



Studio of Martin Johnson. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.

## MARTIN JOHNSON

For Martin Johnson, art is an unedited repository of the mind. His concepts are complex, varied, generalized, numerous, and his cluttered P.S. 1 studio is bulging at the seams. He writes poems, takes photographs, puts on private performances, paints pictures, and makes all sorts of painted sculptural objects: small and large structures, wall pieces, floor pieces, paths, and mounds from found or inexpensively purchased materials, such as wire, display cases, cheesecloth, wood, old school desks, advertising signs, and cardboard. As a symbolist of sorts—well aware that anything signifies something else—Johnson has centered his obsessive investigations on the word *FOR*, which physically and conceptually structures all of his work.

Beginning with minute, seemingly incidental linguistic fragments, Johnson rapidly collects and constructs, like a

"pack rat," an intricate and vast language. *FOR*, for him, is the union of *OF* and *OR*, both words that encapsulate, on an abstract level, all concepts, structures, and actions. As a preposition, *OF* functions to indicate the particular correspondence between nouns (or objects) and other nouns, verbs (or actions), or adjectives (or descriptions). *OF* is a preposition for descriptions which, when used in phrases, clarifies origins, associations, locations, distances, concrete and abstruse qualities, results, possessions, compositions, and so on. *OR*, on the other hand, as a conjunction, connects words, phrases, or clauses of equal rank. *OR* indicates choice, or the attempt to focus on specific possibilities; it can both confine and expand, depending upon its context. *OF* corresponds to the visual function of art, or to the object, *OR* to the conceptual aspect, or to the artist. *FOR* unites the activ-

ities of the artist with the function of the object by implying communication, reasoning, and sharing, all of which involve intention and result. If all of this seems confusing, it is because Johnson condenses and interweaves written and visual language to such an extent that they are practically interchangeable.

To each of the letters of *FOR*, Johnson has assigned a color, a corresponding shape, and an associated formal attribute: *F* is a red square or the "feel frame"; *O* is a blue circle and symbolizes "order"; *R* is a yellow triangle and denotes "rhythm." The symbols of a given letter can stand for the whole, and thus Johnson uses these "notations to transmit the word *FOR* without actually writing it."

A large four-sided structure in his studio, *FOR'T*, contains, like a book or a mind, a manifesto for *FOR*. Each of the four *FOR* walls is constructed

of various checkerboard and free-form patterned weavings of rhopexed cheesecloth (flattened and stretched tautly) and open "peep holes," framed by a tall, slender *F* on the right, an *R* on the left, with an equally thin horizontal *O* frieze located halfway up each side, connecting the two ends. The viewer enters through an *O* opening in the cheesecloth web, and finds various things on the floor—red, blue, and yellow cheesecloth triangles, confetti, and written *FORS*—beneath an old school chair and desk, on which the qualities of *FOR* are delineated.

The character of much of Johnson's work and his attitudes about it is evident in his writings. For him, the object is merely a marker of a specific time and place ("it = is, face it") which is but a fragment of a larger whole. Objects and words are catalysts for further permutations, and specific meaning has few fixed points. Transformations of words, often based on homophonic associations, simultaneously have simplistic, humorous, and poignant effects, for example, the following "cosmic puns":

avoidance—a void dance  
 existential—X is tensile  
 metabeing—met a being  
 sincere—sin seer  
 myth—My<sup>th</sup>

apocalypse—a pack of lips  
 mysticism—missed his ism  
 a line meant—edge alignment

base is examination basis.  
 bringing up potent phrases  
 of-or for order rhythm.

Johnson is an eccentric who indiscriminately volleys with concepts, actions, and objects. He is attracted to aspects of thought that appear so simple that there must be more to them. His zaniness allows for a nondogmatic indulgence in the eclectic nature of language and the ways the mind muddles and ultimately redefines it. Like a spider spinning an elaborate web out of instinctual response, Johnson enjoys opening his can of worms with few specific goals intended, and thus allows the concepts to shape themselves as much as the artist does. Through his investigations, Martin Johnson constructs potent word and object vessels that transmit the complexity of an intricate individual. (Phyllis Kind, *January 15-February 16*)

Allan Schwartzman