

Bitter sweet inherent see,
still moving delight.
Play cupid clay pubis,
hermeneutic hairstyle.
To make do recollect,
again adding to pile.
Containing connection,
for fundamental freedom.
Continue to provide proof,
as life's found object.
Able meanings nourished subject,
rambling signifiers tone ongoing proposal.
Know wasted time on dislike,
finish this with that start.

M.J.

September 1989



*Martin Johnson, GLIMPSATONE installation, Peninsula Fine Arts Center,
Newport News, Virginia, January-February 1990.*

A vast and cumulative inventory of component forms, Martin Johnson's installations buffet the viewer between perplexing hilarity and profound revelation. His richly allusive compounding of forms, text, and imagery "produces hallucinatory visions of the known which show just how unknown it really is, because it is so encrusted with our half-known intentions" (Kuspit 1983).

Kitsch and chance run rampant in Johnson's carnival of found objects ("life is a found object," he quips). Commonplace junkyard debris is reconfigured into a carnival-like proliferation of webbed structures set before walls filled top to bottom with found paintings. Each painting is stenciled at the bottom edge with fragments of found text, both letters and words, that are occasionally obtuse or unintelligible. Painted across the top of each painting is a dotted black border resembling the sprocket edges of film. Densely massed together, the paintings produce the media-blitz effect of banked television monitors, their thousands of images at complete odds with the closed captions underneath them. Johnson's words often do not correlate with images; neither word nor image provides the complete message or meaning, but only a glimpse of an idea. These fragmented image/text pairings are built into a visual whirlpool that engulfs the viewer with snippets of ideas alternately disconnected and reconnected, rejuvenated by new associations or unexpected visual alignments. Johnson's use of words or phrases is akin to his use of component objects in his installations, all part of a larger and ever-growing body of work. None of the objects is seen alone, nor are the words free-standing.

A huge red mouth, detached and absurdly mocking, is a surrogate for the artist, in a sense imposing himself on this otherwise appropriated

realm. The mouth's grinning toothiness dominates by frequent repetition and scale; floating free-form from the ceiling or on the floor, applied to various sculptures, or frequently painted over the mouth of a figure or animal in the found paintings. In combination with all the repeated components and densely decorated surfaces, the mouth adds to both the fetishistic and carnival-like effects of Johnson's work.

Diverse and iconoclastic artistic and literary sources feed Johnson's imagery and methods. They include, but are not limited to, Constructivism, Dadaism (Duchamp), Surrealist automatism, folk art, '50s trash/funk art, Chicago Imagists (Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum), installation art (Jonathan Borofsky and Judy Pfaff), and early East Village graffiti art (see McGreevy 1988^b). Johnson also acknowledges the influence of Lucas Samaras, whose unbridled experimentation with nontraditional materials to uncanny effect has been incorporated into Johnson's working method.

Looking for new and unexpected meaning, Johnson has revived and reformulated the challenge posed by Duchamp's ready-mades earlier in this century. His irrational or unexpected combinations of found objects with nontraditional materials, as well as his free-spirited attitude toward their use, counters his disaffected attitudes about making, experiencing, and exhibiting art.

Words and talismans have their own life in Johnson's work and their own self-propelling relationship to the history of his career. Gamesmanship is operative in decoding text, image, pun, and poetry. The word FOR is a critical talisman for Johnson that he uses physically and conceptually in all his paintings. A union of OF and OR, FOR is a catalytic word that he feels abstractly encapsulates broad archetypal concepts. Word play result-



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ing from the chance or purposeful combination of FOR with other words or images transmits an intricate symbolism for him that appears disarmingly simple, yet it bears the weight of complex meaning. Johnson has assigned colors, shapes, and formal attributes to each letter of the talisman: F = red square (“feel frame”); O = blue circle (“order”); R = yellow triangle (“rhythm”). Using a shorthand of symbols of a given letter, Johnson can transmit the concept of FOR without actually writing the whole word (Schwartzman). With this talisman he can share abstract thoughts and feelings with the viewer (FOR-US = FORCE; METAFOR). Clustered like concrete poetry, the individual letters suggest sounds and summon images both related to and independent of the image in which they appear.

He occasionally objectifies FOR, forming the three letters into hundreds of colored wire sculptures piled in a large heap of possibility on the floor, like sand. There is an unspoken invitation to the viewer to “take one,” and an almost uncontrollable urge on the part of viewer to do so, thus to begin to participate with Johnson in his poetic search, his recycling of the familiar, the commonplace, the rejected, with most uncommon results.

While all of his paintings involve the FOR talisman, his sculptures are grouped under the all-encompassing category entitled UNIS (UN-IS, or not is, a process of becoming—with associations with the words unit, unite, unified). Combining visual and textual tools repetitively in both media, he explores the gap between seeing and thinking. By way of explanation, Johnson says, “I am attempting to BE FOR—a psychological state that transcends art, that takes place in space and time.” He continues, “Epiphanies of the language of a moment catch an idea like a scent, a vague recol-

lection that you grasp and then it’s gone” (Johnson). After having been delighted by playing the game, deciphering the codes, the viewer leaves with a sense of having glimpsed aspects of many truths.

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