*ff.)*, is within mainstream scientific opinion. Further research is called for.

and in the 'Bath Series' this translates into the many examples shown of unstable visual perceptions of space.

In her essay for the catalogue that accompanied the retrospective exhibition of Johns' work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1996, Bernstein says that the bath works

> create a disturbing uncertainty about whether the things depicted hang before us on a wall, are reflected in a mirror, or constitute a stream of images racing through the artist's mind … In his paintings since 1982 … [he] devis[es] a new kind of picture space that allows for an illusionistic frame of reference even as it cancels out any consistent spatial reading. (Va: 55)

I suggest that the most prominent of the perpetually shifting visual perceptions of the series is the figure/ ground shifts. Furthermore, the recurrent metastable images, as well as the other examples of ambiguous figure/ground relationships, are, I suggest, signs of an undefined signified with which Johns continually involves himself and questions.

In his recent study of Johns' oeuvre Yau (2008) speaks of the making of Johns' *Flag* painting(s), which recur in nine[90] of the 'Bath Series' works. Johns said he had a dream of himself painting the American flag (Castleman 1986 : 28), and when he woke up that was what he did. Yau states, however, that Johns' 'objective … was not to reconstruct the flag … but to reconstruct the dream itself' (14). The flag image or figure is taken from the ground or dimension of the dream and is reconstructed into and onto the ground of the waking world. The unstable, because moving, seen image traverses the ambiguous space between what is seen in a dream and what is seen in a waking state. It is fixed into the space of the awareness of the waking state by the process of making the work and the

[90] {4}, {5}, {10}-{12}, {16}-{19}.

materials used. The artist wanted to reconstruct what[91] he saw in his dream in the waking world. According to Yau,

> … his goal was to reconstruct the mental perceptions basic to all dreams, not his particular dream about the flag. (17)

Yau says that 'Johns' definition of seeing … includes dreaming' (14), and thus the unstable images of dreams are included in this inquiry into instabilities of visual perception. This inclusion of dreams shows the extent of his 'abiding preoccupation with the figure/ground … relationship' (17). In attempting to reconstruct the dream, and creating *Flag* (1954-5),

> Johns recognized that the "seeing" that occurs in dreams subverts all the accepted views[92] of figure/ground. Where does the dreamer end and the dream begin? Does the figure inhabit a dream (landscape) or does the dream inhabit the dreamer? Or, as *Flag* seems to ask, are dreamer (figure) and dream (ground) both distinct and inseparable? (17).

I suggest that Johns' works are signs that interrogate an unknown signified. His work poses questions about the nature of 'dream' and 'reality', 'real' and 'unreal', and the spaces which these states of awareness occupy, without giving answers. Unstable mental perceptions, translated[93] into artworks, are unanswered questions about something we do not understand. We are given access to the works by iconic signs, such as the ones mentioned above (a vase, masking tape, a flag, *et cetera*), and the spatial ambiguities which are

[91] (according to what?)

[92] The questions which Yau poses next are questions which go against his estimation of 'all accepted views'.

[93] 'translate' derives from the Latin 'transfero, transferre, transtuli, translatum … *to carry over* or *across*; *to transfer, transport'* (Simpson 1977: 611). The 'carrying across' of the image seen in the dream from one place of consciousness to another is very correctly signified by the word 'translate'.

subsequently generated by constantly shifting visual perceptions such as on going figure/ground interactions make each work a compelling, unanswered question.

Next I discuss the 'striated jigsaw pattern' (R&F 290) on the left side of most[94] of the works. When one first looks at these sections they appear to consist of jigsaw-like, interlocking, rounded organic shapes with stripes on. The stripes on the shapes go in different directions from each other, so that the shapes are distinguishable from each other by the direction of the stripes painted onto them, as well as by clear outlines. The pieces appear to occupy the same flat surface space because the artist has not employed any techniques to differentiate between figure and ground. Johns said that '[i]n a sense, [this area] is drained of illusionism, reduced to pattern' (R&F: 73). Because of the problematization of space in the series, of which the interrogation of figure and ground is apparently a very important part, the beholder cannot simply accept this 'puzzle' at face or 'surface' value and must look further. Investigation[95] reveals the outlined image of the ergotism sufferer[96] in the lower left corner of the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Grünewald (c. 1515), cut up, reassembled and reorientated, mixed in with shapes similar to itself, in the left side of fifteen of the works of the series. Of the remaining 'puzzle works' two, ({1} and {15}), are constructed from a fallen Roman soldier from the *Resurrection* panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, and in *Ventriloquist* (1983 {5}) and *Ventriloquist II* (1986 {19}) the 'jigsaw' pieces are constructed from an engraving by Moser of

[94] {1}-{5}, {7}-{20}, and {23}, that is twenty out of the twenty-three works.

[95] First done by Johnston (1987).

[96] Johns says 'He is the demon' (Vb: 283), Shiff in Rothfuss also calls him 'the demon' (2003: 20), R&F refer to him as a 'diseased demon' (1990: 32) and an 'afflicted demon' (82), Rothfuss calls him 'the man/demon' (2003 : 29), J-K Huysmans calls him 'a decomposing, suffering human being … a poor wretch' (1958: 19), and Johnston describes a 'creature-person (1987: 135). When I look at the image I see a suffering human being, therefore I refer to the 'ergotism sufferer' or 'victim', as he is suffering from ergotism, a disease contracted from a poisonous mould found in rye bread during the Middle Ages in Europe (Hayum 1989: 21).

the whale from Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851). In {6}, and {20}-{22} there is no 'jigsaw puzzle'.

When Johns first made the works he did not tell anyone[97] that he had embedded an image in the 'puzzle' on the left. Only in 1987 did Johnston, after lengthy examination, 'prise out' the swiveled figure of the ergotism sufferer. This may be seen as deliberate game played by the artist with the viewer. What rather concerns us here, however, is that it is another variation of presenting the figure/ground question, on a flat surface where the more usual expectation would be to see a differentiated figure and ground, as one indeed does see in the original paintings and prints, from which[98] Johns took tracings for these works. When the eyes, the brain and the mind work together on the stable visual surface of the 'puzzle' to prise out the Isenheim and Moser shapes the viewer consciously destabilizes what she perceives with her eyes using mental abilities to perceive what she knows is hidden, although it is all, already, right before her eyes. The brain and the mind forces itself to look for and see the outlines of the swiveled ergotism sufferer, separating it as a figure out of its ground. This activity is the activity of looking for meaning or significance in an anonymous mass, using the eye, the brain and the mind's abilities to destabilize perceived fixed shapes and forms. The *activity* bespeaks or signifies the interrogation of a meaningless ground for meaning, and is thus an indexical sign of one of the broader projects of the series as a whole, which is to interrogate an unknown signified, to prize out slices and sections of this undefined, and to attempt to construct a significant whole, the work of art, of the questioning. The works of the series do not answer the questions of figure and ground, of internal and external space, of dream and

[97] that is, anyone publically known.

[98] Johns' 'incorporation of details from the monument began in 1981, soon after a German dealer in modern master drawings, Wolfgang Wittrock, sent him as a gift a fine set of reproductions of the altarpiece, published in Munich in 1919' (R&F 36). 'The book Wittrock sent to Johns in the summer of 1980 is of Ostar Hagen, *Grünewalds Isenheimer Altar in neun und vierzig Aufnahmen* (Munich, 1919)' (R&F 45).

waking, of 'reality' and illusion, which the searching eyes, brain and mind ask as stable visual perceptions are destabilized when the participant in the work is led from one question to the next.

Johns' notes to himself while he was making *Voice 2* of 1982[99], just before the 'Bath Series', about puzzle and figure and ground, are helpful to the viewer of the Grünewald and Moser 'puzzles',

> **S-39. Book B, c. 1968.**
>
> Shake (shift) parts of some of the letters in VOICE (2).
>
> A not complete unit or a new unit. The elements in the
>
> 3 parts should neither fit nor not fit together.
>
> … **Avoid the idea of a puzzle**
>
> **which could be solved**. Remove the signs of "thought".
>
> It is not the "thought" which needs showing.
>
> the application of the eye
>
> _____
>
> the business of the eye
>
> The condition of a presence.
>
> The condition of being there.

[99] Not *Voice II* of 1986, which also has a set of taps in the lower right corner. I came upon it at a late stage of the research and is not included in my {1} to {23} numbering. It does not change anything that I argue.

> It is not interesting and should not be shown
>
> ~~to be~~ as interesting that **the parts**
>
> **can be shifted.**
>
> **It was always true that they can be shifted.**
>
> (Vb: 64) (my bold, underlined).

The images and techniques in the series ask such questions about figure and ground, showing that 'the parts [of what is perceived] can be shifted [in the mind, by only partially understood processes]'. The images and techniques provide, to my mind, convincing evidence that a very basic, if not the main question on which the artist is meditating in his bathtub is the figure/ ground issue, and on metastability as prominent feature of this issue.

Most[100] of the remaining iconically rendered images of the series are also indexical signs which refer to the ambiguous spaces of shifting figure/ground relationships. In as much as they indicate unanswered questions they are signs of the unknown from which the dream of the flag, for example, came - a sub- or unconscious[101], or a universal consciousness, or an unknown dimension[102], for example.

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[100] See the table of frequency of appearance of objects.

[101] Orton, for example, says 'The story of the dream places the origin of *Flag* on Johns's unconscious, in the repressed or partially erased contents of his autobiography, and thus at a level of meaning of which he must have been more or less ignorant … *Flag…* is empty of intentionality' (1994: 99).

[102] 'Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaption". William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 1902.' (Edwards 2008: 61).

The iron-on version of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (c. 1505) in the two *Racing Thoughts* (1983 {9}), 1984 {13}) are examples of how

> Johns has used reproductions of the Mona Lisa in several works as a reference both to Leonardo and Duchamp (Bernstein 1985: 60).

Johns named them as two of his three 'teachers' (Bernstein 1985: 59), and as such their inclusion in his overview of his practice seems natural. I suggest that da Vinci and Duchamp more specifically find a place in this meditation because both had interests in the metastability and figure/ground shifts which are involved in the instabilities of visual perception which is the subject of this study. The ongoing fascination with the *Mona Lisa*'s smile concerns its shifting aspects, for example Livingstone quotes Gombrich who said that,

> Sometimes she[103] seems to mock at us, and then again we seem to catch something like sadness in her smile (2002: 71).

Livingstone explains the 'switching' by an alternation between central and peripheral vision (2002: 68-73), which reminds me of the switching of the metastable images such as the profile vase which also has a central and a peripheral area, which switches back and forth. The profiled vase is placed just below the *Mona Lisa* iron-on in {9} and {13}, and their proximity to each other seems to suggest that there is a close relationship between them.

An article in the *NewScientist* magazine of 21 October 2009 refers to Livingstone's research, and then discusses neuroscientists Martinez Otero and Alonso Pablos' experiments to establish the 'secret' of the smile,

---

[103] The gender of the sitter has been called into question by, for example, Quested, who suggests that the painting is a mirror image and self portrait of da Vinci (1992: 754*ff*). The bearing of this upon my present figure/ground investigation is too complex to carry further here, therefore solely for the sake of convenience I shall refer to *Mona Lisa* in the feminine singular.

> [d]ifferent cells in the retina transmit different categories of information or 'channels' to the brain … sometimes one channel wins over the other, and you see the smile, sometimes others take over and you don't see the smile,

according to Otero (Callaway 2009: 1).

These switching, unstable visual perceptions remind me of a metastable back and forth. I have not found any mention anywhere that I have looked[104] that the 'secret' of the smile is a type of metastable shift, but the inclusion of the work with such frequent other metastable images in the 'Bath Series' suggests to me that Johns instinctively felt that it belonged with this type of depiction.

Furthermore, da Vinci is known to have been interested in metastability. In an article on his *Anna Matterza* or *The Virgin and Saint Anne* (c. 1508), for example, Gandelman (1979) demonstrates da Vinci's interest in metastability. He argues, for example, that da Vinci's doubled image of the Vitruvian man is a metastable rendering and should be read as switching aspects of the same figure (164)[105]. Gandelman shows in his article that metastability permeates the work of da Vinci[106].

Johns explains his interest in da Vinci in his artist's statement for the *Sixteen American Painters* exhibition in 1959 (Vb: 19), when he says that one of his three 'teachers' was

> Leonardo's idea ("Therefore, O painter, do not surround your bodies with lines …") that the boundary of a body is

[104] According to Elkins, the literature on the *Mona Lisa* is so extensive that it 'can no longer be mastered by a single scholar' (1999: 123) which implies that such a mention, of which I am not aware, could exist somewhere.

[105] Gandelman repeats this in a later article (1989: 101).

[106] His article brings metastability in a relationship with neo-Platonic interests of the Renaissance, which is beyond the scope of this discussion.

> neither a part of an enclosed body nor a part of a surrounding atmosphere (Bernstein 1985: 59).

Johns is interested in the way da Vinci problematizes the figure/ground relationship, and his sketchbook notes again give us an idea of how he thought about this,

> Foreground
>
> Background
>
> Figure as a space (or hole?)
>
> In the _____ (landscape?)
>
> Leonardo
>
> Meeting of figure
>
> & ground in (?)
>
> Dimensions----- silence (Cage)
>
> (Va: 52)

It seems clear to me that Johns ponders the interaction between figure and ground when he writes, 'Meeting of figure/& ground in (?)/Dimensions', and that he is wondering where the line of demarcation between them is, when he asks about their 'meeting' … in which dimensions? There is no answer to his questions, only 'silence', that is a non-verbal, experiential state[107]. What is happening in that state?

[107] of which further elaboration lies beyond the scope of this dissertation.

A further allusion to da Vinci is the reverse writing in {14} and {15}, which Johns also used[108]. The reversed 'KNEE, FACE, FEET' destabilize the habitual way of perceiving the current standardized alphabet and thus also participates in the complex considerations of the series.

Duchamp was also interested in figure and ground relationships, for example his painting *Yvonne and Magdeleine Torn in Tatters* (1911) shows a 'reversibility of figure and ground' (Gamboni 2002: 143). His interest 'feeds into' Leonardo and Johns' interest in the same phenomenon as it manifests in the *Mona Lisa* iron-on in {9} and {13}. The *Mona Lisa* iron-on thus participates in the meditation on unstable visual perceptions, particularly in the metastable figure/ground switching phenomenon, and again underlines Johns' ongoing engagement with the 'fundamentals of seeing' (Va: 16).

The door hinges in {5}, {9}, {11} and {13} ambiguate figure and ground space because when a door is closed it is part of the ground, or the wall, and when it opens it becomes a figure mostly separate from the wall. The door hinges can thus also be seen to indexically participate in the problematisation of the perception and the experience of space in the 'Bath Series'. In addition, the hinges can be seen as indexical of 'Johns' adoption of another Duchampian trope, the "hinge picture"'[109] (Krauss 1996: 81) if we recall {1}, which consists of two panels and a disproportionately large paper clip drawn, in highly visible white paint, near their joining line. According to Krauss 'the folding over on itself … is already at the heart of Johns' method in the slowly built up collage and encaustic surface of the very first *Flag*, 1954-55' (1996: 81). The 'folding over' recalls Johns' notes,

2 kinds of "space"

[108] for example his (da Vinci's) notes on the page containing drawings of '*The Upper Abdominal Organs (Possibly of a Pig)*' (Costantino and Reid 1991: 190).

[109] in *According to What* (1964), for example.

> one on top of the other
>
> and/or
>
> one "inside" the other (is one a detail of the other?)
>
> " "around" " "
>
> What can one do with "one includes the other"?
>
> "something" can be either one thing or another
>
> (without turning the rabbit on its side)
>
> (Sketchbook [n.d.] 1968-69) (Castleman 1986: 23).

It seems that we are back again at the inexplicable metastable figure/ground switching which permeates the meditation on instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series', that is Johns' thoughts on seeing.

I shall discuss the remaining images which participate in the interrogation and consideration of the figure/ground relationship as facets of instabilities of visual perception in the series more briefly. An important point of reference for Johns in these considerations is Cézanne, whom Johns mentions as the first of his three 'teachers' (Bernstein 1985: 59)[110]. It may seem inappropriate to discuss the first of his teachers in the latter section of the essay. However, I stated at the outset that the main drift of my discussion follows a chronological line, and Cézanne is only referred to indexically in the final section of the 'Bath Series'. That is why he is only mentioned now.

In the 1959 *Sixteen Americans* exhibition artist's statement Johns said he was interested in

[110] Also Vb: 19.

> what a teacher of mine (speaking of Cézanne and Cubism)
> called "the rotating point of view"[111] (Bernstein 1985: 59).

This refers to the experience of 'seeing in successive moments from "the rotating point of view"' (Bernstein 1985: 74) and recording the successive experiences on the flat surface of the format, such as in the Cubist works *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910) of Picasso and *Woman with a Mandolin* (1910) of Braque[112]. By the extremely compact nature of Johns' art, 'Cézanne and Cubism's' problematization of pictorial space and investigations into figure/ground relationships are compacted into {19}-{23}, which show Johns' reworkings of Picasso's painting *Straw Hat With Blue Leaves* (1936)[113] because there is such a strong art historical link between 'Cézanne and Cubism' and Picasso[114]. Of interest to the present inquiry into this complex rendering is that the painting at first suggests that it is a painting of three dimensional objects because, for example, the book lying flat is rendered with two point perspective , and thus creates pictorial depth as a conventional representational rendering of the book. The doubled face is opaque where it is painted over the column-like form behind it, suggesting that it is in front of the column, and thus also indicates

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[111] It can rightly be argued that 'Johns is cinematic in the presentation of his thoughts' (Francis 1984: 101) in the series (particularly the band of drawings across the format in {14} and {15}), that this has its root in the 'rotating point of view', and that Cézanne is therefore present in the series from the start. However, I find that sticking to discussing the works in chronological order simplifies the presentation of a very complex series. Also, the information is eventually presented, even though only at the end of the discussion.

[112] Francis mentions the 'illusionistic Braquian nail' (1984: 106) in *Ventriloquist* (1983 {5}), which calls up the history of Cubism (see footnote 114), but further elaboration of this would make this dissertation too long and would not add to the basic terms of the argument. Similar nails are depicted in {1}, {4}, {5}, {7}, {9}-{19}, and {21}-{23}.

[113] 'the source that triggered this schematic rectangular face was Picasso's surrealistic *Woman in Straw Hat* (also known as *Straw Hat with Blue Leaf*, among other titles)' (Va: 59).

[114] 'from 1907 through 1909 … Cézanne's example came into the ascendant amongst younger artists, in the wake of the major retrospective exhibition at the Salon d'Automne of 1907' (Roskill 1985: 32), and Picasso and Braque were among the 'younger artists' (Roskill 1985: 32).

the existence of pictorial depth behind it, using the technique of conventional representational rendering. The image as a whole, consisting of face, column, book and stand, seems to render a single three dimensional image of a sculpture, but in {22}, seemingly right behind it, hangs a folding cloth. The *lower* shadow line of the sculpture and of the hanging cloth appear to be the same line, but the same shadow line going *up* the right side of the cloth only belongs to the cloth, and not to the sculpture as well. How can the figure, the sculpture, be part and not part of the ground, or hanging cloth, at the same time? This shows iconographically how close figure and ground can be, how they are in fact existing simultaneously on the same flat surface, as Johns' investigation of 'Cézanne and Cubism' and Picasso has evidently shown[115] in this work. These are examples of unstable visual perceptions of shifting figure and ground relationships in ambiguous space which appear to be a prominent concern in Johns' reworking of Picasso's painting in {19}-{23}.

The skull and crossbones on the mirror-like surface warning of falling ice are indexical of the perils which can be encountered when one engages with breaking up the possibly illusionary surface of the world perceived by the 'naked' eye and questions the significance of destabilized visual perception. The suggestion of a slightly disturbed veil, which I pointed out in {2}, and a mirror/road sign with a falling ice warning written on it[116] take up the notion of a visually disturbed surface, that is of a surface which can break, (like falling ice), and become destabilized while you are looking at it. The skull and crossbones suggest the danger of the disturbance of the stable experience of spatial organization because

[115] In Picasso's work there is 'interpenetration of figure and background in 1909-10' (Roskill 1985: 33), which derived from his (Picasso's) study of Cézanne's work.

[116] in {1}-{4}, {7}, {9}, {11}-{17}, {19}.

the danger sign seems to be on a mirror-like surface[117] (which could also be a bathroom mirror), particularly in relation to the solidity and permanence of the experience of space in the figure/ground relationship.

The flags[118] are iconic signs of the *Flag* paintings of the early 1950's, which thoroughly destabilized the habitual ways of seeing figure and ground within the visual culture from which the paintings issued, which is the Western European and North American culture of the 1950's[119]. The repetition of the images in individual paintings as well as within the series, signify the mind reflecting on them, and is also a type of instability.

The seemingly brittle surface of Barnett Newman's lithograph[120] can be interpreted as a figure which is meant to destabilize the usual expectation of what one should see in a print or a painting and which encourages the mind to propel itself into a new ground of metaphysical truth. Feinstein speaks of the 'reversed image of Newman's 1961 lithograph evoking the sublime' (1997: 11).

The partially transparent lumpen form in *Racing Thoughts* (1983 {9}), which, upon closer inspection proves to be trousers hanging against the wall of the bathroom, makes me think of the lumpen form of the *Green Angel* series of works which follow the 'Bath Series'[121]. Johns has not divulged the 'key' to this

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[117] In 1958 Johns painted *Tennyson*, which evokes 'Camelot, where the Lady of Shalott is confined and condemned to see the world through a mirror on pain of death … Her corpse and mirror will not be forgotten. Johns will revisit them a couple of decades later.' (Weiss 2007: 218).

[118] In {4}, {5}, {10}-{12}, {16}-{19}.

[119] For example, Varnedoe (a: 17) speaks of '[t]he unexpected mental spasm those first objects induced-is it a flag, a painting, or both?-was meant to cause a shift in attention that would enliven awareness on a much wider front … by disrupting our habitual ways of seeing, could snap awake the senses and awaken our consciousness of being alive'. Johns said 'I wanted to make them see something new' (Va: 17).

[120] In {5}, {9}, {13}-{15}, {19}.

[121] Discussed, for example, by Hertz (2007).

'green angel' form so that it can continue to signify the 'unknown' which, as I understand it, his work must[122] signify. The anonymous form participates in figure/ground shifting in as much as the observing eye, brain and mind try to prise out a recognizable form from the indefinable ground. To me it suggests da Vinci's advice to painters to look at 'walls splashed with a number of stains or stones of various mixed colours' (Gamboni 2002: 129) to find ideas for paintings[123].

I have not exhausted the discussion of the instabilities of visual perception in relation to the problematization of space, particularly in relation to figure and ground interaction in the 'Bath Series', as this would simply make the dissertation too long. I have nevertheless presented a convincing case to show the thoroughly pervasive presence of a preoccupation with the unstable, constantly shifting visual perception of figure and ground in the 'Bath Series' which problematizes the perception and experience of space. I have further shown that this ongoing instability is a way of engaging with an unknown and an undefined signified. The works of the 'Bath Series' appear to interrogate and signify '*what?*'[124].

[122] in a sense of having some internal need to do so.

[123] Richard Dadd (Gamboni 2002: 193), whom Johns evoked in his painting *Nothing At All Richard Dadd* (1992) said that he followed a similar procedure, which involves instabilities of visual perception. A more extensive study than the present one would investigate this further.

[124] This refers to Johns' painting *According to What?* (1964), 'a large, synthetic assemblage-painting … to mark previous points in his development' (Va: 14). Johns' sketchbook notes show he considers '**Seeing** what? According to what?' (Vb: 60) (my bold and underline).

6.4 Provisional conclusion

Critics and commentators continually try to find the 'heart' or the 'essence' or the 'key' to Johns' work[125], as the works in the literature review testify. We may recall Francis' remark that 'the mystery [is] still resolutely locked up' (1984: 7) after critics' explanations. My sympathies regarding the 'key' to his work lie with the figure/ground, metastable switch, which Gandelman calls an 'Ur-Gestalt' (1989: 209), and which shows how Johns' art engages with 'fundamental issues of seeing' (Va: 16). 'Seeing' places the emphasis on visual processing, which follows a different set of rules or procedures to verbal processing, and it sometimes seems futile to attempt to verbalize the ineffable[126], which is what explaining 'seeing' in Johns' art comprises. My opinion is that to understand Johns' art better we must understand the workings of the 'visual', 'right mode' of the brain better, and its involvement with instabilities of visual perception.

[125] He even integrated a set of keys into *Numbers* (2007) on show at his May-July 2011 exhibition at the Mathew Marks gallery in New York (Heno-Coe 2011), arguably in recognition of this (Kalm 2011: 2.45).

[126] Indeed, 'ineffable' is derived from the Latin '*for fari fatus sum*, to speak, say', (Simpson 1977: 252), and 'ineffable' means 'cannot be spoken, said'.

CHAPTER 7. DISCUSSION OF MY WORK

7.1 Prologue

The examination presentation was a site specific installation in the Substation gallery of the University of the Witwatersrand. This practical component of the research was completed before the final examination presentation. When it was complete I arranged it in the exhibition space as I thought to put it up, and my supervisor and I discussed how it would go up, without making final decisions. I then wrote this chapter on my work according to our planning, and the final installation was very similar to our discussion. However, our discussion was not an exact blue print of the final presentation, and after the final presentation I had to revise this chapter from **7.3 The tack board** onwards, for the discussion to correlate sensibly with the actual presentation. The reader may feel that the writing becomes somewhat unwieldy in places, and I apologize for this as I am not able to control it better than I have done.

The suggested routes to follow, as set out in the final examination installation with threads and dots to follow from the tack board outwards, are discussed under **7.4.2 Suggested tack board routes**. Before this I make introductory remarks about the work, followed by a discussion of the two sided works, then a short introduction to the tack board, after which I proceed from the tack board as it was displayed for the examination. The tack board leads into the rest of the installation. Finally there is a summarary consideration of space as an element of installation art, to round up several references to the experience of space during the course of the discussion of the installation. In conclusion I refer briefly to displayed works that were not mentioned during the discussion.

7.2 Introduction

The present project is the most recent phase of the pursuit of a life long interest in the exploration and development of the human potential. I am particularly interested in what the human brain and mind is capable of, and also in the realm of the soul. Concomitant with this is an interest in how and what we see, both with our physical eyes as well as with the so-called 'mind's eye'. I have already explained how these interests led to my choice of the topic of this study of instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series' of Jasper Johns, which is Johns' meditation on the not entirely understood, on-going processes between the eye and the mind.

I do not wish to preach to the reader, I simply feel it is only fair to one taking the trouble to read this that I explain what the basic point of departure of my thinking is. The reader will be spared having to seek it out, and will be able to evaluate my communication with less effort. My basic point of departure is lodged in my personal understanding of certain New Testament teachings. I do not wish to impose this on the reader, merely to clarify it, and the reader is of course free to think what he chooses of my communicated understanding. The first two of the underlying three underlying 'tenets' of the present project are also the underlying idea of the previous project, namely 'seek ye first the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 6:33) and 'the kingdom of heaven is within you' (Luke 17:21). The third underlying 'tenet' is 'the last enemy … is death' (I Corinthians 15:26). I relate at least part of 'seeking' the 'kingdom of heaven' that is 'within' us to investigating the human potential, particularly the capabilities of the eye, the brain, the mind and the nature of the soul. *Seeing* has a particular place in this economy for me because some types of seeing produce a sense of timelessness, of eternity, in the beholder. A poem of Rimbaud comes to mind, for example, which communicates how the sight of sun on an expanse of water produces an

experience of eternity in the beholder[127]. Why, I ask myself. Are these the first springs of a time when there will be no more death while we are still in a human body? Recent advances in medical science make these ideas seem less 'airy fairy' than not long ago, as the research of the Cambridge gerontologist Aubrey de Grey, for example, suggests. The popular health guru Deepak Chopra has also put forward a case to this effect (Chopra 1993).

This, then, is the 'pool' of beliefs and ideas which underlie my project. I feel an affinity with Johns' inquiry into the workings of the eye, the brain and the mind because for him the matter of how we see remains an open question, as it does for me - part of the content, the dynamics, the energy of his work is a *questioning* which remains unanswered, and it exerts a compelling attraction on the viewer. The present project is a questioning of and investigation into mental processes which I experience and do not entirely understand, processes which involve switching between different types of mental processing, and the actual mechanics of the different types of processing, including what popular psychology calls the 'right and left modes' of the brain.

Before discussing the specific works and the form of presentation of my work I would like to make a last introductory comment. The practical component was made parallel with the theoretical research, and therefore the practical component mirrors the process and progress of the research, and not its final conclusion, namely that a central 'organizing energy' of the meditation in the 'Bath Series' seems to be the metastable switch which Gandelman calls the 'Ur-Gestalt' (1989: 209), which only crystallized out at the end. Much of the research involved considerations relating to visual and verbal processing, and this switching is shown and considered in much of my practical work. Finally, when I revised this chapter after the final installation was put up, I realized that with the

[127] Eternity./It's the sea gone/With the sun. (*Eternité./C'est la mer allée/Avec le soleil).* (Décaudin 1964: 102). (My translation).

switching rock/profile of Gauguin's *Seascape with Cow or Above the Abyss*, which the red thread leads to Gandelman's article on the *V&CSA* showing the vase/goblet in *Can of Worms Notes* (30), the 'Ur-gestalt' (Gandelman 1989: 209) had also emerged as the basic organizing energy of the practical component.

Some critics see the switching of aspects as an uninteresting banality[128], but I see it as having a relationship with the different ways or 'modes' in which the brain processes information, and I find this more interesting than I have words for. However, my practical component does not *focus* on metastability, it considers broader issues relating to mental processing in which the eye, the brain and the mind participate, and which manifest in particular examples during the course of art history. One of my questions is into what direction is all of this pointing? Never dying?

7.3 The two sided works

There are five works worked on both sides, namely *Ode to the Switch* (14), *Where do We go from Here?* (6), *The Trees of the Fields* (5), *Textur If you Could Read My Mind* (24), and *Thank U Jasper Johns* (23).



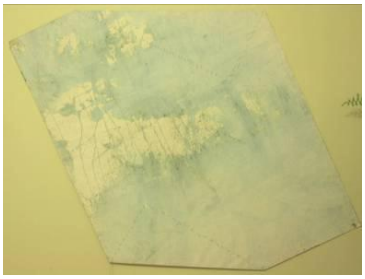


Fig. 14 i, ii. *Ode to the switch*

[128] For example Varnedoe says that the 'devices from perceptual psychology that have attracted Johns's interests, for example-the duck/rabbit, the drawing that is both young girl and old woman, and so on-are common things at the call of undergraduates … It takes either a special creative mind or an overearnest pedantry to see such things as emblems of something broad and profound' (a: 22).

Ode to the Switch ii is covered with writing in a blue fountain pen. The writing relates, broadly, to the meditation on seeing which is the topic of the inquiry. The writing is continuous and develops by association, therefore it forms an integral part of the meditation of the body of work. However, I put the sheet of paper on which the writing is done rapidly into a bath with water in to make the ink run and also to make it wet and more receptive to the ink that I poured onto the other side, which is side *i* of the work. Two corners of the sheet are folded over from the writing side to the 'ink blot' side and sewn into position along the outside cut of the paper, into the inside of the 'ink blot' side. The alphabet side suggests the part of the brain which deals with verbal processing, and the running ink suggests the way the verbal transmutes into the suggestive Gestalt-like 'clouds' on the other side of the sheet, and vice versa. Side *i* suggests processing according to visual 'rules', for example the light blue horizontal lines which become darker suggest a seascape, while the curved horizon suggests that the viewer is not observing a conventional seascape, but participating in a questioning permutation of the mind, questioning how we see, how we process what we see, and how we interpret the fruits or results of the processing. The 'Gestalt clouds' can evoke the well known past time of seeing images in the clouds (such as camels, faces and so on)[129] . The work demonstrates a switching between the verbal and the visual, between word and image, and the folded over and sewn on corners suggest that their interaction is indissolubly linked. Sewing with a needle and thread is a simple yet laborious method of joining two materials. It evokes various aspects of mental processing, which can sometimes be as slow as working by hand.

This and the other two sided works were made in sympathy, as it were, with the thoughts Johns expresses in his writings discussed above, namely,

> 2 kinds of "space"

[129] Gamboni 2002: 16, 29 and *passim.*

one on top of the other

and/or

one “inside” the other (is one a detail of the other?)

“ ”around” “ “

What can one do with “one includes the other”?

“something” can be either one thing or another

(without turning the rabbit on its side)

(Sketchbook [n.d.] 1968-69) (Castleman 1986: 23).

Here the ‘2 kinds of space’ suggest, for me, the two mental spaces, or areas in the brain, where verbal and visual processing take place.

The title *Ode to the Switch* suggests that when the two modes work in concert they can produce something mysterious and beautiful, which the work is to me, and so suggests the ‘undefined’ and ‘ineffable’, which Johns’ work bespeak, as I have contended in the above discussion. The words are hung up side down to suggest the metastable switching of aspects.



Fig. 6 i, ii. *Where do we go from here?*

Where do We Go from Here? asks a very broad question about the general state of global culture and the contemporary world, especially in the light of what is being discovered about the abilities of the human organism and mind. Duchamp’s ‘attack on mathematical or aesthetic absolutes’ (Dalrymple Henderson 1998a: 188) has contributed to relativizing absolute beliefs. Nothing seems to be

forbidden, and in addition advances in the fields of medicine and genetics suggest that human bodies and minds can regenerate indefinitely (De Grey, Chopra; cf. Isaiah 25:8, 26:19, 1 Corinthians 15:26), given suitable conditions. The work is done in a graffiti style to suggest it is a question for everybody, for the 'street', rather than for a particular set of 'chosen' only. In the lower right corner is pasted a section torn from a local daily newspaper showing Damien Hirst with his painting *Death Denied* (2007), and this contributes to putting the work into a contemporary idiom. Side *ii* of the work has, to my mind, aesthetic qualities, for example the varied qualities of line, colour, tone and composition. A visual language in undeniably present, but it cannot be adequately encoded into verbal terms. As such it is indexical of the 'undefined' which Johns' work bespeaks.



Fig. 5 i, ii. *The trees of the fields.*

The Trees of the Fields is one of my suggested answers to the question *Where do We Go from Here?* The work is two-sided. The yellower side uses iconic and indexical signs to suggest a more verbal, rationally encoded representational mode, while the whiter side suggests a more irrational, visual encoding. Holes have been cut into the paper and covered with acetate to suggest the circulation of meaning and communication between the two sides. Red paint, staples and sewing used to attach the acetate to the paper suggest that the communication is sometimes difficult and painful. The cut out letters in riffle cardboard spell the word 'conflict', although it is not so clear. The letters on side *ii* are reversed, and recall the reversed letters used by Johns and da Vinci, as well as the 'reverse world' that Alice enters when she goes 'through the looking-glass' into

'wonderland'[130], by following a white rabbit that carries a clock which goes backwards and of which the numbers are reversed. My work *White Rabbit* (number 16), and the acetate in *The Trees of the Fields* speaks to this. On the largest section of acetate I traced the outlines of Magritte's 1964 work *The Difficult Crossing.* It shows an eye inside a dismantled room drawn in conventional one point perspective - the 'sides' of the perspective 'box' have been dismantled. The somewhat wooden eye is looking at a storm at sea outside. The organic lines of the lightening bespeak the irrational, 'visual', organic, processes which the eye/brain/mind is aware of, beyond the broken perspective box. Magritte's painting is, in a way, a terse formulation of my presentation. In addition, as I have mentioned, Johns was interested in Magritte and his considerations on seeing, and this is therefore another interaction between my practical and theoretical components.

I came upon the title of the work *The Trees of the Fields* while I was considering an answer for the question *Where do We go From Here?* I turned to my personal beliefs and the words 'the trees of the field shall clap their hands', from Isaiah 55:12, came to mind. It is an optimistic vision of the future,

> For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth in singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands (English Standard Version (copyright 2001).

This is a 'vision', seen by the 'mind's eye', and in as much as it involves religious experience the 'soul' would also be involved. When the prophet Isaiah 'saw' his vision some not fully understood cerebral processes were involved, and there is no common consensus regarding the location of the space in which his vision was

[130] In the imaginative novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) Lewis Carroll (the pseudonym of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) Alice, the young heroine, follows a white rabbit into his reversed 'wonderland' by falling down a rabbit hole and, in the sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), she enters by going trough as looking-glass, or mirror.

(is?) located. As words of a prophecy the passage carries a sense of an eternal life for me, a life which would involve making better use of the potential of our brain and its various functions, among other things. The image of trees clapping their hands is visual and irrational, and comes from the part of the eye, the brain and the mind which is beyond reason, as did, according to my understanding, Johns' dream of the flag. While drawing the clapping tree/hands of this work the side of the hand started looking like the side view of a dove to me. As I was thinking about this in a semi-waking state I remembered a work of Magritte with a hand like that in it. I found that it was *The Difficult Crossing* (mentioned above), in a book on Magritte which I had bought a few decades ago, and that is how it came into this work. In *The Trees of the Fields* I sewed a border around my hand/dove drawing and the hand I copied from Magritte's work onto the acetate, to show a connection between the rational/representational and the irrational/'dream' experiences. The sewing by hand again translates a laborious and sometimes painful process, which is how I at times experience the switching between different modes of mental processing, and which is the pivotal issue of this research.

All the details of the work are involved with this idea, for example on the yellower, representational side there is, along the top part of the work a row of fairly iconic green trees with brown trunks against a blue horizon. On the other side are drips of black paint on white paper. When I started the work I took a sponge full of black paint and squeezed it out along the top edge of the paper and let it drip down both sides in the same way, simultaneously. On the representational side I made ('verbal') 'sense' out of the lines by making them into trees against a horizon, while on the 'irrational, visual' side I let the feel of the lines direct me as energies which inspired me to make more energy lines, in a way similar to the automatic writing practiced by the Surrealists, except that I was not writing in words but recording energies from a not entirely rational state. The repeated lines on the 'rational' side showing the vibrations of the clapping hands

could suggest the meanings of the work reverberating without ever reaching a finality. The riffle cardboard and 'riffle' paint marks, done with a riffle sponge roller, also suggest a continuing reverberation of some kind of vital energy which cannot be expressed verbally.



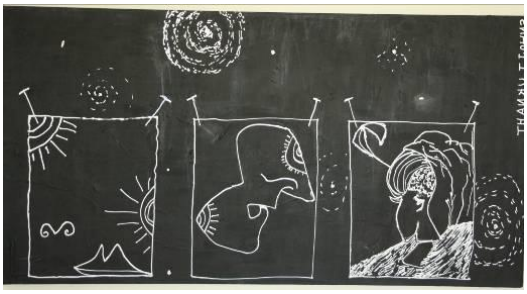
Fig. i, ii. *Textur If you could read my mind.*

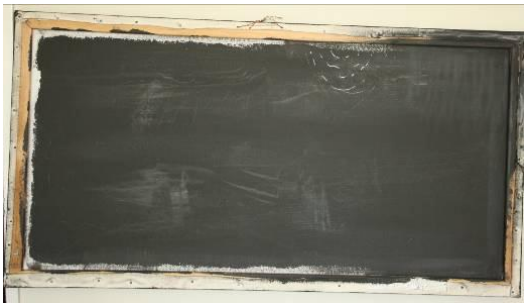
If You Could Read My Mind was made later and is therefore less literal and more suggestive than the earlier works - the 'visual mode' had become more activated. I let a glove fall onto tulle, and sewed it onto the tulle in the position that it fell, thus working like the Surrealists, such as Jean/Hans Arp did, who let papers fall onto a surface according to the laws of chance and then fixed them where they fell, so that reason would not interfere with its conditioning and determining action. This indicates 'chance' and workings of the mind which are not entirely understood, yet, as I see it, vital for survival into the future. The title suggests that there is a lot that we do not know, and at the same time it suggests that it is not possible to 'decode' all the workings of the unknown functions of the mind into verbal terms - 'If you could *read* my mind - but you cannot because a verbal system does not furnish you with adequate tools with which to do it'.

The top, largest laboriously sewn word is 'textur', 'texture' deliberately miss spelt to draw attention to 'text', something which is written in words of some sort, and then also to 'texture', to suggest that even words are entities which the

mind first 'feels' and then codes into learnt meanings. The work should suggest the relativity, even the arbitrariness, and the ephemerality of meanings which are created by the verbal, representational, symbolic processing mode of the brain. The tulle is not cut into a neat square to further suggest its ephemerality, as something passing and not permanent, and the letters in the tulle also suggest something flimsy and fragile caught in a net, which can easily escape and disintegrate.

The position into which the glove fell looks uncomfortable, perhaps as if the hand is pulled up in a cramp, or scratching against a wall of an imprisoning surface. This would again suggest the difficulties of the communications between the two modes of processing. The raw, unworked, black side of the glove is seen when looking at the writing from the 'right' side, to suggest the finality of a conventional mind set, while the glove on the 'reverse' side of the writing is in 'magical' violet/lilac/iridescent colours suggesting the vital, creative, processing functions of the eye, the brain and the mind.





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ig. 23 i, ii. *Thank U, J. Johns.*

In this work I thank Johns for his mental voyages into the not well known or understood regions of awareness, of consciousness, of the mind and probably of the soul. I have written the title of the work in Tippex along the top right section of the vertical right side of the format with the Ns, K, Js and S reversed, as a recognition of how he and da Vinci have treated this phenomenon in their work, as I have noted. The white Tippex circles and spots recall the spiral galaxies which

develop during the latter phase of the 'Bath Series', in {20}, suggesting an opening into new realms of spatial awareness.

This suggestion is 'qualified', in a sense, by the three drawings deliberately placed in equally sized rectangles, equidistant from each other, along the lower horizontal edge of the format, and each one is 'affixed' by two illusionistic nails with illusionistic shadows in the top corners against/'against' the 'backdrop' of black blackboard paint. The first contains Johns' rendering of the facial features he encountered in the drawing of Bettelheim's schizophrenic child patient, the second the doubled face of his reworking of Picasso's *Straw Hat with Blue Leaf*, and the third is his rendering of the old/young woman drawing. I copied these drawings, aligned and placed as they are on the format, from his *Untitled* (1986), (98. R&F 298-9). I see them as three questions, in a sense the same question, that he asks about the location of the awareness of the perception and of the experience of space that is indicated by each drawing. He places the child's drawing, Picasso's drawing and the metastable drawing on the same level, and thus, as well as by their size, he gives them equal importance. I admire this, namely that he sees the same questions about the interactions between the eye, the brain and the mind in works (of an ill child, Picasso, and the metastable image) that conventionally have very different statuses from each other when considered art critically.

In the just mentioned *Untitled* of 1986 the 'backdrop' of the work is flowing Isenheim sections. In a 1987 *Untitled* (98a. R&F 298) he aligns the same three drawings in the same place, order and size, but this time each against a hanging cloth/'hanging cloth' which in turn is affixed/'affixed' with shadowed nails against an Isenheim backdrop with hanging cloth-like qualities. Each work thus poses the question of what is behind the flimsiness and instability of perceived reality in its own way, and to me it suggests that behind this film there is an enormous ineffable.

In *Thank U J. Johns* I painted the 'backdrop' with black blackboard paint. The 'blackboard' with white, chalk-like Tippex drawing suggests a didactic, step by step spelling out of the questions, to which there are nevertheless no entirely palatable answers available at the present time that I am aware of. In this my work is conceptually related to Magritte's *Les deux mystères*[131] (1966) which shows his *This Is Not a Pipe* (1928)

> composition on a blackboard mounted on an easel. Its proper site is not the museum or gallery, but the classroom, and its function is as a pedagogical primer (Mitchell 1994: 66).

It reminds me of my experience of showing my copy of Picasso's *Present Indicative* (1938), of which the meaning was so obvious to me, to my uncomprehending psychiatrist, where visual language was simply not understood. It also links with Johns' interest in Magritte's work. Going over from the 'right' side of my work to the reverse side I have drawn the outside circles of the spiral galaxy faintly reverberating and disappearing, indicating the journey into the unexplored, the undefined, the ineffable. Only the side with the faces was displayed in the Substation, below the staircase linking the upper and lower levels. The semi hidden work gives recognition to the giant on whose shoulders my work stands, without him overshadowing the installation space. The work was not fixed, therefore it could have been pulled out, the back looked at, and the faintly reverberating spiral galaxy seen.

These were the two sided works.

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[131] *'The two mysteries'.*

7.4 The tack board.

7.4.1 Introduction to the tack board.

The next eight works were made when I 'officially' turned my attention to the practical component, to 'start' it. I set myself the task of producing a number of 'final', completed works. As Johns 'parades' his questions and meditations on seeing in the 'Bath Series', I do the same in these eight works. The first work I made of this group is called *Seeing* (10i), and it 'parades' various questions about seeing, placed along a section of a circle, suggesting perhaps a merry-go-round, or the old fashioned 'binoculars' into which one inserted a cardboard wheel with a series of coloured photos of a particular subject, such as the Eiffel Tower or Mount Fuji. I 'parade' my series of questions, partially inspired by the study of the 'Bath Series', and elaborate some of them further in the works which follow. This set was placed against the back wall of the larger room of the Substation, pinned onto tack board (3.66 x 7.32 m), with pins a various points in the work, and threads running between the pin points, to show how they interconnect with each other and other works of the installation. The viewer could follow the connections, which demonstrate logical thought process as well as non-logical thought which proceeds by association rather than by step by step logic, and seeing would have initiated the processing.

When one first looks at *Seeing* the immediate impression can easily be that of a complicated mess. This is acceptable, because it speaks to the complex nature of seeing that this research is investigating. Closer looking soon reveals a fairly simple basic compositional structure, namely the top section of a near-arc placed diagonally across the format. The images are ordered according to the curve of the arc, and this impression should supersede an initial impression of visual disorder. Each viewer will then engage differently with the work by starting at a point which interests or attracts them, and then follow where this leads, to the next and the next and the next point, and so on. Thus the viewer participates in

the questioning or meaning forming activity which the installation is performing. I shall next give a few examples of suggested routes around the installation. These are the routes I set out for the examination, and they are, to me, the most crucial.

7.4.2 Suggested tack board routes

One enters the exhibition space by the larger doors of the Substation, and sees against the wall opposite a tack board with eight drawings nailed to it. There seem to be a few lines drawn across the works. As one approaches one sees different coloured threads, held in place at certain points by pins. Possibly the most obvious is a thicker, silky red embroidery type of thread. Its beginning is nailed close to a sketch of a cow, with rocks above it which suggest a profile. This is a copy of Gauguin's *Seascape with Cow or Above the Abyss* (1888)[132]. The viewer first sees a sketched representation of a cow and rocks, but then the mind leaps or switches into another perceptual space and sees a profile and a bovine shape in the rocks. *'Abyss'* could express a fear of falling into this unknown perceptual space. The red thread leads to *Ten Commandments as a Landscape* (10vi), where the rock/profile has become more evident and the bovine looking rock on the left more bovine. The *horror vacui* of the rock/profile has become more evident[133]. The rock images have 'switched' into profiles by processes for which, to my knowledge, no adequate explanation exists at the present time.

The viewer may then follow the red thread along the wall, through the threshold into the smaller room, left across the width of the room, to where the thread goes through a sheet of photocopy paper, sewn onto a sheet of tulle hanging

[132] Analyzed by Gamboni 2002a: 87-8 and 2002b.

[133] A discussion of what happens when one is confronted by an unknown spatial experience would have some relevance here, but not enough to be pursued further.

close to the top of the ceiling, in the top right corner. At the point where the thread enters the paper there is a depiction of the switching vase/goblet image, of which a variant appears so often in the 'Bath Series' (in 16 of the 23 works). This is an example of the close relationship between the practical and theoretical components of the inquiry.

On the tulle, titled *Can of Worms Notes* (30), are more photocopies with metastable images on, namely the Necker cube, the duck/rabbit, and the old/young woman, which initiated this work when I saw *the Drawings of Jasper Johns* exhibition in the Hayward gallery in 1990[134]. The photocopies are from Gandelman's article on da Vinci's painting *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* (1510), which discusses da Vinci's interest in metastability (1977: 160-1, 163, 170). Further photocopies on the same tulle show da Vinci's exploratory sketches for the painting, particularly his seeming searching for satisfactory positions for the feet, for which different places are repeatedly tried out. On the same sheet are his drawings of a steel rod going through wheel, implying a turning round and round, like the abovementioned feet, and like the mind searching for a satisfactory aesthetic solution for the figures' feet to rest. I see this spinning around as analogous to stitching between possibilities, as the search for what looks 'right' continues (and this links, by a fairly long path, with *sinstra/dextra* (19), that is left/right issues).

The sheets of paper on this tulle relate to thoughts, intuitions and the like, about the abilities of the eye, the brain and the mind, for example the small copy of the well known profile by da Vinci showing the eye's 'three-bubbled' connections with the brain, with little passages between them leading to a part of the brain into which rays of some sort are shining diagonally, slightly tilted upwards, suggestive to me of the sky, realms of the mind, soul, and the unknown.

[134] Except for the Necker cube.

This particular painting, the *V&CSA* remains 'unquiet' as the feet, arms and legs have not settled into the 'right' place, and as such it continues to be a questioning work which testifies to the processes of the mind which are not entirely understood. That is why it is in my 'tack board collection'. Its presence is motivated by the *Mona Lisa* iron on in the 'Bath Series', in fact I first became aware of the *V&CSA*'s 'seeing problems' while investigating the *Mona Lisa* for the 'Bath Series'. I came across references in Gandelman (1977) and Gamboni (2002a: 188), for instance, to Freud's theory that da Vinci drew a vulture in the Virgin's lap as a result of complex destabilized visual perceptions. After some research I decided Freud's theory is not correct because it is based on a mistranslation of the Italian *nibbio* into 'vulture', while it actually means 'kite' (Constatino and Reid 1991:16). I nevertheless feel that Freud was aware that there is an unresolved 'seeing problem' in the work, although I do not agree with his explanation of it.

While meditating on the seeing questions in the *V&CSA* I thought that all the questions that arise are really like a can of worms opening up, and then front leg of the Virgin looked like a worm or larva of some sort to me. I decided to play with it, since I am observing and investigating the mind which 'plays', the non-rational, non-verbal mode, 'visual mode', as I have explained.

A wavy copper wire comes out of the photocopy of the *V&CSA* in *Can of Worms Notes*. Over the photocopy is a sheet of tracing paper, with the traced larva/leg cut out and put alongside the opening in the tracing paper left by the cutout. This cutout was used as a template for the subsequent larva/leg shapes. All of this is put into an A4 plastic folder, and sewn closed all around in fairly large, fairly loose stitching. The wavy copper wire imitates the Virgin's larva/leg, bent slightly at the knee, and the viewer may follow the wire through the threshold back into the larger room. It first comes to rest at a thumbtack stuck into *Seeing* at a very bright, colourful collection of larva/legs, arranged into a circle emanating from a

central point. Light blue circling coloured pencil lines follow the circular movements of the spinning larva/legs, recalling da Vinci's spinning wheels in *Can of Worms Notes.* The bright spinning wheel is a kind of variation on the smile of the *Mona Lisa* - a mystery laughing at humanity trying to understand and explain things which cannot be put into words, which 'do a lot better' when translated into visual terms and function according to 'visual mode' processes, which are not, as far as I know, fully understood.

The copper wire continues its route and finds its next resting place on a grey variant of the larva/leg. The viewer may then pause and look along the semi arc on which it is resting. The viewer will see three versions of the *V&CSA* in different styles, showing different types of mental processing, and alongside the arc of *V&CSA*s a small, pen drawn diagram showing Freud's perception of the obliquely orientated vulture in the Virgin's lap, showing it is part of this group of questions. The second highest *V&CSA* variant is an abstracted version of the work, and the last one, above it, is changing into a more cubist version, and is in conversation with the photoreceptors at the photoreceptor's party, along a straight line with them. A sufficiently curious viewer will read the words in the speech bubbles and notice that the photoreceptors are discussing Marcel Duchamp, who said[135] that he was against a purely retinal[136] art, as noted by Johns, for example,

> Marcel Duchamp … moved his work through the retinal boundaries which had been established with Impressionism (Vb: 22).

The photoreceptors are not overly impressed with Duchamp, as their conversation shows. A pinned thread leads from this location to *At The*

[135] 'Duchamp has always vehemently rejected the "retinal", heaping invective on 'retinal painting"' (Krauss 1993: 123).

[136] 'Retinal painting' is 'a way of painting that dealt specifically with the representation and interpretation of sensorial data' (Garcia-Bermejo 2004: 5).

Photoreceptor's Party (10v), which is an enlargement of this section of *Seeing,* to which I shall return further on.

The lingering unresolvedness of the *V&CSA* of da Vinci bears a relationship with the *Mona Lisa*, of which the 'seeing problem' of the smile has not yet, to my knowledge, been satisfactorily resolved. The *Mona Lisa* iron on in *Racing Thoughts* {9}, {13}, reference both Duchamp and da Vinci, and this is an example of how my work grew out of that of Johns.

To summarize, then, the red thread leads to the basic theoretical underpinning of the installation, namely a meditation on seeing, with metastability as its cornerstone, when it stops at the row of metastable figures in the lower row of photocopies in the *Can of Worms Notes.* The copper wire leads the viewer back to the tack board, where one can decide which 'route' to take next - suggestions are made by different coloured and textured threads, each with its own coloured circular stickers to mark out the route more clearly. I will make brief comments about the suggested routes to give more of a sense of the nature of the meditation, and then about the experience of space, which is one of the main ingredients of installation.

In *Seeing,* a pin is stuck close to the words 'unreal city', recalling T. S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* (1922)[137], and a thread leads from there to the work at the top left, *Questions that are too difficult to answer, sometimes to ask, even* (10viii). The thread stops at a pin stuck in what seems to be a flow of lines, but because of slight colouring one may prise out lines suggesting a kneeling figure, with a yellow line coming out of the eye/head area. Above it is written 'I saw a

[137] As well as the many utopian dreams humanity has come up with to date. The semi-circular, eye-like form, with tadpole-like forms crowding into it, beneath these words, was initially a photo of a papercrete house, as a point of departure, which metamorphosed into the eye-like depiction. Papercrete housing falls within the gambit of dreaming about cities of the future.

new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1)[138] The 'prising out' recalls da Vinci's recommendation to painters to 'prise out' images from cracks in rocks (Gamboni 2002a: 29), and the Isenheim figure which must be 'prised out' in the 'Bath Series'. The thread continues along the wall, with periodical dots on it, to *The Trees of the Fields* (5). The final dots are at the words 'The trees of the fields shall clap their hands', taken from the book of Isaiah 55:12[139]. The lower section of the work curves slightly to anticipate the arrival of the thread from the 'new haven and the new earth'. This was one of several 'happy accidents' which occurred when the work was being installed, and which necessitated my revision of this section, which describes the installation as it was installed. The words from Isaiah are a suggested answer to the question above it, posed in a graffiti type of writing, against a suggested brick wall, *Where do We Go from Here?* (6). The vision of the prophet is also a type of seeing, when the 'figure' of the future is being prised out from the 'ground' of the present, when, arguably, a perceptual shift in time and space takes place.

Returning to *Seeing,* a transparent (glass-like) pin is stuck next to a speech bubble containing writing in pencil, and reads, 'What do you think of Marcel Duchamp?'. The photoreceptor is not very happy with Duchamp, as we have said. A pale green thread leads from this to the work above to the left of it, *The Caterpillar of Consolation* (10vii). The pink caterpillar consoles the photoreceptor by telling it that it should read on, that is look at the contents inside the three near squares in its (the caterpillar's) body: Impressionist or 'retinal' painting, then Duchamp's progressive photos of himself descending a staircase which can be seen, art historically, as the next step after Impressionism, and a third, more exploded rendering suggesting in what varied ways art/'art' has developed since Duchamp. The caterpillar is a flipped or switched over version of the cloud in

[138] English Standard Version 2001.

[139] *Ibid.*

Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1923), of which the processing into a caterpillar is shown in *Caterpillar of Consolation Notes* (31) in the smaller room. The caterpillar consoles the photoreceptor by reminding it that Duchamp's remark must be seen in an art historical context, and that the photoreceptor should not take the remark personally. The levity provides relief from the serious subject matter of the work, while at the same time 'playing' as the flipped *Play* (33), which hugs the wall from the smaller into the larger room, enjoins one to do. The Dada movement, in which Duchamp played a significant role, was also characterized by, among other things, 'unseriousness'. *Night Notes with Transitional Figure* (11) echoes this in that the figure is a mealie leaf version of Hugo Ball in his shrimp costume, evident if one were to prise out the photo of this behind the transparent black cloth next to the figure. I saw the small, bowing, drawn mealie figure to the left of the transitional figure in a dream, and he reminded me a lot of Hugo Ball in his shrimp costume. There is, behind the same cloth, a copy of a page of Dada poetry below this group, which further continues the themes of play, Dada and seeing.

To return to *The Photoreceptors' Party* (10v), the 'receivers of light' in the retina are having a conversation about Marcel Duchamp because he was against the 'retinal painting' of the Impressionist[140] movement - he was not satisfied to have only a play of light on the retina transcribed[141], but wished for the mind to be involved as well in 'seeing'. The backdrop of the drawing is a reworking of sections of the brain, showing the involvement of the brain in these matters. In the left section of the backdrop some of the brain forms are suggestive of gasping human heads, which express the ongoing longings of humans for something

[140] 'Duchamp had always been clear that he had Impressionism in mind as a premier example of the retinal' (Krauss 1993: 123).

[141] 'I [Duchamp] was so conscious of the retinal aspect in painting that I personally wanted to find another vein of exploration' (Dalrymple-Henderson 1988b: 329).

better, a 'beyond', a sublime, new vistas, perhaps a 'new heaven and a new earth'.

On the left 'foot' of the photoreceptor in the middle sits a collection of creatures. Upon closer inspection they will be recognized as the creatures surrounding the bent over figure in Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (c. 1797). They have also 'come to the party' because they, as part of Goya's etching, also have a place in the development of ways of seeing, and investigations into the interactions of the eye, the brain, the mind and the soul: Dada, of which Marcel Duchamp was a practitioner, explored the 'irrational', the subconscious and the unknown regions of the mind. Goya is given a place in this drawing because *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* speaks to a nascent awareness of these matters.

The creatures on the 'foot' of the middle photoreceptor are fed up because the bouncer at the party will not let them in. They feel entitled to enter because of their link with Surrealism, which followed Dada. The cat therefore says to the bouncer,

> We're from Goya, in case you don't recognize us.

The blue Duchamp line with blue dots, which started in *Seeing*, goes over *the Photoreceptors' Party,* along the wall , passing below the threshold of the door and above the Johns' 'blackboard' below, up the wall on the other side, into the smaller room, where it ties a knot with the threads coming out of *Marcel Descending a Staircase* (25). The beholder has switched into a new space, and if she looked to the right she would see, by the light switch, a *P* version of the melted clock on a branch from Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1933), and above it, seemingly ready to tip over, the seemingly unstable forms of Cézanne, the sphere, the cone and the cylinder. This corner refers to the discussions about the 'fourth dimension' in Paris in the 1920's in which Duchamp participated (Lebel 1958/1985). The alternative title of the *Large Glass* is *The Bride Stripped Bare by*

Her Bachelors, Even, and according to Lebel, whose book on Duchamp Johns read in translation[142],

> the function [of 'even'] is to project the title to another level, to make it deviate into another dimension which is evidently the fourth, that which Duchamp introduced *by force* … into his works (1958/1985: 173) (my translation).

The 'fourth dimension' represented a mental space beyond conventional reason, the space on the other side of the glass, perhaps, even, the glass through which one passes 'darkly' in order to gain access a clearer vision, to see 'face to face' (I Corinthians 13:12).

7.5 The experience of space.

Site specific installation involves making the site and its space part of the work (O'Doherty 1999), and to conclude the discussion of my work I shall address this matter.

When one enters the installation *Gniees* ('seeing' reversed) by the large doors of the Substation the left side of the installation contains more visual information than the right side. A long white line, made up of night notes sellotaped together, lies on the floor, starting just right of the entrance, and it moves in a slight diagonal direction, leftwards towards the tack board against the opposite wall. It stops just below the white circle of *the Inventor of Chinese Writing had a Double Set of Eyes* (Gamboni 2002: 23) (10iv). The white night note line and the white 'dot' suggest the receding line and the vanishing point of perspectival space, and it leads into the installation's 'official' starting point, at the drawing *Seeing* (10i) on the tack board. The cat-like creature in the 'white dot' can be a *doppelganger*

[142] George Heard Hamilton's translation of 1959, New York: Grove Press (Va: 70).

of the viewer picking his way through the installation. To the left of the perspectival line are 'waves' of night notes, 'washing out' of a less conscious state, the 'white corner' to the left of the entrance door, into more conscious work on the tack board.

Against the left wall there are two already mentioned lines with dots, the large work *Puppy Experiments*, and next to it a *P* box with ten A6 books with *Daily tree sketches, e.a.* (9) on it. Just above it is the drawing *Dream - At the Hairdresser* (8). (5) and (6) are placed parallel to the tack board wall, thus creating a semi-enclosed space which contains a fair amount of material. The smaller 'boxed' area, directly to the left when one enters, is also a partly enclosed space, which has a strong white component, and carries a sense of pristine and almost impersonal cleanliness, innocence and purity, which could be the space most closely connected to the ineffable and the unknown because of the ten lines of sellotaped night notes coming from the ceiling. The fluorescent ceiling light shines particularly strongly onto the top section of this white cascade of paper with semi-consciously made lines and writing on. The physical height emphasizes the suggested vastness from where the notes are coming.

Near the top of the further corner of the same wall are two shiny *P* forms which suggest inverted commas, used to indicate quoted speech, and they could suggest that this 'busy' side of the installation is the verbal section of the space. The inverted commas could also, perhaps more importantly, suggest that the whole installation is in inverted commas because they could be embracing and enclosing the whole work. They shift the awareness of space along the almost empty wall to the ceiling, making one aware that one is indeed in a 'white cube' (O'Doherty 1999). The 'quotation marks' can suggest that the building and its contents are fleeting and unstable, just a few utterances forming part of the ongoing conversation of humanity about who we are, where we come from, where we are going, and why?

When the brain tires from too much talking we are 'switched off' and go to a quieter mental space, the experience of which is suggested by the left side of the installation. Two double sided works hang diagonally, 'pointing' left to the emptier, calmer walls. One can circulate between the works and stop at various points. At each stop, from each viewpoint, one perceives a different spatial organization because the relationships of the forms in the space change. *Ode to the Switch* ((14), in particular, seems to be floating because it is just below shoulder level away from the floor. It works with the spaces created by the very transparent *sinistra/dextra* (19) (made from the negative shapes of the word 'conflict' in *The Trees of the Fields*) and the minimally used white wall to enable the experience of freer, more open awareness. 11, 12 and 13 are calm works against the 'door wall' of the right side of the space. Once could say that the left side of the space is more 'left mode'-of-the-brain friendly, while the space on the right is more 'right mode' friendly.

The three pages of semi-calligraphic writing (15, 21, 26) each contains a quotation that compares the 'verbal mode' with the 'visual mode' of the brain, and thus relates to the spatial organization I have just discussed. 26 includes a small sketch of Redon's *The Eye like a Strange Balloon Mounts towards Infinity* (1882), and speaks to the experience of the eye and the mind of infinite space.

The glove of *Textur If You Could Read my Mind* (24), sewn onto tulle and surrounded by cotton thread writing, at first seems to be floating because of the transparency of the tulle, and this adds to the experience of lightness and floating in the installation space.

7.6 Conclusion

I have not referred to the following works of the installation, and I shall now make very brief comments about some of them , proceeding numerically. Overall

the titles of the undiscussed works give an indication of how they fit into the concept of the work, and further elaboration would make this reading too long, without necessarily adding anything pertinent to what has already been brought up.

Ticks (3) suggest day to day, ongoing process; *Puppy experiments* (7) are drawings done with the left and the right hand, with and without glasses, with the photos being copied orientated 'correctly' and up side down, in different states of mind, as becoming more aware of what the eye and the mind can produce in different states exercises; *Dream - At the Hairdresser* (8); *Night Notes with Roots* (12), *Night Notes with Black Velvet* (13); *White Rabbit* (16); *More Puppy Experiments* (17); *Trying Out* (18); *From Behind* (20); *Ongoing Process, Bouquet for J. J.* (22); *t*he quote in Latin next to the fire hose (27), where it fit snugly into the space between the wall and the hose the first time I tried the works out in the Substation, and with its colours red, white and black working well with the wall and the hose, is *nox est perpetua una dormienda*, literally translated as 'night is perpetual, a having to be slept'. It is from one of Catullus' well known love poems in which he expresses his passion for 'Lesbia' (Carmen 5, line 6, Fordyce 1978: 4). I see it as a strong protest against death, and a profound, heartfelt statement in favour of life, and it is part this work's statement; *Geometry Melting* (28); *Skin* (29); *P*, shimmering pinkish objects, changing, various sizes; and *Hanging onto the Vestiges of Sanity, with Puppies* (10iii).

As the discussions of *Seeing* and *V&CSA*, for example, have shown, each work engenders a long route of references by association. The associations are mine, and not necessarily what would interest someone else. The purpose of the work was to engender an experience of process and further discussion and experiences which would have some kind of meaning for the viewer. Judging by the feedback I received from the show it achieved this purpose.

CHAPTER 8. RETROSPECTIVE OVERVIEW AND EVALUATION

8.1 Overview of the progress of the research

The theoretical component of this research is the first recorded academic study of the 'Bath Series' at the time of writing that I am aware of. The study of the artist's meditation on his practice over the past thirty years has shown that in his art he 'engages with fundamental issues of seeing' (Va: 16).

The study has shown that Johns proceeds by first destabilizing the initial expectation of the viewer to see a conventional representation containing conventional figure/ground strategies, such as placing one object 'before' another by making the 'front' object opaque, and not allowing the 'behind' object to show through the 'front' object. He then destabilizes this expectation by letting an object emerge from 'behind' the other, where, logically, in terms of conventional representation, there is no 'behind'. This was demonstrated at the beginning of the discussion of works of the series, when {1}, {2} and {5} were discussed. The discussion addressed the question of how we see, the interaction between the seeing eye and the interpreting mind, and how the initial expectations of what we think we are going to see are destabilized in the works of the 'Bath Series'.

The inquiry continued and considered instabilities of visual perception that were set up by the flag motif, the metastable drawings (the profiled vase, old/young woman and the duck/rabbit), the Isenheim and Moser fragments, the *Mona Lisa* iron-on, hatchings, the avalanche warning, masking tape, the reworked Picasso, and seen and imagined images in the same pictorial space, such as the wicker basket and the floating Ohr pots. These unstable visual perceptions made the experience of figure and ground in the pictorial space ambiguous, and the viewer was not sure what is where anymore. The disorientating experience of figure and ground is a questioning of how and why we see, and no clear answer is provided. Destabilized figure/ground perception is particularly emphasized during the

experience of seeing metastable images which, as the table shows, recur most often of the images of the 'Bath Series'.

The dislocated experience of figure and ground within the pictorial space eventually led to questions concerning the location and nature of waking consciousness and 'dream', when discussing the flag motif, for example, and this led to questions about what is 'real' and 'unreal'. These questions grew from an initial questioning of how and why we see, and the inquiry into instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series' set these questions into motion. I am not aware of a generally accepted scientific explanation of why and how these processes take place, and the works themselves only pose the questions, without giving answers. The 'mystery [is] still resolutely locked up', as Francis said (1984: 7).

I contend, however, that this should not deter us from attempting to learn more about the mysterious workings of the eye, the brain and the mind. As I have shown, I am convinced that it is possible to learn more about the 'mystery' by learning more about 'visual' processing, which is different from 'verbal' processing. 'Visual processing' is a form of energy which 'shuns statement', as the 'non-verbal', non-representational side of *The Trees of the Fields* shows, for example.

The practical component shows instances of non-rational processing which is a 'forage' into the not entirely understood, rather than the rational processes of the mind. The iridescent lilac papier mâché objects for example, *P*, are indexical of this because they suggest a phase in a mysterious process of transformation. The two-sided works, particularly, draw attention to the switching between 'verbal' or rational and 'non-verbal', 'visual' or non-rational modes. One of the purposes of the practical component is to show the exhilarating experience of the 'creative', 'visual mode' process, and to stimulate and inspire the viewers to work more with their own creative abilities.

After discussing the works of the 'Bath Series' I concluded that the metastable switch, the 'Ur-Gestalt' (Gandelman 1989: 209) seems to be a core energy motivating Johns' art making. Furthermore, '[t]he appearance of multistable [or metastable] images in studies of both the "savage" and the "modern" mind' (Mitchell 1994: 46) shows that Johns' art is participating in something that is operational beyond the boundaries of a particular historical era, geographical location and the outward trappings of culture - participating in what? *According to What* is it all being done? Johns' art, as it is summarized in the 'Bath Series', is an ongoing questioning of the nature of the human condition. The instabilities of visual perception in the 'Bath Series' show questions about the human condition posed particularly in figure/ground terms, but no satisfactory verbal answers are given. For me this bears some relation to Weiss' contention that Johns' art belongs to the family of images of the 'sacred art of the premodern West' (2007: 29-38). His works are signs of an undefined signified, of 'what'?

8.2 Evaluation of the methodology

The methodology I used for the research proved to be adequate for the task. The substantial amount of writing available on Johns and visual perception is far more than I would have been able to work through in its entirety. I was guided in my initial choices of texts to study by my first supervisor, who had done his PhD on Johns, as I have mentioned. What I gleaned from the first readings pointed me to subsequent sources, and all of this was obtained from the university's library facilities. When I noted that the same observations were being repeated by various authors I deduced that I had found the basics of Johns' art. This turned out to be the very characteristic which attracted me to his work initially, when I was 'interpellated'[143] by the metastable motifs in the works on show at the

[143]Elaboration of Althusser's theory of interpellation lies beyond the scope of the present inquiry, as I mentioned at the outset.

Hayward gallery in 1990, which Rosenthal formulates as 'the Johnsian question, "Whether to see the 2 parts as one thing or as two things."' (1988: 23).

I found that my setting up of the works into the 'Bath Series' made the research relatively easily and pleasantly manageable - there were not too few nor too many examples to work with. The table showing the most frequent appearance of the metastable motifs in the series underline the main finding of the research, namely that the 'Ur-Gestalt' (Gandelman 1989: 209) switching is a potent underlying motor in the art of Johns.

The structuring of the written component has followed the progress of my research. I started by examining the works closely, as I showed with the ekphrastic reading of the works at the beginning of the discussion of the works in chapter 6. This led to an awareness that figure/ground instability is the main unstable visual perception in the work, which in turn problematizes the experience of pictorial space in the work. This dislocation of the conventional experience of space, instigated by instabilities of visual perception, initiate broader questions about the nature of reality and the human condition. Questions about how we see in the 'Bath Series' also touch on scientific research into the workings of little understood parts of the human brain and the implications of new discoveries in this regard for human life on earth - indicated by the spiraling galaxies from Johns' childhood in {20}, for example.

These comments, in general, also apply to the practical component, which grew out of the step by step research of the theoretical component. More specifically I would say that Gamboni's *Potential Images* (2002) has been a significant source for the practical component. My methodology was that when I did not know what to do next I read from Gamboni, where I always found a fresh point of departure. Interestingly, Gamboni says that,

> Jasper Johns … is one of the most interesting artists of his generation from the point of view of potential images [which includes metastable

> images] on account of his systematic use of simultaneous and concurrent systems of meaning … [of] visual as well as semiotic ambiguity (2002: 227).

For the purposes of the present study, this again shows the aptness of research into Johns' interest in the switching or alternation between the 'visual' and the 'verbal' processes of the brain, into which both the practical and the theoretical components of my research has delved.

Overall, the methodology of the project has been standard, step by step qualitative, thematic research, sometimes inductive and sometimes deductive, and well suited to the aim of learning more about the instabilities of visual perception in Johns' 'Bath Series', and of making a practical component conceptually closely related to the theoretical component.

8.3 The Theoretical Framework

I have done predominantly qualitative research and given an account of my research in my own voice. I have not consciously cast my research into the workings of any particular theory, although I have used, at times, Peirce's system of signs when referring to iconic and indexical signs. Otherwise, my reading and interpretation of the 'Bath Series', as well as my own work, is based on various sources, choices and experiences, which I have already explained.

The theoretical framework that I was most consciously aware of using while doing both the practical and the theoretical work was, as I have mentioned, my understanding of certain New Testament teachings, namely 'seek first the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 6:33) and 'the kingdom of heaven is within you' (Luke 17:21). For me, this is what research into the workings of the eye, the brain, the mind and the soul is about. In addition, and probably not very obvious, is the underlying thought of the work, namely 'the last enemy is death' (I

Corinthians 15:26). Sometimes, while alive and aware in our physical bodies, we see, with our physical eyes, something which awakens a sense of eternity in us. I mentioned Rimbaud's poem on sun reflecting on water in this regard,

… - Eternity.

It's the sea gone

With the sun.[144]

[144] *'L'Eternité./C'est la mer allée/Avec le soleil.'* (Décaudin 1964: 102). (My translation).

9. CONCLUSION

9.1 The instabilities of visual perception in Johns' 'Bath Series' make a statement about visual art: it is about what people do not understand, about lingering and teasing mysteries in ourselves and the universe in which we live. The crystallizing out of the still mysterious 'Ur-Gestalt', the metastable switch as a core energy of the works of the 'Bath Series' confirm the role of visual art as a window into the unknown, as an opening into 'something new'. Both the theoretical and the practical components confirm that visual art has a significant role to play in our development as human beings, in helping us to live life.

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iii. Further reading for the practical component

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ILLUSTRATIONS - MY WORK



Fig. 1. *Night notes i (9)*



Fig. 2. *Night notes ii (4)*

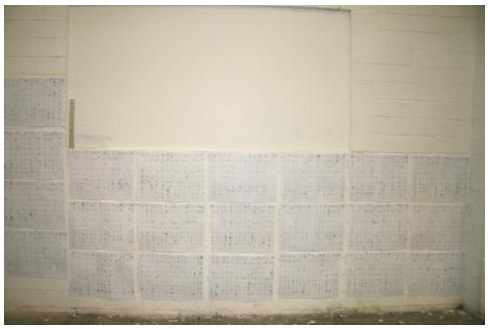


Fig. 3. *Ticks*



Fig. 4i. *More night notes*

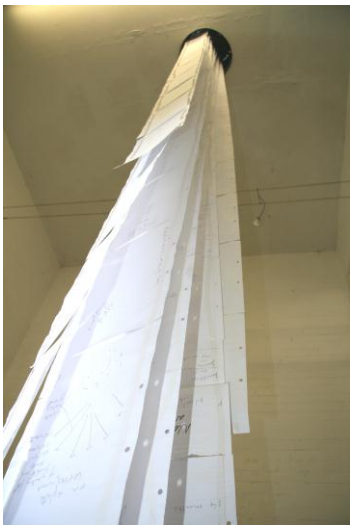


Fig. 4i. *More night notes*



Fig. 4ii. *More night notes*





Fig. 5. *The trees of the fields*

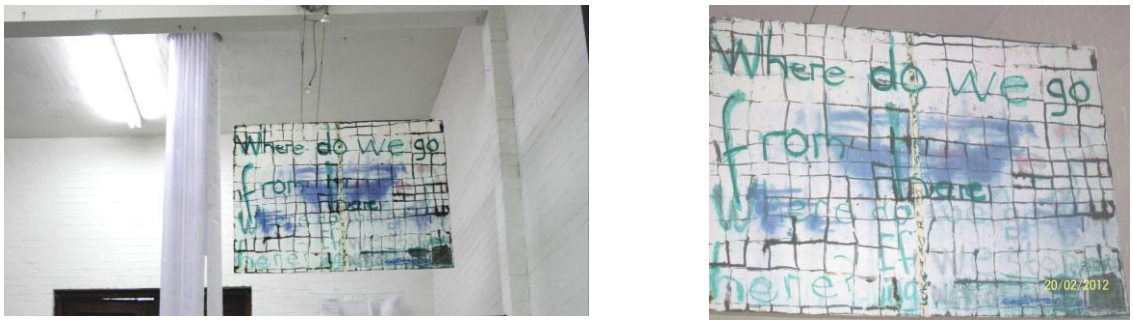


Fig. 6. *Where do we go from here?*



Fig. 7. *Puppy experiments*

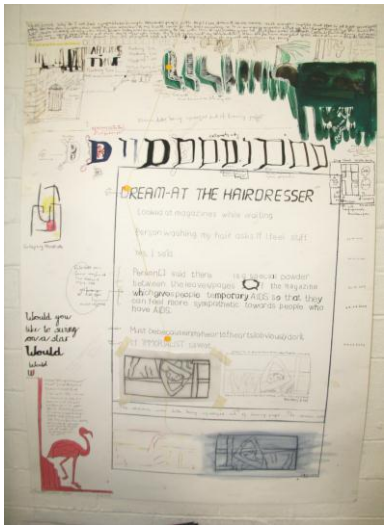


Fig. 8. *Dream - at the hairdresser*



Fig. 9. *Daily tree sketches* et alia





Fig. 10. *The tack board*



Fig. 10i. *Seeing*



Fig. 10ii. *Can of worms*



Fig. 10iii. *Hanging onto the vestiges of sanity, with puppies*

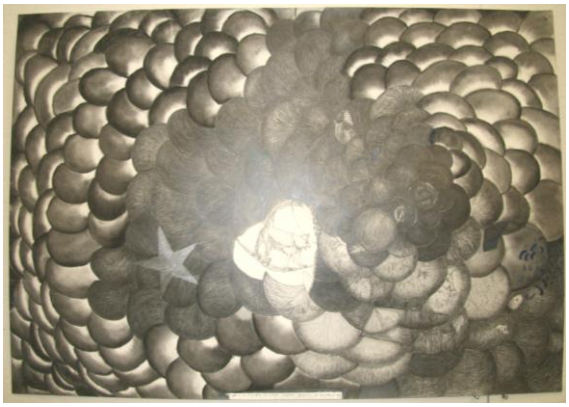


Fig. 10iv. *The inventor of Chinese writing had two sets of eye*



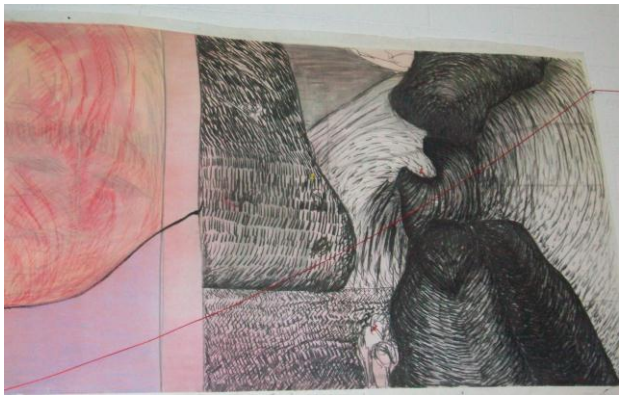


Fig.10vi. *Ten commandments as a landscape* (above)

Fig. 10v. *At the photoreceptors' party* (left)

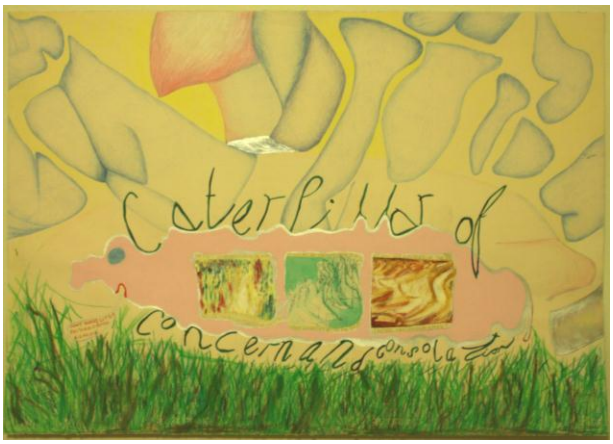


Fig. 10vii. *Caterpillar of consolation*

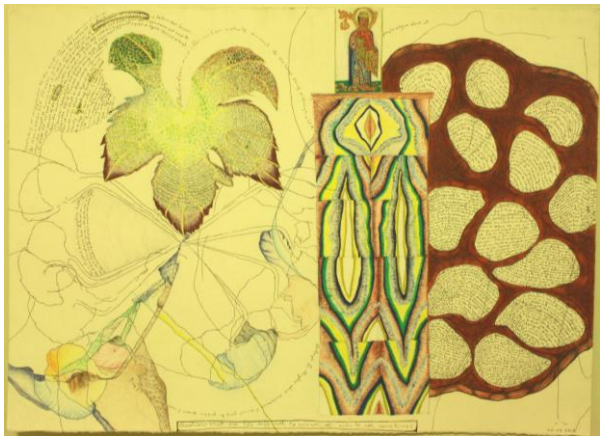


Fig. 10viii. *Questions that are too difficult to answer, sometimes to ask, even*



Figs. 13, 12, 11.



Fig. 13. *Night notes with black velvet* (↑)

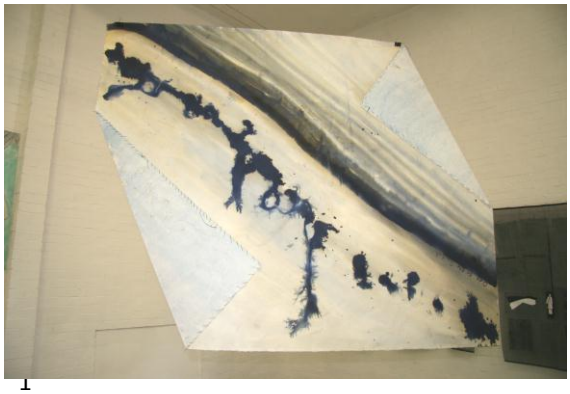
Fig. 12. *Night notes with roots*

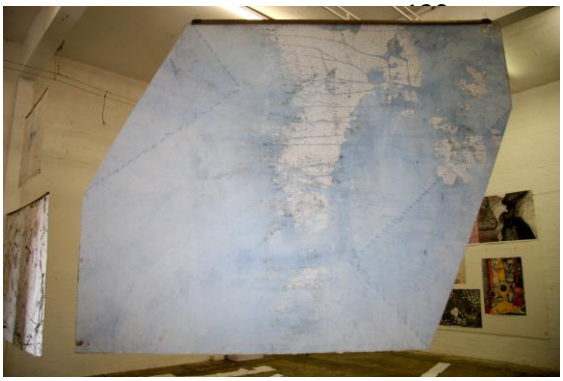
Fig. 11. *Night notes with transitional figure*











14. *Ode to the switch.*





Views of *Ode to the switch*

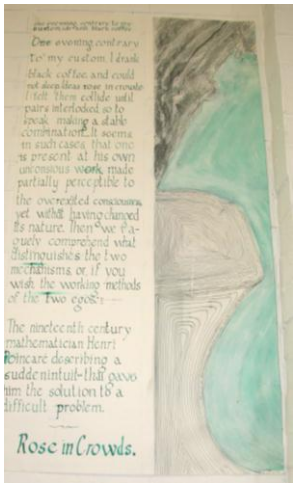




Fig. 15. *Poincaré quote*

Fig. 16. *White rabbit.* Fig. 17. *More puppy experiments* (3)





Above, left and right, fig. 20. *From behind.* Below left, fig. 20, then fig.19. *sinistra/dextra, then, at the top, fig. 18, trying out (verf van vettewinkel).*



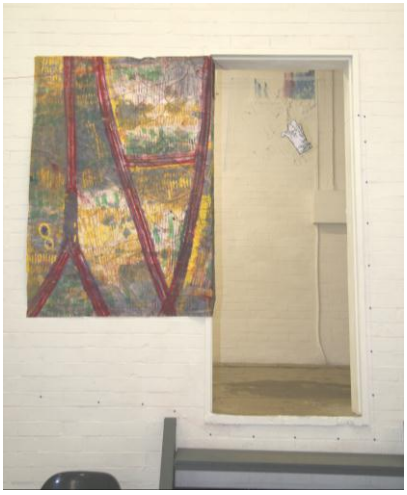


Fig. 21. *Huxley quote*

Below left, fig. 22. *Ongoing process, bouquet for J. J.* Below right, fig. 23 *Thank U J. Johns, i and ii*







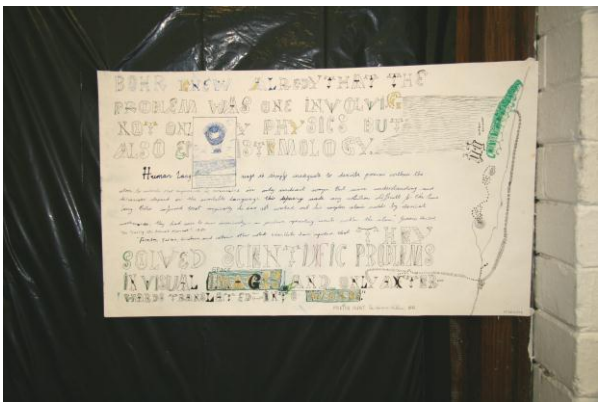




Top right small glove, reversed writing, middle, other side of glove Top left, fig. 33 *P*, right, fig. 25

Fig. 24. *Textur/If you could read my mind* *Marcel descending a staircase*





Top left, fig. 33, *P* (Cézanne's sphere, cone, column), Fig. 26. *Hunt quote*

Below middle, melting clock on a branch (Dali)

Fig. 27 (below)). *Nox est …* Fig. 28. *Geometry melting.*



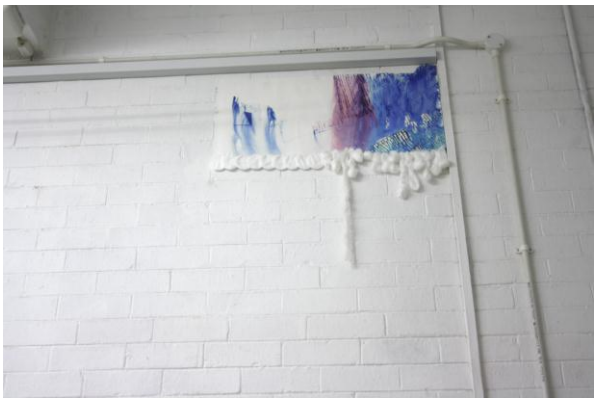




Fig. 29. *Skin.*



Fig. 30 *Can of worms notes*



Fig. 31. *Caterpillar of consolation notes*





Fig. 32. *Play,* flipped, hugging wall and threshold

Fig. 33. *P.* Shimmering pinkish objects.

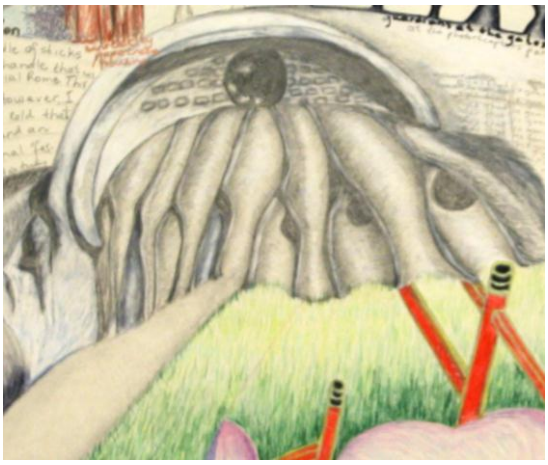




You are invited to

GNIEES

A MEDITATION ON SEEING



by MARIETHA SMIT

Monday, 20 February 2012 at the Wits

Substation at 18.00. Until 22 February

WALTER OLTMANN will open the exhibition

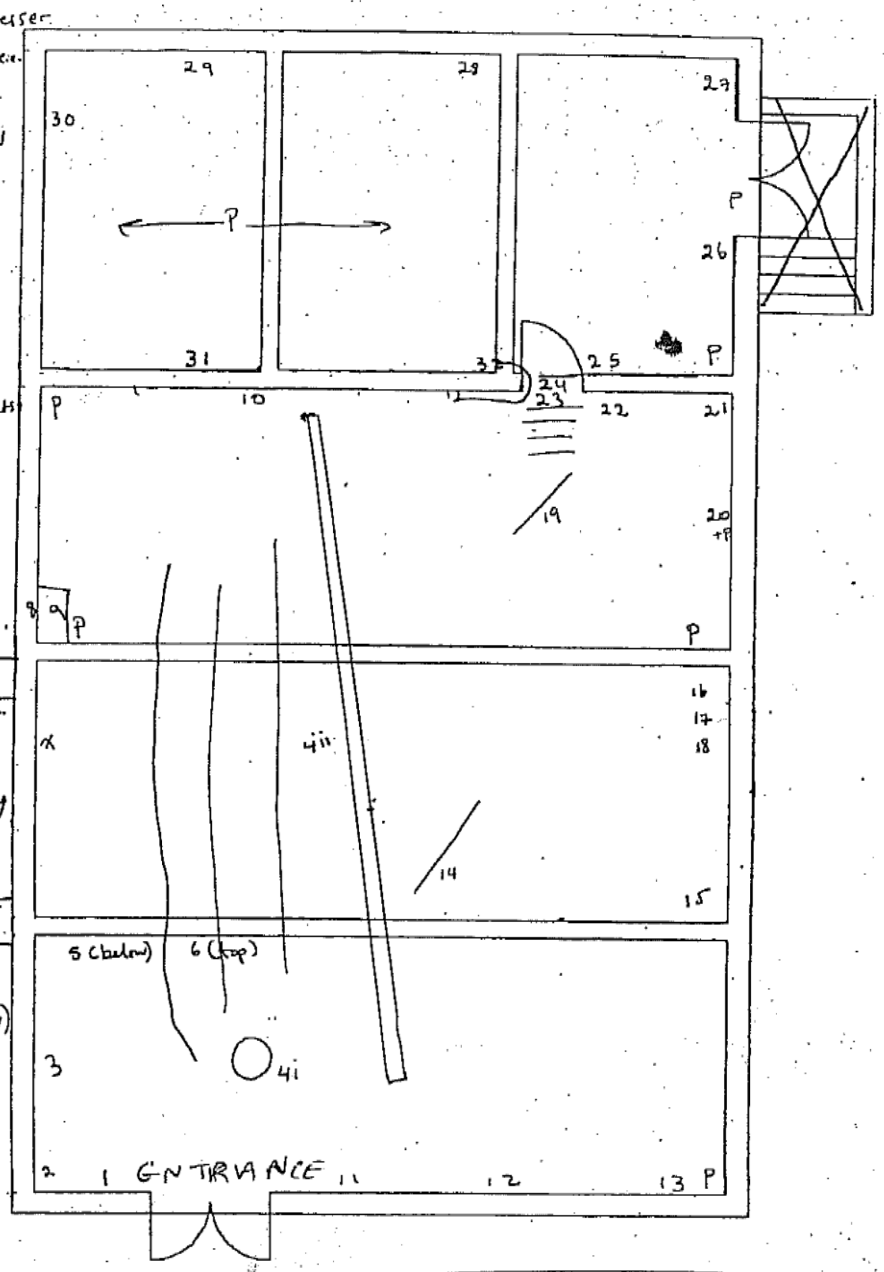
An exhibition in partial fulfillment of the degree Master of Fine Arts

YNITES

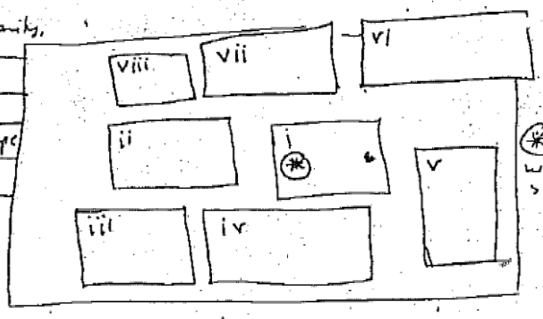
- ~~A meditation~~ on seeing

Substation Stilling
20-22 February 2012

1 - Night notes i
2 - Night notes ii
3 - Tricks
4 i,ii - More night notes
5 - The trees of the fields
6 - Where do we go from here
7 - Puppy experiments
8 - Dream at the hair dresser
9 - Daily tree sketches, etc.
10 - The tackboard
11 - Night notes with transitional figure
12 - Night notes with roots
13 - Night notes with black velvet
14 - Ode to the Switch
15 - Poincaré quote
16 - White rabbit
17 - More puppy experiments
18 - Trying out
19 - sinistra/dextra
20 - From behind
21 - Huxley quote
22 - Ongoing process, bouquet for JJ
23 - Thank you, J. Johns
24 - If you could read my mind (earlier version)
25 - marcel descending asc.
26 - a note/thirst
27 - no rest....
28 - Geometry melting
29 - Skin
30 - Can of worms
31 - Caterpillar Cloud of consolation start
32 - Pliny
33 - P - shimmering pinkish objects (changing)



0 - The Tackboard
- Seeing
- Can of worms
- Hanging onto the vestiges of sanity, with puppies
- The man who invented chickens with two sets of eyes
- At the photoreceptors party
- Ten commandments as a landscape
ii - Caterpillar of consolation
iii - Questions that are too difficult to answer, sometimes to ask, even



Seascape with consuggested start