



DRAWINGS FROM THE
COLLECTION OF
DOROTHY AND
HERBERT VOGEL

MARTIN JOHNSON

b. 1951

Martin Johnson is a native of New Jersey. He received his B.A. degree in architecture from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute before moving to New York.

His art is a curious blend of the visual, the linguistic, and the conceptual. His media encompass everything from the English language to found objects. He produces paintings, drawings, constructions, environments, poetry and puns. The one consistent element in all of his work is his novel use of the English language.

In 1979, for example, he developed a personal iconography based on the word FOR, which according to Johnson, is a combination of OF and OR. OF represents the visual in art, or the object, and OR represents the conceptual, or the artist. Combined they become FOR, which stands for the artist and the art work; that is the concept merged with the object, implying communication. Furthermore, he has assigned the visual symbols for each letter of the word FOR enabling him to express the word without actually writing it. The F is represented by a red square or "feel frame," the O is a blue circle symbolizing "order," and the R stands for "rhythm" in the form of a yellow triangle.¹

Other examples in Johnson's linguistic exercises include his "cosmic puns" such as "avoidance — a void dance," "a metabeing — met a being," "apocalypse — a pack of lips," and "mysticism — missed his ism."² Recently he has taken to inserting extraneous letters and rearranging syllables within words and stenciling the resulting phrases in capitol block letters on the lower edge of his paintings and drawings. Examples include "REREFLECTIFLECTI," "HOME WORKING OUT," and "SHOW DOWEFFEC LIC"³ These phrases are not meant as titles for the accompanying image but as part of the image.

The untitled drawing in the Vogel collection includes the phrases "WHEN THEN THEY ARE JOINED INSEPERABCAGED."

Even though this series of words suggest some meaning it is only mildly interesting until certain letter patterns are observed. For example, the third letter of each of the first four words is an E. The first two words have a three letter series, HEN, in common. Similarly, the second and third words have the three letter series, THE, in common. The final word, or set of letters, INSEPERABCAGED, appears at first glance to be nonsensical; however, the first nine letters in the set suggest the word "inseparable," and the final five letters spell "caged." Johnson's merging of the two creates a familiar series of the three letters ABC, as they occur in the alphabet.

What this has to do with the accompanying image, if anything, is not clear, but their juxtaposition invited the viewer to look for associations. In this drawing the chicken, apparently a rooster with human legs is flanked on either side by symmetrically identical geometric structures, in effect creating a square around the figure. Perhaps the three letter series common to the first two words in the phrase is meant to spell the word "hen," in reference to the chicken figure. And the square around the figure may represent the cage mentioned in the final word of the phrase.

R.P.

¹ Allan Shwartzman, "Martin Johnson," *Arts Magazine* 54 (January 1980): 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ "Group Show," *Arts Magazine* 59 (September 1984): 33.

Untitled #4 1983
acrylic and enamel on paper
30 x 40 (76.2 x 101.7)



WHEN THEN THEY ARE JOINED INSEPERABCAGED -