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MARTIN JOHNSON

UN / COMMON GROUND

ELIZABETH KING

JOHN McCARTY

MASAKO MIYATA

CARLTON NEWTON

ROBERT STUART

HOLLY WRIGHT

YURIKO YAMAGUCHI

VIRGINIA ARTISTS 1990

U N / C O M M O N G R O U N D

Virginia Artists 1990

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts / Richmond

This catalogue was produced in conjunction with the exhibition
UN/COMMON GROUND: *Virginia Artists 1990*
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
October 23-December 16, 1990

Organized by the Department of Twentieth-Century Art
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

UN/COMMON GROUND : Virginia Artists 1990 / Julia W. Boyd . . . [et al].
p. cm.

Catalog of an exhibition held at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
Richmond, Oct. 23-Dec. 16, 1990.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-917046-31-5 (pbk.)

1. Art, American—Virginia—Exhibitions. 2. Art, Modern—20th
century—Virginia—Exhibitions. I. Boyd, Julia W. II. Virginia
Museum of Fine Arts.

N6530.V8U5 1990

709'.755'074755451—dc20

90-12773

CIP

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Printed in the United States of America.

Produced by the Office of Publications,
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

Accredited by the American Association of Museums

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Future historians will analyze what impact all

of this has had on the creative arts of our time. However the matter is resolved, from time to time we will continue to provide summaries of how Virginia artists have responded to their times and contributed to them.

Once again, we are indebted to Phillip Morris Companies Inc. for their sponsorship. The company's continued support of cultural institutions is a cause for profound personal and collective gratitude. Here, too, acknowledgment is due to the help and cooperation of the lenders, whose patience and good will made this presentation possible. But the highest credit goes to the artists and to the four curators who organized this exhibition. We all benefit from their personal insights and dedication. Lastly, an effort of this kind would have been impossible without the collective support of the entire Museum staff. They represent professionalism and the highest commitment to excellence.

PAUL N. PERRROT

Director

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The universally favorable, indeed generous response to the first *Un/Common Ground*, an exhibition of contemporary Virginia artists that was shown in 1988, reaffirmed our commitment to continue our efforts to present the most creative artists of the State. It also vindicated our confidence that such a carefully and honestly selected effort would gain approval even from those who were disappointed in not being included. That exhibition, and the effort that went into its development, revealed a wide variety of talent in the State, the coexistence of traditional and advanced approaches, an adherence to tried techniques, and an exploration of totally new media. From that vast diversity, twelve artists were selected.

This year, following the same exhaustive methods of slide viewings, studio visits, and soul-searching, the staff of our Department of Twentieth-Century Arts has selected fourteen artists for *Un/Common Ground: Virginia Artists 1990*. These artists, all of different orientations, seek in their own ways to find new truths and to express beliefs, willingly or not, that reflect various facets of our society. As such, their work adds to our heritage and becomes both a mirror of what we are and a harbinger of what we may become.

Culturally, we are going through an emotional period. This is evident from the controversy that has surrounded certain works to the point of arousing such passion that fundamental precepts upon which our society is based—i.e., respect for freedom of thought and expression—are being threatened by the specter of official censorship and an equally insidious fear that leads to self-censorship, to the concealment of ideas, and to the lack of courage to explore.

A great deal of art being made today involves a critique of representation. Post-Modern perception of reality recognizes no absolutes but finds it subject to many meanings, to layers of interpretation and possibility. Having demonstrated the controlling effects of advertising, the media, and infinitely reproduced imagery and information on our perceptions of what was once considered objective reality, and having observed the failure of institutions to control or prevent political, ecological, financial, and technological disaster, many artists have chosen to respond to the bankruptcy of Modernist ideals through irony, cynicism, or parody. They challenge the Modernist detachment from history and its underlying principles of aesthetic purity and autonomy, as well as its utopian confidence in progress and the ability of individuals to control their own destinies. Because of the power of reproduced imagery to blur our understanding of reality, and because art has become so commodity-oriented, artists often express a lack of faith in originality and authenticity—a stance which thus makes obsolete the concept of creativity, imagination, or the masterpiece, as it enforces the relativistic power of context on the work. High art and popular culture have been drawn so close together they are often indistinguishable; once-distinct art forms have become hybridized. Deconstruction of absolute meaning into a proliferation of contingent meanings and situational interpretations suggests a rupture in both value and communication that produces a disturbing insecurity and emptiness—even meaninglessness—and has contributed to a general sense of fragmentation, both in society and in art. Conventional definitions and approaches to art no longer work. Being forced to question what we see forces us to question meaning itself. Perception of the

self as de-centered, constructed and defined by momentary codes, creates a greater need for the artist to identify this self and to communicate this awareness as a reflection of universal experience.

If abstraction, pure and analytically self-contained, was the sign of Modernism, then subjective, ambiguous representation, ironic and relative, underscores most of the work of Post-Modern artists. The fractured, de-centered consciousness underlying much contemporary work can either dwell on this irony, deconstruction of meaning, and anxious pessimism, or it can integrate art into society by establishing pertinent new forms that express vital perceptions of our collective existence.

In a sense, the direction that art is taking parallels the direction that generally must be taken to solve the massive problems that are disintegrating society. The autonomous individual, back turned to history, society, and convention, cannot change the systems and institutions in which we have lost faith and toward which we feel fear and vulnerability. Instead, a collective approach is required. This shift from an individual to a collective stance is observable in the arts, as an international art scene now asserts the greatest influence, having supplanted national or city-dominated centers of art. At the same time, the relationship of the artist to the viewer has changed drastically. One of the great failures of early Modernism was its reluctance to address the viewer more directly as respondent. As a result, art became increasingly hermetic and self-referential. To much of the general public it still remains an effete activity. Many artists are now attempting to redress that exclusion. Artists today, sensing a new urgency to communicate, have left their self-imposed solitude purposely to engage the viewer in multiple possibilities of meaning as a critical component of their

works. Artists make their work accessible through choice and manipulation of materials (often unusual or unassociated with art) and through such subject matter as allegory, fantasy, performance, or appropriated style or imagery as social commentary. Whatever the mode of approach, the artist is providing a means for the viewer's associative resources to be activated and thus to influence the outcome and impact of the image.

Acknowledging the role of the viewer and the effects of history, some artists are re-examining many forms, categories, and materials. Rather than rejecting the more heroic ideals associated with Modernism they are using them expressively or ironically in order to find new possibilities for meaning. In so doing, they are striving to re-instill the belief in art's evocative power by coming to terms with present society and culture, despite its artificiality. The artist becomes a conduit for knowing and finding the self, and thus all of our selves, in a culture that is quickly transforming us from centered contributors to passive receptors of information.

How are these ideas reflected in the works on view in *Un/Common Ground: Virginia Artists 1990*? The fourteen artists in this exhibition were selected independently of one another for the sole merits of their work: seven are sculptors, one a filmmaker, one a photographer, four are painters, and one concentrates on drawings. Once selected and assembled together, the group invites an irresistible inclination to look for cohesive signs of theme or definitive activity occurring in Virginia now and in relation to the art world generally. Two immediately apparent forces, though neither in a pure form, conveniently divide the group. A large but disparate representational camp (Davenport, Elliott, Essley, Fox, King, Johnson, Miyata, Stuart,

and Wright), most of whose work is strongly tinged by surrealist tendencies and the incorporation of some form of photography or its sharp-focus effect, is balanced by a slightly smaller group of abstractionists, several with a conceptual bent (Brzezinski, Crow, McCarty, Newton, Yamaguchi). But these broad camps tell us nothing really of what, why, or how these fourteen artists relate to the fictive presence of reality expressed in the broader art world. Each of them is involved to some degree with current issues of the Post-Modernist condition. Some are looking for compelling avenues of meaning within historic formats, re-examining the possibilities offered by earlier Modernism—its aesthetic principles and forms—not for purposes of parody or cynicism often characteristic of the mainstream, but for its restorative potential, beyond innovation for its own sake. Others are re-examining the natural processes and behavior of materials to fuse form and metaphorical meaning. Some are examining landscape as a means of expressing our dysfunctional relationship to nature. All of them are dealing with personal and cultural identities and values in some form by actively engaging the viewer's response to their work in a significant way and by exploring the human condition, to come to terms with the decline in the order of things and the lack of centeredness. Characteristic of international Post-Modern tendencies, there is some appropriation of imagery or style, but in a new sense that is becoming widespread. These artists are reviving an early Modernist emphasis on the material presence of art and its ability to carry profound meaning. The belief that art can bear some kind of spiritual resonance seems to indicate a reinvestment in ideas thought by many in the Post-Modern art world to be passé.

For artists living outside the mainstream, the urge to continue to make art and to find meaning in doing so is readily confirmed in the work on view in *Un/Common Ground 1990*. While optimism may be hard to summon, meaning in either representation or abstraction has become viable again.

The artists in this exhibition are forging a new synthesis of past and present ideas that indicates territories beyond the art object and attempts to re-integrate art within the broader context of life in a chaotic world. With a renewed belief in the spiritual power of art, the artists in this exhibition validate existence over style or form through disparate visions that are rooted in this world and offer a vast potential to make us see more clearly.

JULIA W. BOYD

Associate Curator
Twentieth-Century Art

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-



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

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; META-FOR). 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.

J.W.B.

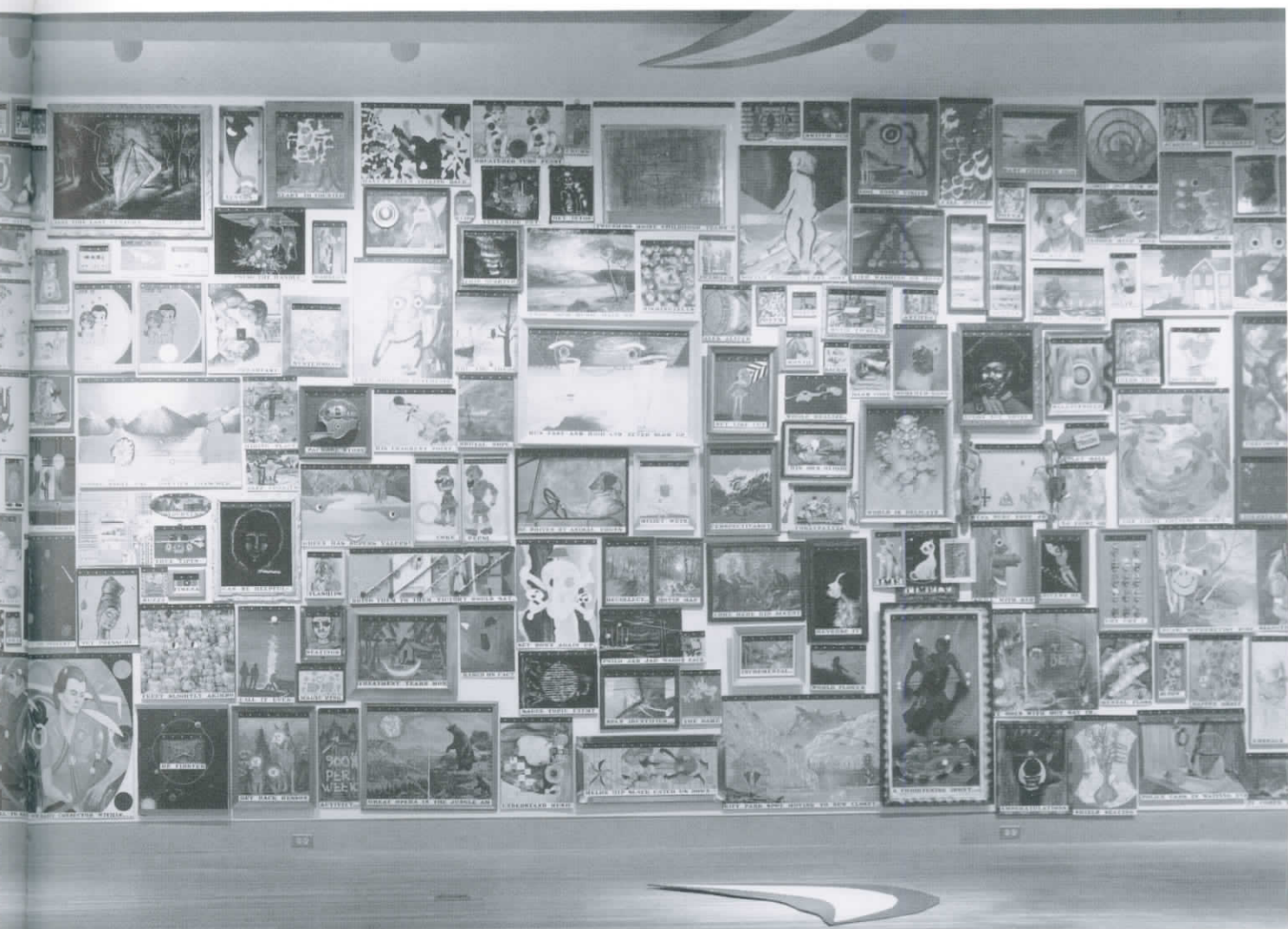


*Martin Johnson, GLIMPSATONE installation, Peninsula Fine Arts Center,
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- . 1988*. "Household Media." *Port Folio*, 19–25 January.
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*Martin Johnson, GLIMPSATONE installation, Peninsula Fine Arts Center,
Newport News, Virginia, January-February 1990.*



View of the artist's studio

Martin Johnson

Born 1951, Elmer, New Jersey.
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, BA, Architecture, 1974.
College of Arts and Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, MFA, 1977.
Lives in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *Glimpsatone*. Site Installation, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia.
- 1988 Site Installation, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
Enigmatic Constructions—(Retro) Active Art Work(s), Portsmouth Museums, Portsmouth, Virginia.
- 1987, 1985, 1983, 1981, 1980
Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York.
- 1981 Site Installation, Florence Wilcox Gallery in Commons, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania.
- 1978 Appalachian Center for Contemporary Art, Charleston, West Virginia.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 *The Portrait in America*, The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.
- 1989 *Sculpture Now: 10 Virginians*, Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History, Virginia.
- 1988 *Household Media*, Virginia Beach Arts Center, Virginia.
Site Installation, Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor, Staten Island, New York.
From the Collection of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel, Arnot Art Museum, Arnot, New York.
Artists' Sketchbooks, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- 1987 *Four Sharp Artists*, The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.
Animals, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, Virginia.

- 1986 *Drawings from the Collection of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel*, University of Arkansas Gallery, Little Rock; Moody Gallery of Art, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; Palmer Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park.
- 1985 *Insider/Outsider*, Virginia Beach Arts Center, Virginia.
Erotic Art, S.P.L.A.T. Alternative Art Gallery, Norfolk, Virginia.
Martin Johnson: Installation, Old Dominion University Gallery, Norfolk, Virginia.
- 1984 *Visiting Artists 1977-1984*, Wake Forest University, Department of Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
Dozen/Half Dozen, Installation, Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York.
Michele Feder-Nadoff, Martin Johnson, Irene Kubota, Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago.
- 1983 *Dialect = Dialectic II*, Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York.
- 1982 *P.S. . . . P.S. I*, 1708 East Main Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.
New New York, University Fine Arts Galleries, Florida State University, Tallahassee; Coral Gables Museum, Florida; Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona.
Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition of the Vogel Collection, Brainerd Art Gallery, State University at Potsdam, New York; Gallery of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Rapids.
- 1981 *Ikoni/Logos: Word as Image*, The Alternative Museum, New York.
Former North Carolina Artists, Fine Arts Gallery, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
- 1979-80 *Painters from New York Galleries*, traveling exhibition: James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia; Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg; Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia.

- 1979 Annual Drawing Exhibition, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro.
The Intimate Gesture, Visual Arts Gallery, School of the Visual Arts, New York.
Previews, Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York.
One Hundred Artists Show, Ten Windows on Eighth Avenue, New York.
- 1977 *The Magnetic Image*, Invitational Video Showing, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia.
- 1976 *Exhibition 280*, Huntington Galleries, Huntington, West Virginia.

COLLECTIONS

- Richard Brown Baker, New York
Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana
Charles Beneson, Connecticut
Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Bergman, Chicago
The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia
William Copley, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Goldberg, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Alan Koppel, Chicago
Prudential Insurance Company, New York
Martin Sklar, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Speyer, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Vogel