

**INTIMATE CODES OF HEAVEN AND HELL:
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, JASPER JOHNS, AND DANTE
ALIGHIERI'S *COMMEDIA***

KRISTEN KEACH, James Madison University

Art historians have studied Robert Rauschenberg's engagement with Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* through his *Inferno* series, yet Jasper Johns's interest in the Florentine poet remains unexplored. By examining Johns's *Targets* through the lens of the *Commedia* and within the context of his relationship with Rauschenberg, this paper considers Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series as a means of communicating with and responding to Johns's *Targets*, which, I argue, may be inspired by Dante's *Paradiso*. I further demonstrate how both Rauschenberg and Johns encoded symbols and information about their homosexual relationship in these works, an argument based on reception theory and a call-and-response dialogue between the two artists. This essay contextualizes the time period in which these artists lived and the age of McCarthyism, the relevance of Dante in 1950s America, and the desire of Rauschenberg and Johns to turn to the *Commedia*, a journey driven by love, as inspiration for their encrypted, "romantic" dialogue.

Keywords: Rauschenberg, Johns, Targets, encoded dialogues

In a brief but intense bond as partners and collaborators between 1953 and 1963, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns created a dialogue in art. Having lived in the same building in New York, Rauschenberg and Johns fostered similar creative projects, at times even imagining artistic interpretations of the same literary text. Art historians have studied Rauschenberg's intermedial reading of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* through the artist's *Inferno* series (1958-1960), yet Johns's interest in the Florentine poet has remained largely unexplored. This essay analyzes Johns's *Targets* (1955-1960) through an engagement with Dante's *Commedia*, specifically *Paradiso*. In light of the exchange between Rauschenberg and Johns, I argue that the two artists developed a call-and-

response¹ to Dante's text to encode a simultaneously private and public dialogue about their intimate relationship.²

In the case of Johns, I argue that his engagement with Dante was also covert, encoded, and hermetic. Cryptography, or subtle secrets and remarks concealed within literary or artistic works, is the study of texts and artworks that requires outside knowledge to interpret the under-the-surface meaning embedded within a text.³ To elaborate on the cryptic, encoded Dantean messages present in these artists' works, I will begin by briefly discussing Marcel Duchamp's role as direct guide to Walter Arensberg's cryptographic reading of Dante. Because Rauschenberg and Johns enveloped elements from their personal lives and relationship into their art, the viewer of their works is expected to acquire specialized knowledge in order to decode them. My reading of Rauschenberg's and Johns's works thus relies theories on reception, dissemination, and interpretation within their respective works.⁴ Regardless of whether the image is a true-to-life visual transcription of the text, or presented in ambiguous terms, the work itself—the artist's interpretation of the literary or artistic work—and the viewer's expectations and observations of the image combine to create a "horizon of expectation"⁵ within a singular frame. By utilizing reception theory as Rauschenberg's and Johns's creative and dynamic approach to literature and art, the modernized *Inferno* drawings by Rauschenberg and the multi-layered subject of Johns's *Targets* develop

¹ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry," *Black Music Research Journal* 11 no. 2 (Autumn, 1991), 277. According to Floyd, call-and-response relies on specialized knowledge, encoded messages, and audience interaction to assert a conversation between the work and the community. A popular phenomenon within the New York music scene of the 1950s and 1960s, it is likely Rauschenberg and Johns were very familiar, if not a part of, this type of artistic exchange.

² Martin Duberman, "Is There Room for Privacy on the Canvas?," *New York Times*, 7 September 1997, section 2, 89; Ed Krěma, *Rauschenberg / Dante: Drawing a Modern Inferno* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 73.

³ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁴ Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Washington D.C: The Trustees of the National Gallery of Art, 1961), 59-60; Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Ed.): Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (London: Hutchinson, 1972-79), 128-38; Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward and Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception," in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180-96.

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 269.

another hidden level of meaning in response to Dante's *Commedia*, for they become visual allegories for expressing love during a particularly difficult historical-cultural moment.

One of Rauschenberg's initial drawings for his *Inferno* series that exemplifies an implicit dialogue of exchange between Rauschenberg and Johns is *Canto V: Circle Two, The Carnal Lovers* (fig. 1). The driving force in this *canto* in Dante's poem is: "La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, / mena li spirti con la sua rapina; / voltando e percotendo li molesta" (*Inf.* 5.31-33)⁶, as an eternal punishment for those deemed lustful on earth.



Figure 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canto V: Circle Two, the Carnal Lovers*, from *XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, 1958-1960, solvent transfer drawing, pencil, gouache, and colored pencil on paper, 14 ½ x 11 ½ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image via Artstor.

⁶ Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88.

In Rauschenberg's representation, in the top left corner, one sees a collection of images including an "X," a bull's head, and an athlete's cleated foot and leg. Standing next to this accumulation of objects is the figure of a towel-clad, non-distinct man, who is centrally located above the main focus on the scene: a large, roughly sketched, circular form with various figures—a reference to the silent screen icon Theda Bara as Cleopatra, an image of a carved faced depicting an Assyrian courtesan which appeared in *Life* magazine, and the running figure of playwright Eugene O'Neill—⁷ rapidly traced within the circle's orbit. To further highlight the central cyclone, Rauschenberg accentuates the outer most part of the circle with shades of yellow, red, and blue. The rotational movement the viewer's eye must follow as they attempt to unveil the collection of figures within the tornado ultimately drives the viewer's focus toward the eye of the whirlwind. It is there that Rauschenberg carefully inserts a five-ringed target. As I will show, the insertion of the target is not accidental, but rather an encoded response and engagement with his lover, Johns, and his well-established *Targets* from roughly the same moment, that activates and invites the viewer to decode the scene presented through a new lens.

1950s-1970s: From the Age of McCarthyism to the 700th Anniversary of Dante's Birth

Like Dante, Rauschenberg and Johns worked in an era of political, economic, and social conflict. As homosexual males, Rauschenberg and Johns faced the difficulties of publicly expressing their love and devotion to one another in a time of great anxiety regarding homosexuality, resulting in the "lavender scare."⁸ Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade against the "homosexual angle" warned of potentially "deviant behavior." McCarthy incited a "witch-hunt" designed to purge the government of any person identified as "breaking" heteronormative codes of conduct.⁹ From 1950 to 1955, newspaper articles, interviews, and publications detailed the campaign, led by McCarthy and Senator Kenneth Wherry, to rid the government or government-run projects, such as the military, of any men deemed "sexual perverts." According to McCarthy's and

⁷ Krěma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 59.

⁸ Jonathan N. Katz, "Johns and Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 190.

⁹ Jonathan N. Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Meridian, 1992), 91-92; Krěma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 72-73.

Wherry's logic, since homosexuals were presumably more susceptible to blackmail, the senators expected that members of the homosexual community would cooperate with foreign Communist and Nazi agents in divulging confidential government information. As such, hesitation to outwardly express one's homosexuality intensified during the 1950s and 1960s, the same period when Johns met, worked closely, and lived with Rauschenberg.¹⁰ Although Rauschenberg and Johns were not publicly condemned, their sexual orientation prevented them from expressing their relationship in an overt manner.¹¹ As Jonathan Katz notes:

But given the content of their references, and the McCarthyite cultural context of the time, it's no wonder that Rauschenberg sought to camouflage his intentions. Queer artists, not surprisingly, did what queers have always done, because it was all they could do, constructing distinctions through the recontextualization of the extant codes of culture in such a way as to carry affections unrecognized under the very nose of dominant homophobic culture.¹²

Rauschenberg and Johns instead turned to their artworks to convey inner emotions, sexuality, and personal life in a cryptographic and indirect mode,¹³ modeling their artistic exchange after public response to the "lavender scare" that was built on notions of espionage, surveillance, and the need for secrecy.

American scholars throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth- centuries retranslated Dante's texts in the hope of identifying deeper layers of meaning within the poet's *Commedia*.¹⁴ By the twentieth-century, Dante Studies in the United States became a regular collegiate curriculum, especially at prominent universities such as Princeton, Yale, or Harvard. At the same time when Johns and Rauschenberg began their personal and professional collaborations, the nation also witnessed a resurgence in Dante Studies. In

¹⁰ Katz, "Johns and Rauschenberg," 194.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jonathan N. Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," *Frauen/Kunst/Wissenschaft* (June, 1998), 2ff; Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 76-77.

¹³ Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 73. Krčma cites a 1977 article by Moira Roth in which she argued that Rauschenberg's, Johns's, John Cage's, and Merce Cunningham's works should be interpreted as responding to the repressive atmosphere of McCarthyism. However, Krčma notes that Roth does not explicitly relate this to the artists' homosexuality, a point which Katz greatly emphasized in his work "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," 24.

¹⁴ Harry Hansen, "Ciardi on Translating Dante; Going All out for Sandburg," *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 1954.

the years leading up to the 700th anniversary of the poet's birth in 1965, the Dante Society of America engaged in many well-publicized activities, including the production of a commemorative postage stamp, publishing an updated concordance to the *Commedia*, hosting symposia and exhibits, and organizing a speaker's bureau.¹⁵ Additionally, non-academic intellectuals formed social clubs to hold and sponsor lectures about Dante's poetry,¹⁶ while many international scholars, writers, artists, and celebrities honored the poet for his contribution to the literary and artistic world.¹⁷ Together, these efforts fostered widespread knowledge and curiosity in Dante and his works across the United States. Following the long-standing tradition of illustrating the *Commedia* since its initial fourteenth-century circulation,¹⁸ throughout the 1950s and 1960s, contemporaries of Rauschenberg and Johns began to receive commissions to visually portray the *Commedia*, the most famous being the 1959 Italian government's commission of Salvador Dalí for a 100-*canto* watercolor series.¹⁹ This is also the moment in which Rauschenberg explicitly, and Johns implicitly, began their unprompted artistic engagement with Dante's poem.

¹⁵ Christian Dupont, "The Dante Society of America," in *Dante Beyond Borders: Contexts and Reception*, eds. Nick Havely, Jonathan Katz, and Richard Cooper (Oxford: Legenda, 2021), xxv. See also Angelina la Piana, *Dante's American Pilgrimage: A Historical Survey of Dante Studies in the United States 1800-1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948); George H. Gifford, "A History of the Dante Society," *Annual Reports of the Dante Society, with Accompanying Papers*, 74 (1956), 3-27; Anthony de Vito, "The First Hundred Years of the Dante Society," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 100 (1982), 99-132; Christian Dupont, "Reading and Collecting Dante in America: Harvard College Library and the Dante Society," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 22 no. 1 (2011), 1-57.

¹⁶ "Nun Will Give Lecture on Dante's 'Divine Comedy,'" *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1952; Paolo Milano, "The Meaning of Dante: DANTE'S DRAMA OF THE MIND: A Modern Reading of the Purgatorio. By Francis Fergusson. 232 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press. \$4. MICHELE BARBI'S LIFE OF DANTE Translated and Edited by Paul G. Ruggiers. 132 pp. Berkeley: University of California Press. \$3," *New York Times*, July 2, 1954; "Dante Alighieri Group to Meet," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1958.

¹⁷ Mare Slonim, "In Remembrance of Dante," *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 1965.

¹⁸ *The Doré Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), v; Charles H. Taylor and Patricia Finley, eds., *Images of the Journey in Dante's Divine Comedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xiii; Hein-Th. Schulze Altcapenberg, *Sandro Botticelli: The Drawings for Dante's Divine Comedy* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000), 28-30; *William Blake's Divine Comedy Illustrations* (New York: Dover Publications, 2008), v.

¹⁹ Georgia Museum of Art, "Dalí Illustrates Dante's 'Divine Comedy.' On View at the Georgia Museum of Art from April 10 to June 19, 2011," Georgia Museum of Art, <http://georgiamuseum.org/about/pressroom-item/dali-illustrates-dantes-divine-comedy-on-view-at-the-georgia-museum-of-art> (accessed May 23, 2022).

Encoded Art and Call-and-Response

Rauschenberg and Johns are not particularly unique in their desire to turn to Dante for their artistic subject matter: from as early as Dante's contemporary moment, the poem enjoyed a long history of reimaginings across various visual media. Given the precarity of circumstances under which Rauschenberg and Johns worked, it seems not surprising that they would encode messages capable of concealing what figures like McCarthy and others deemed devious behavior. Indeed, it was common among modern artists, such as the Cubists, to speak of their paintings as if they could only be decoded by viewers with advanced or specialized knowledge.²⁰ The Cubists, Symbolists, and Surrealists practiced occultism and mysticism within their artworks to explore "an inner reality of self and the world."²¹ Hermeticism in modern art aimed to present a physical world removed from "accepted" reality; this opened the door for artists to encode messages in their works as they "ceased to function within traditional rules."²²

When Johns and Rauschenberg reached their artistic maturity by the 1950s, conversations about modern art often accepted the necessarily hermetic condition of art after Cubism. Though familiar with the idea of hermeticism in modern art, Rauschenberg and Johns did not fully embrace such approaches until they began studying the works of Marcel Duchamp, culminating in their joint meeting with artist in 1959.²³ Duchamp was likely familiar with ideas about the place of hermeticism in modern art through his brothers and connections with the circle of artists known as the

²⁰ Timothy Mitchell, "Bergson, Le Bon, and Hermetic Cubism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 no. 2 (Winter 1977), 179.

²¹ Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art," *Art Journal* 46 no.1 (Spring 1987), 6.

²² Mitchell, 181.

²³ Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle, eds., *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013), 313. Though they did not jointly meet Duchamp until 1959, the two artists were very familiar with Duchamp's works and ideas on conceptual art. Together, Rauschenberg and Johns viewed an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1954, featuring forty-nine of Duchamp's pieces from the Arensberg collection. In the case of Rauschenberg especially, much of his initial introduction to such concepts arose from his friendship with John Cage during their time at Black Mountain College (1951). See Hal Foster, "'Made out of the Real World': Lessons from the Fulton Street Studio," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, eds. Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchardt-Hume (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 93-97.

Puteaux Cubists.²⁴ Within this context, Duchamp introduced Rauschenberg and Johns to alternative means for embedding messages behind the veil of a concrete subject, such as the methodological approach to reading literature proposed by Duchamp's close friend and patron, Walter Arensberg.

Arensberg was a prominent New York art collector and supporter of such artists as Duchamp and Dalí. An English major at Harvard University in the early 1900s, Arensberg became infatuated with Dante's *Commedia*. He studied abroad in Florence with the aspiring intention of learning Italian so that he could retranslate the poem.²⁵ However, rather than produce a standard Italian-to-English translation of the fourteenth-century *Commedia*, Arensberg offered a new way of reading Dante, a cryptographic one, and focused his efforts on interpreting the encrypted symbols he felt were present throughout the *Commedia*. According to Arensberg's *the Cryptography of Dante*, the poet veiled his love for his mother through the guise of Beatrice, while simultaneously aligning himself with Christ and Beatrice with Mary, the Virgin mother of God.²⁶ Arensberg utilized cryptography as a vehicle to promote his Freudian interpretation and circulated the notion that Dante's reader required specialized knowledge in order to decode this hidden revelation. Arensberg's interest in cryptography began while he was studying William Stone Booth's *Some Acrostic Signatures of Francis Bacon*. The methodological approach gleaned by Arensberg in regard to Bacon's work thus inspired him to read Dante's *Commedia* through a similar lens.²⁷ Beatrice Wood, an artist and

²⁴ Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996), 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 144; Alison Johnson, *Wallace Stevens: A Dual Life as Poet and Insurance Executive* (Toronto: Cumberland Press, 2012), 90.

²⁶ Francis Naumann, *New York Dada: 1915-1923* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1994), 32.

²⁷ Francis Naumann, "Cryptography and the Arensberg Circle," *Arts Magazine* 55 (May 1977), 127-33; Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, eds., *The Duchamp Effect* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 148. Although I discuss Arensberg's interest in Dante as stemming from his relationship with Booth, Arensberg's interest may have developed from his engagement with philosopher Charles S. Peirce's ideas of semiotics. Peirce, best known for his theory of semiotics and pragmatic philosophy, taught at Harvard University and was an instructor during Arensberg's time there. According to Yvan Beaulieu in "Peirce's Contribution to American Cryptography," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 44 no. 2 (Spring 2008), 263-69, Peirce was fascinated with cryptography and attempted to invent a cryptosystem that could encode and decode messages. Whether or not Arensberg studied with Peirce, it is likely he was familiar with Peirce's work, given the revolutionary ideas put forth by Peirce in the field of cryptography and Arensberg's later-known interest in the subject.

friend of Duchamp, recalled meeting with Arensberg²⁸ and described his fascination with poetry as being “a pseudo-scholarly obsession, which involved searching for the hidden meanings and symbols that he thought were encoded, cryptographically, in the works of Dante and Shakespeare.”²⁹

Because of Arensberg’s close connection to Duchamp, Duchamp may have communicated Arensberg’s cryptographic theories regarding Dante to Rauschenberg and Johns, considering Duchamp would have known about Rauschenberg’s earliest plans for his *Inferno* series at the time of their meeting.³⁰ Early on in their artistic careers, Rauschenberg and Johns encoded “hermetic” messages into their art for audiences to decipher. In the case of Rauschenberg especially, Katz argued that this tendency expressed itself most visibly in messages inspired by homosexual subcultures.³¹ While Katz and other scholars suggest that Rauschenberg and Johns may make reference to one another within some of their most iconic pieces, the possibility of an encoded dialogue between Rauschenberg and Johns regarding their homosexual relationship via art has remained unnoticed. In fact, Johns claims that ideas of mutual interest to him and Rauschenberg simultaneously may have appeared in their respective works while they lived and worked together.³²

It is my intention to expand upon previous scholarly work by exploring how Rauschenberg’s *Inferno* series and Johns’s *Targets* not only communicate encoded messages but, in order to create a dialogue between these two series, also rely on the African American musical tradition of call-and-response. Call-and-response derives from the musical trope that provides African-American music with semantic value.³³ Originally used as a storytelling device, call-and-response has been adapted for other forms of art, such as

²⁸ Tomkins, 178.

²⁹ Francis Naumann, “Walter Conrad Arensberg: Poet, Patron, and Participant in the New York Avant-Gard, 1915-20,” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 76 no 328 (Spring 1980), 27; Tomkins, 178.

³⁰ Molly Nesbit and Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, “Concept of Nothing: New Notes by Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg,” in *The Duchamp Effect*, 146. Nesbit and Sawelson-Gorse discuss Arensberg’s desire to teach Duchamp how to make cryptic phrases applicable to his art. They further discuss Arensberg’s interest in applying cryptography and language to describe other modern artists’ paintings, such as the works of the Gleizes.

³¹ Katz, “Johns and Rauschenberg,” 202. One example Katz focuses on is Rauschenberg’s work entitled *Bantam* (1954).

³² Jasper Johns, personal email to artist, December 8, 2021.

³³ Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 277.

literature.³⁴ When commenting on something new, the “call” is released. The “response” relies on the pre-existing “call” and attempts to communicate with the “call” in a back-and-forth, cryptic pattern.³⁵ As described by Samuel Floyd, “for example, when pen-dular thirds are used in an original melodic statement, they may constitute a ‘Call’; when they are used to comment upon, or ‘trope,’ a pre-existing use of such thirds, they can be said to constitute a ‘Response,’ or Signifying revision.”³⁶ Unlike the musical trope in which call-and-response most often appears as a collaborative expression of the community, when visual artists enter into a call-and-response, they still maintain a level of self-sufficiency and autonomy over their subjects. At the same time, there is shared a visual language that is created between each artist that unites, connects, and prompts the other to develop further a subtle artistic dialogue via subject, style, color, or medium.³⁷

The choice of Rauschenberg and Johns to initiate a call-and-response dialogue between their works aligns with earlier examples of this type of messaging between artists, such as we may find between Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Scholars such as Yves-Alain Bois and Jack Flam have suggested that, rather than exhibiting an extremely competitive rivalry, Matisse and Picasso develop a call-and-response via art that is rooted in friendship. According to Bois and Flam, Picasso adopted and advanced the painting style, artistic language, and color scheme of Matisse in his painting *Woman with Yellow Hair* (1931), a work devoted to and representative of Picasso’s female muse, Marie-Therese Walter. Matisse “responds” to Picasso’s “call” by reinventing and reproducing Picasso’s painting under the title of *The Dream* (1940), though this time presenting Matisse’s female muse, Lydia Delectorskaya.³⁸ For

³⁴ Maggie Sale, “Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Tradition and *Beloved*,” *African American Review* 26 no. 1 (Spring 1992), 41.

³⁵ Floyd, “Ring Shout!,” 278.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Wall text, *Call/Response: Hannah Barnes and Susan Klein* by Kim Grant, USM Art Gallery, Gorham, ME, Oct. 14 – Dec. 7, 2021.

³⁸ Yves Alain-Bois, *Matisse and Picasso* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 16-23; Jack Flam, *Matisse and Picasso: the Story of their Rivalry and Friendship* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2003). Several scholars, including Bois, and Elizabeth Cowling in *Matisse Picasso* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), view the relationship between Matisse and Picasso through the lens of a heated rivalry as a possible explanation for a dialogue within their artworks. However, Bois and Flam further analyze the call-and-response between Matisse and Picasso through three additional angles outside of a deep-rooted rivalry and conclude that the relationship between such works as Picasso’s *Woman with Yellow Hair* (1931) and Matisse’s two versions of *The Dream* (1935; 1940), though most especially the 1940 version, promote a communicative discourse rooted

Matisse and Picasso, the mutual borrowing of each other's subjects, styles, and color palettes ultimately sparks a conversation driven by friendship and love. In Rauschenberg's *Inferno* drawings and Johns's *Targets*, there, too, exists an understated and reciprocal adaptation of each other's subjects and color scheme. At the same time, the distinct stylistic approaches of each series preserve the artists' individuality and autonomy over the subject matter.

Just as call-and-response depends upon the ability of a work to adapt to new meanings based on certain circumstances, constructed and deconstructed as part of the ongoing dialogue between the creator and the audience, so too do Dante's addresses to the reader encourage audience participation in comprehending the subtle nuances embedded within.³⁹ In the case of Rauschenberg's and Johns's paintings, each series emerged as part of a dialogic call-and-response in which installations of the *Inferno* series were inspired by and stimulated further production of the *Target* series. Neither Rauschenberg nor Johns received a commission for these two series; the artists' decision was an autonomous one to turn to Dante to express their journey in love with one another across art. Although the *Commedia* possesses multiple layers of meaning, love is the central axis upon which the poem turns. As Dante moves through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, he continually strives to reach the purest form of love—God's love—and to be reunited with his beloved Beatrice. The model of call-and-response between creator and interlocutor, instigated by Dante's epic, thus inspires Johns to put out the "call" with his initial *Targets* that will spark Rauschenberg's "response" with his *Inferno* series and Johns return to the *Targets* during this time.

Rauschenberg and his early Inferno Series

In 1949, Rauschenberg enrolled in Black Mountain College, a site which would play a critical role in his artistic development. Located in Black Mountain, North Carolina and founded in 1933, Black Mountain College was an experimental institution that focused on new creative learning tools. Until its closing in 1957, Black Mountain College became a mecca for artists, writers, dancers, musicians,

in friendship. For more on the idea of call-and-response in modern art, I refer to Dr. James Housefield's unpublished work on Matisse and Picasso.

³⁹ Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy*, 13. For more on Dante's addresses to the reader, see Erich Auerbach, "Dante's Addresses to the Reader," *Romance Philology VII* (1953-54), 268-271; Leo Spitzer, "The Addresses to the Reader in the *Commedia*," *Italica XXXII* no. 3 (1955), 153.

and playwrights, with several prominent modern artists listed on the faculty to facilitate an environment for artistic inspiration and genius. Among the most prominent faculty members were Josef Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and visiting lecturers such as Albert Einstein, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson, each of whom elevated the status of the school and drew many international artists and students across disciplines to study there, including Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly.⁴⁰

Though initially the College emphasized painting, drawing, and subjects traditionally defined as “fine art,” in its final years of instruction, there was greater focus on literature, particularly with interdisciplinary approaches that engaged the arts.⁴¹ During the time Rauschenberg attended, it is likely that he was exposed to Dante: a copy of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was catalogued among the books kept in the Black Mountain College library, and it is quite possible that Black Mountain College may have offered a course on Dante, especially in light of the fact that Olson and Williams, both Dante scholars, taught several courses during this period.⁴² Later in their careers, both Rauschenberg and Twombly, his former lover, created works inspired by *Inferno*, which may be attributed to their shared education at the College, in addition to a general recognition of Dante’s larger cultural significance.⁴³

After attending Black Mountain College, Rauschenberg and Twombly moved to Rome in the Fall of 1952.⁴⁴ Upon their arrival, Twombly entered the American Academy in Rome School of Fine Arts to further develop his artistic practice.⁴⁵ More consistent exposure to Dante likely occurred while living in Italy—both by virtue of the academic culture of the American Academy in Rome and the close working and romantic relationship between Rauschenberg and Twombly. Beyond Rome, too, Dantean influence likely emerged in Florence, where Rauschenberg traveled to

⁴⁰ Mary E. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 4-15, 51, 122, 146. Olson would eventually become the rector in 1953 (174).

⁴¹ Leverett T. Smith, *Art and Education at Black Mountain College 1933-1956* (Rocky Mount: Rocky Mount Arts and Craft Center, 1978), 1; Harris, *The Arts*, xv.

⁴² Smith, *Art and Education*, 28.

⁴³ Katz, “Johns and Rauschenberg,” 197. Although Rauschenberg and Twombly were lovers for a time, the two artists lived separate lives, as Katz has chronicled.

⁴⁴ Basualdo and Battle, eds., *Dancing Around the Bride*, 312.

⁴⁵ American Academy in Rome, “Remembering AAR Trustee Cy Twombly (1928-2011),” American Academy in Rome, <http://www.aarome.org/news/features/2011-07-07> (accessed March 23, 2022).

exhibit his work.⁴⁶ After six months in Italy, however, the relationship between Rauschenberg and Twombly ended, and Rauschenberg returned to New York in spring 1953 to pursue other projects.⁴⁷ Shortly after exhibiting some of his work at a gallery in late 1953, Rauschenberg met Johns through a mutual friend while Johns worked at the Marboro Book Shop. Upon their first meeting, Johns regarded Rauschenberg as “the first person I knew who was a real artist.”⁴⁸

After securing a reputation as a “playful” artist, with the production of such works as his “combines”—a hybrid technique that joined Duchamp’s notion of the readymade with painted surfaces—Rauschenberg embarked on an overtly intellectual, serious project that would last from March 1958 to November 1960.⁴⁹ Scholars universally acknowledge that Johns was well read and had greater literary interests than Rauschenberg and often read poetry to Rauschenberg in their studios.⁵⁰ Some scholars have suggested that Rauschenberg had never read Dante prior to beginning this project, but took inspiration from Sandro Botticelli’s *Divine Comedy* drawings (c. 1480-1495) when he began his own series of works inspired by *Inferno*.⁵¹ Calvin Tomkins noted in a biographical essay composed for the *New Yorker* that Rauschenberg, “has seen one or two of Botticelli’s drawings” and that the artist valued the “intimate quality” of Botticelli’s work.⁵² In fact, Johns has recently stated that he believes it was his 1947 edition of Dante’s *Inferno*, published by Lear and illustrated with Botticelli’s drawings, that additionally prompted Rauschenberg’s interest in Dante and to begin his own illustrations thereof.⁵³ At the same time, by 1955 Johns already began working on some of his *Targets*, one of many subjects to which Johns would return throughout his career, most especially between 1958-1960, further spurring Rauschenberg to enter into the world of Dante.

Scholarly attention on Rauschenberg’s *Inferno* series of thirty-four drawings, one for each *canto* of the first canticle of the

⁴⁶ Katz, “Johns and Rauschenberg,” 197; Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2013), 317.

⁴⁷ Basualdo and Battle, eds., *Dancing Around the Bride*, 309-313.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁴⁹ Sam Hunter, *Rauschenberg: Works, Writings and Interviews*, (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2006), 76; Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 332.

⁵⁰ Katz, “Johns and Rauschenberg,” 205.

⁵¹ “Dante Alighieri Group to Meet,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1958; Mary L. Kotz, *Rauschenberg / Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 98.

⁵² Krěma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 45.

⁵³ Jasper Johns, personal email to artist, December 8, 2021.

Commedia, has focused primarily on its stylistic features, emphasizing its relationship to mass media particularly in light of the emerging public interest in Pop Art.⁵⁴ Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series employed a new technique that came to be known as "transfer drawings," in which watercolor and pencil hatchings are combined to create images of painful distress in each circle of Hell represented. Once Rauschenberg designed the background, he transferred commercial images from popular culture (e.g., quotidian advertisements in magazines and pictures of contemporary political figures) onto the paper using a chemical solvent, thus modernizing Dante's medieval allegories for a contemporary audience.⁵⁵

Dante selected both contemporary historical figures as well as classical and biblical figures to condemn eternally to Hell. Unlike Dante, however, most of Rauschenberg's characters are non-specific, suggesting that each soul in the artist's *Inferno* series could possibly represent any figure from Dante's poem. One exception, however, is Rauschenberg's repeated use of Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic Party candidate for President in 1952 who was later appointed Ambassador to the United Nations by John F. Kennedy, for the image of Virgil. Rauschenberg also included other political figures in his vision of Hell, such as Richard Nixon, the governor and candidate for the United States presidency at the time, and John F. Kennedy as one of the many avatars for Dante, in his drawing for *Canto XII: Circle Seven, Round 1: the Violent against Neighbors*.⁵⁶ With Stevenson, Rauschenberg chose an important, immediately recognizable political figure of the time who, like Virgil, never reached his lofty objective. It was well known at the time that Stevenson faced many rumors that he was homosexual;⁵⁷ his

⁵⁴ Along with Mary Kotz and Sam Hunter, Walter Hopps, *Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1997), 156, acknowledges Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series for its stylistic contributions of his transfer technique; however, none analyze the *Inferno* series within the greater context of Johns. While Jonathan Katz discusses Rauschenberg's references to homosexual subculture throughout his *Inferno* series, he does not conclude that Rauschenberg directly alludes to Johns as being a character in his *Inferno* series. Additionally, Catherine Craft briefly alludes to Rauschenberg's engagement with social and political issues of the time in her book *Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Phaidon, 2013). See also Andrew Forge, *Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Abrams, 1972), Gerald Silk, *Automobile and Culture* (New York: Abrams, 1984), and Graham Smith, "'Visibile Parlare': Rauschenberg's drawings for Dante's *Inferno*," *Word & Image* 32 no. 1 (2016): 76-103.

⁵⁵ Kotz, *Rauschenberg / Art*, 98-99; Hunter, *Rauschenberg*, 76.

⁵⁶ Ed Krčma, "'To Use the Very Last Minute in My Life': The Dante Drawings and the Classical Past," in *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 168.

⁵⁷ Katz, "Johns and Rauschenberg," 194; Dudley Clendinen, "J. Edgar Hoover, 'Sex Deviates' and My Godfather," *New York Times*, November 25, 2011.

appearance in Rauschenberg's series as a figure of classical authority and poetic-moral guidance is thus suggestive.

In regard to the other symbols hidden in Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series, it has been addressed how Rauschenberg uses homoerotic imagery to encode his own sexuality in this work. As Laura Auricchio and Katz suggest, Rauschenberg's use of a towel-clad man from a golf advertisement for his figure of Dante serves as a symbol inherently linked to homoeroticism. Because of the popularity of locker room imagery in 1950s and 1960s American society, these images allowed the viewer to engage with the male physique in a commercialized setting, especially as the waist-tied towel draws the viewer's attention to a particular part of the body.⁵⁸ Additionally, Auricchio identifies the towel-clad imagery as a symbol linked to twentieth-century bathhouse culture. Bathhouses were prevalent in 1950s New York and could serve as gathering places for homoerotic encounters.⁵⁹

Also at play in this image is the figure of the physical "everyman" from sports advertisements, which recall similar propagandistic images of masculine athleticism that were widely circulated in anticipation of the 1960 Summer Olympic Games. Though the Olympics became a site where Cold War competition played out, Auricchio and Katz additionally identified the Olympic references and players featured in Rauschenberg's Hell as a cryptographic, homosexual reading of Dante's *Inferno*, such as in Rauschenberg's *Canto XXXI: The Central Pit of Malebolge, the Giants*. Reference to the Olympics and classical Greek and Roman cultures often suggest homosexuality due to the emphasis on the male physique. Various sports, particularly wrestling or boxing, communicated a homosexual context that those with specialized knowledge appreciated as homoerotic art.⁶⁰ Rauschenberg's Dante thus becomes a double entendre, signifying at once an encoded homoerotic image and a robust heterosexual male.

Upon closer look, however, the nondescript "everyman" Rauschenberg employs for the figure of Dante throughout much of this series shares certain similarities with the figure of Johns.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Katz, "Johns and Rauschenberg," 191; Laura Auricchio, "Lifting the Veil: Robert Rauschenberg's *Thirty-Four Drawings for Dante's Inferno* and the Commercial Homoerotic Imagery of 1950s America," in *The Gay 90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Formations in Queer Studies*, eds., Carol Siegel, Ellen E. Barry, and Thomas Foster (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 127-31.

⁵⁹ Auricchio, "Lifting the Veil," 129-131.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 119-133.

⁶¹ Kotz, *Rauschenberg / Art*, 98; Katz, "Johns and Rauschenberg," 191.

Due to the transfer technique, Dante's face is slightly blurred, his identity masked with only partial features recognizable: dark hair, fair skin, and an average physique—incidentally, features shared by Johns. Rauschenberg does not follow the Dantean example and does not include himself as the pilgrim-poet on his journey through *Inferno*. The viewer must consider Rauschenberg as an outsider, protecting and assessing the scene from an observational point of view. Beatrice accepted this role in Dante's *Inferno*. She encouraged Dante to follow Virgil on a journey through Hell and Purgatory, leading him to continue through Paradise with her, his muse and final guide.⁶² The figure of the female muse from Dante is then transferred onto a male body, Rauschenberg, as he returns the call to his artistic and amorous lover to stimulate their collaborative journey.

Returning to Rauschenberg's drawing *Canto V: Circle Two, the Carnal Lovers* (fig.1), we are able to locate a cross-artistic dialogue between this series and Johns's *Targets*. It is within this circle of Hell that the pilgrim-poet and the reader encounter some of the most famous characters within the *Commedia*: Paolo and, more importantly, Francesca, the two lovers tempted by love's fatal literary kiss, whose tragic fate inspires pity. Dantean imagery is blurred into the collection of images located in the top left corner through the transfer technique, whereby the figure of Minos wrapping himself around the souls in judgment of where they belong in Hell appears in the blending of the "X," the bull, and the leg. The figure of the bull, in particular, recalls Dante's animal rhetoric (e.g., "Stavvi Minòs orribilmente, e ringhia" (*Inf.* 5.4)⁶³ used to describe Minos' behavior. The "X" may communicate that someone, perhaps the small figure with his arms raised in fright within this closed figural group, will be sent to *Canto X*, home to Dante's heretics and Epicureans.⁶⁴

Next to these figures is the image which represents Dante, who rests above a large whirlwind (again recalling the "bufera infernal"). Within the whirlwind, Rauschenberg relies on figures from popular culture to serve as substitutes for some of Dante's identifiable members of this circle—Theda Bara becomes Cleopatra, the sculptural Assyrian courtesan stands in for Semiramis, and

⁶² Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy*, 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁴ If we read the "X" located above the whirlwind as an invitation to turn to Rauschenberg's drawing for *Canto X: Circle Six, the Heretics*, we similarly find the inclusion of a target in the bottom left corner of the page.

Eugene O'Neill adopts the persona of Tristan.⁶⁵ Yet, these figures are interspersed among a throng of unidentifiable bodies that overwhelm the central part of the scene. Though the cyclone muddles most of the scene's specificity, the viewer captures the faint image of two souls repeated within the middle of the whirlwind and outside the tornado. The spatial centrality of these two figures recalls the thematic centrality of *Canto V*'s Paolo and Francesca. Once again, the pencil marks of the transfer technique allow the whirlwind to continuously move in static space and time, creating the image of its perpetual revolution on the paper.

Not only does Rauschenberg include the image of the tornado in his representation of Dante's second circle, but as the sketch marks lighten toward the center, the eye of the tornado emerges in the likeness of a target. This detail is significant for considering the call-and-response dialogue between Rauschenberg and Johns, since the target at the center of the tornado appears identical to those painted by Johns and contains the exact number of rings Johns chose to feature in his *Target* images. Rauschenberg does not always include the towed Dante in each transfer drawing. However, this figure does appear in his *Canto V*. As mentioned earlier, since this towed figure could represent Johns, it is appropriate to include it in *Canto V*, the circle for lustful lovers. Rauschenberg and Johns often hermetically encoded same-sex references to one another throughout their artwork, in contrast to the artist Jess whose references to his own homosexuality were more overt.⁶⁶ It would seem natural for Rauschenberg to encode references to Johns in the circle of Hell that Dante assigned to transgressive, erotic lust. Though Dante claims that this circle is: "Intesi ch'a così fatto tormento / enno dannati i peccator carnali" (*Inf.* 5.37-38),⁶⁷ Rauschenberg re-writes Dante's "peccator carnali" as "Carnal *Lovers*" (emphasis mine) in the title of this work, transforming the fourteenth-century Italian sin into a further embedded call to his love affair with Johns.

In fact, early in the series, Rauschenberg often includes references to Johns's most famous works, such as his *Canto VI: Circle Three, the Gluttons* (fig. 2) and *Canto XIV: Circle Seven, Round Three, the Violent Against God, Nature, or Art* (fig. 3). Dante's *Canto VI* addresses the eternal punishment of the gluttonous,

⁶⁵ Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 59.

⁶⁶ Jonathan N. Katz, *Hide and Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 35.

⁶⁷ Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy*, 88.

damned to forever lie in excrement while “Grandine grossa, acqua tinta e neve / per l’aere tenebroso si riversa; / pute la terra che questo riceve” (*Inf.* 6.10–12).⁶⁸ Rauschenberg’s depiction of Dante’s third circle offers the viewer a tactile experience of scratchy, chaotic lines scattered across the surface as he visualizes the heavy, “muddy” rainfall cast upon the sinners. No bodies can be ascertained, but parts such as hands, eyes, and cartoonish yet horrified faces appear in the harsh background. The viewer also identifies the figure of Cerberus, the three-headed dog, centrally located among the strayed lines and blurred background.



Figure 2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canto VI: Circle Three, the Gluttons*, from *XXXIV Drawings for Dante’s Inferno*, 1958–1960, solvent transfer drawing, pencil, gouache, and colored pencil on paper, 14 ½ x 11 ½ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image via Artstor.

The adrift body parts, in particular the hands, may communicate the idea that gluttony ingests and consumes the world around it—a world perhaps that is uncontrollable and

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

ungraspable.⁶⁹ Although gluttony is a sin distinct from lust, perhaps in this instance Rauschenberg uses gluttony to signify his overabundance of love for Johns. He includes both the numbers two and three printed backward in the image. Perhaps he chose the number three because this is the third circle of Hell; however, why would Rauschenberg also include the backward number two? Perhaps it is an obviously crass and direct reference to the type of excrement present throughout this hellscape.

On the other hand, perhaps it is an allusion to the previous circle, the second circle of Hell, and the importance of Rauschenberg's love for Johns. By the time Rauschenberg completed this drawing in 1958, Johns would have already been associated with his *Numbers* series, and the inclusion of two of Johns's numbers in Rauschenberg's work references Johns's artwork and their relationship.⁷⁰ It is also important to remember that Rauschenberg included inverted numbers in his own works, such as his combine *Collection* (1954/1955).⁷¹ Though Johns was recognized for his *Numbers* series, the reversal and inversion of numbers is not typically found in Johns's works. Thus, the numbers serve as a symbol of mutual influence and an interest shared by the artists that furthers the call-and-response implied by this series. Due to the fact that Rauschenberg includes the homoerotic image of Dante, the Johns surrogate, in his drawings for *Canto V* and *Canto VI*, one can assume these *canti* work hand in hand to respond to Rauschenberg's lover, Johns.

At the same time, if we consider for a moment the importance of numbers and numerology for Dante, Rauschenberg, and Johns,⁷² Rauschenberg appears to emphasize this with

⁶⁹ Carter Ratcliff, "Rauschenberg's Solvent-Transfer Drawings," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 18 no. 2 (May-June 1987), 50.

⁷⁰ Carlos Basualdo and Scott Rothkopf, eds. *Mind / Mirror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 58. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, there is strong evidence to conclude that Johns's *Numbers* are Dantean.

⁷¹ The inversion of numbers and letters by Rauschenberg could also be attributed to his dyslexia. See Ken Gobbo, "Dyslexia and Creativity: The Education and Work of Robert Rauschenberg," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30 no. 3/4 (2010). Additionally, Rauschenberg's interest in numbers may be due to his interest in print culture and the necessary reversals of the medium of print.

⁷² For more on numerology in Dante see: Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938); John La Monte, *The World of the Middle Ages: A Reorientation of Medieval History* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949); Ernst Curtis, "Numerical Composition," in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1953); Charles S. Singleton, "The Poet's Number at the Center," *MLN* 80 (1965), 1-10; Edward

particular importance in these two drawings. Katz discusses the significance of numerology in homosexual culture and explains that the number scale for homosexuality was between zero and six, zero being most heterosexual, and six as the highest level of homosexuality.⁷³ Since Dante places gluttony in *Canto VI*, this would explain why Rauschenberg calls to Johns in the gluttonous realm of Dante's Hell.⁷⁴ The symbol of the target that appears in the circle for Dante's lustful lovers and the heightened attention to the numbers, especially the "six" of *Canto VI*, underscore Rauschenberg's and Johns's intimate desire for one another.

On the surface, *Canto XIV: Circle Seven, Round Three, the Violent Against God, Nature, or Art* might seem a more

Moore, "The DXV Prophecy," in *Studies in Dante, Third Series: Miscellaneous Essays* (New York: Haskell House, 1968); Christopher Butler, *Number Symbolism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); Manfred Hardt, *Die Zahl in der "Divina Commedia"* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1973); Gian Roberto Sarolli, *Analitica della "Divina Commedia"* (Bari: Adriatica, 1974); John MacQueen, *Numerology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985); Manfred Hardt, "Zur Sahlenpoetik Dantes," in *Dante Alighieri 1985: In memoriam Hermann Gmelin*, eds., R. Baum and W. Hirdt (Tübingen, 1985), 149-167; John J. Guzzardo, *Dante: Numerological Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); Guglielmo Gorni, *Lettera nome numero: L'ordine delle cose in Dante* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990); Manfred Hardt, "I numeri e le scritture crittografiche nella *Divina Commedia*," in *Dante e la scienza*, eds., Patrick Boyde and Vittorio Russo (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1995), 71-90; Manfred Hardt, "Dante and Arithmetic," in *The Divine Comedy and the Encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences*, eds., Giuseppe Di Scipio and Aldo Scaglione (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1998), 81-94; Richard Lansing, ed., *The Dante Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Thomas Rendell, "The Numerology of Dante's Divine Vision," *The Explicator* 68 no. 3 (2010), 151-154.

⁷³ Katz, *Hide and Seek*, 34.

⁷⁴ If we recall that Rauschenberg includes a target in both his previous drawing for *Canto V* and in *Canto X*, we are further reminded of the references to Johns and his *Target* series. Dante's sixth circle of Hell is home to the Epicureans and the heretics and includes figures such as Farinata degli Uberti and Guido Cavalcanti's father, Cavalcante de Cavalcanti. Here Dante emphasizes the Augustinian principle that individuals ought to receive punishment for submitting to their carnal impulses as well as for the denial of the immortality of the soul. In Rauschenberg's image, though Farinata in his temporarily open tomb occupies the center of the drawing, the artist includes arrows surrounding this image to guide the viewer's eye down toward the target in the bottom left corner, followed by an arrow that points right, presumably toward the next image. See J. A. Mazzeo, "Dante and Epicurus," *Comparative Literature* 10 (1958), 1-19; André Pézard, "Un Dante épicurien?," in *Mélanges offerts à Étienne Gilson* (Paris: Vrin, 1959), 499-536; Emerson Brown Jr., "Epicurean Secularism in Dante and Boccaccio: Athenian Roots and Florentine Revival," in *Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of Robert Earl Kaske*, eds., Arthur Groos, Emerson Brown Jr., Giuseppe Mazzotta, Thomas D. Hill, and Joseph S. Wittig (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 179-193; Valerio Lucchesi, "Epicurus and Democritus: The Ciceronian Foundations of Dante's Judgment," *Italian Studies* 42 (1987), 1-19; Lansing, ed., *The Dante Encyclopedia*, 347; Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy*, 162.

appropriate choice for Rauschenberg to offer suggestive hints at his relationship with Johns. In this sub-circle, Dante describes the punishment faced by the blasphemers (*Canto XIV*), the sodomites (*Canto XV*), and the usurers (*Canto XVI*), and, according to Ed Krčma, “all of whom chose sterility in life and are now condemned to the Plain of Burning Sand, the aridity of which corresponds to the nature of that choice.”⁷⁵



Figure 3. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canto XIV: Circle Seven, Round 3, the Violent Against God, Nature, and Art*, from *XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, 1958-1960, solvent transfer drawing, pencil, gouache, and colored pencil on paper, 14 ½ x 11 ½ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image via Artstor.

For Dante, the blasphemers, or the violent against God, are naked souls who either lie on the ground, are huddled together, or walk endlessly while “ma più al duolo avea la lingua sciolta. / Sovra tutto 'l sabbion, d'un cader lento, / piovean di foco dilatate falde,

⁷⁵ Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 77.

/ come di neve in alpe senza vento” (*Inf.* 14.27–30).⁷⁶ In an interview with Calvin Tomkins, Rauschenberg claims:

Once I started in on Dante, I found the natural interruptions of living in New York, plus my impatience with the morality in Dante, which I didn’t agree with, forced me into isolation. His morality I had to treat objectively—the self-righteousness, the self-appointed conscience imposing guilt on his friends. He was the author, the hero, and the man who made the world he described. He ran into his teacher, and couldn’t imagine what he was doing in hell! It might not have bothered Dante, but it bothered me.⁷⁷

Although Rauschenberg would not immediately agree with Dante’s moral condemnation of the souls within this sub-circle, he appropriated Dante’s *canto* to encode a message about his relationship with Johns.

Rauschenberg creates a beautifully crafted image of unknown figures floating within the Burning Plain in a blue and yellow background. While some of these figures remain anonymous silhouettes of running fireman Rauschenberg plucked out of an advertisement, others have more discernible features for their faces—shot putter Bill Nieder serves as the head of Dante’s Old Man of Crete and banker Frank L. King, who represents the sin of usury, is found among various businessmen from a photo in *Life* magazine. This juxtaposition joins the perhaps unknown figures of Dante’s past to 1950s American culture of Rauschenberg’s present. There is a capital “C” included on the left next to a swimmer, serving as the contemporary stand-in for Dante’s Capaneus, an exemplary blasphemer who stood in direct defiance against his highest God.⁷⁸ Rauschenberg also includes an imprint of his own foot to signify implicitly his sexuality, though he does not pair himself with any one figure in particular in the drawing.⁷⁹ The fiery crimson foot is traced atop the image of a human body that has been separated down the middle and topped with an augural head whose eyes roll back into their sockets. Rauschenberg additionally includes a series of stylized footsteps as they march from the top left down toward a series of alternating red and white marks along the left side of the

⁷⁶ Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy*, 219.

⁷⁷ Calvin Tomkins Papers, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York (IV.C.19); Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 78.

⁷⁸ Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 78.

⁷⁹ Johns will follow suit and include an imprint of foot in his later work *Memory Piece (Frank O’Hara)* (1961) and a shoe in his work *High School Days* (1969).

page.⁸⁰ Here, there is no representation of Rauschenberg's towel-clad Dante, targets, or numbers. Instead of including these references, Rauschenberg incorporates a faded American flag tucked away in the background.⁸¹ Though the flag is an overt symbol intrinsically linked to American ideals of freedom and justice for all, Rauschenberg's direct incorporation of the flag critiques this notion, particularly in regard to rights and freedoms not granted to the homosexual community as well as ties this imagery to Johns. No longer alluding to Johns's images that could be seen as "Paradisean," Rauschenberg showcases Johns's other iconic images that have no explicit connection to Dante. In his analysis of this transfer drawing in particular, Katz notes:

Rauschenberg outlined his own foot in red, placing it over a transfer drawing of the two men embracing—actually two superimposed photos of divers from *Sports Illustrated* magazine. To the left, there is clearly visible the alternation red and white of an American flag, connected to the image of the foot by a series of finely delineated footsteps. The flag, obviously referencing Jasper Johns, implicates his then lover in this scene of subjective identification with Dante's long-suffering sodomites.⁸²

In this *canto*, Rauschenberg makes a statement regarding his homosexuality, foreshadowing the sin which will be explained by Dante in Canto XV, and takes the opportunity to comment on his current relationship with Johns through the inclusion of an American flag. The blurred vision of the flag, a symbol deeply rooted in American conservative and militaristic values of the 1950s, perhaps additionally references the haunted and threatening forces of the United States government which sought to chase down homosexual men—the contemporary counterparts to those sinners Dante locates in this particular sub-circle of Hell.⁸³ Rauschenberg

⁸⁰ Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 78.

⁸¹ Katz, *Hide and Seek*, 43.

⁸² Ibid, "Lovers and Divers," 30.

⁸³ At the same time, Rauschenberg often referred to war figures, political leaders, and turmoil within his transfer drawings. For instance, the prominent scene of *Canto XXI: Circle Eight, Bolgia 5, the Grafters*, is a group of masked military figures in place of Dante's demons, the Malebranche, who guard the boiling pit awaiting the sinners who extorted others. The leader of this group, Malacoda, is represented by the smiling face of the leader of the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), Patrice Lumumba, situated to the right of his demonic squad and labeled with the letter "M." In the top right corner, Rauschenberg inserts the toweled-clad image of his Dantean figure, while the African American champion athlete Rafer Johnson victoriously leaps in the air, arms raised, to this figure's left—symbolic of the swift galloping movements of the Malebranche. The inclusion of Lumumba and the gas-masked police in

completed these abovementioned images between 1958 and 1959, the same time period in which Johns was concentrating on his *Targets*. Rauschenberg thus uses his *Inferno* series to “respond” to Johns’s *Targets*’ “call/recall” in paradise.

Johns and his initial Targets

Johns’s rise to artistic stardom varied slightly from that of Rauschenberg. The artist grew up in South Carolina and for a short time was raised by his paternal grandparents. His grandmother was an amateur artist who exposed Johns to art by displaying her paintings in their home in the small town of Allendale. After attending several different elementary, middle, and high schools, Johns attended the University of South Carolina for a brief time, where he focused his attention on art, specifically painting, before enrolling in Parsons School of Design in New York. Due to the financial hardships that come with the life of a starving artist, Johns was forced to drop out of Parsons and enlist in the army during the Korean war. However, once discharged, he returned to university and enrolled at Hunter College where he took many different courses in the humanities, including several literature courses. Although it is uncertain if Johns studied Dante in an academic setting, it is likely he encountered Dante while at Hunter College, given that he enrolled in many literature courses and worked at the Marboro bookstore, where Rauschenberg and Johns first met.⁸⁴ Rauschenberg described Johns as, “soft, beautiful, and poetic. He looked almost ill—I guess that’s what I mean by poetic... He read a lot, and he wrote poetry.”⁸⁵ At

Nyasaland demonstrate a reference to the political conflict in the Republic of Congo against Communist Russia that was frequently showcased in American news and media outlets and might offer insight into Rauschenberg’s political beliefs in support of Kennedy’s anti-colonial policy efforts. At the same time, this image more generally connects to the threat posed to Dante as a potential trespasser within Hell to the militaristic threat of crossing enemy lines during times of crisis. As Johns was a soldier in the Korean War and possibly hinted at his time in the army through such subject matter as his targets, flags, and maps, the towel-clad Dante could be now also a soldier, back from the war, reliving the Hell he just witnessed, just like Johns. Rauschenberg carefully inserts a “V” directly below the Dantean guide and to the right of the soldiers, returning the viewer to not only his *Canto V*, but also the dialectic between Rauschenberg and Johns via his *Inferno*’s references to Johns’s “militaristic” yet personal targets and flags. See Kotz, *Rauschenberg / Art*, 99 and Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 452-453. The topic of race in Rauschenberg’s drawings has received little scholarly attention. For a recent discussion on the representation of race in the *Inferno* series, see Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 94-108.

⁸⁴ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 443-456.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 456.

this time, Johns also expressed an interest in Dante, having purchased a copy of the *Divine Comedy* that featured Botticelli's illustrations.⁸⁶

Throughout Johns's career, his technique has most often been celebrated as the defining innovative characteristic of his work. John Cage saw in Johns's painting style a "danger of falling in love" since "the paint is applied so sensually."⁸⁷ Johns's style shares qualities with abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock in terms of the physicality and direct relationship between artist and artwork. Unique to Johns, however, is the layering, waxy, haptic sensation of his encaustic style.⁸⁸ Jeffrey Weiss discusses Johns's technical approach, coupled with the practices and artistic strategies Rauschenberg developed in the latter's new idea of a collage, or "combine" image.⁸⁹ Johns's encaustic technique involves the process of layering paint and oil on top of newspaper, rather than on canvas, to develop a thick, collaged, surface.⁹⁰ Because Johns and Rauschenberg worked and lived near each other during the 1950s and 1960s, especially at the inception of Johns's *Targets*, it is evident Johns influenced Rauschenberg and vice versa.⁹¹

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Johns produced several of his most iconic series of artworks, including *Flags*, *Numbers*, and *Targets*, subjects among which Johns would return repeatedly throughout his career.⁹² Similar to the attention that has been placed on Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series, scholars working with the *Targets* have focused primarily on Johns's encaustic technique, though many works from these early series many have multiple sources of meaning.⁹³ However, George Boudaille considers Johns's interest in the target and "readymade" images as an outlet to "convey a message," whereby the artist uses quotidian subject matter to cryptically distort preconceived notions associated with

⁸⁶ Jasper Johns, personal email to artist, December 8, 2021.

⁸⁷ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 443. Johns destroyed much of his early works prior to 1954; the abovementioned quote describes the paintings and style developed by Johns while in his relationship with Rauschenberg.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 444; Basualdo and Rothkopf, eds. *Mind / Mirror*, 29-30.

⁸⁹ Jeffrey Weiss, *Jasper Johns: An Allegory of Painting, 1955-1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 21.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 22; George Boudaille, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1989), 13.

⁹² Basualdo and Rothkopf, eds. *Mind / Mirror*, 57-60.

⁹³ Many of these early subjects including the targets, flags, and maps may remind the viewer of his time spent in the army. See Robert Morris's chapter "Jasper Johns: The First Decade," in *Have I Reasons: Works and Writings, 1993-2007* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 224-55.

the objects so that they carry underlying layers of meaning.⁹⁴ Hence, Johns could cipher his dialogue with Rauschenberg under the target guise, without exposing their homosexual love affair. Weiss furthers Boudaille's claims by suggesting that Johns adapted the image of the target from Francis Picabia's works. Although Johns did not view the exhibition of Picabia's work in New York, Johns could have acquainted himself with the artist's work, especially due to the relationship between Johns and Duchamp—a close friend also of Picabia. Johns may have adapted Picabia's use of the target as an emblem of a shooting gallery due to his interest in the dichotomy of the target being both a functional object and a visual image that cryptically could hold a myriad of interpretations beneath its outward appearance.⁹⁵ Additionally, the target might recall Johns's time spent in the army, thus implicitly communicating aspects of Johns's personal history behind the veil of the everyday object. At the same time, the commonplace image of the target absorbs the viewer into the canvas so that the viewer may question their own preconception of the object as both everyday objects and as works of art.⁹⁶ Such viewing practices catalyze interpretations of the various layers of meaning based on personal experience on the part of the viewer.⁹⁷

Johns first began his *Targets* in 1955 with the *Target with Plaster Casts* (fig. 4),⁹⁸ in which he presents the viewer with a five-ringed target painted in alternating blue and yellow on a red background. Above the central target are nine boxes with nine different body parts located inside each box. This painting was met with robust controversy at the time of its unveiling for one of the body parts included is a sculpted penis cast from life.⁹⁹ *Target with Plaster Casts* poses a highly sexualized image associated with a quotidian object. Because this work was created before Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series, it could have been the work that initiated the call-and-response between these two artists. While the target image might refer to a military subject, for the artist's references to the *Commedia*, Johns uses the target to convey the concentric spheres of Paradise described by Dante and initially visualized in medieval

⁹⁴ Boudaille, *Jasper Johns*, 10-11.

⁹⁵ Weiss, *Jasper Johns*, 16-17.

⁹⁶ Boudaille, *Jasper Johns*, 17.

⁹⁷ Weiss, *Jasper Johns*, 26-27.

⁹⁸ Another *Target* painting that is of note during this time is Johns's *Target with Four Faces* (1955) in which the artist utilizes the same color scheme as *Target with Plaster Casts* but includes plaster casts of four seemingly identical faces above the encaustic target image.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

manuscripts and such drawings as Botticelli's for *Paradiso*. The nine boxes correspond to the nine spheres of Heaven, while the sexualized body parts hint at rectal imagery, the artist's own sexuality, and his new-found relationship with Rauschenberg.¹⁰⁰



Figure 4. Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955, oil and collage on canvas and wood with objects, 52 x 44 ½ inches. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Image via Artstor.

Dante associated the number nine with Beatrice, along with the Trinity.¹⁰¹ Therefore, the nine boxes may also suggest Beatrice's nine, a symbol of both Dante's love for her and Johns's love for

¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the body parts may refer to glimpses of nudity in the barracks and showers, underscoring the military references within his early works. This may further be seen in his *Target with Four Faces* in which shooting at a target, with heads that lack eyes, refers to blind military obedience. See Morris, 226-227.

¹⁰¹ Frederick W. Locke, "Dante's Miraculous Enneads," *Dante Studies*, with the *Annual Report of the Dante Society* no. 85 (1967), 69.

Rauschenberg.¹⁰² It is of interest that the respective *Canto IX* of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* are laden with erotic references such as: “O voi ch’avete li ’ntelletti sani, / mirate la dottrina che s’asconde / sotto ’l velame de li versi strani” (*Inf.* 9.61-63) or “Di questa luculenta e cara gioia / del nostro cielo che più m’è propinqua, / grande fama rimase; e pria che moia” (*Par.* 9.37-39).¹⁰³ This may further emphasize the importance of nine for Dante and his unrequited love, which perhaps Johns mirrored when designing the nine boxes filled with erotic sculptures. Though his first *Target* appeared in 1955, the *Target* image did not become popular subject matter for Johns to turn to until the end of 1958, the same time when Rauschenberg began his *Inferno* series.

The color scheme of *Target* (fig. 5), which mimics the overall style and color scheme of *Target with Plaster Casts*, is particularly relevant for a homoerotic communicative dialogue. The three primary colors—red, blue, and yellow—are the colors Johns uses throughout his *oeuvre* as visual emblems for Rauschenberg and as a reference to himself, visually connecting the two of them.¹⁰⁴ Johns repurposed the image and color schema of his original target image to establish a connection to *Target with Plaster Casts* but imbued this new target with subtle, cryptic messages about his relationship to Rauschenberg’s *Inferno* series.

Johns’s works “play between secrecy and disclosure that is the essence of the closet,” further suggesting that throughout Johns’s paintings, he transforms his interest in and knowledge of poetry into a “secret and confessional” mode of conveying secrets about himself.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰³ Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy*, 142; For *Inf.* 9.61-63, John Freccero in his “Medusa: the Letter and the Spirit,” *Yearbook of Italian Studies* 2 (1972), 7-10 proposes a reading of these lines as a parallel to Dante’s *rime petrose*, suggesting there is an erotic fixation on the surface of the text versus the spiritual or allegorical meaning veiled beneath. Durling and Martinez support Freccero’s interpretation by adding that the metaphor of “penetrating” a text to understand the inner meaning may be applicable here (150). For *Par.* 9.37-39, the entire *canto* for the sphere of Venus is related to themes of love and courtship, with the particular play on the term *gioia* (jewel) as a reference to the Provençal troubadour term for erotic fulfillment (*joi*). See Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 190, 200.

¹⁰⁴ Katz, *Hide and Seek*, 39. This is not unlike Robert Indiana’s “borrowing” of colors for his initial icon “LOVE” from Ellsworth Kelly, with whom, at that time, he was romantically involved. See Bradford R. Collins, *Pop Art* (New York: Phaidon, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-39. In *Hide and Seek*, Katz analyzes some of Johns’s other works, such as *Tennyson* (1959), as products of his internal feelings, especially romantic ones, toward Rauschenberg (39).



Figure 5. Jasper Johns, *Target*, 1958, oil and collage on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of the Artists. Image via Weiss, *Jasper Johns: An Allegory on Painting, 1955-1965*, 75.

To further this notion, the closet is something individuals protect at the level of the interior, whereas Johns's chosen medium, the space of the canvas, is available for open interpretation by a public viewing audience. Let us recall that the target that stands at the center of the tornado in Rauschenberg's *Canto V* drawing appears similar to Johns's *Target* series. At the same time, if the target imagery evokes Johns's personal history within the army, then a further connection between Johns's images and Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series may be drawn as Rauschenberg subtly alludes to this notion within his various drawings.¹⁰⁶ In this particular case, the primary colors of Johns's *Target* participate in the call-and-response dialectic, as Rauschenberg included a primary color scheme in his vision of *Canto V* for his initial "response" to Johns.

While Dante's *Inferno* is the diametrically opposed inverse of *Paradiso*, these two realms share the same underlying message of love. Throughout *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the pilgrim-poet experiences his journey externally, where he witnesses, and the reader

¹⁰⁶ See footnote 83.

sympathetically may feel, the bodily emotions, physical contortions, and sensations of the souls in each realm.¹⁰⁷ In Paradise, Dante transcends human experience to enter the heavenly realm of God, guided first by Beatrice and then by Saint Bernard. *Paradiso* can only be an imaginative, internal experience because Dante creates an intellectual, cryptic reading of this canticle for his audience.¹⁰⁸ This clarifies the distinction between Rauschenberg's outward, overt expression of *Inferno* versus Johns's secret, internalized vision of *Paradiso*. Rauschenberg presents the part of the poem that reflects bodily experiences and man's natural inclination towards sin and does not have to conceal the source of his communicative dialogue with Johns. Instead, Rauschenberg can explicitly rely on and represent Dante's *Inferno* with the subtle integration of encoded messages to Johns. Johns evokes the world of *Paradiso* in his *Targets*, but keeps his love for Rauschenberg and dialogue with the *Inferno* series encoded behind the target shape.

Since Dante describes Heaven as a series of concentric spheres rotating in a specific order, the target symbolizes the construction of *Paradiso* and was an image already closely aligned with prior representations of Dante's third canticle. It is interesting to note that of the three *cantiche*, the metaphor of the arrow—at times Cupid's arrow—striking a target appears most frequently in *Paradiso*, and often is included in the *canti* that address love (e.g., the sphere of Venus (*Par.* 8.103-105) and Saint John's examination on love (*Par.* 26.22-24)). To extend this comparison further, the inverse of *Inferno V*, *Paradiso V*, describes Dante's journey from the sphere of the Moon to the sphere of Mercury, where the metaphor of an arrow striking a target appears: “e sì come saetta che nel segno / percuote pria che sia la corda queta, / così corremmo nel secondo regno” (*Par.* 5.91-93).¹⁰⁹ Rather than rely on one specific *canto* of *Paradiso*, Johns invokes an abundance of target imagery provided both by Dante's text and earlier visual iconography associated with *Paradiso*. Johns utilizes the theme of *Paradiso* to outwardly express his inner passions, just as Dante does so through his writings. Rauschenberg “responds” to the ultimate act of love,

¹⁰⁷ Lino Pertile, “Introduction to *Inferno*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 67-90; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, “Introduction to *Purgatorio*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 91-106.

¹⁰⁸ Joan M. Ferrante, *The Political Vision of the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 254; Rachel Jacoff, “Introduction to *Paradiso*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 107-124; Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, 12-17.

¹⁰⁹ Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, 108.

Paradiso, with the inverse, *Inferno*, to signify two diametrically opposed worlds colliding cryptographically to express transcendent love.

A Story's End

Though the earlier drawings in Rauschenberg's series include embedded references to Johns and his works, immediately following Rauschenberg's *Canto XIV: Circle Seven, Round 3, the Violent Against God, Nature, and Art*, there is a shift in imagery where Rauschenberg turns away from any specific references to Johns. As Rauschenberg progressed in his series, his relationship with Johns came to an end, after which Rauschenberg relocated to Florida to finish the work.¹¹⁰ According to Auricchio and Katz, Rauschenberg strictly relies on homoerotic imagery devoid of any specific autobiographical significance, such as the Olympic references found in *Canto XXXI: The Central Pit of Malebolge, the Giants* (fig. 6). Within Dante's narrative, as the pilgrim-poet and his guide approach the epicenter of Hell, they see what appears to be a series of towers in the distance, only to discover these "towers" are the Giants and Titans blocking the entrance to the ninth circle. Here, Rauschenberg heavily applies the transfer technique to divide the scene into three registers. In the top register, the towel-clad Dante stands next his guide, now represented as a transferred image of tennis player Ham Richardson. To their right is a large trumpet and chain. The trumpet serves as a reminder of the horn of Nimrod—who builds the Tower of Babel—while the chains signal the giant Ephialtes. In the middle register, Rauschenberg depicts a row of classical arches and an enlarged hand "crushing" a cluster of people in its grip. The arches remind the viewer of the wall on which the pilgrim-poet and his guide stand as they approach the final circle while the hand becomes the hand of Antaeus, who lowers Dante and Virgil into the ninth circle. There is an arrow that points from the hand toward the Olympic winners, implying the downward motion into the final realm of Hell and signaling that these Olympic wrestlers—a sport cryptically entrenched in homoerotic subcultures—represent the Giants of Dante's underworld. The final image included within this register is a transfer drawing of Dyrol Burleson, an exhausted high school athlete whose expressive face

¹¹⁰ Hunter, *Rauschenberg*, 94.

communicates the terror felt by the pilgrim-poet.¹¹¹ Rauschenberg's thematic emphasis on homoeroticism in his works is his way of encoding these drawings with hints solely of his sexuality, rather than of his lover.¹¹²



Figure 6. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canto XXI: the Central Pit of Malebolge, the Giants*, from *XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, 1958-1960, solvent transfer drawing, pencil, gouache, and colored pencil on paper, 14 ½ x 11 ½ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image via Artstor.

Because Rauschenberg deviates from direct connections to Johns that were present in his representations of the early *canti*, at the peak of their relationship, the artists inserted encoded messages

¹¹¹ Krčma, *Rauschenberg / Dante*, 46-49.

¹¹² Katz, "Johns and Rauschenberg," 188-207; Auricchio, "Lifting the Veil," 129.

into their artwork that recall each other's most memorable pieces.¹¹³ For Johns, these would have been his *Targets*, *Numbers*, and *Flags*, which is why Rauschenberg includes targets, numbers, and a flag in his *canti* depicting the symbols of erotic love. As their relationship began to dissipate in the summer of 1959, so too did the implicit "response" to Johns as Rauschenberg's *Inferno* series slowly comes to an end.

Though Johns used several color schemes and types of targets throughout 1955 and 1960, toward the end of his relationship with Rauschenberg, Johns's targets are monochromatic black and white.¹¹⁴ In response to Rauschenberg's lack of references to Johns's works in the later drawings of the *Inferno* series, *Black Target* (fig. 7) demonstrates Johns's transition from an artistic journey motivated by love to an emotional period of resolve and recuperation. In this painting, Johns does not alternate between black and white rings but blends the two colors to produce varying shades of black, white, and grey. While Johns paints with his encaustic technique, *Black Target* is less controlled, witnessed in the paint the artist had allowed to drip between the rings of the target image. *Black Target* corresponds with the final *canti* of Rauschenberg's *Inferno* drawings and represents the final moments of Dante's *Paradiso*. In *Black Target*, Johns's representation of the penultimate *canto* of *Paradiso* turns Dante's vision of God into a fleeting moment of love, presenting a target image devoid of erotic symbolism. Instead of the beatific vision described by Dante, Johns provides the viewer with monochromatic colors that could convey sorrow, remorse, and agony over the loss of love. Johns's *Black Target* follows Dante in a cathartic expression of love that can never be achieved on Earth and realizes that the Heavenly Paradise can only be reached spiritually, a similar conclusion Dante draws in *Paradiso*.¹¹⁵ The dialogue between Rauschenberg and Johns needed to be complicated because it served as an escape from the outside world.¹¹⁶ *Black Target* draws on Johns's experienced emotional distress in a manner that recalls how Rauschenberg's last *Inferno* drawings, such as his drawing for *Canto XXXI*, eliminate references to his specific relationship with Johns to emphasize the theme of homoeroticism more generally.

¹¹³ Katz, "Johns and Rauschenberg," 188-207.

¹¹⁴ Weiss, *Jasper Johns*, 35.

¹¹⁵ Durling and Martinez, eds. and trans., *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, 17.

¹¹⁶ Katz, *Hide and Seek*, 40.



Figure 7. Jasper Johns, *Black Target*, 1959, oil and collage on canvas. Image via Weiss, *Jasper Johns: An Allegory on Painting, 1955-1965*, 82.

Conclusion

It is apparent that Rauschenberg and Johns underlined their intimate relationship in these works through a dialogue with Dante's journey in the afterlife. With Duchamp's guidance, Rauschenberg and Johns followed Arensberg's cryptographic reading of Dante to disclose their homosexual relationship. Rauschenberg included iconic and obvious references to Johns in his circles of Hell, importantly the circles of Hell linked to sins of lust, overindulgence, and same-sex desire. In his "call and recall," Johns adopts the inverse of *Inferno*, *Paradiso*, and answers Rauschenberg's "response" with the target shape and color scheme. As Rauschenberg and Johns leave their romantic past behind, so too do they abandon their artistic dialogue. Rauschenberg completes his *Inferno* series without including further references to Johns, while Johns redirects

his *Targets* to other subjects and conceptual matter.¹¹⁷ Dante's *Commedia* appeals to the lovers as a literary journey that stimulates their desire to express their love and connection. Once that journey ends, Rauschenberg and Johns, like Dante, must cope with the transformation of love that transitions into new phases of their careers and lives.

¹¹⁷ Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 442.