

JASPER JOHNS: *NO* (1964)

TATIANA FLORES

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Jasper Johns made *No* in 1964 while he was living in Tokyo for two months. The drawing was inspired by a painting of the same name that Johns had made in 1961, and it is interesting that he chose to revisit the subject three years later. Unlike numbers, maps, or the alphabet, the particular word *NO* was not a frequently recurring theme in Johns's paintings and drawings. In his notebooks from that time, he indicated that the Japanese phonetic *no* was equivalent to the possessive "of," so it is likely that being in a different linguistic context led Johns to explore new possible meanings for the syllable.

There are significant differences between the painting from 1961 and the drawing from 1964. Although the palettes of the two works include similar gray tones, in the drawing the word *NO* is inscribed into the paper, while in the painting the word *NO* is made up of flat metal letters hanging from a wire. These dimensional objects cast shadows onto the surface of the canvas, allowing for variation on the painted surface. The drawing is much more structural in nature, made so by the presence of a ruler drawn across the bottom third of the paper. The ruler includes legible numbers for measurement, but it also seems to have functioned as a squeegee in the making of the drawing. Notice that above the ruler the color is muted and striations suggest a leveling-out of an inked surface, whereas below the ruler darker gray pigments drip down, threatening to obliterate the inscription. The *O* is already covered with two drips, as is the right edge of the *N*.

The drawing's title reveals that negation is a dominant theme of the work, and its structure suggests that even this negation is about to be negated. What could this possibly signify? One interpretation is that Johns's use of the word *NO* is in dialogue with Abstract Expressionism. The artists associated with this celebrated postwar American

movement, including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, each developed a signature visual language that embraced a subjective kind of abstraction, also known as "all-over painting" since it often covered the entire surface of the canvas. Paintings and drawings executed in this way were considered to express the artist's inner world. By the 1960s, Abstract Expressionism had dominated the American art scene for more than a decade. Johns and his contemporary Robert Rauschenberg developed a competing mode of painting that a critic at the time described as "the aesthetics of indifference." Where Abstract Expressionism was self-important, the work of Johns and Rauschenberg was blasé. In the drawing *No*, Johns applied gray inks in a painterly way with brushes, and the color drips down slightly at the bottom edge of the sheet. In this way the artist referenced both the all-over quality and the painterly style of Abstract Expressionism. He juxtaposed the abstract painted surface with an image of a ruler—a tool used for precise measurement and making straight lines. This representational object violates the commonly held notion that abstraction was related to spirituality.

Both versions of *No* function in part as a rebuttal to Abstract Expressionism, but the drawing seems to go one step further to negate Johns's own previous painting. This attitude puts him in dialogue with an important earlier movement known as Dada. Dada was an avant-garde movement that emerged during World War I in different European cities; it was precisely a movement about refuting the traditional notion of representational art. (Its members referred to it as "anti-art.") Indeed Johns's work was classified at the time as "neo-Dada." *No*, an innovative and masterful drawing, boldly indicates Johns's refusal to follow any previous mode of art in order to forge his own path.

Tatiana Flores is an Associate Professor of Art History at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. She teaches courses on contemporary art as well as the arts of the Americas and the Caribbean.