

Robbe-Grillet on Target Or Interrogation by the Numbers

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Numbers as visible language are at the center of one of the legs of Robbe-Grillet's recent triangular novel which focuses on verbal-visual relationships. The work of Jasper Johns provokes a visit to a recent retrospective exhibition from which Robbe-Grillet draws an enigmatic detective tale linked with narratives provoked by the work of Irina Ionesco and René Magritte. The focus of the enigma is on painting by the numbers that lead to both writing and painting. This essay visibly plays with 3 and/or more problems suggested in re-counting.

4-thoughts

Freud is our old modern master when it comes to the investigation of verbal-visual relationships. The dream is visual. The analyst cannot see, but tries to catch a glimpse of the things seen by the dreamer during his "sleep of reason" by demanding that he recount, on the couch, the pictures of his dream. This is to invert the dream process in which the dreamer, by dreaming, paints, and thereby denies grammatical sequence and explicit meaning, transforming the sweet reason of life and language into the surrealist visual. The dreamer revels in the short-circuited and the enigma it produces. The "sleep of reason" is a slip from the certainty of logic, grammar and numerical sequence into the mystery of the plastic. That mystery then becomes detective-object – of a reductive-seductive quest.

Unlike the analyst, I am not interested here in the language of the visible, the restoration of meaning and reason, but in the overdetermined visual of the dream text: that which loses its unknowability in language become transparent, whose visibility, whose enigma is denied by investigation, re-counting, final solution. Freud himself was tempted by the process of translating image into word (a new field for detection) but continually foiled by the superior cunning of the visual, the dreamed. The dreamer, by a consistent denial of grammatical and logical sequence, leads astray with word the detective who attempts to *solve* inscribed plastic unreadability. The anal detective can only reach and deflate the enigma by obliging the dreamer to reduce the seen-

scene to words said and mean meaning; a science, it seems, of one-for-one symbolism, of finality and guilt. In *Studies on Hysteria* Freud writes, "Once a picture has emerged from the patient's memory, we may hear him say that it becomes fragmentary and obscure in proportion as he proceeds with his description of it. *The patient is, as it were, getting rid of it by turning it into words*" (Avon, p. 325, Freud's emphasis).

Robbe-Grillet, probing Jasper Johns's plastic images, his dreams, follows Freud in the role of investigator, but disguises himself as Inspector Duchamp. He, like Freud, takes the found (dream) object as point of departure for a re-counting, but the answer to the sum is not $1=1$. There is, Robbe-Grillet intimates, no one-for-one symbolism. Freud, in spite of his Faustian temptation, would have agreed. In distinction to some of his epigones, he did not opt for sense. Wanting the certainty of meaning in his struggle, he set out to look for the murderer, to find that there isn't one, only a myster. Hence even he, the Great Detective, is obliged to point out that a cigar is sometimes a cigar: a clue is not a clue.

The Detective and the Numbered Target

The old dilemma of the relationship between pictures and words is at the center of the work of Marcel Duchamp, godfather of Jasper Johns and Alain Robbe-Grillet. In *La Boîte Verte* (*The Green Box*) and *Le Grand Verre* (*The Big Glass*) as in the rectified ready-made, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, the artist investigates and plays with the interaction between writing and the plastic arts, coupling this concern with the erotic and the verbal-visual pun. Alain Robbe-Grillet as Rem Brandt, as Ironing Board, writes, paints and scorches in red, black and white the *toile vierge*, the *page blanche*, with memories of a triangle of gold. Three texts are the matrices of his recent novel, *Souvenirs d'un triangle d'or*, published in 1978 by Les Editions de Minuit.

Until now the writer's concern with the materiality of language has been concentrated to a large extent on the letter. Robbe-Grillet adds a new dimension by obliging us to view geometrical forms and numbers in their plasticity giving rise to gesture and story. The triangle – whether Bermuda, drug, platonic, or erotic – is novel box-housed as are Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, the ultimate inquiry into the accuracy and distortion of measuring devices. In his *1914 Box*, Duchamp writes on the idea of (its) fabrication: "If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane distorting itself *as it pleases* and creates a new shape of the meas-

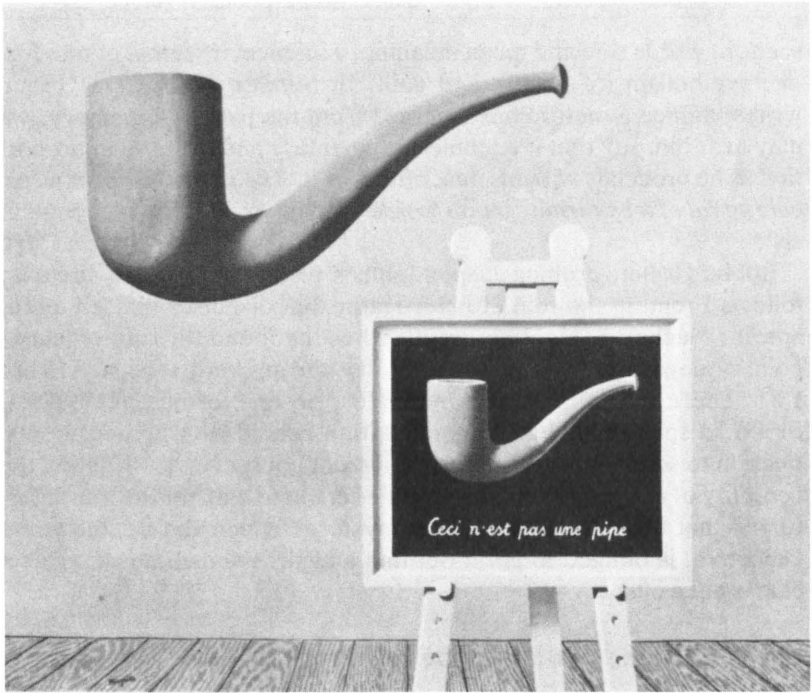


Figure 1: *Two Mysteries*



Figure 2: *The Critic Sees*

ure of length – 3 patterns obtained in more or less similar conditions: considered in their relation to one another they are an approximate reconstitution of the measure of length” (*The Salt Seller*, p. 22). It should come as no surprise, then, to stumble on a Monsieur Duchamp as perverted *voyeur*, as Prefect of Police, in Robbe-Grillet’s most recent enterprise. The Golden Triangle Remembered as “or” object – this or that or these or those – combines three legs from Robbe-Grillet’s recent past: the first is his text of *La Belle Captive* (Magritte); the second is *Temple aux miroirs* (Irina Ionesco); the third is *La Cible* (Jasper Johns). In search and memory of his youthful experience as a painter, (“Between 10 and 15, I did some painting. / Entre 10 et 15 ans j’ai fait de la peinture.” *Le Monde*, September 22, 1978, p. 17), la belle *Alaine* (à l’*aine*, our N) creates an easel (Figure 1) from stories aroused in his flashlight memory by the work of these artists where word and painted image complement and compete with one another. His golden triangle is three-legged, a cauldron, an easel, a tripod, a stool on which the sybil sits to speak oracles, and there he inscribes his own phantasms in words.

Here I will deal only with one leg of this triangle, avoiding stability – psychological or otherwise. That leg is *La Cible*, Robbe-Grillet’s preface for an exhibition of Jasper Johns’s work at the Beaubourg reproduced as essential third leg of his *Souvenirs d’un triangle d’or*. I leave for another time the relationship between the 3 except where the numbers of Robbe-Grillet-Jasper Johns invite a foray into this interlocking debris. *The Critic Sees* (Figure 2), but with his mouth, with words: image versus word, an interesting rivalry in the past, but Robbe-Grillet, our Rem Brandt, inspired by Jasper Johns, takes a new tack. He does not write *about*, but *on* and pillages, combines, and transforms the images seen. The exhibited work of an artist, in this case Jasper Johns, is used to generate a new work – a word-work. As reader-spectator-writer, Robbe-Grillet formulates his own récit-recette: “Browsing through a retrospective exhibition of a painter he loves, the writer immediately chooses objects and stories from it. The figures come alive, the recurrence of a motif becomes diachronical development; the title of one of the paintings looms as a password. / Traversant l’exposition rétrospective d’un peintre qu’il aime entre tous, l’écrivain aussitôt y choisit des objets, des histoires. Les figures s’animent, la répétition d’un thème devient développement diachronique, le titre d’un surgit comme un mot de passe” (Back cover, *La Belle Captive*).

When Robbe-Grillet sees, he becomes an Alice in Wonderland, a Morgan le Fay, entering the work of the artist a mirror where he is temporarily caught amid these treasure-objects. His only recourse is to

become a fabulist. In the process he produces in words and in images inspired by his experience a new insight into Jasper Johns's letters and numbers, indeed his work as a whole, and writes/paints himself into and out of the cubicle of the galleried spaces into which he has fallen.

Locked up, in a prison cell (for a crime, a sex crime?), the narrator of *Souvenirs d'un triangle d'or* is drugged, questioned, and begins a description of his cell in an attempt to prove his innocence. There in that space, the mirror of his cell is placed so that he sees only his own eyes reflected. "It is hung so high that I have to stand on the chair (bent wood, lacquered white) in order to see the upper part of my face, cut by the lower curvilinear edge at about the middle of my nose. *Note well this detail which is important.* / Il est placé si haut que je dois monter sur la chaise (en bois tourné, laqué de blanc) pour apercevoir, interrompu par le bord inférieur curviligne et coupant, le haut de mon visage, jusqu'au milieu du nez environ. *Notez bien ce détail, qui a son importance*" (STO, p. 126). (My emphasis) This "detail," I suggest, is a *souvenir* of Jasper Johns's *The Critic Sees*. The doubled mouth as eyes replace the mouth of the narrator cut by the partial mirror's edge. In this image is embodied a Freudian *modus operandi*. The dream seen is recounted in words. The analyst obliges the visual to become verbal (Jackson Pollock is the great exception) as the patient becomes narrator. The parallel with the critic, the writer *on art*, is clear. The difference is that with the aid of mechanical reproduction, the recounting of what has been seen is accompanied in art books, in newspapers, and in journals by copies (whose quality is often dubious) of the images themselves (as here). Robbe-Grillet's game is multiple. First, he gives us the text and image together as in the three texts to which I have referred: *La Belle Captive*, *Temple aux miroirs*, *La Cible*. Then he combines the texts and absents the reproduced generating images and gives us his easel remembrance: *Souvenirs d'un triangle d'or* as novel – a traversal of pictures at an exhibition now absent and remembered. His *ciné-roman* is now embodied in a movie, a traversal, a narrative where images have a mixed, complex relationship with each other and with words.

In his cell, a Judas hole and a screen resembling a mirror (oh the silver screen) join the broken mirror that only returns his eyes. Sight, the eye, the I, number I, dominates, inventories, and interrogates the objects of his situation. The Judas hole is filled intermittently with a pair of eyes facing the "mirror"-screen. In the paintings of Johns the Judas holes reveal mouths or other parts of the body; the eye, the "I", is always absent, present only as other, target eye (Figure 3). Inspection, surveillance, and projection are visual. The narrator speaks of insistent questions organizing these images. "What is the mechanism

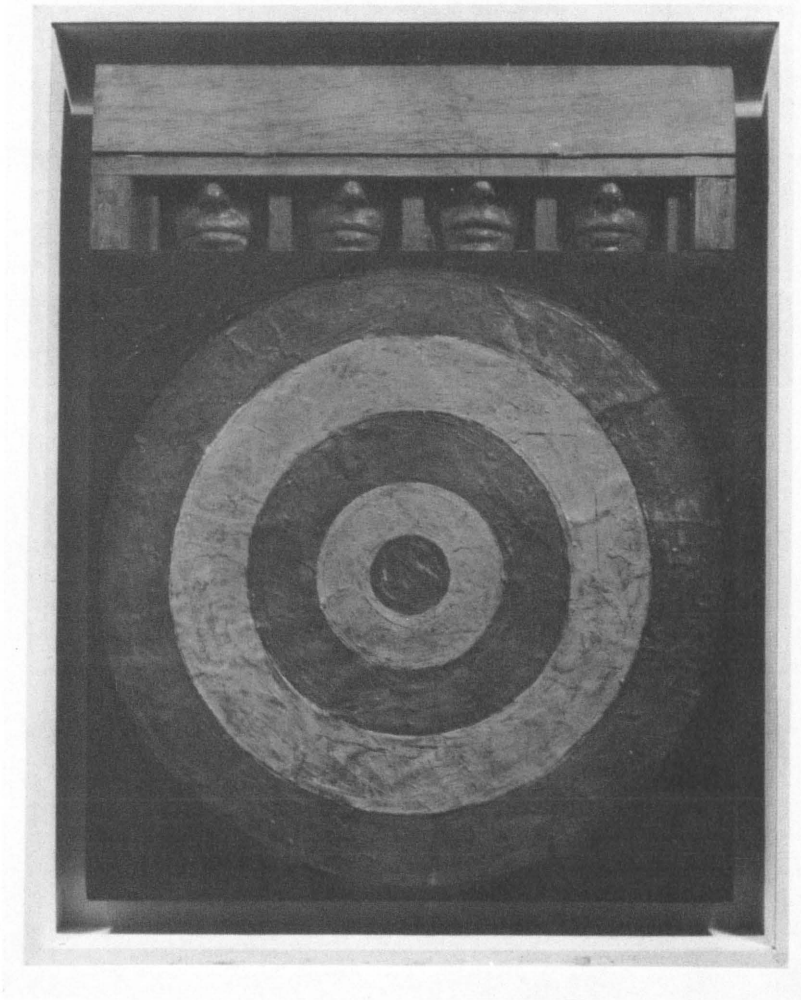


Figure 3: *Target with 4 Faces*

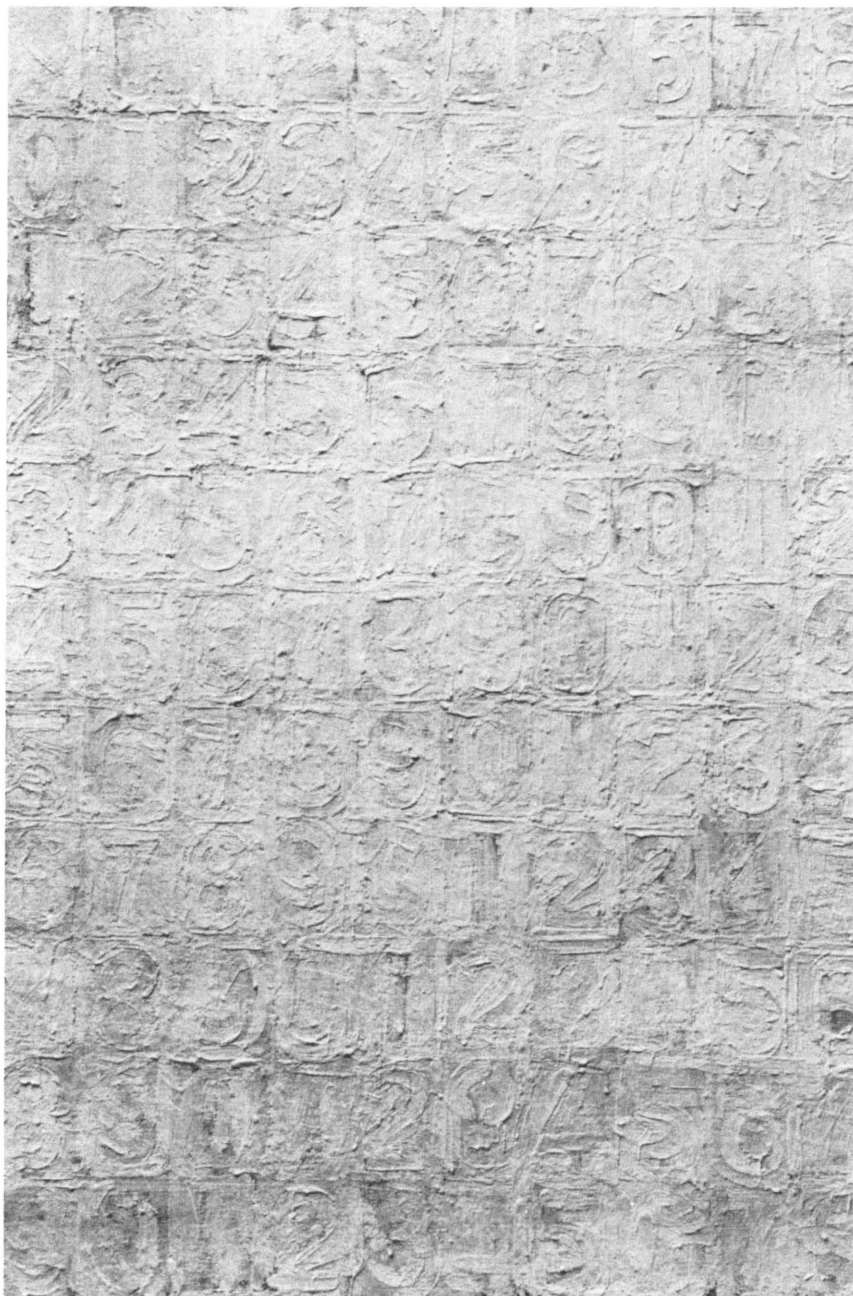


Figure 4: *White Numbers*

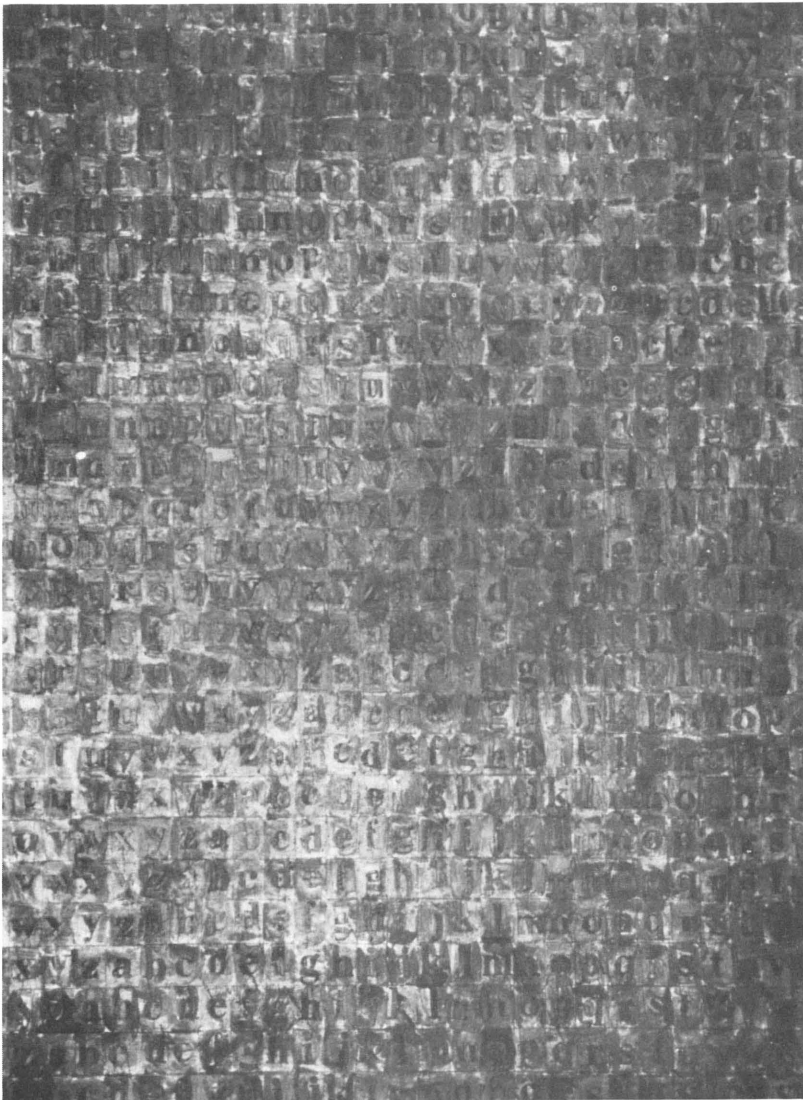


Figure 5: *Gray Alphabets*

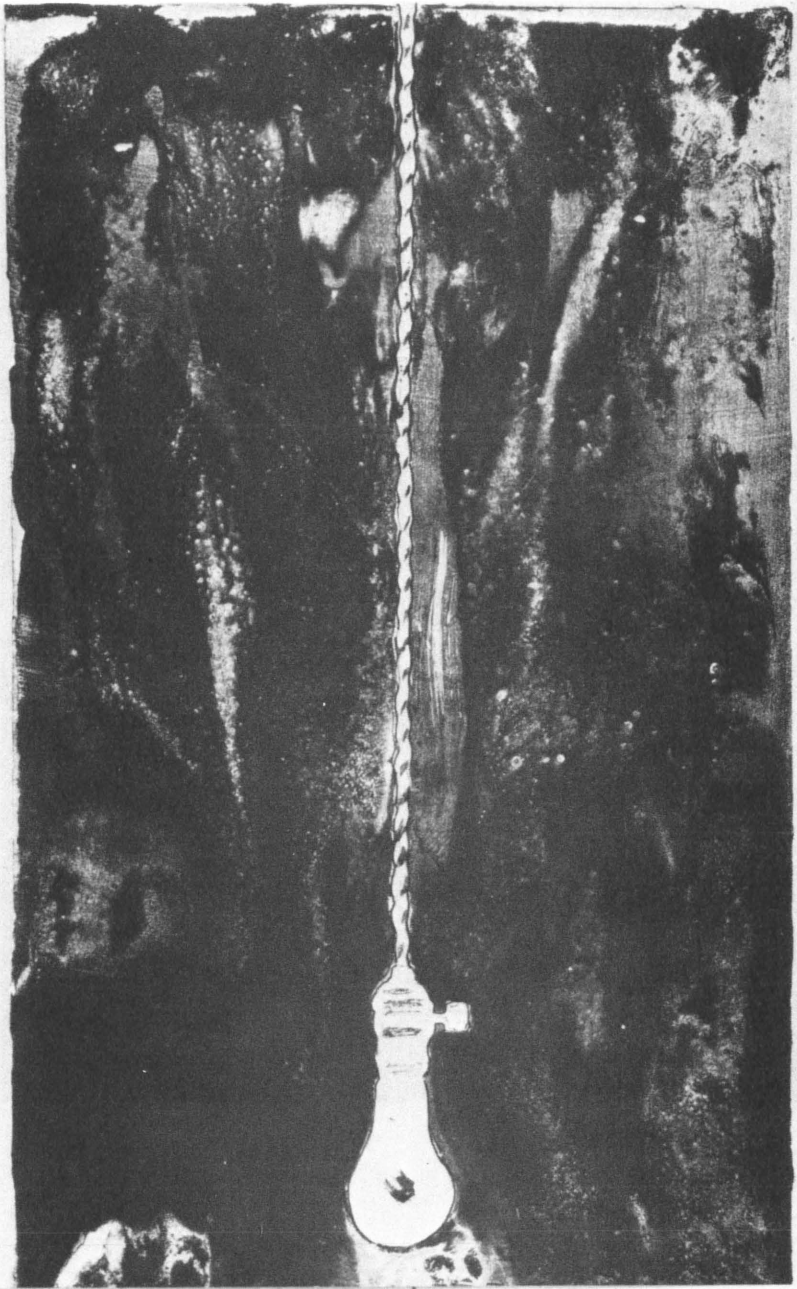


Figure 6: Detail of *Light Bulb*

organizing these elements? Do they really give the complete illusion of [a] reality? Why did I write like a mirror? / Quel est le mécanisme qui en organise les éléments? Donnent-elles vraiment l'illusion totale d'une réalité? Pourquoi ai-je écrit comme un miroir?" (*STO*, p. 126). The answers relate to images made visible by words, of things seen as numbers read and distorted in an attempt at interpretation, and to a 0 degree of writing (Figure 4). In the Jasper Johns leg of the tripod, the slip and play of letters combines, perhaps gives way to the central preoccupation of making numbers visible, only to free them for endless, multiple interpretation. Robbe-Grillet like Jasper Johns places on the page the numbers themselves as objects and takes us through the traversed visual base of 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The move is from and back to 0, to absence, to cipher and visible but coded writing. 0 as absence is a blank canvas, a space and beginning point where adjustment and reckoning of positive and negative quantities occur on a graduated scale of temporal, diachronic (but enigmatic) narration that leads to naught. But the naught is double, 00, mirrored, and returns us to EYE glasses and spyglasses.

Robbe-Grillet as Rem Brandt builds his story on the words and images of the painter. Title and object in the work of Jasper Johns are clues to the enigma. In *Broken Target* the eye is metamorphosed into target and underscores the conflict between the seer and the seen. Newspaper-frame and target-eye give rise to mouth- and eye-target as in *The Critic Sees*. Robbe-Grillet derives his Judas hole from multiple mouths that become eyes and are seen. The spy cipher is not alphabetical but numerical. Here the philosophy is not from A to Z, letter-based; a Duchamp-inspired undercutting of letters read but not seen results in toying with these alphabet blocks in their plastic dimension in a number of Johns' works: for example his *Gray Alphabets* of 1960 (Figure 5) where he shakes up letters into a new type face. Robbe-Grillet opts for painting by the numbers, another Duchamp-inspired enterprise of Jasper Johns. The 5 concentric rings (Figure 3), the 0 eyes of Johns's targets are doubled (mirrored) by Robbe-Grillet to 10: 9 plus 1/0 or 0/0 with 0 at the edge and yet physically present in each ring as 0 ring itself. The rectangle of letters alphabetical is challenged as diachronical, numerical sequence is eroded by the simultaneity and ambiguity of numbers seen. Drawing on the Johns *0 Through 9*, a re-count begins.

The 0 as pearl of light dropped through the Judas hole (Figure 6), an echo of the squaring of the circle, provokes a vision of whirlpool eddies, 9 in number, as target. The light bulb as precious stone drops through the square Judas and falls but does not break, creating on the floor of the cell "the 9 circle target, imagined by Prefect Duchamp, used by elite marksmen for military target practice. /la cible à neuf

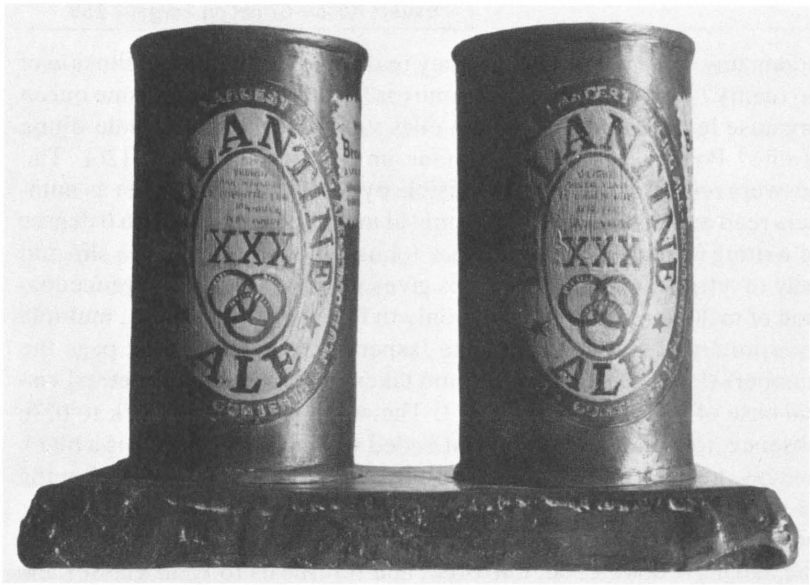


Figure 7: Painted Bronze



Figure 8: Study for Skin

cercles, imaginée par le préfet Duchamp, dont se servent les tireurs d'élite pour l'entraînement au fusil de guerre" (*STO*, p. 132). Each circle is point-numbered 0 where objects read as numbers replace the military scoring system of numbers and Maggie's drawers.

I will not, for reasons of space, dwell on each circle of the ciphered target, but quickly enumerate the richness of object read as number, of number seen in objects. At first an apparent stability of interpretation. Outside in. 0 becomes 9. The doubled, mirrored Ballantine Ale cans (Figure 7). "And moreover on looking closely at the trademark which ornaments the soft metal cylinder, one can ascertain that its oval circumference contains within it a circle, tangent to or rather coincident with it over half the circumference of the curve of the oval of which it occupies the upper half constituting precisely the number 9, made even more visible by a slight interruption in the series of words printed in capitals making up the lower ring. / Et d'ailleurs à mieux observer la marque de fabrique qui orne le cylindre en métal léger, on constate que son pourtour ovalaire contient à l'intérieur un cercle tangeant, ou plutôt coïncidant sur près d'une demi-circonférence avec la courbure même de l'ovale dont il occupe toute la moitié supérieure, ce qui compose justement le chiffre 9, rendu plus perceptible encore par une petite interruption dans la suite des mots imprimés en capitales formant la boucle inférieure" (*STO*, p. 132). 8. The *Voyeur's* cord. 7. Twisted

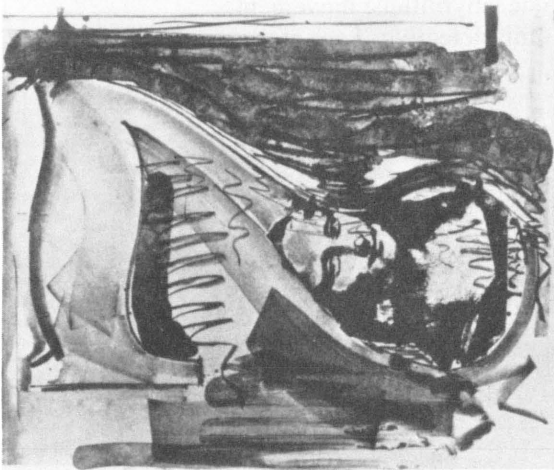


Figure 9: Figure 7

hanger. 6. Bent spoon. 5. Handprint (Figure 8). 4. White chair. 3. Apple bitten into. 2. High-heeled shoe (Figure 9). 1. Flashlight (Figure 10).

Bit by bit, numbered security is eaten away and the clarity of the object read as cipher disappears to be replaced by a flickering, a shifting of meaning. The presence in the cell-text of objects read as number, then of the problematic reading of the numbers themselves, literally depends on illumination. The 0 drop cord of constant light (Figure 6, *Recent Still Life*) initially provides Cartesian clarity as numbers successively enumerated, but in that apparent certitude, a growing hunger, dizziness, and intermittent flashes of light change the fixed interpretation of object-number. The apple of knowledge (Figure 11) is 0 whole, Cartesian jewel light, and Omega beginning. Eve-given, it becomes obsessive clue, grows larger, and is remembered eaten. Coming out of Magritte and *La Belle Captive*, where the apple is room-sized, it blocks the view, fills the mouth until it is bitten into and discarded as the number ∞ . Like the 0 apple, each number is transformed through the act of looking. In his "Sketchbook Notes," Jasper Johns writes: "The watchman falls 'into' the 'trap' of looking. The 'spy' is a different person. 'Looking' is and is not 'eating' and 'being eaten'." The 1 of flashlight yields to the 1 of the "double décimetre" of Johns's *Painting with Rule* where the ruler measures the 0 target, multiple 0's, impossibly measured, ambiguous targetted naught seen by the single 0 lens of flashing light. The 0 eye remains. Object fixation, number fixation become the same labyrinthine movement.

Reading the clues of this detective / I spy story, our 0 EYE becomes

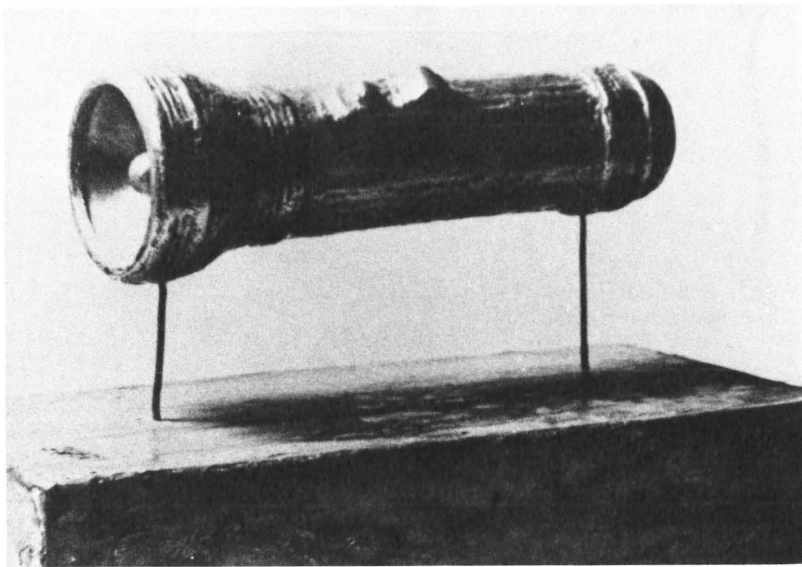




Figure 11: *The Great War*

Figure 10: *Flashlight*

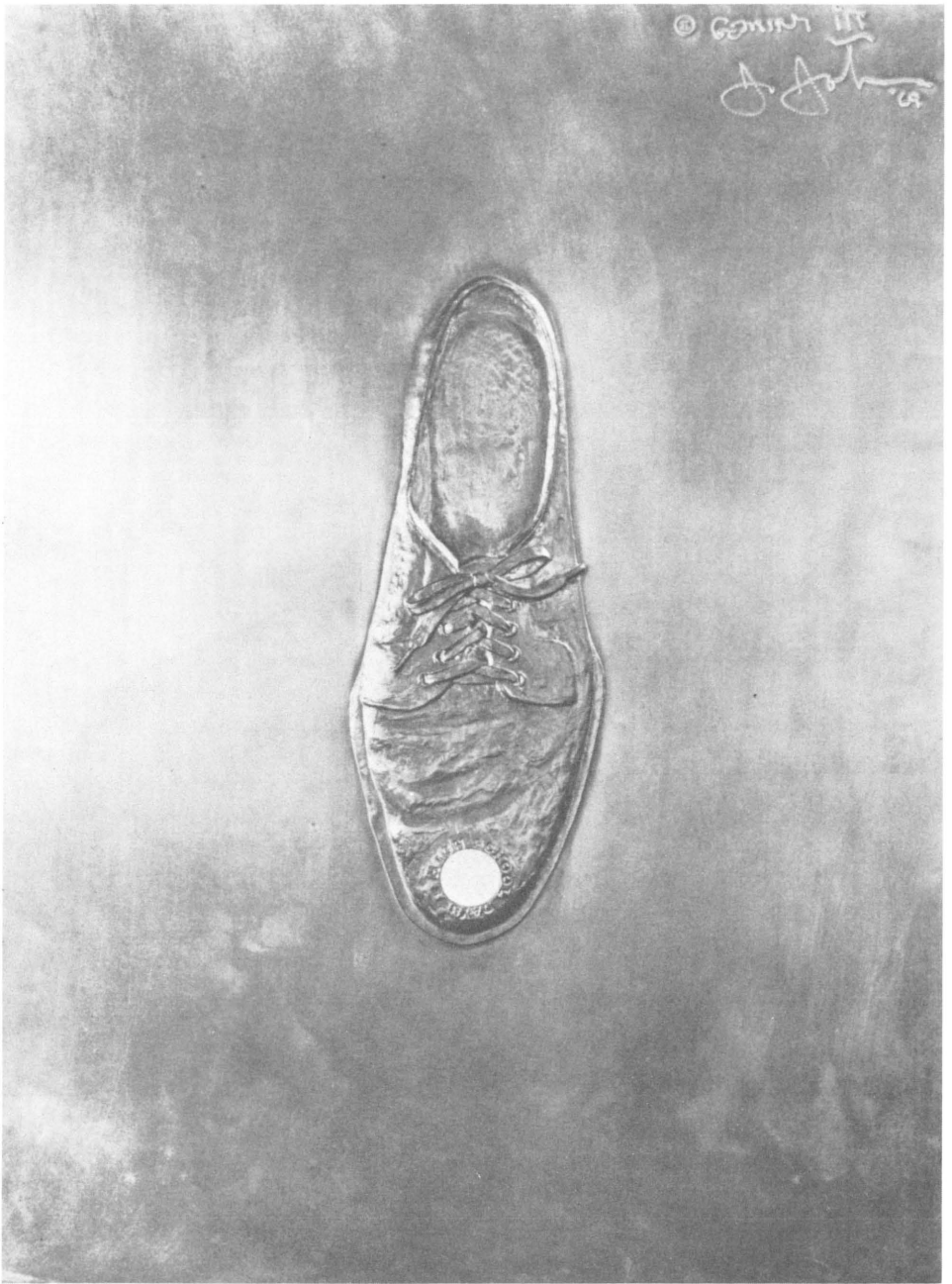


Figure 12: *High School Days*

betraying Judas. The familiar objects float and change as 0 becomes 3. The lady (la-dit, la-dite) eaten apple now is 3. “Indeed it (the number 3) is easily made out in the remains of the half-eaten apple (according to what has been said, but where and when). / On l’identifie en effet sans mal dans le résidu de la pomme à demi croquée (selon ce qui a été dit, mais où et quand)” (STO, p. 136). The worn blue lady shoe as 2 shifts from 2 to 7 (Figure 9). “And moreover it is the number 7 (without the bar, American style) that its profile takes on, whereas the 2 would require a turned-up toe like *poulaines*, [a kind of slipper] which was not the case, the only feature of this shoe tip being a mirrored circle as big as a half-dollar set into the leather which I had first taken for a cabochon of cut crystal. / Et c’est d’ailleurs bien davantage la forme du chiffre 7 (sans barre, à l’américaine) qu’affecte ici son profil, alors que le 2 nécessiterait une extrémité recourbée à la poulaine, ce qui n’est pas le cas, la seule particularité de cette pointe de soulier consistant en un miroir rond, large comme une pièce d’un demi-dollar, qui se trouve enchâssé dans le cuir et que j’avais pris d’abord pour un cabochon de cristal taillé” (STO, p. 137). Souvenir of Jasper Johns’s *High School Days* (Figure 12) and customized blue suede shoes, the lady (la-dit) is contained, reflected in the 0 mirror EYE. The numbers 7-2, 2-7, these tricks (Figure 13) mirror and enclose the Prefect of Police Duchamp’s *La Giaconda* (his con-con joke) (Figures 9, 12 and 13) reminding us of the boyish skirt inspectors of the 50’s who artfully stood or sat in attempts to con the con, to briefly view the lady as ship’s head, as delta, opening, door, the V, in their game of I Spy, I see the V, I see the door surmounted by triangle and 0 EYE.

Through object numbers, the narrator-detective seeks to escape the cell, to wander in their labyrinthine meaning (Figure 14) in order to prove his innocence. But it is a trick, an *attrape-nigaud* (booby trap). Shots ring out as he stumbles, guided by the 0 light ring of the flashlight (Figure 10): broken shoe (Figure 9), the members of a wax mannequin used for target practice, then back to 0, the light bulb and its violet, violating cord (Figure 6) (I leave aside the number color combinations that govern the récit-recette), a target-door-text composed of printed lines from a newspaper. All are seen, scrutinized, and read as the 1 of rule and flashlight dims before looking into the latter’s 0 face and the former’s lying numerical, diachronic edge. “Of course, it was in vain; I couldn’t see the slightest redness. I ended up by throwing it somewhere behind me, that useless device, remaining obstinately before this flat surface that had seemed to me to be a door. / C’est en vain, bien entendu: je ne perçois pas la moindre rougeur. Je finis par jeter au hasard, derrière moi, l’appareil inutile, demeurant moi-même avec obstination contre cette surface plane qui m’a paru être une porte” (STO,

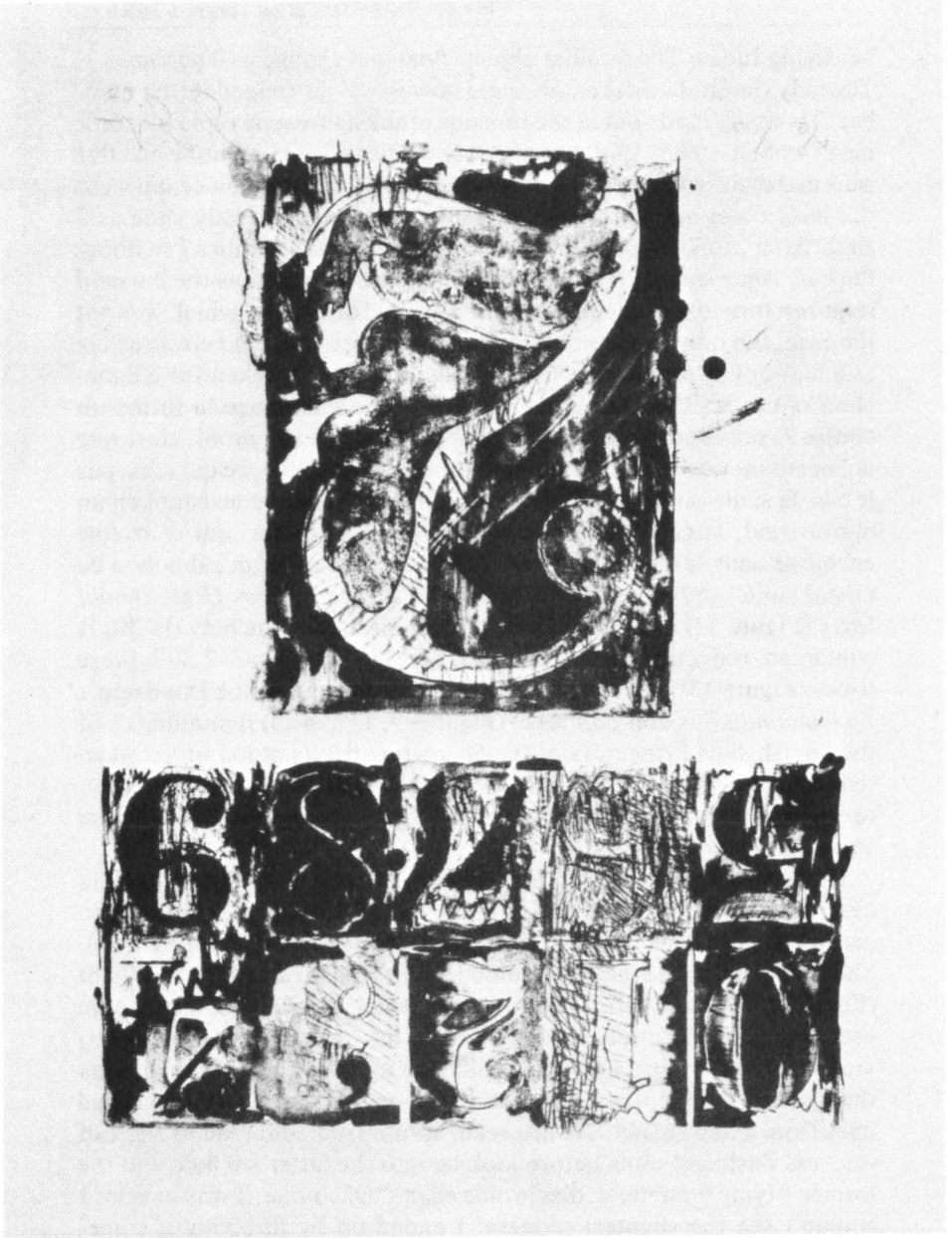


Figure 13: 0 Through 9

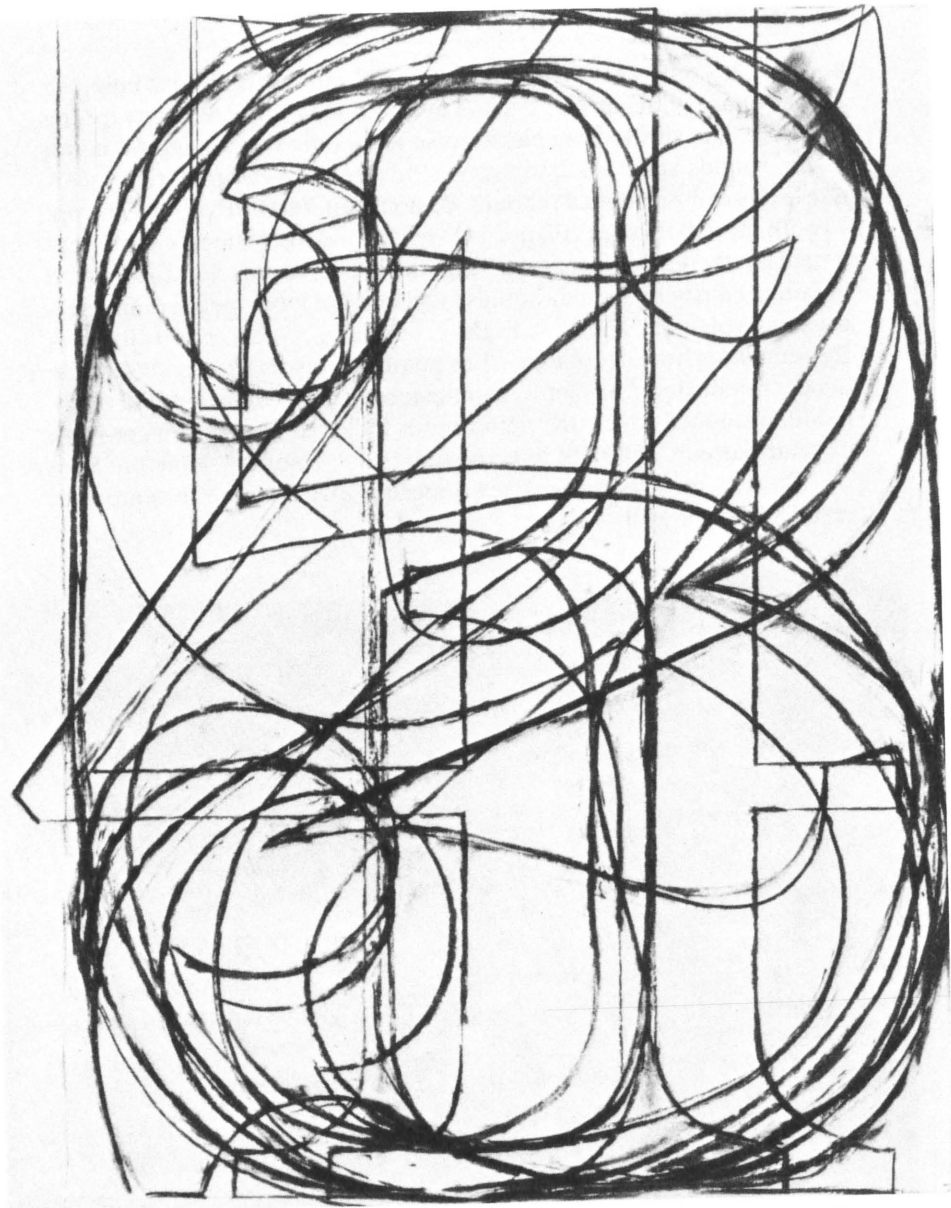


Figure 14: 0 Through 9

p. 148). The door, that delta, both page and canvas, the Judas hole, the Judas square with staring, jealous eyes remains. Sounds interrupt the silence. "The shrill alarm clock noise marks the beginning of a count down, sounds again. / La sonnerie stridente de réveil-matin, qui marque le début du compte à rebours, de nouveau, retentit . . ." (*STO*, pp. 149-50). Numbers seen (Figure 14) are now heard. "The numbers, separated by decreasing intervals, begin their reverse parade, spoken with unfailing clarity by the passionless voice of the loud-speaker, an interrogatory voice . . . Nine . . . Eight . . . Seven . . . Closer and closer as the remaining time decreases. / Les nombres, séparés par un intervalle qui décroît de degré en degré, commencent à nouveau leur défilé rétrograde, prononcés avec une netteté sans faille par la voix sans passion du haut-parleur, celui des interrogatoires . . . Neuf . . . Huit . . . Sept . . . De plus en plus rapprochés à mesure que diminue le temps qui reste" (*STO*, p. 150).



Figure 15: *Passage II*

Objects as ciphers incite investigation and result in dream enigmas (tales told), but the pseudo-Freudian interpretation of seeing, remembering, and dreaming that would reduce the visual to verbal knowable threatens. Through loudspeaker voicing, traditional analysis reduces to naught the central visual 0 and () opening of seen and mirrored eroticism. Freud himself avoids a dictionary key, a key of one for one meaning, of interpretation and solution to the investigations of visual, Orphic descents. Robbe-Grillet's detectives are gumshoes, who "gomment," who in their resistance to reductive interpretation, hurl, in their cells, the 9 of Ale cans into the eye and mouth of the 0 target and erotic spy hole. "With all the energy I could muster, I threw the beer can against the strong door, right at its center; it resonates long and deeply, majestically like the bronze door of a cathedral. / Avec toute la vigueur dont je suis capable, je lance la boîte de bière contre le panneau blindé – juste en son centre – qui résonne profondément, longuement, majestueusement comme la porte d'airain d'une cathédrale" (*STO*, p. 150).

The disembodied voice of interrogation and search for sense and guilt provokes the seeing-seen, guilty-innocent, watchman-spy-detective to confront the conflict and collusion of things verbal and visual, whether it be number or letter (Figure 15). Franck V. Francis, FVF, is only a public detective who would be a private EYE with multiple aliases. Numbers, letters, objects are "incompréhensible détrit" that appear, disappear, combine, and separate as fragments of the inexplicable whole. "The system (of maintaining a certain kind of freedom within an ideological prison) is born of the New Novel and of all of modern art – of pop art in American painting, and of modern music, too. It consists of detaching fragments from society's discourse and using them as raw materials to construct something else" ("What Interests Me is Eroticism" in *Homosexualities and French Literature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell, 1979), p. 93).

The novel's distinctive beginning is a black lacquered door (Delta) frame capped by a classic triangular pediment in which resides the 0 eye turned on its side to become vulval matrix (Figure 16). The narrative is a mirrorical return of the golden triangle built on an easel (tripod), a parenthetical depth and surface of seen female third eye, through which and on which the recounting is projected. Mirrored Shirley Temple, Magritte captive False EYE, O woman target of Jasper Johns's *High School Days* are laid over, delayed in the red-dream violence of imagined, remembered images recounted in the black and white numbers and letters of Robbe-Grillet as novelist-painter (Figure 17). *Souvenirs d'un triangle d'or* stirs up the "incompréhensible débris" and is the other half of the diptych for the plastic creations of

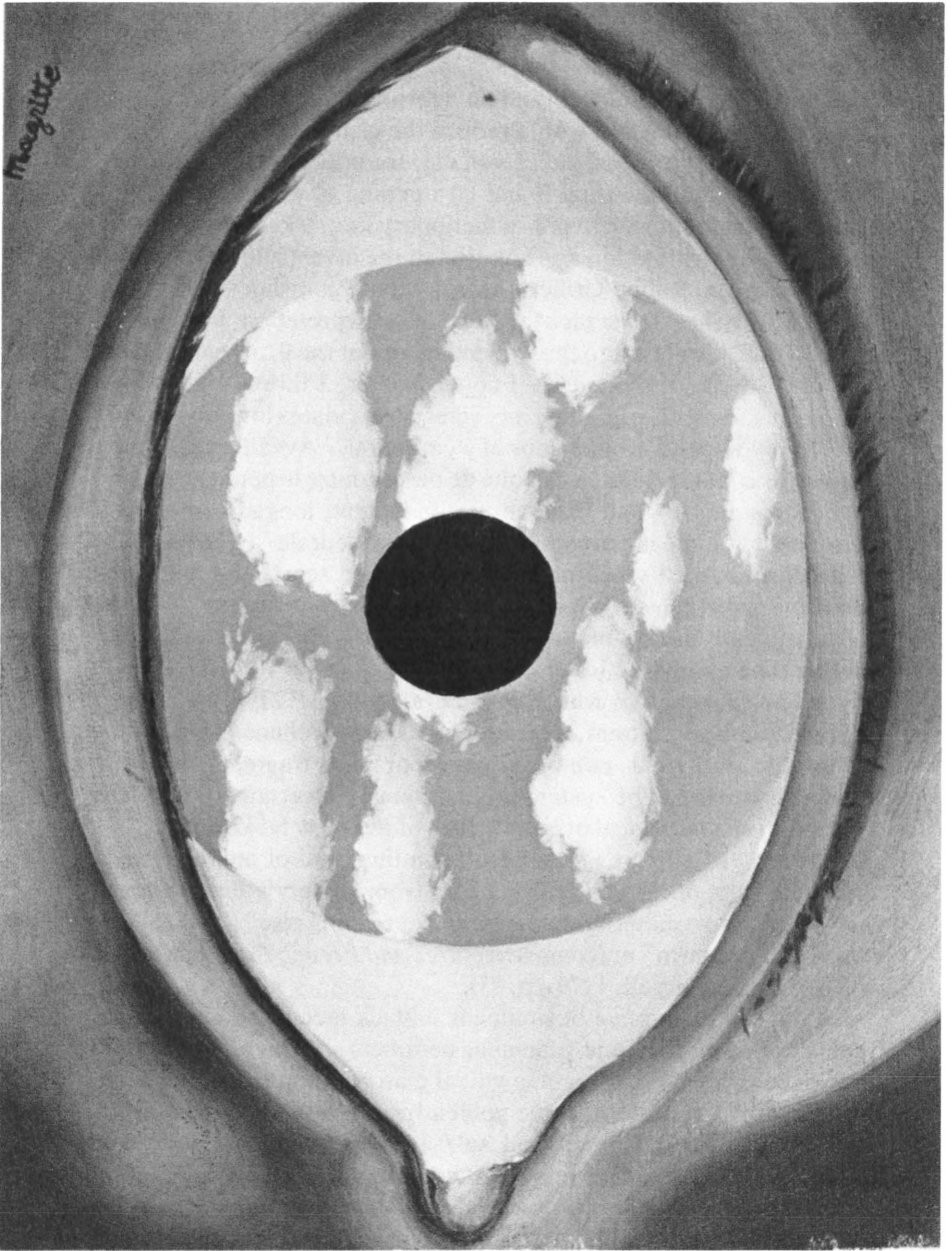


Figure 16: *The False Mirror*

Robbe-Grillet alias Rem Brandt in which words torn from *Le Monde* are heightened and haunted with red images and given to be read in the problematical visual-verbal relation where an N, an *aïne*, breathes (ha-leine) new life into the temptation to be both painter and novelist or novelist-painter. "Browsing through a retrospective of a painter he loves, the writer immediately chooses objects and stories from it. The figures come alive . . . etcetry, etcetry.

Figure 1: Detail of Magritte's *Two Mysteries*, in Suzi Gablick, *Magritte* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1970), Pl. 110.

Figure 2: *The Critic Sees* in Max Kozloff *Jasper Johns* (New York: Abrams, 1969). Pl. 28. All reproductions of the artist's work are from Kozloff except where noted.

Figure 3: *Target with 4 Faces*, Kozloff, Pl. 2.

Figure 4: *White Numbers*, Kozloff, Pl. 16.

Figure 5: *Gray Alphabets*, Kozloff, Pl. 8.

Figure 6: Detail of *Light Bulb*, Kozloff, Pl. 45.

Figure 7: *Painted Bronze*, Kozloff, Pl. 25.

Figure 8: *Study for Skin*, Kozloff, Pl. 38.

Figure 9: *Figure 7*, in *Jasper Johns: Prints, 1960-1970* (New York: Praeger, 1970), Pl. 101.

Figure 10: *Flashlight*, Kozloff, Pl. 72.

Figure 11: *The Great War*, Gablick, Pl. 144.

Figure 12: *High School Days*, *Jasper Johns: Prints, 1960-1970*, Pl. 118.

Figure 13: *0 Through 9*, Kozloff, Pl. 44.

Figure 14: *0 Through 9*, Kozloff, Pl. 27.

Figure 15: *Passage II*, Kozloff, Pl. 48.

Figure 16: *The False Mirror* in Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Belle captive: roman* (Lausanne & Paris: La Bibliothèque des arts, 1975), p. 63.

Figure 17: Robbe-Grillet, *Peinture*, Supplément aux Nos. 16-17 d'*Obliques* (1978), pp. 240-41.