

# THE LIMITATIONS OF DEPICTION: THE FLAG PROBLEM

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*In this paper, I want to show that at least two of the three reasons Wollheim provides in order to show that Jasper Johns' **Flag** is not the object of a proper seeing-in experience are correct. By means of the very same reasons, one may also show that some other paintings by Johns that are in the vicinity of **Flag** are instead the objects of a proper seeing-in experience. Since that experience is for Wollheim the mark of pictoriality, this exploration once more shows what the limits of depiction.*

## Introduction

A Jasper Johns' flag painting like *Flag* (Fig.1) is “a conscious challenge that functions as both paradox and puzzle [..., for] *Flag* serves to question what a painting is, and how it is to be differentiated from the object(s) it represents” (Loring Wallace 2014, 9-10). In (1980, 150-1), Wollheim claimed that such paintings are borderline cases of pictures.



Fig.1 *Flag*, Jasper Johns 1954-55 (Jstor from Artstor)

Paintings like *Flag* merely seemingly satisfy what for him is the both necessary and sufficient condition in order for something to have a *figurative* value, hence the necessary condition for something to be a *depiction*, i.e., a *pictorial* representation, a *bona fide* picture—namely, to be grasped (by a suitable spectator) by means of a *sui generis* perceptual experience of *seeing-in*. Granted, in order for something to *really* be a depiction for Wollheim, a seeing-in experience of something must also be its *correct* seeing-in experience—namely, the experience conforming to the author's pictorial intentions in painting that something. *Pareidolias*—e.g., rocks *in* which one spontaneously sees faces, clouds *in* which one spontaneously sees animals—are typical examples of something in which something else is seen. Pareidolias have figurative value, yet

are not depictions for Wollheim, for *no* correct seeing-in experience is associated with them. Yet Johns' flag paintings like *Flag* also differ from pareidolias. Independently of the correctness issue, in such paintings nothing can be properly seen. Instead, for Wollheim (1980, 150), the perceptual experience of ultimately grasping a Johns' flag painting like *Flag* is closer to a standard perceptual experience of *seeing-as*— namely, seeing such a painting as an (American) flag.

Granted, one might think that the case of Johns' flag paintings like *Flag* is too marginal in order to be interesting for a general reflection on depiction. But this conclusion would be too hasty. Wollheim discusses this case in order to fix the boundaries of the figurative, hence the boundaries of what makes a representation a depiction. Indeed, if one legitimately assumed that Wollheim's assessment of the case of Johns' flag paintings like *Flag* rules them out of the realm of depictions, that case would be *another* example showing that his theory of depiction is revisionary, since it would not rank as depictions paintings that are pretheoretically taken to be *bona fide* pictures just as any other depiction. As is well-known, for him (1987) genuine *trompe l'oeils* are not depictions since they do not elicit a seeing-in experience of them.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I assume that Wollheim's criteria of figurativity and depiction are correct. Instead, I focus on whether Wollheim is right in claiming that Johns' flag paintings like *Flag* are not grasped via a proper seeing-in experience by assessing the three reasons he provides (1980, 150-1) to this purpose:

1. a Johns' flag painting like *Flag* is a painting of a particular rather than of a state of affairs;

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<sup>1</sup> In these two cases, Wollheim's theory of depiction is restrictive. Yet in other cases, it is permissive; it allows abstract paintings in which one (correctly) sees something to count as depictions since one is able to perform a figure/ground segmentation in what one sees (cf. Gaiger (2008, 54)).

2. it is cropped to the contours of its subject's representation—in it one can only see an (American) flag as a whole;
3. it shares with that subject (at least most of) its essential properties: “both are two dimensional, both are made of textile, both are coloured and to the same design instructions” (1980, 150)—it is actually a sort of (American) flag.<sup>2</sup>

First, I claim that Wollheim is generally right as regards *Flag* in particular. Indeed, given what a seeing-in experience amounts to in Wollheim's terms, no such experience really grasps *Flag*. Hence, since for Wollheim seeing-in is a necessary condition for depiction, *Flag* is not a depiction. However, *pace* Wollheim, who seemingly considers (iii) as more relevant than (i) and (ii), I take these two reasons as decisive, when properly assessed.

Second, however, I claim that there are other flag paintings by Johns similar to *Flag* that are grasped via a proper experience of seeing-in (e.g. *Three Flags*), since, unlike *Flag*, they are not featured by (i) and (ii). Hence, they are depictions according to Wollheim's criterion (being *correctly* seen-in).

One might observe that, undoubtedly, unlike *Flag*, paintings like *Three Flags* are depictions for Wollheim. Yet, it is important to understand

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<sup>2</sup> Such reasons are remindful of the three general reasons Wollheim (1980, 140-9) provides in order to distinguish a seeing-as experience from a seeing-in one: a) it may merely have a particular item as its content, instead of possibly also having a state of affairs constituted by some particulars as that content; b) while when one sees an x as a certain item there is always a part of that x that is seen as that item (the so-called localization requirement), there may be no parts of an x in which an y is seen in it: a painting may present occlusions, as well as items for which there are no corresponding figurative areas within its vehicle (the second case is what Nanay (2023, 160) calls *boundary extension* in pictures—Wollheim's (1980, 141) own example of this case is Cosimo Rosselli's *Way to Calvary*, presenting a Christ-like figure holding a cross whose depicted borders escape the picture's frame); c) it is an alternating experience now of an x now of the item that x is seen as, while the seeing-in experience is a twofold experience in which one is simultaneously aware both of an x and of the y one sees in it.

why they are so, since some people (e.g., Walton 2008) have assimilated the two cases. The point is: by distinguishing Johns' flag paintings into those, like *Flag*, which fail to be depictions—since according to (i) and (ii) they are not properly seen-in—and those, like *Three Flags*, which are genuine depictions—since they are properly seen-in—Wollheim's seeing-in criterion for something to be a depiction actually draws another demarcation line between depictive and non-depictive paintings.

The architecture of this paper is as follows. In Section 1, I focus on the first point, by addressing some objections to my assessment in Section 2. In Section 3, I focus on the second point.

### 1. Some Johns' Paintings (e.g., *Flag*) Are Not Depictions

For Wollheim (1980, 1987, 1998, 2003a, 2003b), a seeing-in experience is a *sui generis* twofold perceptual experience. It is made out of two different folds—namely, the *configurational fold* (CF), in which one perceptually grasps the picture's *vehicle*, the physical basis of a picture, and the *recognitional fold* (RF), in which one perceptually grasps the scene that a picture presents, which for Wollheim also coincides with the picture's *subject*.<sup>3</sup> Enjoying this experience means enjoying a proper *fusion* experience, in which the two folds are interpenetrated (Voltolini 2020a). Indeed, neither fold coincides with the corresponding perceptual experience of the picture's vehicle or of the picture's subject, taken in isolation.

Given this Wollheimian characterization of seeing-in, I address Wollheim's reasons why *Flag* is not grasped by a proper seeing-in experience and, thus, is not a depiction.

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3 This coincidence must not be taken for granted. For various people (Husserl 2006, Nanay 2018, Voltolini 2018), what one sees in the picture, the scene it presents, must be distinguished from the picture's subject, taken as what that picture is about. Indeed, in one and the same picture one may go on seeing the same scene, although the picture may be about different things (cf. Wiesing (2010), Voltolini (2015)).

To start with, I take that Wollheim's reason (iii)—to repeat, that *Flag* shares with its subject most of its essential properties, hence it is a sort of flag as well—basically does not work regarding *Flag* itself. Granted, both *Flag*'s vehicle and its alleged subject can be truthfully attributed some, perhaps many, identical properties. First, both can be truthfully attributed what Lopes (2005) calls the vehicle's *mere surface properties*, such as being made of a certain stuff. *Flag*'s vehicle can be indeed made by the same stuff constituting an American flag (as Wollheim says, both are made of textile). Second, certainly both are truthfully attributed what Lopes (*ib.*) calls the vehicle's *design properties*, i.e., those of the vehicle's surface properties enabling a subject to be seen in that vehicle: namely, the same colors, as Wollheim again stresses, the same shapes, and even the same arrangement of such colors and shapes. Yet, *Flag*—in particular, its vehicle—and its alleged subject differ in some at least of their essential properties, i.e., what makes them items of a different kind.

First of all, *pace* Wollheim (1980, 150), unlike the former, the latter is ascribed three-dimensionality: unlike the painting, which is flat, a flag is an admittedly thin yet 3D item.

On behalf of Wollheim, one might reply that *Flag* is a 3D object, although very thin as well, hence it shares three-dimensionality with its alleged subject. But this reply would be wrong. As regards ordinary pictures, one abstracts from the fact that their vehicle is a 3D object, albeit very thin. For otherwise it would be meaningless to talk, as many people do (see Wiesing 2010), of the 'miracle' of pictures, i.e., the astonishing fact that one can see a 3D subject as emerging from what is basically a 2D object. In this respect, *Flag* is no exception. *Flag* is nothing like a bas-relief; it is flat just as any ordinary picture.

Moreover, *Flag* and its alleged subject differ regarding *flagness* itself. Unlike the latter, the former is not a flag; at most, it shares with the latter its flag-like design, as Wollheim (1980, 150) stresses: "both are [...] to

the same design instructions”.

On behalf of Wollheim, one might reply that *Flag*'s vehicle indeed is an (American) flag, since it is utterly indistinguishable from that flag. Hence again, how can one see an (American) flag in an (American) flag? This is what Lopes (2005, 42) stresses as regards the similar case of Jasper Johns' paintings of targets.

Yet, it is very clear from Wollheim's original quotation that he is making a (wrong) claim not about phenomenology, but about metaphysics. To repeat, among the properties that he claims *Flag* and an American flag basically share, there are not only phenomenologically relevant properties (colors), but also material properties (being made of the same textile) and architectural properties (being made in accordance with the same design instructions). Moreover, if Wollheim's point were merely phenomenological, it would make the same point he makes in the case of genuine *trompe l'oeils*. For him, such *trompe l'oeils* are not depictions, since their experience is phenomenologically indistinguishable from that of their alleged subjects. More generally, the above reply is implausible. As is well-known since Austin (1962) and Putnam (1975), indistinguishability is not a good guide to metaphysics, whether one conceives it epistemologically—for all we know, we cannot distinguish one item from another one—or phenomenologically—the experience of two lookalike items have the same phenomenal character. Likewise, the epistemological or phenomenological indistinguishability of *Flag* and its alleged vehicle does not make them metaphysically the same kind of thing. So, the fact that *Flag*'s vehicle looks like an (American) flag does not mean that it is such a flag. *Flag*'s vehicle is not a flag; at most it is a *painted* flag (Morris 2020): it is an artefact corresponding to a suitable modification of a flag. In other words, as Morris (*ib.*) stresses, it is modified by some painting activity in a flagwise way, in the very same sense in which a fake duck is not a duck, but at most is a *toy* duck, i.e., it is molded by some sculptorial activity in a duckwise way for some

ludic purposes. Granted, given its indistinguishability from an (American) flag, *Flag* might be used as such a flag. But to be used as a flag is not the same as being a flag, just as for a screwdriver to be used as an ear cleaner does not make it an ear cleaner, as Umberto Eco once wittfully said. Hence, this use would not lead to that overall coincidence between *Flag*'s vehicle and its alleged subject that would prevent *Flag* from being grasped by a proper seeing-in experience.<sup>4</sup>

Granted, Wollheim's reason (iii) to take *Flag*'s experience as not being a proper seeing-in experience might work if *Flag*'s vehicle and its alleged subject were truthfully attributed (at least almost) *all* the same properties, whether essential or accidental. This would be the case with a 2D item allegedly supposed to be a picture of another 2D item with the very same properties: both the 2D vehicle and its alleged 2D subject would share their two-dimensionality as well as their colors and shapes, as with Yves Klein's *Blue Monochrome* (Fig.2), which is both 2D and utterly blue. If one supposed that it is a picture of a 2D blue item, one would be wrong. For one does not see a 2D blue item in a 2D blue item, one merely sees a 2D blue item.

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4 One might wonder why I have considered *Flag* in terms of its vehicle and not as an interpreted picture. Since being an interpreted picture is the same as being a depiction, this is for Wollheim precisely what is in question as regards *Flag*. Incidentally, however, even if by argument's sake one considered *Flag* as an interpreted picture, it would be a picture of a flag, but again, not a flag.



Fig. 2 *Blue Monochrome*, Yves Klein 1961 (Jstor from Artstor)

But this is not the case with *Flag*, in which the vehicle's and the alleged subject's respective essential properties *overall* differ in important respects. Indeed, since *Flag*'s alleged vehicle and its alleged subject *merely partially* share the same essential properties, this mere partial coincidence would not prevent the alleged subject we face when we see *Flag* from being grasped by a seeing-in experience.

All in all, therefore, Wollheim's reason (iii) to take *Flag* not to be grasped by a proper seeing-in experience, hence not to be a depiction, does not work (although it might work for other paintings). However, this fact does not undermine Wollheim's conviction that the experience of *Flag* is not a proper seeing-in experience. For the other two reasons he provides—to repeat: (i) Johns' *Flag* is a painting of a particular rather than of a state of affairs; (ii) it is cropped to the contours of its subject's representation (in it, one can only see an (American) flag as a whole)—are perfectly acceptable. On behalf of Wollheim, let me explain why I take this to be the case.

First of all, as regards (ii), consider that in the RF of a seeing-in experience, for Wollheim one sees parts of the picture's subject as standing *behind* other parts: “my perception is twofold in that I simultaneously am visually aware of the marked surface and experience something

in front of, or behind, something else—in *this case, a woman in a hat standing in front of a clump of trees*” (2003a, 3). If this is the case, then what one sees in a picture must mobilize *some occlusion relation*. In the above case, by standing in front of a clump of trees, the hatted woman covers not only some of the background elements of what is seen in the picture Wollheim mentions—possibly, it covers some of the trees themselves, at least partially—but also her back, since the woman is given frontally to the spectator. For Wollheim, this precisely happens with Michelangelo’s Sistine *Deluge*, in which “what I see is, say, a crowd of people of which all but the leading members are obscured from view by a fold in the ground” (1980, 141).<sup>5</sup> Yet no occlusion relations are captured while attending to *Flag*. For in *Flag*’s vehicle, all its alleged design properties are visibly manifest. Hence, there is no chance for that vehicle to present any occlusion relation. Thus, saying *à la* Wollheim that in its case, since *Flag* is cropped to the contours of its subject’s representation, one only sees an (American) flag in the painting as a whole is just a (clumsy) way of saying that *Flag* is affected by no proper seeing-in experience. Consider again Yves Klein’s *Blue Monochrome*. Following Wollheim, I said before that no proper seeing-in experience affects that painting, since its vehicle and its alleged subject coincide in their essential properties. Now, could it regain a figurative value if one supposed that *in that painting as a whole* one sees not a 2D, but a 3D item? Obviously not. For it presents no occlusion relation (all its alleged design properties are visibly manifest). Hence, supposing that one sees a 3D item in it would be a mere wishful thinking. Ditto for *Flag*.

Moreover, reflecting on Wollheim’s (2003a) example shows that also his reason (i) to dismiss the idea that *Flag* is affected by a seeing-in experience is cogent. If for Wollheim one must grasp occlusion relations

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5 On depicted occlusions, see also Petterson (2011, 283, 293). For Petterson, both depicted occlusions and boundary extension in pictures show that the perception of the picture’s subject, Wollheim’s RF, is *substantively* cognitively penetrated, as Wollheim (2003a) claimed. On this see Voltolini (2015, 2020b, 2024).

in order to see a subject in the RF of a seeing-in experience, then *pace* Lopes (1996) (and what Wollheim himself actually seems to concede, 1980, 140), one cannot see only a single particular in a picture. Rather, as Nanay (2022) maintains, in it one can only see a state of affairs viz a *complex scene*, i.e., a state of affairs whose particular constituents stand between them at least in certain figure/ground relations that determine certain occlusion relation. Thus, one cannot have a proper seeing-in experience of *Flag*. *Flag* would indeed only allow to grasp *a particular* as its alleged subject.

All in all, although reason (iii) hardly seems a good reason for *Flag*'s experience not to be a proper seeing-in experience, reasons (i) and (ii), when properly assessed, are instead good reasons for denying that such an experience is a proper seeing-in experience. Hence, given Wollheim's further correctness criterion for depiction, *Flag* is not a depiction.

## 2. Objections and Replies

In (2005, 42-3), Lopes has raised an important objection to Wollheim on this concern. A Johns' painting, says Lopes, is indeed grasped by a seeing-in experience, only of a special case. For, says Lopes, it is a case in which an *illusionistic seeing-in*, such as the one occurring with genuine *trompe-l'oeils*, doubles with *design-seeing*, the perceptual grasping (in the CF of the relevant seeing-in experience) of the *design properties* of the vehicle. As I said before, for Lopes design properties are the vehicle properties that are responsible for the fact that (in the RF of that experience) the picture's subject is seen in that picture; primarily, its colors and shapes.

Yet there are two reasons to stress that *Flag*'s experience is not a seeing-in experience. First, *pace* Lopes, so-called illusionistic seeing-in is not seeing-in at all. For it is the kind of experience that instead applies to genuine *trompe l'oeils*, which, as Wollheim himself stressed (1987, 62), are not depictions, since they are just experientially mistaken for something else, i.e., for their alleged subject. Second, also appealing to

design-seeing is not sufficient for having a seeing-in experience. For experiencing the vehicle's design properties does not yield seeing-in yet; instead, experiencing such properties amounts to a seeing-in experience only in a more complex experiential scenario that involves a grouping operation on the vehicle's elements. This scenario precisely constitutes a proper seeing-in experience, since its CF enables the picture's subject to *emerge* in the vehicle, hence to be seen in the picture, in the RF of that very experience.

Regarding the second point, consider the following example. In the case of the 'aspect dawning' picture of some horses (Fig.3), in an earlier phase one perceives only the black and white colors of the patches that are scattered across the picture's vehicle. Granted, such colors are design properties. They are responsible for the fact that, in a later 'recognition' phase, one sees in that picture a group of spotted black-and-white animals; namely, a group of horses (on a background). Yet perceiving such colors by themselves prompts no seeing-in experience. In that later phase, one needs to perceptually perform on that vehicle the grouping operation of subjectively contouring certain of such patches while assembling some others as standing behind that contour in order to get a CF allowing the visual emergence of the horses, as seen in the corresponding RF.



Fig.3 Horses (by courtesy of Paola Tosti)

So, even assuming with Lopes that perceiving *Flag* involves coupling an illusion of a ‘*trompe-l’oeil*’-kind with mere design-seeing, that coupling would not be enough to have a proper seeing-in experience of *Flag*.

Granted, Lopes would disagree with my assessment of the second point. For him, Fig.3 shows a case of *pseudo-twofoldness*, hence of an improper form of seeing-in. For unlike standard cases of seeing-in, in that case the design properties are not seen independently of what one sees in the picture (2005, 40-2). So, for him, the subject’s emergence, as illustrated by that case, is unnecessary for a proper seeing-in experience. Hence, *Flag* may be affected by that experience.

Yet Lopes confuses the fact I just showed that, as the case of Fig.3 shows, the vehicle’s design properties really play their seeing-in role only by virtue of the grouping operation on that vehicle’s elements that is responsible for the emergence of a subject in the picture, with the generally wrong idea that seeing the vehicle’s design properties *qua* design properties is not independent of seeing the subject in the picture. For in actual fact, also in this case a grouping operation concerning the vehicle’s elements is *preliminarily needed* in order for the design properties to play their seeing-in role. Certainly such properties are responsible for what is seen in the picture. Yet *only once that operation is performed*, one can see a subject in the picture.<sup>6</sup> Granted, knowing what one may see in a picture (“don’t you see the horses?”) may enable one to see something in that picture (“yes, I now see them”). But this merely depends on the fact that such a knowledge may enable one to perform a certain grouping operation on the picture’s vehicle that *further* allows one to see a

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6 For Voltolini (2015), the case of ‘aspect dawning’ pictures such as that exhibited by Fig.3 is instead the paradigmatic case of seeing-in. For it allows one to realize in temporally separate steps what in a picture’s experience normally happens at one and the same time; namely, the ascription of a *figurative value* to a vehicle via the rise of a certain seeing-in experience.

subject in the picture.<sup>7</sup>

All in all, perceiving in *Flag's* vehicle the colors that are also the colors of an (American) flag which one would see in *Flag*, provided that one might see it in that way, does not make it the case that *in* it one sees that flag. Hence again, *Flag* is not a depiction.

### 3. Some Other Johns' Paintings (e.g. *Three Flags*) Are Depictions

However, the two afore-mentioned reasons why one cannot have a proper seeing-in experience, thereby failing to have a depiction, with John's paintings like *Flag* are precisely the very reasons as to why one can have this sort of experience, hence a depiction, with similar paintings by Jasper Johns.

Consider *Three Flags* (Fig.4).

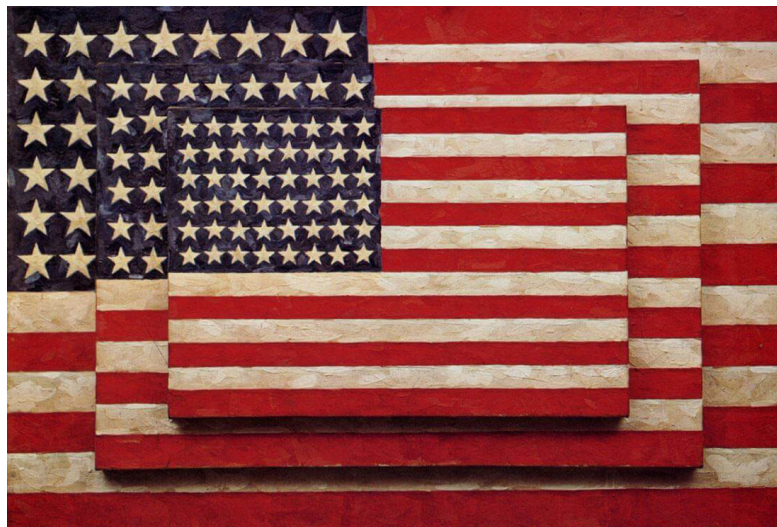


Fig.4 *Three Flags*, Jasper Johns 1958 (Jstor from Arstor)

<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the perception of the CF is *weakly* cognitively penetrated (concepts only affect the phenomenal character of the CF whose content remains non-conceptual), along the model of *cognitive penetration lite* (cognitive penetration only contingently affects that phenomenal character). On weak cognitive penetration and cognitive penetration lite, see Macpherson (2012, 2015).

As Wollheim himself would have probably acknowledged, one can certainly have a proper seeing-in experience with *Three Flags*. Yet this precisely depends on the fact that unlike *Flag*, the reasons (i) and (ii) for something not to be a proper seeing-in experience, as I have assessed them in the previous Section, do not apply to the experience of *Three Flags*. First, in it one perceives an (American) flag that *partially occludes* a different such flag which in its turn partially occludes another such flag. Thus, in that experience there is no cropping of the picture to the contours of its subject's representation. Hence, second, as regards *Three Flags*, one does not perceive a single particular stretching across so to speak the whole of the pictorial space, as in the case of *Flag*. Indeed, in the experience of *Three Flags* one instead perceives a *state of affairs*, or more precisely a complex scene, whose different particular constituents—the three flags—stand in a spatial figure/ground relation holding between each other, as standing in certain occlusion relations. Thus, Wollheim's reasons i) and ii) against the existence of a proper seeing-in experience do not apply to the experience of *Three Flags*. Hence, that experience is a proper seeing-in experience, whose RF is such that the above three-dimensional scene is perceived in it. Therefore, since *Three Flags* is also taken to be an item in which one correctly sees three American flags one upon the other (this was indeed Johns' intention for something to be seen in it), this painting is a depiction; notably, a picture of such flags. So finally, Johns' flag paintings like *Flag* on the one hand and *Three Flags* on the other hand can be exploited to show the limits of depiction in Wollheim's terms.

## Conclusions

First, one can rule *Flag* out of the realm of depictions. For, when one properly sees things, *Flag*'s experience conforms with Wollheim's reasons (i) and (ii) in order for an experience of a painting not to be a proper seeing-in experience of it. Thus, given Wollheim's seeing-in theory of depiction, *Flag* is not even a genuine depiction. Yet second, the

experience of Three Flags is a proper seeing-in experience, since (i) and (ii) do not apply to it. Since that experience is also a correct seeing-in experience in Wollheim's terms, Three Flags is a genuine depiction. So, the case of Johns' paintings nicely illustrates another dividing line, hitherto scarcely assessed, holding for Wollheim between depictions and non-depictions.<sup>8</sup>

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 8 This paper has been presented in various workshops: *14th Conference of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy*, University of Messina, Sep. 22-24 2021, Noto; *Reality, Presence, Vision, Eikones*, University of Basel, Oct 26-27 2021, Basel; *Formerly Anglo-German Now Global Picture Group Workshop*, Department of Psychology, Feb 16-17 2022, Turin. I thank all the participants for their insightful and stimulating comments.

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