

Jasper Johns' Flag (Moratorium)



Design Statement

Flag (Moratorium) advocates for a particular method of viewing and experiencing the piece. It simultaneously flickers and endures; some people can never see the illusion. Trying harder doesn't always work. Sometimes, one just has to believe that someone else, differently positioned, even if slightly, has been able to catch the difference, the double reality. Like Jasper Johns' flag, toxic exposure presents in fleeting, illusive ways -- to those exposed, and to those responsible for their care and compensation. Toxic exposure, like the traditional red, white and blue flag that flits into view in Johns' Moratorium if looked at just right, is hard to see, validate and endure.

Project Statement

This essay explores how "toxic injury" and "toxic stress" have emerged as categories for clinical and juridical claims making. I am particularly interested in the ways that claims of toxic injury grant recognition and access to resources while at the same time reproducing marginality in difficult-to-diagnose conditions. Given the ways in which toxic subjects are rendered invisible by dominant understandings of transmission, injury, and time, new forms of visualization and reading are called for. The images I include seek to illustrate the various tools patients and clinicians use in order to render toxic conditions visible in both clinical and legal domains.

Caption

Look briefly at John Jasper's Flag (Moratorium) and one will see what appears to be the United States flag, painted in Army greens and orange, with a small pin—or dare I say bullet?—hole at center. Yet glance away after gazing at the painting, and one will "see" the U.S. flag projected in its familiar red, white, and blue, as if materializing out of nowhere. The intensity of the specter directly correlates with how long the viewer has been staring at the original painting. What the painting is remains unclear: is the primary image the orange and green painting or is it the illusion? Which did the artist intend for us to see? Which do we remember? Without guidance, the viewer likely does not know that the illusion even lies beneath (beside?) the painting. Yet, once the illusion is known to the viewer, it becomes difficult to un-see, simultaneously seeing multiple things at once. A variation of the famous duck-rabbit illusion, in which both, and neither a duck and/nor a rabbit are pictured in the same illustration, the flag is multiple things at once, though not simultaneously sustained visually by the viewer. Wittgenstein's (1953) famous rumination on the duck-rabbit conundrum helps to further this point, explaining how viewers will first see either a duck or a rabbit, but cannot report seeing something that they are unfamiliar with (193-196). Like toxics, the image lingers after exposure.

Morgan, Alli. 2019. "Jasper Johns' Flag (Moratorium) (1969)."

In "Toxic Capture: Rendering Difficult Subjects Visible." In Visualizing Toxic Subjects, curated by James Adams and Kim Fortun. The Center for Ethnography. May.

<https://tinyurl.com/y4zzcs2n>

