



Folk Art

MESSENGER

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Cover: Meat and Blood
(detail), by Thornton Dial.

Photograph courtesy Indianapolis Museum of Art



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Martin Johnson's "ForInstance"

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAY KASS

Describing his personal initiation as an artist, Martin Johnson said:

On December 10, 1974, I gave birth to a painting onto which I scratched the word 'FOR' on the bottom because I felt that everything was connected and that I was experiencing an expanded sense of infinity in which everything in the universe was FOR everything else—and freely given from the heart.

FOR seemed to mean FOR US. Then I saw the words FOR IS FORCE FOR US.

The word FOR, when broken down, is a symbol for composition: FEEL-FRAME, ORDER and RHYTHM. When they join together, I make my art. FOR leads to poetry and is the power behind every poem.

UNIS is also an important word that connotes the object and the process combined. An abbreviation for UNISON, it also stands for UN-IS—both becoming something and changing at the same time.

My drawings have always been very layered. One of my teachers called them my "emographs"—meaning "emotional graphics."

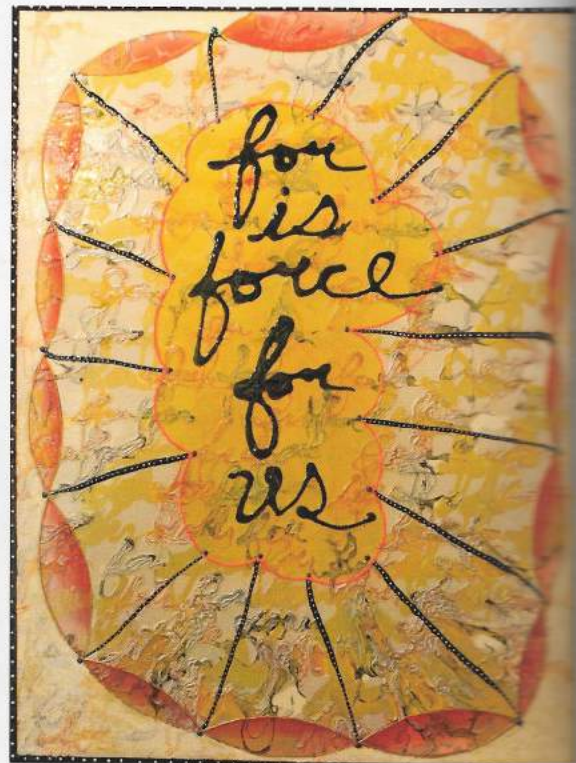
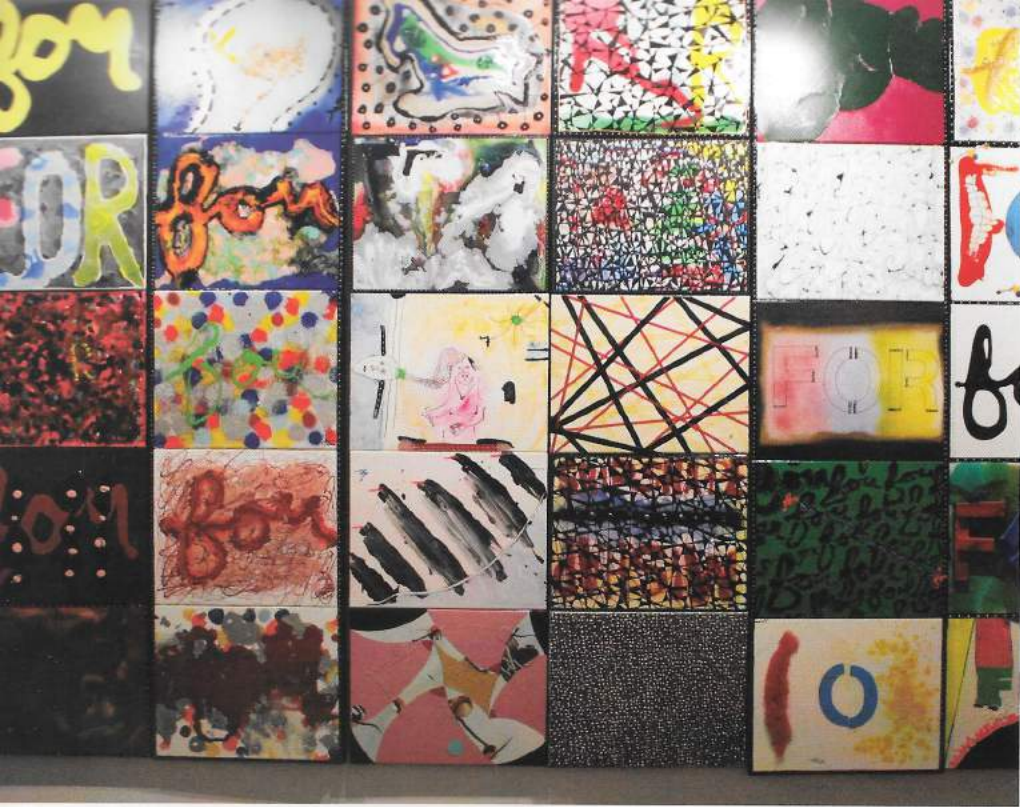
My sculptural constructions all come from my EMOGRAPHS. They are the connection of points in space with lines.

The Smile that recurs in my work is an expression of my feeling when I begin to sense the unknown. At those moments I feel like laughing.*

[* Martin Johnson in conversation with Ray Kass, ForInstance Gallery, Richmond, Va., May 15, 2011.]

Martin Johnson's visual art works represent dynamic glimpses of his stream of consciousness. His multi-layered works, often in shallow relief, become grottoes for his furtively inspirational and ironic words and images. Maze-like webs in which verbal and

visual images, ambiguous grinning lips floating amidst scripted broken puns, are his personal metaphysics—an abiding questioning voice tinged with alchemical magic that either hits the bull's eye or forgets the target. In fact, Johnson says that "mysticism" means "missed his ism."



Born in New Jersey and raised in Richmond, Va., Johnson graduated from Virginia Tech's College of Architecture and Urban Studies in 1974 with no intention to become an architect.

He went on to pursue an M.F.A. degree in Studio Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where they offered him a scholarship and an ample studio.

His artwork at that time touched on many of the significant issues that would soon emerge in the Neo-Expressionist art world of the early 1980s, particularly the emerging stylistic characteristics of self-taught and Outsider art. Johnson wove words and patterns together in a manner that expresses a genuine kinship with outsider artists. Like many self-taught artists, the basic strategy and style of his ongoing work has remained consistent with that of his earliest pieces.

You pause to wonder whether he actually learned anything in school. Or, like other notable "outsiders," such as the New York City El Barrio street-artist, James De La Vega, who received a scholarship to Cornell, did he simply receive

the benefit of lots of time and space to work?

Johnson graduated from Chapel Hill in 1977 and moved to New York City. Over the next decade, he became a well-known

figure in the New York art scene. But in 1987, following a string of sell-out exhibitions at the Phyllis Kind Gallery and major reviews in important art magazines, Johnson abruptly packed up his family and left New York to take over his family's business in Virginia Beach—a sales and marketing company for plumbing supplies. Although he had dropped out of the New York art world, he never ceased his prodigious art production.

For Instance Gallery, Johnson's Richmond studio and personal museum, contains an ample cross-section of the more than 40 years work of a compulsively prolific artist. His work, in both 2-D and 3-D formats, is based on combining recycled found objects or shapes, densely woven patterns, text images and language games that improvise assonant puns or pure free association.

Several key images appear in all mediums. The preposition "FOR" is present throughout his work and is a favor Johnson extends to the viewer to enter his world. Another more ominous iconic image is the giant red-lipped grinning mouth—the kind of thing that would chase you in your dreams.

"The Smile that recurs in my work is an expression of my feeling when I begin to sense the unknown. At those moments I feel like laughing."

Everything that Johnson brings together in his densely embellished pieces is literally tied together with wire or twine. Knots are both a methodology and a universal imagery in his artwork. They are the basis of his constructions and are central to the sensibility of the words and images that he weaves into them. Johnson's "found objects" are mostly





discarded frameworks of various kinds. Once tied together, the discarded armatures—electric fans, shopping carts, display racks, plastic frames, sundry chairs and car parts—become skeletons that Johnson fleshes-out with skeins of cheesecloth stretched over wire webs, hardened with acrylic or Roplex and painted with colorful diagram-like patterns. His elaborately embellished sculptures assume the proportions of the body—the classical dimensions of the human form.

“My sculptural constructions all come from my EMOGRAPHS. They are the connection of points in space with lines.”

Johnson has associated his use of found objects with Marcel Duchamp’s appropriation of such materials for the representation of fine art, a kinship that has been strengthened perhaps by Johnson’s playful use of pun-like aphoristic words in his constructions. However, there are few strategic parallels between Duchamp’s deconstructive objectives and posture of aesthetic disinterestedness and Johnson’s galaxy-building ambitions. Early on he called his sculptures “UNIS,” a joining of the prefix “un” and the verb “is,” to signify that his works were in a constant state of transformation and change. “UNIS” does not designate the condition for the Readymade in Duchamp’s propositional sense, but rather, a continual morphing by addition into something new—something like a snowball rolling down a mountain gathering mass and material until it becomes a new world.

“UNIS is also an important word that connotes the object and the process combined. An abbreviation for UNISON, it also stands for UN-IS—both becoming something and changing at the same time.”

Johnson’s visual forms embrace a broad lexicon of cultural and historical references. His frequent use of interwoven words and images—providing the string leading through a labyrinth—creates an obscure narrative that nevertheless serves the artist’s purpose in making personal sense of a world filled with tenuous banality, social dysfunction and meaninglessness. The all-inclusive scope of his highly detailed works bring to mind art forms that are intended as aids to meditation and transcendence such as Navaho and Tibetan sand painting or tantric art illustrating the transfer of vital cosmic energy.

“FOR seemed to mean FOR US—and then I saw the words FOR IS FORCE FOR US.”

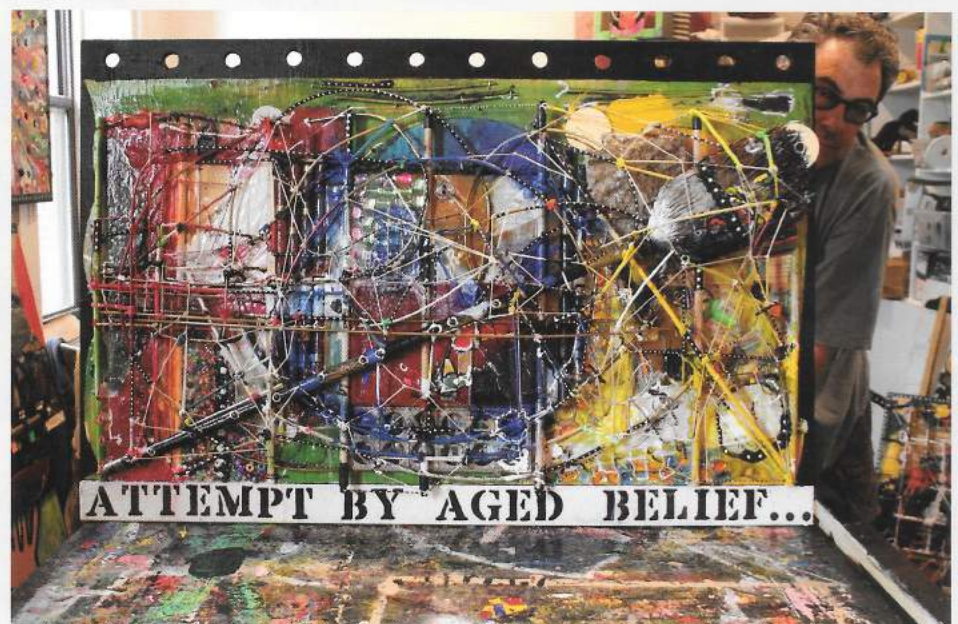
The spirit that emanates from Johnson’s work is a Mediterranean sensuality that borders on opulent fecundity. It is

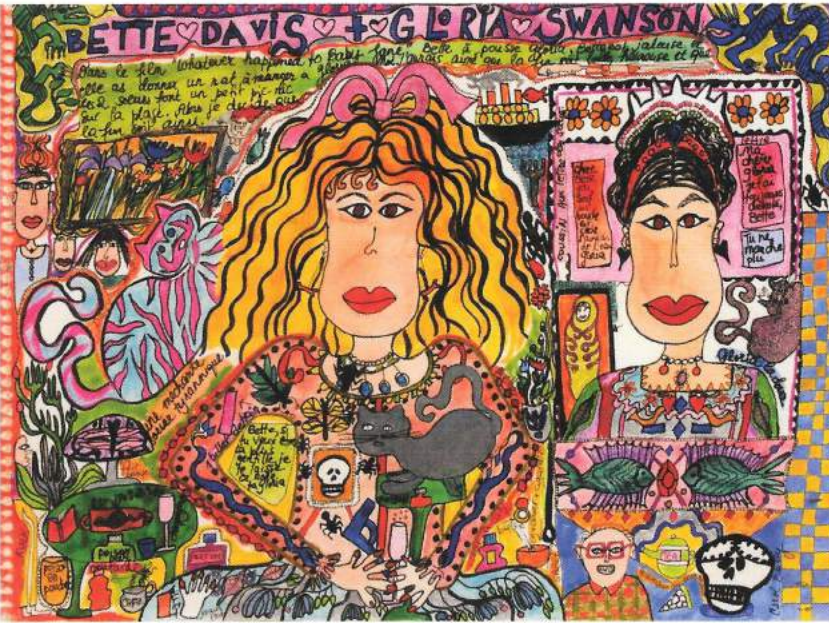
the manner in which he adorns found objects and combines them in animated phantasmagorias that project the particular aura of Eros. Many of his pieces share the Mediterranean quality of *horror vacui*, the generalized all-over surface decoration of ancient Greek art. Yet Johnson’s chaotic aggregations take us beyond a sense of decorative continuity; they are dynamic force-fields. His art making is an effort to transform the world into a stultifying avalanche of provocative fragments of an alternative reality—a world that is FOR US.

“I felt that everything was connected and that I was experiencing an expanded sense of infinity in which everything in the universe was FOR everything else—and freely given from the heart.”

In September, an exhibition of Martin Johnson’s work will be on view at Richmond’s Visual Arts Center during the Folk Art Society’s Richmond conference. ❏

RAY KASS is a nationally recognized artist and a professor emeritus of studio art at Virginia Tech. The founder and director of the Mountain Lake Workshop at Virginia Tech, he produced workshops for Howard Finster (1985), John Cage, Jiro Okura, Stephen Addiss, James De La Varga and Merce Cunningham, among others. He is the author many publications, including John Cage: Zen Ox-Herding Pictures (2009), The Sight of Silence: John Cage’s Complete Watercolors (2011) and Morris Graves: Vision of the Inner Eye (1983). His future plans include a retrospective exhibition of the work of the Virginia artist Georgia Blizzard, with Lee Kogan as co-curator. He a founding board member of the Folk Art Society of America.





Bette Davis + Gloria Swanson, 2008, by Carol Bailly.

OUTSIDE U.S.

Sous le Vent de l'Art Brut: Collection Charlotte Zander, Halle Saint Pierre, 2 rue Ronsard, 75018, Paris, France, January 17–August 26, 2011.

Carol Bailly, Musée de la Création Franche, 58 Ave. Mal de Lattre de Tassigny, Bègles, France, April 1–June 19, 2011.

Adolf Wölfli Univers and Amicalement Brut: Collection Eternod & Mermod, Lille Metropole, Musée d'Art Moderne, d'Art Contemporain et d'Art Brut, 1 Allée du Musée, 59650 Villeneuve d'Ascq, France, April 9–July 3, 2011.

Nannetti, "Colonel Astral," Collection de l'Art Brut, Avenue des Bèrgières 11, 1004 Lausanne, Switzerland, May 13–October 30, 2011.

Three Centuries of American Folk Portraits; Inspiration and Ingenuity: American Stoneware; We See America; Down on the Farm and Cross Rhythms: Folk Musical Instruments, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, 325 Frances Street, Williamsburg, VA, Ongoing. Also: **Material Witnesses: Quilts and Their Makers,** Through April 29, 2012.

Martin Johnson, Visual Arts Center, 1812 West Main Street, Richmond, VA 23220. Opens September 9, 2011.

WISCONSIN

Hiding Places: Memory in the Arts, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 608 New York Avenue, Sheboygan, WI 53082, June–December 2011.

MARYLAND

What Makes Us Smile, American Visionary Art Museum, 800 Key Highway, Baltimore, MD 21230, October 9, 2010–September 3, 2011.

NEW MEXICO

Multiple Visions, Museum of International Folk Art, 706 Camino Lejo, Santa Fe, NM 87505, Ongoing. Also: **Folk Art of the Andes,** April 17, 2011–February 12, 2012. Catalogue Available.

NEW YORK

Super Stars: Quilts from the American Folk Art Museum, American Folk Art Museum, 2 Lincoln Square, New York, NY 10023, Through September 25, 2011.

Perspectives: Forming the Figure, American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019, Through August 22, 2011. Also:

Eugene Von Bruenchenheim, Through October 9, 2011. Also: **Quilts: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum,** Through October 15, 2011.

OHIO

Hard Knocks: Art Without Art School, Thunder Sky Inc., 4573 Hamilton Avenue, Cincinnati, OH 45223, June 24–August 12, 2011.

PENNSYLVANIA

Animals in Art: TNT, Outsider Folk Art Gallery, 201 Washington Street, Reading, PA 19601, May 14–August 31, 2011.

Kutztown Folk Festival, Kutztown Fairgrounds, Box 306, Kutztown, PA 19530, July 2–10, 2011.

SOUTH CAROLINA

The Collectors' Vision: Southern Folk Art from the Collection of Ted and Ann Oliver, Art Museum of Myrtle Beach, 3100 South Ocean Blvd., Myrtle Beach, SC 29577, April 29–October 2, 2011.

TENNESSEE

Gather Up the Fragments: The Andrews Shaker Collection, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 919 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203, May 20–August 21, 2011.

VIRGINIA

Three-Ring Circus: Highlights from the Oppenheimer Collection of Folk Art, Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, 129 North Main Street, Farmville, VA 23901, September 9, 2011–January 2012.

The Self-Taught Artist in Context: Influences of American Culture, Old Dominion University, Baron and Ellin Gordon Art Galleries, 4509 Monarch Way, Norfolk, VA 23529, February 26–September 4, 2011.



No 1, St. Adolf II in der Waldau Bern, 1922, by Adolf Wölfli.

Photograph courtesy: Lille Metropole Musée d'Art Contemporain.