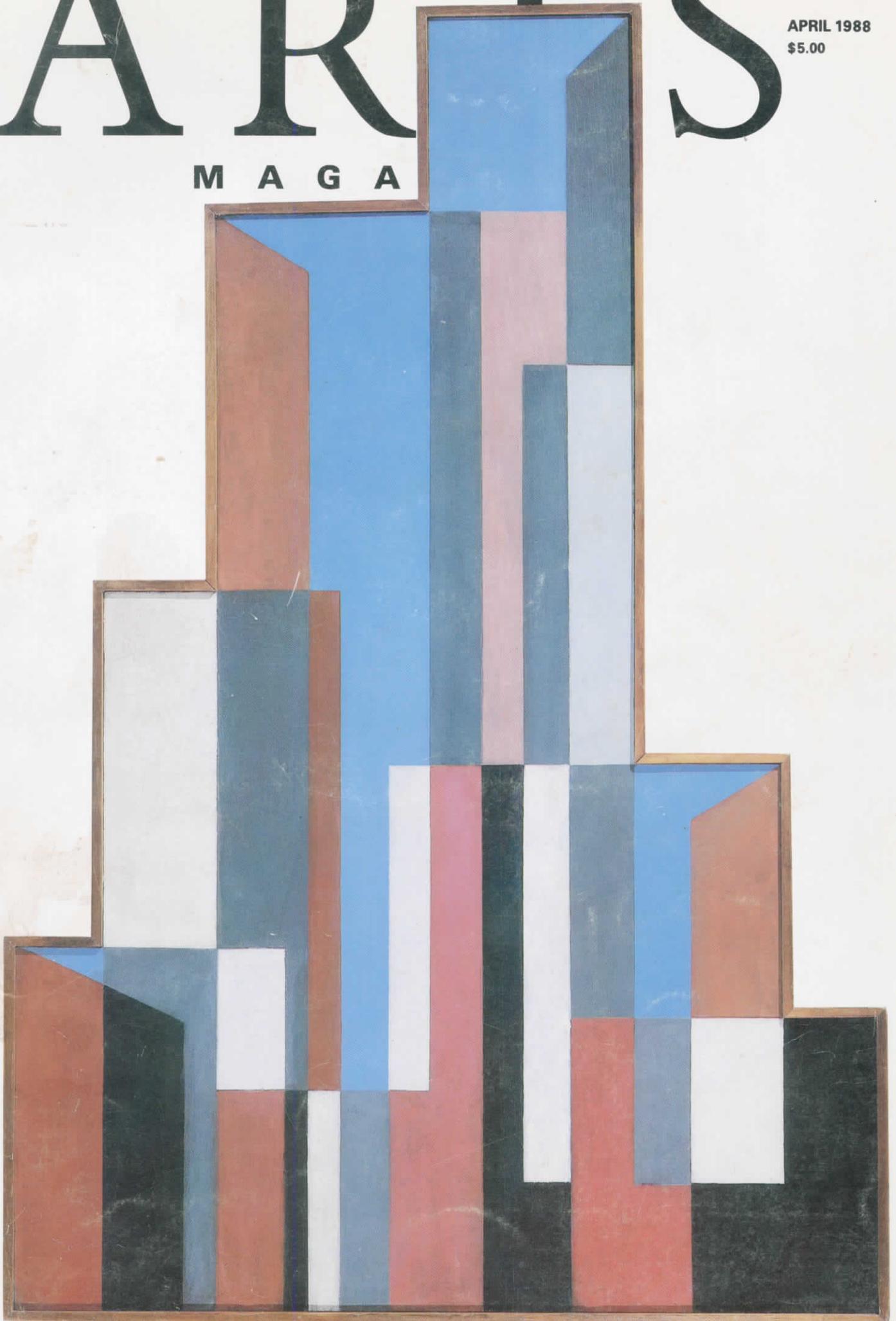


# ARTS

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# ARTS

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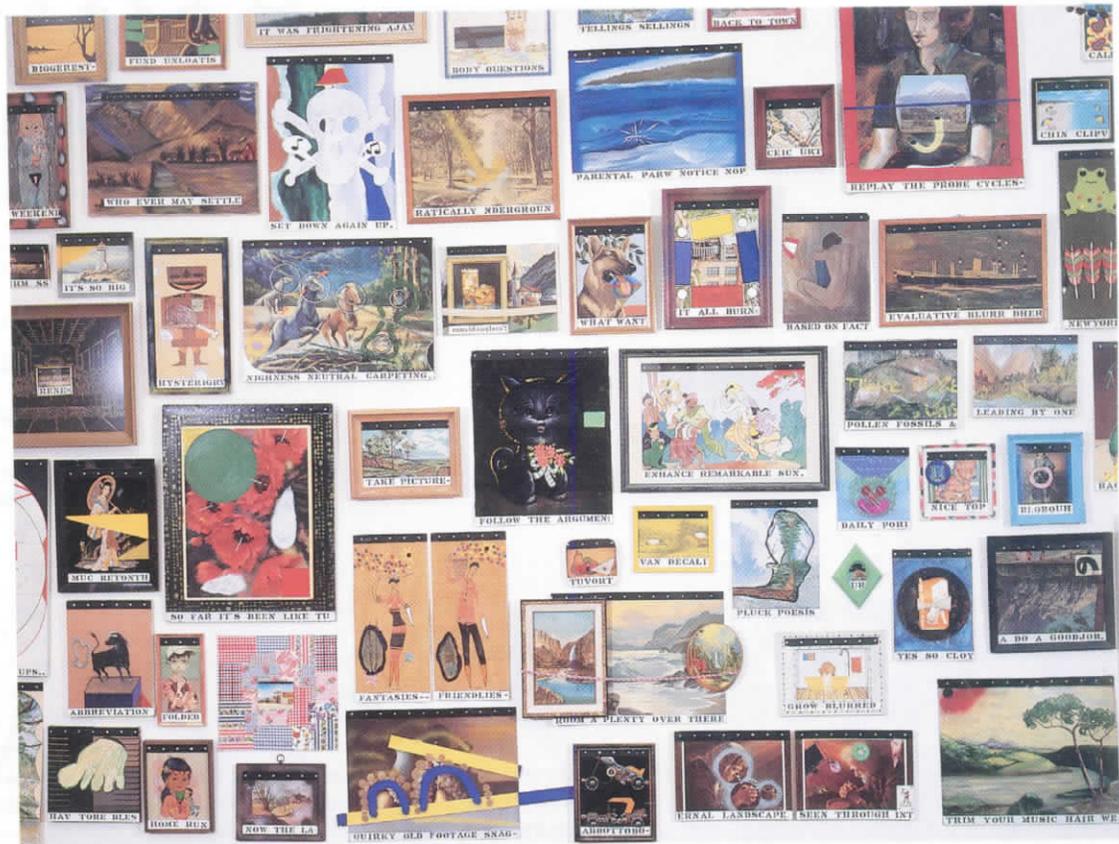
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Martin Johnson, Room Installation, Phyllis Kind Gallery, 1987.

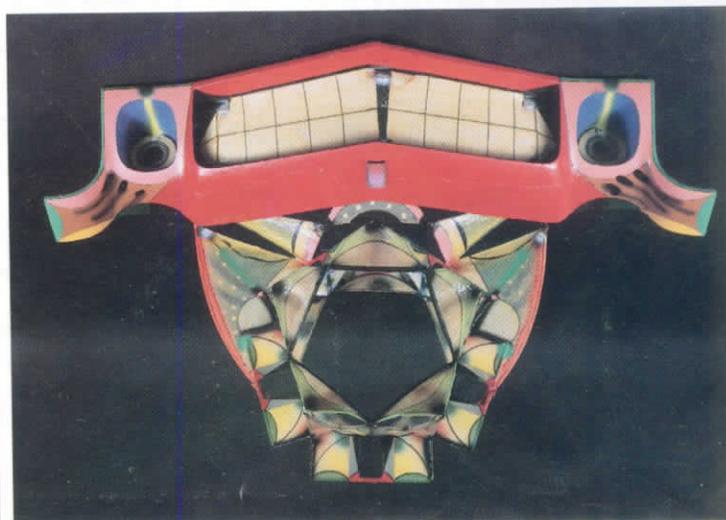
## CRYPTOGRAPHIC GLOSSOLALIA: MARTIN JOHNSON'S DOUBLE-EDGE GAMES

LINDA MCGREEVY

Is a picture worth a thousand words or is a word worth a thousand pictures? Martin Johnson likes to have it both ways: words and images, homage and satire, art and junk—each pair intertwined in inextricable webs. Johnson's myriad works contribute to an ongoing rebus of mutating segments composed of cryptolinguistic models, games, surrealist automatism, consumer debris, abstracted constructions, arcane philosophies, environmental interstices, and found-art appropriations, all rendered with tongue planted firmly in cheek.

This transplanted New Yorker's latest studio, a small house in Virginia Beach, is literally crammed from foyer to attic with the results of his playful investigations, many of which center around a personal catchword. The deceptively simple word *for* has had a talismanic significance for the artist for almost two decades, serving variously as a mantra, a filter, and a game-piece. In his *Fortext*, written in a stream-of-consciousness style during the early '70s, Johnson called it his "ontological motto," and, typically, tinkered with phonetics by respelling *aphorism* and *metaphor* as *a-for-ism* and *meta-for*.

In Johnson's quirky parlance, *for* is reminiscent of what Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty called a "portmanteau word," liberally packed with meaning(s). The implications of *for*'s baggage aren't always playful; in *Fortext* the German writer Karl von Stutterheim's mystical reference to "a word without meaning, but also a unique bridge to the enigma of reality" is given a significant place in the artist's scheme of things. When this enigmatic, disconnected "meaninglessness" is merged with chance and changeable context, as it so often is for Johnson, the



Martin Johnson, See are Vehicle, 1982. Mixed media and rhoplex, 31 x 56 x 13".

resulting objects are fortuitous reconnections.

Late in the month of April the artist will be seen in two shows: a group exhibition of installations curated by John Perrault for Snug Harbor's Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art (May 23-June 7), and a "mini-retrospective" at Portsmouth, Virginia's restored 1849 Courthouse Gallery (April 29-June 13). Johnson should have no difficulty in filling both spaces, since his visual production has kept pace with the proliferation of words surrounding it.

To adverse critics, such postmodernist inclusivity—its acceptance not only of narrative and personal or diaristic themes, but also of fringe techniques like performance and body-art—proves how overripe Romantic faith in spontaneity and naïveté has become. If *anyone* can make art of *anything*, then the meaning of the word *art* blurs; yet, given the radical dislocations of early modernists like Duchamp and the Dadaists, followed by the Surrealist's games played out in the unconscious and the trash/funk aesthetic of the post-'50s, it is difficult to consider art such as Johnson's in traditional formalist categories. A *mélange*, he is the happy heir to a curious blend of art and nonart

strategies, and he uses them with a frenzied abandon verging on aggression, his blunt humor concealing a submerged vein of gravity. It is often difficult in the face of a veritable glut of art that seems to fall from the artist like drops of sweat to find the connections, much less the aesthetic. But they are there, as are obvious influences and affinities.

Johnson's work owes debts to Paul Klee, to Navaho sand-painting patterns, to *Art Brut's* admiration for the art of the insane, to Surrealist automatism, to the graffiti movement (and not only for the spray can), to psychedelic posters and underground comics, to Karl Wirsum and Jim Nutt, to the Reverend Howard Finster, to Eastern mandalas, to the 18th-century Salon, and most of all to Marcel Duchamp, whose *Ready-mades Aided* chosen in a "state of indifference" suggested Johnson's recent forays into appropriated art.

His affinities with Jonathan Borofsky, Judy Pfaff, and the early effusions of the East Village graffiti scene are obvious. Perhaps it's just a generational thing, but the very personal linguistic imagistic game he began playing in the early '70s was not that unusual. However, Johnson's unique energy, humor, and persistence has made it an intelligent and often hilarious pursuit, and the thematic presence of a disembodied grin, writ large in rhoplex, hidden in spray-paint webs, or projecting from a ludicrous construction, lends his over-the-top production a disarming air of self-mockery. The grin is Johnson's own, a down-to-earth reminder of the nature of the game.

His cryptographic glossolalia postdates his graduation from V.P.I.'s stringent architectural program, though drawings from earlier periods were already crowded with amorphous detail in stubborn opposition to the clean, pure voids and solids of modernist architectural practice. Throughout *Fortext* a hint of the constructive lessons taught him recurs, though often in such ironic juxtapositions as: "Formalize . . . For My Lies."

Continuing his education, Johnson switched to the University of North Carolina's MFA program, where his penchant for accumulation was indulged. Paintings in the repetitious patterns of nightmarish wallpaper, with red mechanomen devoured by flying fish, alternate with mystic green-mirror faces extruding a shared abstraction between them. That they seem to be vomiting this bit of "pure" art is an early hint of the artist's conflicting attitudes toward the nonobjective aesthetic. Typically in such mandala images, the ground is a congested series of small architectonic spaces, rats' mazes in *trompe l'oeil*. Everything in these paintings is outlined by shimmering dots, giving them the look of beaded bags. This resemblance to fabric—whether quilting, beading, or embroidery—continues in the most recent works, a literal thread of reference to the once lowly position of crafts on the hierarchical scale.

Though much of Johnson's work has the look of accidental or random construction common to the untrained artist, closer examination reveals a grid system, the hardy survivor of his architectural training. Tensile webbing—resembling Buckminster Fuller's geodesics mimicked by a spider on LSD—appears to obscure much of the work of the mid-'70s, but this is deceptive; these parts are triangular, reinforced

by the imposing holistic system of the X-shape. In 1974, when his "wallpapering" began to become low relief (in three-dimensional drip-webs that fulfill the threats of entrapment in Jackson Pollock's flat paintings), he also discovered his basic concept of retaliation, causing words and images to reverberate throughout his works.

The assemblages, or "UN-IS" pieces (a "plural unit," the kind of conundrum that delights Johnson) predict Nancy Graves's gaudy sculptures in the '80s—Constructivism gone mad in the junkyard. These apparently magnetized objects, picking up detritus at random, are made of discarded commercial racks, ripe for aesthetic transformation by the passing postmodernist. For Johnson the concept of transmutation is double-edged, combining both the modernist tradition of the *objet trouvé* and the lost traditions of the Shamanistic transformer, the spiritual artist-leader. From 1975, his *Five Minute Spirit Manifesto Adorned by an Adept*, with its wandering pattern of N's and M's suspended on a rough white ground (reminiscent of Lucas Samaras's more threatening razor blades on toilet paper of 1960) suggests the trance-hum of the shaman.

However, lest the viewer of these enigmas take the artist too seriously, the Cheshire Grin is always present somewhere in the works, none of which is meant to be seen by itself; his *oeuvre* is—and was—manifold, and isolation of the works defeats their purposeful clamor. The grin, seen alongside—or in—the shamanistic pieces, brings the viewer back to mundane, complex reality. Johnson sees clearly that it's *all* there, *all* significant, *all* equal, and *all* grist for his mill . . . with laughter as its greatest relief.

Part of this enveloping complexity is visual, to be found in the daily glut of media imagery. This has been Johnson's inspirational fodder since the mid-'70s, when he first used a commercial print as the basis for an image. *Reign for His Hat* (1976) is a signal conflation of pun and picture, found in what the Japanese called the "floating world" of quotidian pleasure. The cheap reproduction of a geisha kneeling before her musical instrument suggested the addition of "rain" in the shape of the word *for* surrounded by black strips peppered with white dots raining down on the scene. This was the first appearance of his ubiquitous filmstrip edge filtering across the grainy little image. The entire scene is gratuitously crossed out, a fortuitous cancellation of initial meaning.

This was immediately followed by a series of miniretrospectives akin to Duchamp's boxes, hieroglyphic drawings in a rebus pattern from his work to date: *for* schematics which proved fruitful. Johnson then began to construct *for* out of miscellaneous natural and unnatural objects: shells, wire, plastic toy Indians in primary colors, grasses and sticks, arrowheads, and a long jellyroll of *for*s rotating mathematically on their axis . . . *for*-constructions for fun. In chance encounters with *for*s on commercial signs, he isolated and decontextualized a number of documentary *for*s, some of which resemble the working photos used by Robert Cottingham, for corroborative evidence of his obsession.

This environmental aspect, coupled with the proliferation of objects in his studio, led to the first of several *for*ooms (with this word's

phonetically explosive overtones) in which the art began to aggressively subsume its creator and its visitors. The forooms are like labyrinths, congested tunnels leading to unexpected corners all in restful white, the glut realized in a suffocating absence of the void... "a-void-ance." Johnson was finally achieving the formula of *Fortext*: "radical subjectivism = world as ornament of mind." And what a mind!

Forooms have furniture and shelves for fortifacts, like the one he inhabited at P.S. 1's alternative space from 1978-79. Johnson's spray-painted constructions, full of rhoplex-saturated triangles laced over the debris of Manhattan's sidewalks, fit the emerging antiaesthetic that would soon locate in the East Village. But Johnson, secure in the accepting, Chicago-imagist womb of the Phyllis Kind Gallery, remained at a remove from that scene, constructing his debris shrines in other environs.

Since the early '80s, the word games have literally sunk to the lower edges of his paintings, serving as nontitles created by a quasi-logical system of associations culled from a deep stream of consciousness and arbitrarily assigned to the images. These canvases, lightly sprayed and stenciled in vivid colors, are often shaped, protruding like bas-reliefs. Many display the influence of Klee, obviously in the random buildup of their conception and in their techniques: both *Chow* and the raftlike *Combine Bound for the Sea* incorporated the spidery architectural rendering common in Klee's work of the early Bauhaus years. But this delicacy of tone is jostled by the erotic undertone that creeps into these streetwise images, where towers can metamorphose into surrealist penises. The words are broken up into inches as well, conforming to an arbitrary beat imposed by the size of the entire image. This system of spacing the text has survived in the appropriations of the present, making sense of nonsense and nonsense of sense: "Some Different Not Apart. Opportune Him" . . . and "Dry Criticism of These Sober Houses," or: "Yank You Know. Broke Step Aside. Difto Condo," which is positioned beneath a yellow rooster climbing a hill embellished by a shaky "H," a Sisyphean construct that seems to have no connection to the strident words beneath it. This disconnectedness is typical; in many works the limpid blue grounds establish a landscape, but it's like the memory of a view quickly glanced from a speeding car. The results are a congeries of unrelated images and words that float through the "still" mind, a mind at rest but continuing to operate on an autonomous level, willful, and utterly illogical. In such an image, pink angel wings can flank a log cabin with a figure busily mowing its transparent wooden surface. This staged tableau, with its sugary proscenium, has its own visual irony, heightened by the uneasy feeling produced by the words "Flacid Come . . . Go Forget Go . . . Lots or if endo . . ." which stagger into incoherent stutters.

Johnson isn't always so incomprehensible, however. In a set of comic-book mug-shot images the text and the visuals meld, though the former must be read upside down and backwards into an alternating sequence of *Person/Story*. But, says the strip below, *Nobody Saw It*. But mid-decade, Johnson's interest in the manipulated ready-made object had taken over and his studio became devoted to art found and imposed upon. These were then shown in *Academy Style*, an adaptation of the

Salons of the 18th and 19th centuries, when annual exhibitions of everyone considered appropriate displayed the productions of hundreds of artists—floor to ceiling, room after room. In this case, however, Johnson adapts works of hundreds of artists *manqués*, discards found in thrift shops, garage sales, and trash bins up and down the East Coast. The remnants of some unknown artist's efforts, often eccentric but more often sentimentalized patterns or—at worst—store-bought kitsch, are reutilized in a traditional manner. It is in these embellishments that Johnson comes closest to Duchamp.

In Duchamp's *Readymades Aided*, there is a skewed, humorous logic. A piece like *Pharmacy*, originally a mediocre calendar illustration meant to hang only for a month and be replaced by another equally unintrusive image, becomes art by aesthetic embellishment, by imposition. Duchamp delicately altered this woodland scene by the addition of two complementary dots of red and green pigment associated with the pharmacy by their resemblance to the colored glass vials that identified the chemist's shop to passersby . . . the sign of color/as color. A pharmacy is a place to find things which will make one feel better, and, by extension, Duchamp's complementaries make the original better. Thus the levels of meaning become interlocked in a grid replete with conceptual ironies.

Of course, Duchamp claimed—or feigned—complete indifference in his *Readymades*; Johnson again wants it both ways. His criterion of choice is largely monetary: "No work over \$2.50," but he seems willing to complement almost any sort of image. The juxtaposition of these canvases can be dizzying, as clamorous as the "high-art" of the Salons. A store-bought *Tweety Bird* rolls his goo-goo eyes (without much Johnsonian augmentation) toward an awkward hand-drawn version of the Bat Boy, titled *Divert Me Robin* (a true media-call), that zooms off toward a yellow-and-orange felt frog next to a needlepoint house against a lurid purple sky, dotted (a Johnsonian augmentation) with thick primary blobs of tempera paint, a wry comment on the original artist's chosen color scheme. Multiply these images exponentially and the hilariously discordant effect of Johnson's strategies in uniting the high and low art worlds becomes clear.

For one Virginia show, in May of 1985, in which Johnson had the challenging luxury of an entire gallery to himself, the standard format of text below—filmstrip above was expanded over the entire space, brashly asking: "What If Pattern is a Regional Swampland . . .?" But such regionalism is a fading thing in the age of mediated mediocrity spreading across the globe, and thus Johnson is able to find the glut of imagery *cum* trash everywhere—and find his audience's recognition everywhere as well. His feverish recycling of the good, the bad, and the ugly, part of his continuing "experiments in transpositional meaning-value," a free-for-all between the artist and the environment of high art and low artifact, is bound to continue to exhaustion. Perhaps Martin Johnson, resident in the cult of kitsch, is as much orchestrator as artist, but then what's the difference? Or, as he would say, "what's it all for?" □

\*All references to, and various spellings of, *for*, are taken verbatim from *Fortext*, Johnson's unpublished apologia to his xeroxed book of 1971.