THE OBJECT OF LANGUAGE: JASPER JOHNS’ *GRAY ALPHABETS*, 1956

by

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Jennifer Leigh Garcia

April 2012
DEDICATION

I dedicate this Master’s Thesis to Marge Tyler Powers, Cameron J Walker, and Lindsay A. Glick, without whom this would not be possible. To my grandmother Marge, who is a continual source of inspiration and has always believed in me. I would not be the person I am without your guidance, advice, and fiercely acute sense of self. To my fiancé Cameron, your love, support, and wisdom have carried me through the toughest of times and for this I am eternally grateful. Lastly to my colleague and dear friend Lindsay, you have maintained sanity, stability, and joy in an otherwise chaotic environment. I am incredibly thankful for you.
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The art of American Jasper Johns has been extensively studied within the realms of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Neo-Dadaist movements. Yet his 1956 work *Gray Alphabets*, (1956) has not received scholarly attention. Not only is *Gray Alphabets* his first gray painting but also his first depicting the alphabet, which uses the established structure of the alphabet in order to subvert it. Johns does not alter the alphabet, rather, he distances its visual representation from an original concept. He creates this distance through the medium of encaustic, *grisaille* color palette, and a reorganization of individual letters within an established grid. These compositional choices provide the viewer with an ambiguous space with which to engage with the work. Johns challenges greater systems such as linguistics by means of this subversion. Johns supplants that the bond between visual and spoken languages is completely arbitrary by commenting on Saussure’s notion that language is in itself arbitrary. While there is no author of the alphabet or language Johns’ reorganization of such systems becomes a defiant gesture toward the convention of broad linguistic and pictorial systems. The viewer is enmeshed within a discursive schema that allows for one to challenge the making and meaning of language.
INTRODUCTION

American artist Jasper Johns crafted an identity for himself as an artist with a diverse aesthetic and process. Due to his versatility in media and representation his work possessed a transitive quality. Johns’ early work set the stage for his long career of experimentation and variation in both content and technique, yet he retained similar themes over the course of his career. One such theme was the repetitive manipulation of conventional symbols. Johns’ distinctive treatment of symbols\(^1\) emerges in his early works and continues throughout his oeuvre, inhabiting various manifestations. The symbols he chose for his early subjects were well known and recognizable, including flags, maps, targets, numbers and letters – specifically the alphabet. Johns leaves such symbols intact, he does not manipulate the reception of the symbol or icon in its formulation but instead how the viewer interacts with it. Rather than changing the symbol, he manipulates the form by which is understood through the use of encaustic, he change the aesthetic through his color choice, and finally he subverts the system by restructuring it. Johns does not wish to alter the symbol rather how it is viewed. By creating modifications in form, color, and structure he makes the symbol his own.

Johns’ important work *Gray Alphabets*,\(^2\) (figure 1 & figure 2) completed in 1956, investigates the purpose and function of symbols. In *Gray Alphabets* Johns manipulates

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1 Symbol is defined as something that represents an idea, process or entity that is distinct from the symbol itself. For more information on this see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1972) 25.

2 For the purposes of this discussion the painting of *Gray Alphabets* will be the only focus. However there was a print of the same subject created in 1960. For more information see, Riva Castleman, *Jasper Johns: A Print Retrospective* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1986) 56.
the iconography of the alphabet and its components to invite alternate readings through his use of encaustic and compositional choices. A standardized alphabetic structure is crucial to understanding Johns’ reorganization of systems. Creating an alphabet comprised of letters shifts the meaning from the system to his individual contribution. The painterly forms of the letters maintain a reference to the alphabetic system within which they function both individually and as an ensemble. A standardized font is used as a means to separate himself as artist from the authorship of the symbols themselves. Johns’ intention is not to recreate the system, but instead to invite alternate interpretations with it. In Gray Alphabets, Johns examines the ambivalence between the image of the alphabet and the conceptual underpinnings of the alphabet. The painting underscores this investigation by means of material and color palette. Johns’ use of encaustic materializes an otherwise intangible and disparate collection of letters, and his use of color palette further distances the meaning of the alphabet from its initial construction. Through this process of abstraction, of obfuscation, the alphabet transforms from concept to figurative space.

Jasper Johns began his professional career as an artist in 1953 upon his relocation from South Carolina to New York City. During his first year in New York, Johns created work that he destroyed only one year later, which his friends recall as “the birth of Johns as an artist.” After the destruction of his first work, he began painting with encaustic. The content or aesthetic of this original work is unknown as none of it survived Johns’ destruction. His friends at the time are also unable to describe the work specifically but do reference it as being an artificial projection of what Johns thought it meant to be an artist. The subsequent work was more genuine even though it was widely ambiguous. For
Johns then met the multimedia artist Robert Rauschenberg with whom he entered a romantic relationship; a liaison not only amorous but also jump-started his artistic career. Rauschenberg is whom Johns identifies as “the first real artist I had ever met,” and subsequently looked to him as an inspiration and as a fellow artist with whom to brainstorm. As a result of his new encaustic work and chosen subject matter of icons, in addition to his relationship with Rauschenberg, Johns was able to make inroads to the powerful art market of New York.

He made his debut in 1957, when Leo Castelli saw Johns’ work on a visit to the apartment that he shared with Rauschenberg. Castelli was intrigued by Johns’ paintings that featured re-envisioned symbols and soon invited him to exhibit in a group show at Castelli’s gallery. After the group show, Castelli was impressed with Johns, granted


4 “The employment of wax, however, was a new step, which served several purposes for Johns: ‘I wanted to show what had gone before in a picture, and what was done after that. But if you out in a heavy brushstroke in paint, and then add another stroke, the second stroke smears the first, unless the paint is dry. And paint takes too long to dry. I didn’t know what to do. Then someone suggested wax. It worked very well; as soon as the wax was cool, I could put on another stroke and it wouldn’t alter the first.’ The wax, in other words, conserved the character of each individual brushstroke. This conformed with Johns’ desire to focus in ‘concrete’ things.” Hess, 8.

5 Ibid, 19.


7 Varnedoe, 127. The show took place in May of 1957 and was entitled, “New Work: Bluhm, Budd, Dzubas, Johns, Leslie, Louis, Marisol, Ortman, Rauschenberg, Savelli.” Only one work of Johns was displayed, *Flag* 1954-1955. During Castelli’s first visit to Johns’ studio, that prompted his inclusion in the aforementioned group show, Castelli sees *Gray Alphabets*. Johns chose to keep it out of subsequent shows, until nearly ten years later when he sold it to a private collector.
Johns a solo show. His solo exhibition marked his entrance into the commercial and public realm of art. During this solo exhibition Johns’ distaste and perhaps distrust of conventional systems became apparent to critics and reviewers. Johns’ describes his choice of concrete motifs for his early work, “both things which are seen and not looked at, not examined, and they have clearly defined areas which could be measured and transferred to canvas.”8 These concrete motifs included flags, targets, numerals, letters and maps, which Johns chose because they were “pre-formed, conventional, depersonalized, factual, exterior elements.”9 It is apparent that Johns began to examine the ambivalence between image and object through his application of paint and his choice to use unconventional color palettes. Included in the Castelli show were: Flag, (1954-1955) (figure 3), Target with Plaster Casts, (1955) (figure 4), White Flag, (1955) (figure 5), Target with Four Faces, (1955) (figure 6), Green Target, (1955) (figure 7), White Numbers, (1957) (figure 8), Flag on Orange Field, (1957) (figure 9), and thirteen other works,10 all of which featured reconfigured symbols as the subject matter. In every case, symbols were reconceived and then presented to the viewer and, as such, were subversive as blatantly representing the known, and therefore visible realm. All of the work exhibited was sold with the exception of White Flag, which Johns kept for himself.11 The sale of his work and the exposure he gained from this exhibition cemented Johns as an innovator within the art world from the 1950s onward.

8 Hess, 9.
9 Ibid, 11.
10 For a complete list of the works included in Johns’ first exhibition, “Jasper Johns: Paintings” see Varnedoe, 128.
11 Ibid, 128.
*Gray Alphabets* was one of these initial works yet remains understudied by scholars. *Flag, White Flag, Green Target, Gray Alphabets* and *White Numbers* were all created within an overlapping three-year period spanning from 1954 to 1957. The treatment of signs and symbols in *Gray Alphabets* is complementary to these other works. In *Gray Alphabets*, Johns subverts the symbol of the alphabet to assert his agency over language – both while challenging the linguistic and painterly systems in which the alphabet functions. A lack of agency Johns had in the formative areas in his life12 is re-contextualized among many of these early works. Yet, in *Gray Alphabets* the restructuring of the alphabetic sequence and symbol of the alphabet itself provides Johns with some semblance of authorship over a linguistic system. Johns’ assertion of power is diminished by his inherent reliance upon them. He needs the systems in order to make the subversion of them relevant. Johns is both in control of the system with his reorganization of it while simultaneously being controlled by its static nature.

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12 His mother and father raised him for the first two years, at which point they separated and his grandfather obtained the role of caregiver. This required Johns to relocate to his grandfather’s farm in South Carolina where he stayed until his grandfather’s death in 1939. It was only then that Johns returned to his mother’s home at the age of nine. The years spent with his mother and stepfather was short lived, as he quickly moved in with his aunt and her family, only returning sporadically to his mother’s home. After graduation from high school, Johns lived on his own and soon moved to New York to pursue a career as an artist. He had limited luck with college, only completing a few semesters at each of the two institutions that he attended until he was drafted into the army in 1951. This displays how Johns was treated in his formative years. He was passed from family member to family member with little or no say as to where or how he would live. From this environment he moved in to the army where he was again told what to do and how to behave. Furthermore his entrance into the university was unsuccessful due to his increased distaste of being controlled. For further information see Varnedoe, 119-121.
Johns’ work with symbols linked him to several artistic movements, including Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Neo-Dadaism, all of which he had certain ties to, but none of which defined him. Johns’ brushstrokes, which was made all the more evident due to his use of encaustic, linked him to Abstract Expressionism. Lawrence Alloway in his 1984 text *Network: Art and the Complex Present* describes Abstract Expressionism as adhering to certain criteria:

The term “gestural” is commonly applied to Abstract Expressionism with reference to conspicuous brushwork. Abstract Expressionism achieved a new alignment of the existing styles of modern art and found a way of painting that maintained flatness without any diminishment of signification. If it is not evident from the art, there is ample verbal evidence in the

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13 Johns’ work in various media has also been referenced as rule-based art. “Rule-based art will be defined as art created utilizing one or more logic-based systems to direct the design and creation of the object. Their foundation may be mathematical, such as those based on geometric and number theories. Or, they may be founded in logic; for instance, solipsism and other tautological constructs. And finally, there are applications of game theory, in which the artist forces the art to conform to certain arbitrary (if personally meaningful) rules...Over the course of four decades, the use of rule-based systems has evolved through several iterations. The adaptations have proceeded from formula-based systems, which generated deterministic outcomes, to those that are variable, allowing some part of the artist’s process to direct or influence the result. Most recently, they have developed into elaborate schemes, whose generative power is driven by complex or chaotic processes, the results of which are unpredictable by nature.” However since this discussion is focused on Johns’ paintings rather than his prints (which are more in line with the definition of rule-based art) the inclusion of rule-based art is not as poignant. For more information see, Marc Glimcher, *Logical Conclusions: 40 Years of Rule-Based Art* (East Greenwich, RI: Meridan Printing, 2005) 7.

14 Encaustic is an artistic medium, which uses wax mixed with pigments. Johns describes his use of encaustic as a mixture of oil paints with beeswax, which applies to the process that he employed in the creation of his early works. Wax is heated in a pot over a one-burner stove and then the oil paints mixed directly into the pot of hot wax. He would then apply the molten wax with a brush or palette knife to canvas. This process allowed Johns to build his brushstroke as he worked. Many times Johns used pieces of newsprint or fabric mixed with the wax to give it a more sculptural and dynamic appearance to his work. For a further description see Barbara Hess, *Jasper Johns: The Business of the Eye* (Los Angeles, CA: Taschen, 2007) 8.
written recorded statements of the artists of their conviction that art was a projection of their humanity.\textsuperscript{15}

The built-up nature of encaustic drew attention to the process of mark making on the canvas a tenet of Abstract Expressionism. However, some have suggested that Johns lacked the emotionality that was associated with the movement. Within Johns’ early work, he attempts to distance himself as the artist from the chosen subject matter,\textsuperscript{16} apparent in his choice of established iconography. Johns remains distinct from Abstract Expressionism with his adherence to static objects. The Abstract Expressionists focused on the act of painting as physical expression and therefore turned away from static imagery in favor of the multidimensional and rigorous works. Johns, on the other hand, was reliant upon the static nature of the symbols he chose.

Johns’ ties to Pop Art were formative to how and why he painted the subjects he chose. While his choice of static symbols distanced him from the Abstract Expressionists, there are distinct aesthetic complements to the works of Pop Artists, since the Pop Artists used of contemporary or popular subject matter, Johns’ choice of easily recognizable symbols and icons seemed to place him within this movement. David Cottington discusses the general sentiment of Pop Artists as:

US pop art – call(s) commercial popular culture itself into question, as the Europeans had (if often obliquely). That culture

\textsuperscript{15} Lawrence Alloway, \textit{Network: Art and the Complex Present} (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984) 63-65. The Abstract Expressionists used their abstracted forms and expressive brushstrokes to convey their emotions or to reference their current emotional state. While the work of the artists incuded within this period may vary they hild these criteria as their tennets.

\textsuperscript{16} Johns’ early subject matter included but was not limited to: flags, maps, targets, numbers and letters. David Cottington, \textit{Modern Art: A Very Short Introduction} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005) 62.
was, for US pop artists, both a means of challenging the elitism and inflated individualism of American abstraction, and an object of an enjoyment that was sometimes fiercely expressed.\textsuperscript{17}

Johns does have some correlation with Pop Art as he is challenging or drawing attention to a larger system through his work that is focused on one symbol. Yet Johns’ treatment of the subjects negated his inclusion with the Pop Art movement. Pop Artists, such as Andy Warhol, took popular images and redistributed them to the public as a means to inflate individualism and identity. Few changes were made to the image itself in order to sustain the multi-layered reference to pop culture. Johns conversely changed the iconic symbols that he chose in both color palette and in form with his use of encaustic. His work maintained a reference to larger systems but he manipulated the individual symbol in accordance with his intentions. Rather than commenting on the popular culture of the mid-twentieth century, Johns’ goal was about the nature of the systems in which the symbols he chose functioned. His commentary was not limited to a specific decade but larger systems in general.

In 1956, the depiction of letters within a picture plane was neither new nor unprecedented. Prior to Johns’ emergence in the art world, artists of the Dada movement (1916-1922) were disassembling language in an autocratic manner. Dada artists deconstructed both the structure and sequence of written language in response to the breakdown they perceived in the government as well as society. By breaking all conceived elements of language, such as word structure, syntax, and letterforms, the Dadaist’s intention was to create the same feeling of chaos that observed in the world

\textsuperscript{17} Cottington, 110.
through pictorial language. As George Baker explains in *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris*:

> Art history seems to have forgotten that Dada was not entirely interested in discovering the meaning of works of art. Meaninglessness was its goal. Iconography, even ‘hidden’ or secret meanings, were surely invoked by many Dada works. But usually this was done in the spirit of travesty, a devastating annihilation of the apparatus of meaning that had always supported the traditional work of art. Perhaps the time has come for the deployment of another interpretive model.  

The Dadaists work established a platform for Johns’ ability to subvert and deconstruct written language.

Johns’ inclusion within the Neo-Dadaist movement was marginal, as were his inclusions in aforementioned movements. The Neo-Dadaists shifted their intention away from the political and directly into the art. Rather than the art being a medium for political statements like the Dadaists, the Neo-Dadaists took the same aesthetic choices of rebellion, expression, and redefinition and applied them to their art. The Neo-Dadaists took standard representations of objects and deconstructed them; they favored the non-figural in order to visualize a deconstruction of subject matter. Johns’ work is aligned with the Neo-Dadaists in its lack of overt political content and in its focus on the process of art making. However, Johns’ early work specifically does not fit within the movement due to Johns’ adherence to the figural nature of his subject matter. He maintains the subject’s shape in order to maintain a reference to those systems in which

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the symbols he chooses operate. Johns does not wish to deconstruct his subject matter, rather to reconstruct it as an attempt to draw attention to the systems that are in play.

Johns’ early work demonstrates a disinterest with being defined in favor of creating art without the restraints of a movement. Johns’ treatment of iconic symbols exhibits distaste for systems in which the symbols function and the limiting quality of definition. However, he is reliant upon those systems as well as the symbols that he chooses in order for his work to function. Without the viewer possessing an understanding of the systems and symbols that Johns subverts in his work, the effect of his reorganization is lost. Johns uses familiar symbols and attempts to make them his own, a rejection of the mechanisms of control, an anti-institutional action. He acknowledges such systems in play and willingly defies them. In *Gray Alphabets*, Johns manifests his disregard for the convention of the alphabetic sequence. The manner by which Johns reorganizes the sequence removes it from its original context, that of the written language, and places the alphabet into a context of his own creation. Johns is not reinventing the symbol or the system, rather how the viewer perceives it.

Johns has stated that at the time he painted *Gray Alphabets*, he was unaware of and not interested in the historiography of artwork that came before him. Perhaps Johns made such statements in an attempt to distance himself from the constraints of being a part of the art world in general. Richard Francis has written, “Johns has denied any influence from art historical sources, knew very few of his contemporaries, and says that he had not yet ‘organized any thinking, any of my own thinking, so that I don’t think
other people’s thinking was very interesting to me!"  19 However while Johns tried to distance himself from the complexities of the art world the links between his work, including *Gray Alphabets*, and the work of artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) are unmistakable.

Duchamp’s use of readymade objects in his work that crossed all conventional boundaries is mirrored by Johns’ use of readymade iconography in his choice of symbols. Where Duchamp used readymade objects such as his reconfigured urinal entitled *Fountain* (1917) (figure 10), Johns used established systems, such as a stenciled, preformed alphabet in *Gray Alphabets*, and created new contexts for the alphabet to be viewed. Duchamp and Johns interacted with symbols in converse manners; Duchamp further removed his work from its original context by his choice of title and placement, whereas Johns allowed a title to reflect the original system or symbol that he was representing. Johns directly references the original system from which he has drawn his subject matter while being reliant upon the viewer’s individual understanding of the system. Furthermore, the titles of Johns’ work have been considered with how the work has been conceived, as their easy recognition is that which he is dependent. Both Duchamp and Johns are trying to create new meaning through context. While Duchamp is doing this in a literal form by changing the context in which the work is viewed, Johns manipulates the means by which one understands composition and subsequently how the alphabet is perceived. Effectively, Johns is deconstructing the relationship between the concept of language and its figural representation.

Johns’ interest in depicting the everyday in order to defy commonly held meanings is present in *Gray Alphabets* as in his other early work. Barbara Hess writes, “All of Johns’s early works are characterized by a reliance on existing symbolic forms and mundane materials, combined into collages or assemblages.”

Johns’ characteristic aesthetic is seen in *Gray Alphabets* by his choice of using stencils and to maintain the form of both the letters themselves and the sequence of the alphabet. With regard to his use of written language in his work, Johns states, “I thought that one thing to do with the written word was to pretend that it was an object that could be bent turned upside down and I began more or less folding words or painting the illusion of a folded word.”

In *Gray Alphabets*, he does just that with the form of letters. His use of familiar and standardized letters placed in an alternative context aligns him with the schema held by Pop Artists. However Johns is not employing standardized letters in an attempt to

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20 Hess, 16.
21 Castleman, 18.
22 Quoted from an email correspondence that I conducted with Mr. Johns:

The questions I have (for Mr. Johns) are as follows:
1. Why did he choose the alphabet for the subject of *Gray Alphabets* (1956)?
2. Why was *Gray Alphabets* not included in his first solo show with Leo Castelli?
3. How were the letters formed? Was a traditional stencil used with negative letters or were positive letters painted over and then removed?
4. Did he use an underlying grid as guide for the composition? What was his process for creating this piece?

(In Response)

Dear Miss Garcia,
1. I saw a chart in a book with the alphabet displayed in this way.
2. I don’t remember. And I think that perhaps it was in the exhibition, but I can find no record of it.
3. Most of the letters were cut from newspapers and attached to the canvas with the medium. Some may have been stenciled.
4. A grid of pencil lines was drawn on the canvas.

critically review the constraints of value in society, but on the systems that are always at play within society. As a result, the viewer is not only compelled to interact with something they would normally use as a tool for other means, but also to see it within a broader aesthetic construction. Johns’ other work relies on a chosen symbol to subvert the system in which it functions, his treatment of symbols differs in Gray Alphabets as he is dependent on the structure of the established alphabetic system to be the catalyst for transformation.

Gray Alphabets and its position within Johns’ oeuvre is under investigated; it is a work in which he uses the system in order to critique the system. The painting it is a self-reflexive construction. He uses the components of the alphabet to illustrate both the rigid structure, with the aid of a grid, in which the alphabet functions. Yet, in his manipulation of the alphabet, the painting evidences the arbitrary nature of the system. Johns does this through his simultaneous reliance and manipulation of language. Not only is he using literal language in the form of the alphabet as his subject but also he is reliant upon the multiplicity of other languages. With the language of color, for instance, the message conveyed by his choice of gray is deterministic of how he is engaging both the system of the alphabet and also of color. The language of symbols is another example of how Johns uses linguistic and pictorial systems in order to create subversion. By using symbols to attract attention to the distant relationship between symbol and concept, Johns is examining the interdependent nature of systems.

Gray Alphabets exemplifies Johns’ dependence on systems in order to challenge them. Pre-constructed systems include the use of the grid, the alphabet, color, and
symbols as autonomous constructs of pictorial language. Each element has its own language associated with it and each functions both traditionally, these are then subverted to redraw the boundaries and relationships to the arbitrary nature of the system in which it functions. Johns both needs the systems and exhibits distaste for the same systems. The reconfiguration achieved through this process is that which makes *Gray Alphabets* stand out amongst Johns’ other work.
CHAPTER I: LANGUAGE

In his canonical text, *A Course in General Linguistics* (1966) Ferdinand de Saussure discusses the relationship between speaking and language as connected but each rooted in different purposes. Speaking, he suggests is an individual act, one that is made consciously on the part of the speaker. The speaker’s language is then judged on the speaker’s grasp of the language and one’s ability to use the language to communicate ideas. It is also judged on the execution of mental power on the part of the speaker to organize and physically produce ideas.23 The speaker, on the other hand, does not determine language. Rather, language is a system in which the speaker has no influence, as Saussure states here:

Language is a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts. It can be localized in the limited segment of the speaking-circuit where an auditory image becomes associated with a concept. It is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community. Moreover, the individual must always serve an apprenticeship in order to learn the functioning of language; a child assimilates it only gradually. It is such a distinct thing that a man deprived of the use of speaking retains it provided that he understands the vocal signs that he hears.24

Language can only be learned by apprenticeship – it cannot be created intuitively.25

While there may be verbal communication between two individuals which they alone devised, they would still need to agree on the application of auditory images to mental

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24 Ibid, 14.
25 Ibid.
concepts thereby – assuming an apprentice and master relationship – to completely understand each other. Furthermore language can exist without speech but speech cannot exist without language. Language is the tool with which speech happens but speech is the verbal manifestation of language. Therefore, language can still be read and understood as a way of communicating and does not need speech, whereas speech would no longer be needed if speech were to disappear.

Saussure describes language in terms of the symphony. The written symphony or the concept of symphony is unrelated to how it is performed:

Consider, for example, the production of sounds necessary for speaking. The vocal organs are as external to language as are the electrical devices used in transmitting the Morse code to the code itself; and phonation i.e., the execution of sound-images, in no way affects the system itself. Language is comparable to a symphony in that what the symphony actually is stands completely apart from how it is preformed; the mistakes that musicians make in playing the symphony do not compromise this fact.26

In this vein, the speaker does not change the formal structure or concept of language. Saussure states that the study of speech contains two parts. The first part is the object, that being language, which is socially constructed and independent of the individual rendering it a psychological concept. The second part is based on the individual, which is focused on speech or phonation, which is psychophysical meaning that it is both mental and physical.27 Language is thus related to speech in that the two are part of a cohesive action while engaging separate mental and physical activities. Saussure continues that

26 Saussure, 18.
27 Ibid, 18. “The study of speech is twofold: its basic part – having as its object language, which is purely social and independent of the individual – is exclusively psychological; its secondary part – which has as its object the individual side of speech, i.e. speaking, including phonation – is psychophysical.”
speaking is what allows language to evolve and to develop linguistic habits as speakers. They are then in this sense interdependent but it does not mean that they are unable to function autonomously. Clearly, one recognizes the role of the community within the constructions of speech and linguistics in general. While the individual is not responsible for the creation of language, the community of speakers does need to be in agreement in order to make any variations to the order, form, and presence of a linguistic system.

With language and writing, Saussure states that there are two distinct systems of signs, while positioning that writing only exists to represent language.²⁸ Saussure’s outline for how the influence of writing on our perception of language can be explained and is described in four parts. First, the graphic form of words is seemingly stable which are easier to understand while the bond of sound is the only element actually linked to language. Rather than link sound to language, we attach the visual form of words as representational of language:

First, the graphic form of words strikes us as being something permanent and stable, better suited than sound to account for the unity of language throughout time. Though it creates a purely fictitious unity, the superficial bond of writing s much easier to grasp than the only true bind, the bond of sound.²⁹

Secondly, the visual ‘impression’ of writing remains in our consciousness longer than and more directly than sound:

Most people pay more attention to visual impressions simple because these are sharper and more lasting than aural impressions; that is why they show a preference for the former. The graphic form manages to force itself upon them at the expense of sound.³⁰

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²⁸ Saussure, 23.
²⁹ Saussure, 25.
³⁰ Ibid, 25.
Thirdly people are taught the rules and regulations of writing early in life through teaching within a system of education. Anything we as humans are taught in school came from either a book or some form of writing. At an early age, children still learn from the written word but perhaps not from a book. The result is that people forget that they learned to talk before they learned to read. As a result, the sounds of language are in fact bonded to concepts themselves not the written words, which are in fact arbitrarily assigned to the sounds that language makes:

The literary language adds to the undeserved importance of writing. It has its dictionaries and grammars...language is apparently governed by a code; the code itself consists of a written set of strict rules of usage, orthography; and that is why writing acquires primary importance. The result is that...the natural sequence is reversed.31

Lastly, when there is a disagreement between language and writing, the latter is usually favored due to its static, tangible nature:

Finally, when there is a disagreement between language and orthography, settlement of the dispute is difficult for everyone except the linguist; and since he is given no voice in he matter the written form almost inevitably wins out, for any solution supported by it is easier; thus writing assumes undeserved importance.32

Saussure further discusses two types of writing: ideographic – in which each word is represented by a sign, which is arbitrarily assigned and phonetic that attempts to reproduce the succession of sounds that make up a word.33 Even while phonetic writing attempts to remain true to the sounds attached to language’s base forms, once any of the

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31  Ibid.
32  Ibid.
33  Saussure, 26.
sounds are written down they become equally as arbitrary as the ideographic system.

When language and writing are combined, as is inevitable, their inconsistencies are revealed. One crucial issue that arises is that language evolves with society and time while writing remains stable. As these two elements progress at different rates, they reach a point where writing no longer communicates what it is intended to:

Language is constantly evolving, whereas writing tends to remain stable. The result is that a point is reached where writing no longer corresponds to what it is supposed to record. A transcription that is accurate at a particular moment will be absurd a century later. For a time people may change their graphic symbols to conform with changes in pronunciation, then relinquish the effort.\textsuperscript{34}

Therefore the link between language and writing can be broken down by time and context.

Saussure acknowledges the usefulness of writing to communicate in a tangible sense but he also seems frustrated with the shortcomings of writing. It is not the most effective or even the most understandable system to represent language. He then proposes a system of phonological writing that he believes is more efficient. This system consists of a symbol for every element of the spoken chain of language and needs a system to differentiate between implosive and explosive sounds.\textsuperscript{35} However he states that this system should be reserved for the use of linguists only which suggests that this system of accurate representation of language would only be used by a small subset of people, linguists.\textsuperscript{36} A further implication of this reductiveness is that the arbitrary nature of

\textsuperscript{34} Saussure, 27.
\textsuperscript{35} Saussure, 34.
\textsuperscript{36} “I think that phonological writing should be for the use of linguists only. First, how would it be possible to make the English, Germans, French, etc. adopt a uniform system!
language does not change, it will just become more apparent to certain people. The association of written words and language are so intrinsically joined that the concept of creating a phonetic written system seems ideal but would be difficult since our minds are muddied with current writing systems. Such a change would be difficult, if not impossible, to remove from the phonemes with which we speak. Saussure goes on to say the only rational method of dealing with this issue is to set up a system of sounds that reveal meaning by direct observation. Simultaneously by observing the system of signs closely, one may imperfectly represent those sounds.  

Saussure’s discussion and dissection of sign, signified, and signifier operate within the larger system of linguistics. He states that the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound image.  

The term sound image is the sound of spoken language not as it may imply, but rather is intended to mean the psychological imprint of the sound, furthermore, the impression it makes on our senses. In this realm of language and its links to other concepts, language is manifested in the relationship between the concept and the sound image. The two, concept and sound image, are joined in a sense that each recalls the other. A concept that appears in nature and the word that represents it in language are both dependent and references for one another. He gives the

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37 Saussure, 37.
38 Saussure, 66.
39 Ibid, 66.
example of the word arbor, stating that it is only called a sign because it carries the concept ‘tree’ with the result that the idea of the sensory part implies the idea of the whole.  

This reaffirms that the concept and the sound image are whetted together. The concept of ‘tree’ is linked to the word arbor, which, when combined, create the sensory imprint of a tree. This is occurring in nature and is therefore understood as such. He then proposes to change the naming system for this interaction – defining sign as the combination of the three aforementioned elements – concept, sound image, and word – and replacing concept and sound image with signified and signifier respectively. 

Saussure thus discusses the arbitrary nature of the sign. This key element will reverberate throughout the rest of his work and indeed, in all of the work of Jasper Johns. In short, the relationship of words or terms to their meaning, the concept to which they refer or the elements of language they represent is completely arbitrary. While much of life is dependent on language, there is no reason why a cat is represented in written form as c-a-t. However, since it is the system within which we as humans operate, it is one of the only ways which we have to communicate. Saussure cites onomatopoeia as a possible example of proof in favor of the signifier not always being arbitrary. Examples of onomatopoeia such as “glug-glug” or “tick-tock” are somewhat arbitrary since they are not universal sounds, words and have various meanings. Such words do not transcend across language boundaries. The introduction of such terms into a system that changes with time, are thus subject to variations and evolution of phonetic, morphological

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40 Saussure, 67.
elements.\textsuperscript{41} This is not to say that the sound of a clock would not change for it may. The sound may become outdated and relatively meaningless. So while this is an example of a case in which the signifier may not be totally arbitrary, it falls short of proving a lack of arbitrariness as a possibility.

Is it a problem that language is arbitrary or is it even possible that it may not be arbitrary? The naming of anything is arbitrary: pets, people, businesses, new life forms, etc. This leads to the formation of letters as arbitrary constructions. There is no reason for our letters to look as they do yet since letters are a part of a system that is based in functionality in order to communicate. It would be with great difficulty that letters may be changed, or reconfigured. Arguably, to change letters individually would be equally as arbitrary as their creation in the first place. However we rely on letters so they do mean something just not what they say they do. Such structures mean we are literate human beings who are capable of complex communication both verbally and in print. Even if language were changed to a phoneme-based system in which words were represented with symbols that corresponded to the sounds that we made, the use of letters in and of itself is an arbitrary act.

Every human on the planet uses language daily yet every manifestation of writing is arbitrary. Perhaps there are languages such as those found in parts of Asia that use a more pictorial system that leave the linguistic realm and are based on imagistic traits. However, in languages such as Chinese or Japanese, symbols that comprise the alphabets are still read and function to communicate and are therefore representational of language.

\textsuperscript{41} Saussure, 69.
If language is not written then it may be viewed as non-arbitrary. How this translates across cultures is problematic as what seems logical to one culture may be completely arbitrary to another. However, the system of linguistic signs is the same no matter what language is being spoken or written. That is to say, all languages no matter what idiom it manifests, is inherently arbitrary when written and evolutionary when spoken.

Saussure states that a signifier is freely chosen to be representational of its assigned idea. Conversely, the signifier is fixed, not free by the linguistic community that uses it. Beyond this, the community has no role in choosing the signifier it is chosen rather by the language. The signifier is bound to the language and may not be changed by people. In this way Johns cannot change the meaning of the alphabet, he may manipulate and challenge the system in which it functions but he may not change the concept that is attached to the visual representation. For example, the word ‘duck’ could not suddenly or after unified agreement mean ‘book.’ Saussure defends this point by stating that every language is based in the heritage of the language of the generation before it. There is no recorded act of assigning words to concepts.

No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such. That is why the question of the origin of speech is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking; the only real object of linguistics is the normal, regular life of an existing idiom. A particular language-state is always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable, i.e. why it resists any arbitrary substitution.  

42 Saussure, 71.
43 Saussure, 72.
Saussure simply states the question of where language comes from is not relevant, it is the current real situation of the sign that is important to society. While somewhat contradictory, on one hand language is inherent to human beings but the evolution of language is based on culture and society. For instance, if all persons agreed to call a duck a book it could change names. Yet Saussure’s argument is that the concept of ‘duck’ will never be attached to the word ‘book’ since both are just arbitrary words assigned to concepts that have their own meaning and place within language. Even if everyone agreed that a duck should be called a book there is already too much meaning attached to each concept that changing the word would not matter or even be possible.

Saussure’s philosophy of how and why language is constructed provides a rich lens with which to examine *Gray Alphabets*. With his defense of the arbitrary nature of the language, Johns’ manipulation of the alphabet is permissible. Johns, like Saussure, deploys the symbol as a means to redefine the conceptual basis of systemic thinking. While Saussure is predominately concerned with linguistics, Johns uses the arbitrary nature of linguistics and language more broadly to illustrate his distaste for the ambivalence of pictorial language.
CHAPTER II: COMPOSITION

Composition arrests *Gray Alphabets* from diverging into the realm of deconstruction. The grid is the organizational substructure in which the alphabet resides. Johns is using the grid to maintain the original structure of the alphabet that is familiar to the viewer. The grid by definition is a layout comprised a series of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines creating as a result multiple squares and rectangles.\textsuperscript{44} Johns’ use of the grid (figure 11) creates a structure that organizes the alphabetic system in its entirety; each letter\textsuperscript{45} is contained in its own cell\textsuperscript{46} and exists in relation to the cells of letters with which it shares borders. *Gray Alphabets* is comprised of the alphabetic sequence\textsuperscript{47} including all the letters from the letter A to the letter Z, left to right, twenty seven times within the vertical picture plane. Johns orders his composition through the use of horizontal rows\textsuperscript{48} and vertical columns\textsuperscript{49} within a standardized grid structure. The intersection of the rows and columns creates repetitive rectangular cells, within which he places the letters. Johns uses this structure as the basis for his treatment of the alphabetic sequence.

\textsuperscript{44} Timothy Samara, *Making and Breaking the Grid* (Gloucester, MA: Rockport Publishers, Inc., 2002) 24. Johns’ used a penciled grid as his base structure of organization within *Gray Alphabets*.

\textsuperscript{45} The term ‘letter’ within this discussion references a single alphabetic component of the larger alphabet.

\textsuperscript{46} ‘Cell’ in this discussion is understood to reference a rectangle within the grid that has been created by the intersection of multiple perpendicular lines.

\textsuperscript{47} ‘Alphabetic sequence’ is only used to connote the entire alphabet, beginning with the letter A and ending with the letter Z. It also implies within this discussion the progression from the letter A to the letter Z.

\textsuperscript{48} ‘Row’ references the linear band that inhabits the space between two horizontal parallel lines.

\textsuperscript{49} ‘Column’ references the linear band that inhabits the space between two vertical parallel lines.
In *Gray Alphabets* Johns commences the alphabetic sequence in the second cell of the first row. The first cell remains blank. He continues the sequence in its entirety within the first row. However, due to the odd number of columns and even number of letters within the alphabet, the progression of the sequence is set off by one cell in each subsequent row. Johns continues the sequence from row to row including all of the letters. He does not leave gaps between each repeated sequence, meaning that the letter Z is immediately followed by the letter A. Therefore, in the second row, the alphabetic sequence is complete A through Z but with an additional A following the Z. The sequence progresses in this manner as the rows advance from top to bottom.

While the order of the alphabet in each row is not traditional, all of the letters of the alphabet are contained in each row as well as each column. Additionally each row and column begins and ends with the same letter and all four edges contain the entire sequence from A to Z. Each letter of the alphabet is represented twenty eight times in John’s composition. This factor combined with the aforementioned organization provides the work with visual and spatial balance. The color for example is arguably monochromatic but changes in tone with the advent of each new cell. Johns’ choice of a primarily gray color palette, specifically how and where he applies the various shades of gray balances and in alternate places destabilizes the harmony of the picture plane. While the other formal elements may create an unsettling sensation, the work is structurally balanced establishing a sense of familiarity necessary for Johns’ manipulation of the alphabetic sequence to be effective.
The shifting of rows and columns creates two new alphabetic sequences: due to Johns’ pairings of an odd number of columns with an even number of letters this turns the composition diagonally. The rows begin from the top left corner and descend downward to the bottom right corner. Johns splits the composition in two with a diagonal line of the letter Z that extends from and connects the bottom left corner with the top right corner. The alphabet can then be read in its entirety twice: diagonally uninterrupted from the top left corner to the bottom right, the first sequence ending at the diagonal row of the letter Z and the second beginning directly thereafter. Each sequence is complete; beginning with the letter A and ending with the letter Z.

Johns is eloquent in the reconstruction of the alphabet. He leaves the sequence intact only to shift the entire alphabetic sequence. Yet the reorganization of the alphabetic system is not aggressive. Through Johns’ subversion of the alphabetic system he challenges the viewer to not only read the sequence in an alternative manner but also to reexamine the entire system. The viewer must acknowledge both the system and its constraints in order to understand the reconstruction.

Without a definition and historical basis of the alphabet as a system Johns work loses relevance. As David Sacks explains in his book, *Letter Perfect*,

> An alphabet is a writing system based in letters, which by definition symbolize phonemes. The letters combine to show words of a particular language, shared between writer and reader. The alphabet must adequately represent the language by having enough letters with the right sounds – that is, most of the sounds essential to the spoken language.\(^{50}\)

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Sacks elaborates that the alphabet had several manifestations before it came to be the system that is used today, and through these manifestations it had elements both added and taken away:

The Phoenician alphabet had several built-in memory devices, inherited from Semitic tradition. The letters in abstract were given a strict sequence…the letters had names…each letter name began with a different sound, a sound appropriate to the letter.51

Through this process, the alphabet was given a set sequence in which it must be static in order to function. It does not have room for change in either the forms or order of the letters. If such changes are made, it loses its functionality. As the alphabet is unchanging so is the grid, making the pairing of the two especially effective.

The sequence of letters that comprise the English alphabet is a system because each letter is different; yet, each letter would not carry the same meaning if it were not for the system in which it functions. Each letter is reliant upon the system to demonstrate its individuality by comparison. The same principle is that which maintains the letters from being read only as lines in the composition; the letters maintain their form as letters because Johns has depicted the entire alphabet. Each letter is viewed in relation to another letter. By filling the canvas with the entire alphabet, Johns allows the viewer to have multiple interactions with the alphabet and its consistent letters. The viewer is able to absorb Gray Alphabets in its entirety, move from cell to cell, or look within the letters for more content. The linearity of the composition makes these multiple readings possible. The lines guide the viewer through the work while delineating the space of the canvas, the system, and the individual letter cells.

51 Sacks, 18.
Johns also is reliant upon the familiarity of the letterforms\textsuperscript{52} in order to manipulate the system of the alphabet rather than the letters individually. He chose not to create his own alphabet or reinvent the system itself; rather Johns uses an easily recognizable structure in order to manipulate the alphabetic system. The manipulation is extended to that which the letters have been impressed with the visible, underlying, newsprint. The letters that are exposed in the newsprint mirror the shapes in which they inhabit. The layering of these similar letter shapes gives richness to each of the stenciled letters and the newsprint beneath. The interaction is no longer limited to the alphabetic sequence but expands to printed language.\textsuperscript{53}

The exposure of the newsprint creates a complex dynamic, one of layered language as well as layered lines. The letters formed from a stencil are composed of lines, which are framed within the lines of the cells, framed within a larger grid, and given a rigid structure from the text in the newsprint. The letters present on the newsprint below each stenciled letter are arguably made of the same consistent parts as the letters on the surface, yet are blurred. When the work is examined through these multiple layers of line and language, the composition distances the alphabet from its formal content. The interaction with the viewer has changed due to Johns’ layering of lines on multiple structural levels.

\textsuperscript{52} ‘Letterform’ refers to the aesthetic characteristics of the letters. It is a reference to the way the letters look due to Johns’ choice of a stencil to create them.

\textsuperscript{53} Language can be broken into two parts: verbal and tangible, meaning mechanically printed or written. Verbal language is the system of phonemes used to create complex concepts in order to communicate between two human beings. Written or printed language is a system of signs or symbols devised to represent the phonemes used in verbal language in a tangible form. For more information see Saussure, 38 – 65.
Rather than the stenciled letter and the newsprint remaining autonomous, Johns layers them to create an alternative form, one in which language is both a symbol and legible. In each cell, the stenciled letter is a symbol of the larger system of the alphabet while the newsprint beneath is *read* as printed language. Once the stenciled letter is established as a symbol of the larger alphabetic system and therefore the greater linguistic organization, the letters of the newsprint can be understood similarly. Conversely, the stenciled letters and the newsprint cannot be read simultaneously, either the interior newsprint is read or the stenciled letter is read. If the text from the newsprint within the stenciled letter is read as language rather than symbol, then the stenciled letter becomes a shape within which the text resides. However, if the newsprint beneath is not read due to the layering of the multiple linguistic systems, rather viewed as an element without referent then the stenciled letter is the element of a linguistic system that is read.

Layering takes both the newsprint and the stenciled letters out of context. Rather than being simply tools of the larger linguistic system, Johns has given both the letters and the intact language of the newsprint new functions within the painting. By layering these forms, Johns challenges the viewer to look beyond what is easily recognized. Johns gives the viewer multiple contexts in which to question both the composition but also the systems that make up the work itself. Through his manipulation and deconstruction of given systems, Johns creates a new order for the alphabet challenging the viewer to

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54 Linguistics can reference the study of language. However hear it references the concept of language in its entirety, meaning all the components associated with language. For more information see Saussure, 1-30.
inspect the alphabet this as well as the linguistic system in which it functions, both of which, Ferdinand de Saussure suggests, are inherently arbitrary.  

Johns is able to manipulate the system of the alphabet because the system with which he is working is inherently arbitrary. Saussure’s linguistic philosophies provide groundwork that Johns’ uses as a means to represent the alphabet. As stated in the previous chapter, Saussure discusses two types of writing: ideographic and phonetic. In ideographic which each word and attached concept is represented by a sign, examples of which include the ideograms of the Chinese language. In ideographic writing, the sign is arbitrarily assigned to the concept, which is inherent. The second type of writing is phonetic which attempts to reproduce the succession of sounds that comprise a word. Even though phonetic writing attempts to remain true to the sounds attached to language at its base form, once any of the sounds are translated into written form they become equally as arbitrary as the ideographic system. When language and writing are combined, as is inevitable, the inconsistencies between the two systems are made apparent. One crucial issue that arises is that language evolves with society and time while writing remains stable. As these two elements progress at different rates, they reach a point where writing no longer corresponds to what it is supposed to record. Therefore the link between the two can be broken down by time and context.

Johns’ choice of font responds to the connection between time and perceived meaning. He chose a font that was recognizable and established over long periods of

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55 Saussure, 14.
56 Saussure, 26.
57 Saussure, 27.
exposure in order to preserve its meaning. While the writing remains stable in order to function, the system itself and its attachment to language are arbitrary, and if it has no roots in logic, only tradition, the manipulation of it is permissible. In *Gray Alphabets*, Johns is concerned with the system of the alphabet in written form rather than the spoken structure of language. He is challenging the viewer to look at the alphabet in a different manner, not to articulate differently.

The signs used to write letters are equally as illogical as the words they produce. There is no connection between the form that letters make and the sounds they produce. Secondly the value is differential in that the form of letters varies based on the person creating them as well as the society or culture they inhabit.\(^58\) Saussure discusses the system of signs within which the value of letters can be assessed. In reference to the value of sign within linguistic systems, Saussure states, “language is a system of independent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others,”\(^59\) suggesting that each element of written language is relative to the parts that border it. Each component of language can be assessed in terms of value based on the interaction it has with other linguistic elements. If each linguistic component is dissimilar to components around it than it can be compared due to its difference, to the elements that surround in order to see their value. However, due to the component’s dissimilar quality it cannot be exchanged for the element of which the value is to be

\(^{58}\) Saussure, 15.
\(^{59}\) Saussure, 114.
determined. This is understood to be the system with which words are assessed in reference to the concept that they represent and are judged as to how they are used.

Johns’ choice of stencil-formed letters exemplifies Saussure’s notion of value. By using standardized letterforms, Johns avoids the letters he depicts losing the reference to the greater system of language. However, Saussure suggests that the means by which the signs are made does not affect their meaning or purpose. No matter how the letters are formed, each letter maintains its ties to the concept that it represents. Thus, letters can take on different meanings based on the way in which they are viewed or read. This is clearly evident in Gray Alphabets; Johns is not changing what the letters represent but how they are viewed. His choice of stencil-formed letters keeps the forms within the realm of readability and familiarity to the viewer. The stencil distances Johns’ hand from the system of the alphabet as well as traditional painting, making his statement about the system. His role is that of creator which gives him the power to orchestrate the subversion of the alphabetic system. The letter’s meaning shifts on an individual level but not on a conventional level.

Furthermore, the system of the alphabet is based on each character’s existence as a sign, and the ability to read it as such. The fact that language is inherited from the last generation of speakers and writers within a given society is the crucial factor in order to understand its origin and nature. Language is a system that is inherent to human beings,

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60 Each letter or word is required within the system of written language to be different than any other letter or word. This imbues meaning into each component since they each have singular or at least limited meanings. Such a difference creates value for each component, since they are not interchangeable but instead statically connected to the concept they represent. Saussure, 115.
61 Saussure, 120.
which is not to say that it is unchanging. Saussure discusses that language is able to evolve and is therefore mutable. However this mutability is not actually a change, rather a variation since the basis of language and its concepts are immutable.

A compelling point that Saussure makes in defense of this argument is that a writing system that contains from twenty to forty characters used to comprise multiple words can by nature be easily changed. The limitations on this system require there be alterations. The change occurs in the relationship between the signifier and the signified not the sign itself. A change in the system occurs as consequence of a variety of combined factors, namely time and community. Saussure gives the example of studying a single human using language but living alone for a lifetime. There would be little noticeable change in their language. The same might happen if the language of a community of people were studied without considering time. The two must be present in order to change any element of the system. If language operates and is governed by a community then that system is based in conformity and continuity, not freedom. Johns cannot change the concept of the alphabet since it is static but he can change how it is read in his painting, *Gray Alphabets*. Yet, he is not able to change the alphabet indefinitely; his change of the alphabetic system is limited to the time frame in which a limited number of viewers interact with the work.
CHAPTER III: COLOR AND MATERIALS

Johns’ choice of color adds further dynamism to an already well-ordered composition. The gray palette is punctuated with gold, ivory, and fragments of black from the newsprint beneath. While *Gray Alphabets* is not monochromatic, Johns’ use of a limited color palette provides him with the ability to control the symbol of the alphabet visually. The colors are warm and neutral varying from letter to letter and from cell to cell. The choice of these colors reflects the routine nature of the alphabet, letters are often viewed as minor elements of a more important larger system, while gray is a denial of black and white, and is an indeterminate color. The nature of encaustic requires the artist to move quickly since the wax dries rapidly, this resulted in varied tones from cell to cell. The color changes with each new letter or cell acknowledging the difference between each letter.

Johns’ use of color contributes to the visual balance of the composition. His organization of colored tones guides the viewer through the composition. The application of dark blue-toned gray spanning across the upper edge is mirrored by the same tone across the lower edge. A dark gray tone extends from the top and bottom of the composition toward the center but as it advances, fades to a lighter ivory shade of gray. The two sections of dark gray weight the composition; the top is substantive with dense color, as is the bottom. Yet the lighter ivory gray in the center of the composition creates harmony as well as drawing the eye inward between the two darker sections. The center ivory gray provides a focal point. The heavy darkness of the blue-gray along the upper edge denies the viewer’s gaze from traveling there naturally. The upper edge is dark and
foreboding like a stormy sky, when paired with the center it becomes a dark uncomfortable place that is both uncertain and unwelcoming.

Ludwig Wittgenstein addresses the cultural nature of color in his text *Remarks on Colour* (1977). Color, much like language, varies depending upon the society in which it is used. How color is perceived on an individual level differs due to how each person’s eye absorbs the light spectrums that create color. The link between the color in reality, the way it is seen by each individual, and the word used to universally describe embody substantial distance. Due to this detachment there are several possible interpretations associated with any one color. Color is relative and therefore malleable and potentially arbitrary like language. One scenario that Wittgenstein presents as an illustration of this concept is as follows:

Imagine a tribe of color-blind people, and there could easily be one. They would not have the same color concepts as we do. For even assuming they speak, e.g. English, and thus have all the English color words, they would still use them differently than we do and would learn their use differently. Or if they have a foreign language, it would be difficult for us to translate their color words into ours.  

Here Wittgenstein is demonstrating both the relationship between actual color and language as well as the link between color, language and society. Similarly, the relation of the word to the concept is arbitrarily assigned as stated by Saussure, adding another layer of distance between reality and representation. This paired with Johns’ use of encaustic and his grisaille color palette, suit Johns’ intention of distancing the traditional conception of the alphabet in order to reorder and therefore repurpose the alphabet. Color

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in these terms can then be seen as language. Color can be interpreted in various ways and has only constructed links between the concept of color and color in reality. Johns’ use of the color gray heightens the disconnection between concept and construct.

In order to understand the full implication of Johns’ grisaille\(^{63}\) color palette it is important to examine both the nature of gray and how it is culturally perceived. Gray as a color can be created through various means. James Rondeau in his retrospective of Johns gray works at the Art Institute of Chicago defines the color gray as follows:

> According to the most basic edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, gray is ‘the color intermediate between black and white, or composed of a mixture of black and white with little or no positive hue.’ Black, white, and gray, which are not present in the spectrum, are achromatic colors. Generally speaking the mixture of black and white in equal portions produces middle gray, the center of the gray scale. Naturally, there are endless variations between the absolute poles of black and while, so that any color darker than white and lighter than black, which does not give an independent impression of color, is defined as gray.\(^{64}\)

Even though gray is not included in the spectrum of achromatic colors,\(^{65}\) it can be made by the colors within the spectrum. Gray can be composed of a mixture of the primary colors, red, yellow, and blue. Gray is also the outcome of the combination of complementary colors such as red and green, the reasoning for which is due to the colors

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\(^{63}\) *Grisaille* is defined, as a color palette comprised of primarily gray tones. It is not technically monochromatic since the tones vary.


\(^{65}\) Quantitative adjustment is called ‘achromatic adaptation.’ The eye adjusts to the intensity of illumination, in a manner similar to a camera. In the case of photography, the quantity of light is varied by the shutter, and in the case of the eye it is varied by the iris…. In the case of the eye, a physiological mechanism goes into action if the margin of the iris is either exceeded or not reached. Harald Kueppers, *The Basic Law of Color Theory* (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1980): 19.
that comprise the non-complementary color. In this case, the color is green, which is made of a combination of yellow and blue. The mixture of red and green is in fact a mixture of the primary colors, which, produces gray. When two colors are adjacent, they heighten each other; mixed, they cancel each other out. Gray therefore will always appear to be tinged with the complement of an adjacent color. For example, next to red, it takes on a tinge of green,\textsuperscript{66} its adjacent color. It is important to note that the gray derived from the mixture of black and white is not equivalent to the gray derived from the mixture of primary colors. The gray resultant from primary colors will appear more organic or as if it could be found easily in nature. However, the gray that is made from black and white is more artificial it is created of colors not included on the color wheel. Black is the absorption of all colors within the light spectrum and white is the refusal of all colors, neither black nor white being defined as a color. Therefore the result of the mixture of black and white, gray, is likewise not regarded as a color. Though according to the technical understanding of the functions of light spectrums, gray is not regarded as a color. However, its application and treatment within art implies that it is in fact a color.

Johns has stated of his use of gray within his work, that:

I used gray encaustic to avoid the color situation. The encaustic paintings were done in gray because to me this suggested a different kind of literal quality that was unmoved and unmovable by coloration and thus avoided all of the emotional and dramatic quality of color.\textsuperscript{67}

Johns chooses gray to avoid the implications of color yet the nature of gray allows him “a literal quality” so he is in fact choosing a color based on implication. Gray is unavoidably

\textsuperscript{66} Rondeau, 31.
\textsuperscript{67} Rondeau, 33.
a state apart from the aesthetic color. It can be used to describe or connote ambience. The atmosphere of gray can be used to characterize an absence of direct solar illumination. The word can denote related emotional valences lacking hope: dismal, gloomy, sad, depressing, bleak, or despairing or designate a quality of being - prosaic, ordinary, dull, or uninteresting furthermore it is often suggestive of anonymity.\textsuperscript{68} Additionally, gray can convey an intermediate position, condition, character or to conjure a zone of ambiguity. The use of gray in Johns’ work also references a psychological state as Rondeau establishes here:

The use of gray in particular is linked to notions of personal temperament and psychology. Assuredly, gray indexes modes of sublimation…Refuting emotionalism, Johns’ use of gray, more than any other set of choices, embodies the most conceptual of his expressions. Painterly sensuousness thrives, but the lack of color allows for a fuller presence of ideation.\textsuperscript{69}

Johns’ use of gray is a denial of his emotionality; his work is not a reflection of self but rather an investigation into systems and symbols. While it is clear that he has an opinion about his subject matter it is not his intention to have his emotions be central to his work. Furthermore, Rondeau goes on to state:

Gray enhances Johns’ cultivation of the cool, the detached, the dispassionate stance, allowing the ascetic celebration of his paintings to come to the fore…Gray is quite literally, the look of thought: according to color studies conducted by the German psychologist David Katz in the 1930s ‘subjective visual gray’ is the term used to describe the filmy, shadowy color we see when our eyes are close.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{68} Rondeau, 32.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 32-33.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 32-33.
The use of gray in Johns work is not only a refusal of Johns’ emotionality but also a means by which the viewer is able to engage the work thoughtfully and to think about the concept of thought. Gray is the color of thought as Rondeau states here, even if the meaning of Johns work is lost on the viewer the use of gray references their thought process therefore imploring them to consider what it is they are thinking about. Gray maintains references within the human mind whether conscious or subconscious. Finally Rondeau concludes with a discussion of the span between gray and thought:

Robert Morris recently made explicit the link between the idea driven art that Nauman describes and grayness ‘Thought is not colored. Color adds nothing to thought. Thought is black, white, and gray.’

Johns’ choice to use gray is one that evokes thought with the viewer due to associative states but is evocative of the state of thought as a process. The use of gray in this manner can be considered metalanguage, gray is referential of thought and Johns is using it to provoke thought; therefore the second use of gray references the first. The emotional and conceptual associations correlate with gray not only influence how Gray Alphabets is perceived but also how Johns’ work using gray is studied by art historians as well as viewers.

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71 Ibid, 32-33.
72 This is in accordance with Barthes theory of metalanguage which is defined as a second language in which one speaks about the first. “A linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the language-object, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its won system; and myth itself, which shall call metalanguage, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first. When he reflects on a metalanguage, the semiologist no longer needs to ask himself questions about the compositions of the language-object, he no longer has to take into account the details of the linguistic schema; he will only need to know its total term, or global sign, and only inasmuch as this term lends itself to myth.” Barthes, 115.
For Johns gray was more than a color choice or palette, it was a condition in which he operated. While he was aware of the emotional or cultural implications associated with gray, Johns chose it for different reasons. Gray functioned more than color, it was a tool that he used to further abstract the symbols that he chose as subject. Throughout Johns’ career, gray versions of existing leitmotifs amplify a sense of abstraction. In *Gray Alphabets*, the use of gray exacerbates the relationship between the alphabet he depicts and the concept of alphabet held by the viewer. Gray de-familiarizes well known representations by counteracting associative meanings engendered by the illusionism of color. Gray operates in the service of flatness, as the monochromatic compositions all but eliminate figure-ground distinctions.73

The initial re-creation of an emblem from the larger culture into painting is an act of displacement; the use of gray in the painting *Gray Alphabets* compounds the act by not providing a full record of reality. Gray functions to hinder recognizably in many of Johns’ works, however, in *Gray Alphabets* the alphabet did not have a static color scheme with which it was associated. While in print, it is typically represented with black type on a white background, but the visual representation of the alphabet is one that can be easily changed. Letters have taken various colors and shapes previous to their depiction in Johns work. His choice of a grisaille palette, however, navigates the alphabet away from readability and into concrete representation. Johns is making the alphabet an object to interpret which is a disconnection from its intended use. Gray then becomes the condition is which the alphabet resides. The alphabet is no longer a tool of language but an object

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73 Rondeau, 33.
that Johns has manufactured, and gray is its identity. Gray is a refusal of black and white, it is an intermediary, it allows there to be interpretation. Black and white lead the viewer to a conclusion, but the color gray, due to its ambiguous nature, allows the viewer to arrive at their own conclusion. For this reason, Johns favored gray, he was not fond of definition, which is furthermore reflected in his oeuvre. Of Johns’ choice of color Rondeau states:

Johns refused to accept a condition of art making predicated on polarities – emotional, chromatic, and otherwise – and pioneered a form of painting based on the recognizable and the dispassionate. He always reacts against readily available formal models, maintaining that exposure to certain precedents forces him to work in contrary ways…Seeing or sensing the dominant, expressive rhetoric of black and white, Johns reacted against the strictness. In 1969 he would articulate his rejection in more specific terms: ‘The encaustic paintings were done in gray because to me this suggested a different kind of literal quality…Black and white is very leading. It tells you what to say or do.’ Johns will always reject such pointedness. Indeed, he actively shuns prescriptive statements. Refusing the import of expressionist gesture was also profoundly linked to refusing the leading qualities of black and white. ‘You react against your surroundings to carry our something else.’ This ‘something else’ was, among other things, an embrace of gray as a distinct, even oppositional, idea.74

He chose symbols that carried with them imbued meaning only to challenge and subvert the way in which they were both represented and understood. Gray provided Johns a color palette to contribute to this intention. It functions to reveal the alphabet in a new light, drawing attention to the both the nature of it as a concept but also the system within which it functions. Gray also functions to conceal, in its ability to distance the alphabet

74 This quote exemplifies Johns’ ambiguity but also his intention not only in color choice but how he applied it to his subjects. Rondeau, 38-39.
Johns’ use of encaustic further contributes to the objectification of the alphabet. The built up wax creates a sculptural quality within the work; the subject moves off of the canvas and into real space rather than residing in figurative space. The use of encaustic in Johns’ early work was the first step to engage the static symbols of flags, numbers, targets, and especially alphabets beyond the authoritative position within society the symbols previously inhabited. The alphabet is no longer a flat symbol. Instead, it transitions into a tangible object to be reevaluated on the part of the viewer. Johns is engaging the relationship the viewer has with the alphabet by presenting it within a grid that, while recognizable has tangibility derived from the material of encaustic. The alphabet is distanced from its original purpose and is shifted as an entrance into Johns’ subversion. The alphabet is not communicating in the traditional sense – it is not simply a display of the components of language. Rather, it is transformed into a rebellious gesture that stands in opposition of the system of language as a whole. Johns uses encaustic to materialize an otherwise intangible and therefore perceivably nonexistent system of letters. When the letters of the alphabet are “traditionally” depicted in black and white upon a flat surface, they are not real objects with which to engage, they are mundane, passed-over elements that are used like language itself. In Johns’ treatment of the alphabetic sequence, the use of encaustic as well as his choice of gray negates the previous reading. The use of gray when paired with the encaustic draws attention to the banal nature of the system depicted. Due to both its ambiguous nature the use of gray as a
layered construction of encaustic and newsprint, allows the viewer to interact with the work on a level other than an insignificant tool and to the associations of dullness.

The employment of the grid in *Gray Alphabets* allows the viewer to interact with the work beyond conventional readings. By maintaining an underlying and recognizable structure, viewers maneuver the alphabets by way of the grid of *Gray Alphabets*. The grid as a formative structure within modern art is discussed at length by Rosalind Krauss in her 1979 essay *Grids*. Here she states:

There are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal. In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree. Insofar as its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves; the relationship is the aesthetic field are shown by the grid to be in a world apart and, with respect to natural objects, to be both prior and final. The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic.75

Johns’ use of the grid not only orders letters of the alphabet but it also isolates each letter from the rest of the alphabet. This action creates further subdivision and therefore places greater distance between the letter and its original context. The letter becomes more a part of Johns’ construction as it becomes less of a part of the alphabet. This is not to say that each letter is no longer a part of the alphabet; it is. However, its role has shifted from component of the alphabet to part in opposition of the alphabetic system.

The line within the grid restructures the convention of the alphabet subtly. There are two organizations of lines: the lines that structure the composition into the rows and columns of the grid, and the lines that compose the letters. The lines are all originally rigid due to the nature of the conventional system of the grid as well as the alphabet, but the edges are less refined due to the encaustic. The perimeters of each letter are static since they are derived from a stencil. Johns’ choice to use a familiar military stencil to form the letters rather than to create his own is another compositional element that contributes the redefinition of pictorial language. The stencil, a premade object that creates letters that are arranged in a static sequence allows Johns to create the letterforms to maintain an aesthetic of familiarity.

Johns’ deployment of encaustic also softens the lines of the grid, distancing the parts of the alphabet from the convention of which they were initially derived. The brushstrokes create the structural lines of the composition, accentuating the closed nature of each cell. Each cell is separate yet functions in relation to the letter that it encases as well as the adjacent cell. Heavy brushstrokes further emphasize his authority in the recreation of the alphabetic sequence. The brushstrokes are expressive and liberal while also controlled, in order to separate each cell from another. Through the separation of cells, Johns maintains reference to the grid. The perimeters of individual letters are juxtaposed with the lines that compose the letters creating a focal point within each cell.

Johns challenges how the symbolic construction of the alphabet is perceived, the alphabet inhabits a re-conception of the grid. He took a system that was established and gave it a new meaning. Johns defies conventions associated with the alphabet in order to
repurpose how it is viewed. With this defiance, Johns not only rejects the system of the alphabet but that of established symbols. He gives himself the agency as an artist to manipulate symbols for his own means. While the alphabetic system is not forever changed due to *Gray Alphabets*, it functions as a manifestation of defiance of authority. Within the system of the alphabet, there is no precise author. In rejecting its system, Johns is rejecting authority in a greater sense – he is asserting his power over systems and asking the viewer to do the same.

Johns’ use of newsprint within the encaustic adds further depth to an already complex work. The newsprint is a literal manifestation of how the alphabet is used and provides the viewer with another element with which to engage the work. Douglas Druick discussed the effects of Johns’ inclusion of newsprint as follows:

> The complex surface variegations Johns created through the use of encaustic in conjunction with newspaper may be considered in this context. He liked the fact that the newspaper fragments afforded one ‘a different kind of information…that had nothing to do with the activity’ of the painted surface, introducing an ‘intellectually different focus’ into the viewing experience. By involving reading in addition to looking, these works engage the eye and the mind, vision and thought – and memory.  

The newsprint provides the viewer with a static element apart from the expressive encaustic, which adds to the dynamism of the work. The newsprint is static while the encaustic creates motion through Johns’ layered brushstroke. The layering of these two elements shifts the interaction from just viewing to interpreting. As mentioned earlier with the use of gray to evoke the concept of thought the inclusion of newsprint also

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implores the viewer to recall their thought process as they read both the letterforms and the newsprint.

Johns has suggested that the newspaper collage elements can engender what he called a ‘kinetic response’ insofar as ‘what you’re used to doing with a newspaper is turning [the pages].’… Combining encaustic with newspaper so that the wax medium obscures, partially reveals, and sometimes leaves headlines, passages of text, and bits of imagery tantalizingly evident, Johns realized his intention to create changing focal possibilities. Attention shifts as the viewer alternates between moving in for a close reading of the surface and its texts and pulling back to take in the painting as a whole. This is the restlessness, active attentiveness that the artist evoked when asked about the mood he sought in his pictures: ‘mentally my preference would be the mood of keeping your eyes open and looking…without any constricted viewpoint.’

Johns uses both layered elements of his work to keep the viewer mentally and physically engaged. This layering sets him apart from the Abstract Expressionists; he is not conveying his emotion with the brushstroke rather evoking emotionality and intrigue on the part of the viewer. The viewer cannot read both the newsprint and the letterforms of the alphabet simultaneously therefore the layering of them requires the viewer to have multiple interactions with the work, fulfilling Johns intention. Druick goes on to discuss the relevance of including newsprint:

Newspaper, as Johns incorporated it in encaustic paintings of 1955, may have factored into his privileging of gray monochrome beginning the following year. The farther from normal reading distance we see newspaper, the greater the tendency for the eye to confuse the distinction of letters and ground and to perceive the pattern of small units of black letters of white paper as an overall gray field.

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77 Ibid, 86.
78 Ibid.
Beyond this interpretation by Druick, the use of the newsprint recalls Roland Barthes theory of metalanguage. The newsprint beneath the encaustic uses the very letters in which it inhabits, therefore a second language that of the newsprint recalls the first, the alphabet. This layered interaction held between the newsprint and letters creates greater distance between the concepts each embodies and their physical forms. On the subject of ambiguity in Johns’ work art historian Richard Schiff states:

Gray does for color what metamorphosis does for the cicada: it removes the traces of previous states. Every optical gray disguises a myriad of potential components, as Johns suggests: ‘The clues that the color gives [to the nature of whatever is represented] are lost’; as the optical order becomes unrevealing, so perception rests ‘on a more tactile level.’ Gray is the unrevealing neutral among neutrals: beyond neutralizing the spectrum, it becomes the neutral value between extremes of black and white. Accordingly, Johns coated many of his early canvas-objects with a textured gray encaustic…With the visual color subdued, the tactile ‘object nature’ shone as if it were now the color – grayness ambiguates the visual and the tactile. Interviewer: ‘Do you think of gray as a positive color?’ Johns: ‘Yes, I think so. I don’t know, I don’t really often think about gray.’ Interviewer: ‘Does the color gray carry for you a suggestion of ambiguity?’ Johns: ‘Everything carries for me a suggestion of ambiguity.’79

Encaustic shifts the role of the alphabet from concept to content and object. Johns still uses the alphabet as a tool, but not as a component of larger language. Rather, Gray Alphabets challenges the system of language as color, material, thought and pattern.

CONCLUSION

In his 1956 painting *Gray Alphabets*, Jasper Johns reconceptualizes a construction of linguistics, the English alphabet. Through his compositional organization, Johns restructures the means by which one understands and ultimately uses the alphabet as a sequence. He manipulates familiar structures, such as the grid, alphabetic ordering, and color in order to challenge pre-existing socio-cultural as well as artistic conventions. Furthermore, Johns’ intention was not to alter the alphabet but to defamiliarize those systems, including material and method, in which it functions.

The arbitrariness of language is the cornerstone of Johns oeuvre. Johns’ early work until the present continues to rely on chosen symbols as a means to subvert the system(s) in which they function. His treatment of symbols differs in *Gray Alphabets*, however, as he is dependent on the structure of the established alphabetic system to be the catalyst for transformation. While the (alphabetic) system is not forever changed due to the painting itself, *Gray Alphabets* is a manifestation of Johns’ defiance of artistic authority. He is able to manipulate the alphabet due to its disparate function and location between concept and representation.

The alphabet emerges as his primary material but Johns’ use of encaustic contributes to further subvert the alphabetic sequence. Encaustic removes the intangible nature of language and allows Johns to manipulate the alphabet in a highly visible yet static manner. Yet, it is the choice of the color gray, not only as a method but as part of the title, that creates greater ambiguity between the concept of the alphabet and its physical representation. Gray conveys a sense of ambiguity in its denial of black and
white. Johns chose gray to deny the conventions of Realism, Abstract Expressionism and even Pop Art thus creating further abstraction.

Within the system of the alphabet, there is no precise author. In rejecting the alphabet as a closed system, Johns defies artistic volition in a greater sense – he is asserting his power over arbitrary systems and asking the viewer to do the same. Gray is an in-between state that represents the ambivalence between figural and conceptual languages. Consequently, Johns’ reorganization of the alphabetic sequence in Gray Alphabets provides the viewer with an entrance into the alphabet, redefining its language as an object, one that would not have been accessible to us previously.


Figure 1: Jasper Johns, *Gray Alphabets*, 1956, Beeswax and oil on newsprint and paper on canvas, New York, Private Collection.
Figure 2: Detail Jasper Johns, *Gray Alphabets*, 1956, Beeswax and oil on newsprint and paper on canvas, New York, Private Collection.
Figure 4: Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955, Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, Collection David Geffen.
Figure 5: Jasper Johns, *White Flag*, 1955, Encaustic and collage on canvas (three panels), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Figure 6: Jasper Johns, *Target with Four Faces*, 1955, Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front, New York, The Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 7: Jasper Johns, *Green Target*, 1955, Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas, New York, The Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 8: Jasper Johns, *White Numbers*, 1957, Encaustic on canvas, New York, The Museum of Modern Art.
Figure 9: Jasper Johns, *Flag on Orange Field*, 1957, Encaustic on canvas, Cologne, Museum Ludwig.
Figure 10: Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, Glazed ceramic and black paint, location unknown.