



JASPER JOHNS (b. 1930)

The Critic Sees

wood, aluminum foil, ink, paper, metal, plexiglass

3 1/4 x 7 x 2 in.

c. 1961

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Jasper Johns was born in Augusta, Georgia in 1930, and grew up in small towns in South Carolina. Johns enjoyed drawing from a young age and eventually studied art and poetry at the University of South California. After a brief period at art school in New York, he served in the army in South Carolina from 1951-53, and then in Japan. On his release from the army he moved back to New York. His close relationships with artists, especially Robert Rauschenberg, prompted him to commit to his art at a higher level. This commitment entailed destroying virtually all of his previous works.

Johns' first mature painting, *Flag* (1954-55; The Museum of Modern Art, New York), was painstakingly fabricated, predominantly with newspaper collage and encaustic. A series of encaustic paintings of numbers and targets immediately followed. These works were all but unknown until Johns' first solo exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in January 1958. With the critical attention received from that show, Johns was immediately pegged as one of the most important figures in a new wave of American art that would eventually eclipse the dominance of Abstract Expressionist painting.

Fortified by his close friendships with Rauschenberg and with musician John Cage and the dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham, and strongly drawn to the subversive legacy of Marcel Duchamp, Johns became universally recognized as a key progenitor of both the Pop and the Minimal art of the 1960s. His appropriation of bold flat imagery such as the American flag, and his strategies of working by systematic repetition, catalyzed whole schools of new painting, sculpture, and Conceptual art. However, as was already clear in his first retrospective exhibition, at The Jewish Museum, New York, 19 1964, his own work resisted any clear stylistic label or group affiliation, as it blended attached objects, inscribed words and a complex richness of surface elaboration, within an alternation between concrete literalness and painterly abstraction. A mood of private, enigmatic thoughtfulness, often ironic, melancholic, or gravely repressed in its overtones, linked together his concern with language, the sinuosity of his work's surfaces, and his recurrent imagery of the body in parts. In the early 1960s he also produced a small but influential body of actual-size sculptures of commonplace objects such as beer cans, light bulbs, and flashlights, and by the end of that decade he had gained a reputation as a master printmaker.

For ten years beginning in 1972, Johns' paintings were virtually exclusively abstract, conceived in all-over "cross-hatch" patterns of clusters of parallel lines. Toward the end of that decade, following a major retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in 1977, his art began to evoke, in titles and in motifs, and eclectic new set of references to other art, including that of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, as well as Tantric Buddhist devotional imagery. In 1982 the look of Johns' paintings

once again changed dramatically, as he began a series of representational works that assembled traced and copied imagery both from his own past art and from diverse sources in art history, ranging from Barnett Newman's graphic work and to Matthias Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece. The mid-1980s saw the emergence of overtly autobiographical paintings, their centerpiece being a group of four Seasons canvases allegorizing a cycle of youth and old age with symbols related to the epochs of the artist's work and to his various residences. Near the same time, he developed a new motif, a rectangular "face" with widely dislocated features, that related to Picasso paintings.

Since the late 1980s Johns' art appears to have centered on issues of childhood and memory, often employing a base of motifs recovered from earlier works, layered over with a new skein of imagery ranging from a floor plan of his grandfather's house to a ghostly spiraling galaxy.

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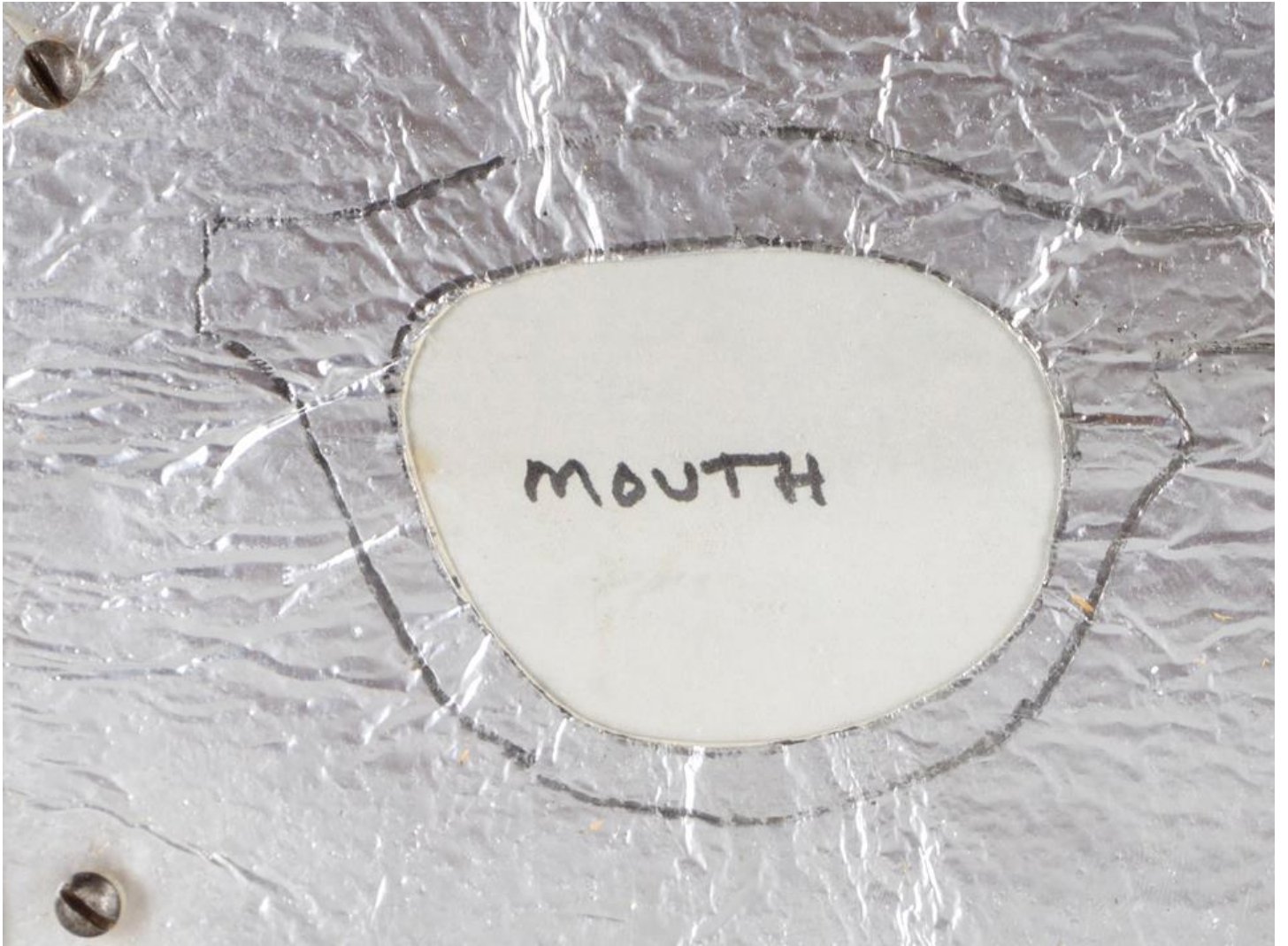


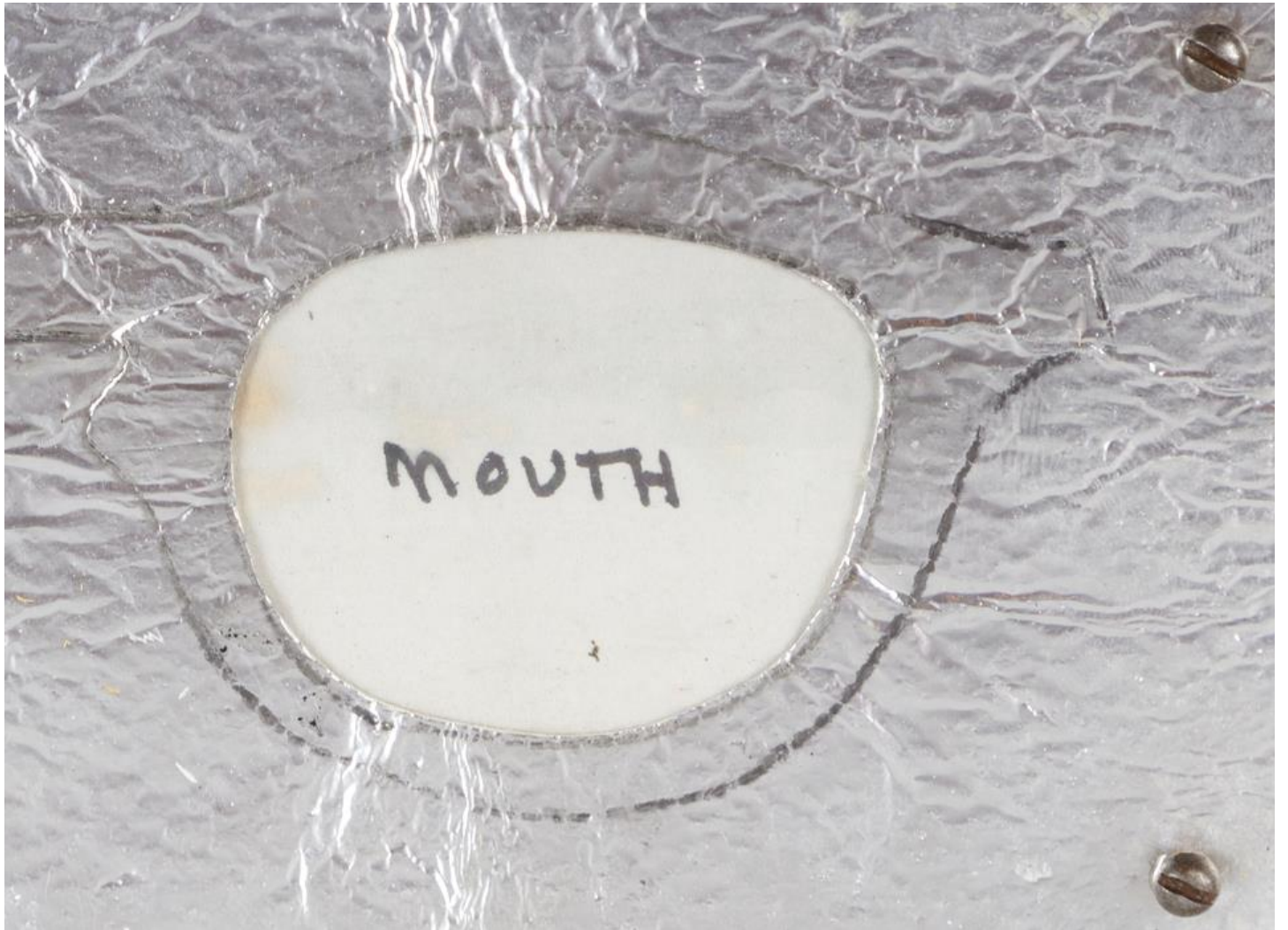


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