

Fisher, Cora. "Jasper Johns' Life and Work: A Conversation Between John Yau, Martha Wilson, and William Villalongo," *Hyperallergic*, 23 June 2018.

## HYPERALLERGIC

### **Jasper Johns' Life and Work: A Conversation Between John Yau, Martha Wilson, and William Villalongo**

Who gets remembered and how?

*This spring, Hyperallergic Weekend's John Yau (poet/critic/curator) joined the pioneering artist and founder of Franklin Furnace, Martha Wilson, and acclaimed painter and collagist, William Villalongo, to talk about the work of Jasper Johns on the occasion of his recently published five-volume catalogue raisonné and, more generally, the workings of artistic canonization today. Who gets remembered and how? And how must the field of art become more inclusive when it comes to representing artistic legacies? Below is an excerpt of their conversation, organized by BPL Presents, the Arts and Culture initiative at the Brooklyn Public Library in partnership with the Wildenstein Plattner Institute.*

**John Yau:** Art gets scattered, how does one keep track of it? [...] Sometimes artists don't even know where their work goes. [...] I was talking to Eileen Costello who was doing [Jasper Johns's] drawing catalogue raisonné, and she said she thought there would be about 500 drawings. And then they discovered there were quite a few more. One of the drawings was found in Oklahoma. A woman had sent a letter to Johns in the early '60s and said she would like to buy a drawing from Jasper Johns and sent him \$50.00 — nothing much — and he sent her a drawing and she's kept it her whole life. Now she gets to see her drawing in a catalogue raisonné. I think in a sense, as a fact, [this] kind of opens up how we see an artist. Johns had his first show at Leo Castelli gallery in January 1958, so it's been 60 years. He's 88 years old.

What do you guys think about it? You [Martha Wilson] are the archivist of artists who barely make any [objects].

**Martha Wilson:** I'm here to provide the feminist filter and also the performance art perspective on art-making, which is not painting and sculpture anymore; it includes event-based works that can occur on the street, works that occur only online. And then, what Franklin Furnace has been doing presenting this work, starting in 1976, is documenting it for art history. Just because it doesn't have a body, doesn't mean it's not important. And then that becomes a discussion because the documentation has changed so much. It used to be slides and press releases and now it's [digital] files.

**JY:** You're the gold standard for artists, particularly who don't make anything. And that's very important because if it doesn't exist in a document then it doesn't exist.

**MW:** I thought it was very interesting that Jasper Johns didn't consider his set material to be art. He considers it to be props but not a work of art, when it's clearly a work of art that is on stage, as far as I can see.

**JY:** At the Philip Guston drawing retrospective that was at The Morgan Library some years ago, we were there together and [Johns] complained that a lot of the works weren't works on paper, so why did they call it *Works on Paper*. So he's very...

**MW:** Particular.

**JY:** Particular is a mild way of saying how he is.

**William Villalongo:** There's also maybe a bit of self-consciousness about how he's looked at or how the work is looked at down the line.

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**JY:** It intrigued me because I was just happy to see all this work and he wasn't unhappy to see it but he had this point to make. So what do you [Villalongo] have to say about all this? A young artist, you don't quite have a catalogue raisonné yet. But you do digitize your work and record it fairly well, yes?

**WV:** I try to. Probably after exhibiting for maybe five years then saying, "OK, maybe I should up my game in terms of thinking about how these things should be documented." But you need resources to do that. I think as an artist you kind of stumble through that. Somebody like Johns, who had such early success, it's such a fortunate thing that almost everything — 60 years of work — has been documented maybe to perfection for the most part. But I don't think it's something you think about [keeping your archive] as an artist — even if you make things — at an early age.

**JY:** I knew a poet who said he kept a draft of every poem he wrote and he kept it in a filing cabinet. I just stared at him, flummoxed, and said, "What about all the stupid things you write?" He could not accept that as a possibility. I do not keep a record of everything I write.

**MW:** Even Jasper Johns decided that his early work was not valid and was not going to be in the catalogue raisonné. At what point do you figure out "OK, this is real, this isn't?"

**JY:** He only kept the works that were publicly known. Somebody who knew that I knew him sent me an image of something he did when he was in the army and had given to a doctor because he was ill. And I sent it to Johns and I never heard a word. He didn't even acknowledge that I sent him the image. I thought, "OK, that's that."

**WV:** I feel like I can understand that though, even though I would never do it. I can understand the notion of the integrity of the idea of what you're doing as an artist gets protected somehow. Or the notion that biography becomes a filter to looking at the work. And that's completely out of your control as an artist as to how that gets interpreted in relation to your work. But it's also very rigid.

**MW:** But don't you find that it's the early work that tells you what an artist is all about? That the early work is where the central ideas are located that the later work elaborates on, even in the case of Jasper Johns?

**JY:** No, I disagree. I think he got stuck as the flag painter.

So I came to New York in 1976 and by then he was quite famous. I came from Boston. I didn't know that he was quite famous because in Boston they only showed Color Field paintings, so the most famous painters in Boston were Jules Olitski and Larry Poons. You would never see a Pop Art painting in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. I think the closest they got to Pop was Robert Motherwell. So anyway, I came to New York and I saw the Johns retrospective at the Whitney because they were giving out free cigarettes and I was a giant smoker. And then in '83 I saw his solo show at Leo Castelli when it had that big space and it was all that new work with *trompe l'oeil*. I just fell in love with it. And I remember telling an artist (whose name will go unmentioned) that I really liked these later works from the '80s and he stood up in the bar and screamed at me, "He hasn't fucking done anything since 1960! What the fuck is wrong with you!" And I instantly knew that something was going on with these works that would make this man so angry. Obviously, it challenged his viewpoint. And I think anything that challenges a kind of set view we have of somebody is interesting and it has to make us rethink everything. So in a way a catalogue raisonné helps us with that. And there [are] whimsical works in the catalogue raisonné. [...] It kind of gives another dimension to the artist. It's not all about his career and how he's seen.

**WV:** I think there's something about Johns's work in general that makes you question. [...] I was really interested in his work when I was starting out. I think I learned that I didn't have to search so hard to find an image, that there are images in the world that I could use and that imbuing something with meaning has something to do with the act of painting itself, so that painting somehow shakes loose image from language. I think, in a lot of ways, in that work he got to have it all: there's subjectivity, there's distance, and there's all this play with material. [...] There's all this newspaper and material being collaged under encaustic.

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**JY:** [Johns and I] talked about collage once because collage became very arbitrary, i.e., you could stick anything next to anything else, the misunderstanding of Surrealism. I think you're right, there's a kind of purposefulness to what he's doing but it's not transparent. [...] I think it's really the viewer who should, as Duchamp said, complete the art and be responsible for the completion of the art. It says as much about the viewer as it does about the artwork.

**MW (to JY):** In your research did you discover works that you felt were performative, that were about the process of creating this thing, where the performance of the artist is somehow clearly embedded in the work? I'm thinking of Bruce Nauman, who dragged his knee through clay and then cast it in bronze, or did a video of himself walking back and forth in the studio, where he foregrounds the body.

**JY:** When you go to Lincoln Center, you see there's a big sculpture that Johns made and one of the things I found out about it is that there's a footprint by Merce Cunningham. He said to me Merce Cunningham had always wanted to be accepted into Lincoln Center and he never had been, so he got his footprint into the piece and the piece is now in Lincoln Center. That's pretty performative. And it's got a wonderful sense of humor that these two men must have just cackled over, because it also says something about society and a kind of rejection/acceptance. They kind of wiggled their way through it anyway.

Talking about the body, Marina Abramović made a catalogue raisonné. [...] I think that's an important book; however you think about how her career's gone after that is not the point. This tells you something that I think is really important. So I feel like a catalogue raisonné can [cover] lots of different kinds of actions, and I think in a way they're necessary or useful because they tell you about a culture at a certain moment.

**WV:** So can we speculate: if it's necessary that an artist have one, why doesn't everyone? Maybe that's why I was asked to come here. But also just thinking about so many artists that are amazing that presumably could have one, or that should have one, or that seem significant culturally, historically.

**JY:** I think that's why the digital age is going to be helpful in some way. There's a lot of artists whose work you want to know more about [but] you feel like it's practically impossible [...] unless there's a decent catalogue, [and so] you go back to do the research to find out what happened. Somehow a lot of history gets frozen over and we accept that that's what happened when it's not really what happened. At the Whitney Museum a curator told me that they had a show of Melvin Edwards in the downstairs Lobby Gallery in 1975. Mel Edwards, an African-American sculptor, didn't sell anything from the show, not even to the museum, and he didn't get a gallery and as he says in conversation, "I didn't give up my day job." So they have one of these works, it's a barbed wire work at the recent show at the Whitney of protest art [*An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017*, Aug 18, 2017–Aug 27, 2018] and the curator said, "Yeah, the museum didn't buy anything then, so we had to pay a really good price to buy it now." "Good for Mel." [...] But at least they recognized that.

**WV:** Funny how much that happens.

**JY:** How many times they recognize they've left somebody out? That's [...] art history: [...] recognizing how many people have been left out. The canon's always changing and it's always being fiddled with and revised and challenged. I think that's the whole living part of art.

**MW:** Now it includes girls! And artists of color. And a couple transgender people are in there now.

**JY:** I once said to someone who curated a big exhibition that there were no Asian-American painters in it. And she said, "I didn't know you were a bean counter," and I said, "I can tell the difference between zero and one." Of course, she never talked to me again.

*Jasper Johns: A Life's Work, a conversation between John Yau, Martha Wilson, and William Villalongo took place at the Dweck Center of the Brooklyn Public Library (10 Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn) on April 26, 2018.*