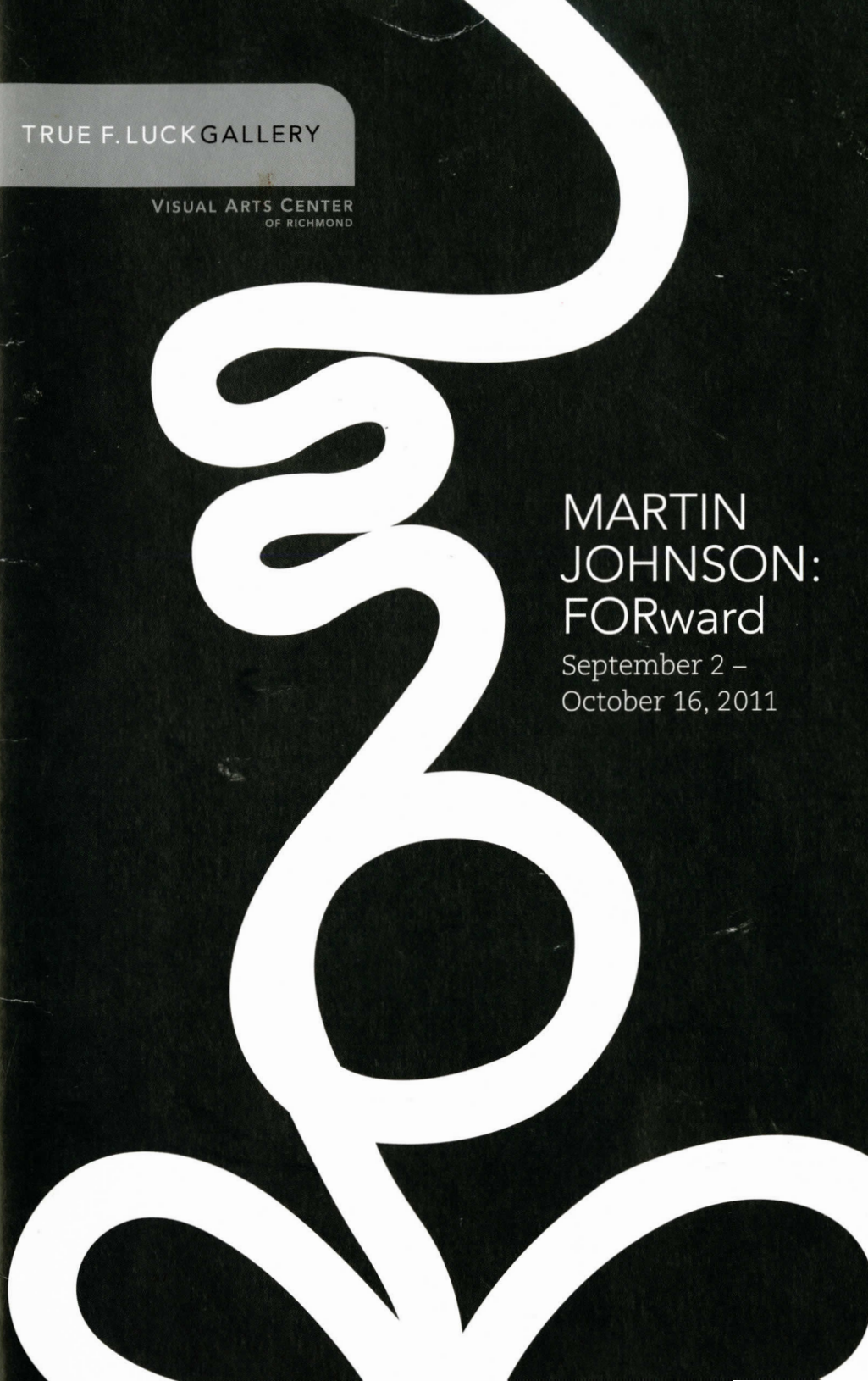


TRUE F. LUCK GALLERY

VISUAL ARTS CENTER
OF RICHMOND

MARTIN
JOHNSON:
FORward

September 2 –
October 16, 2011





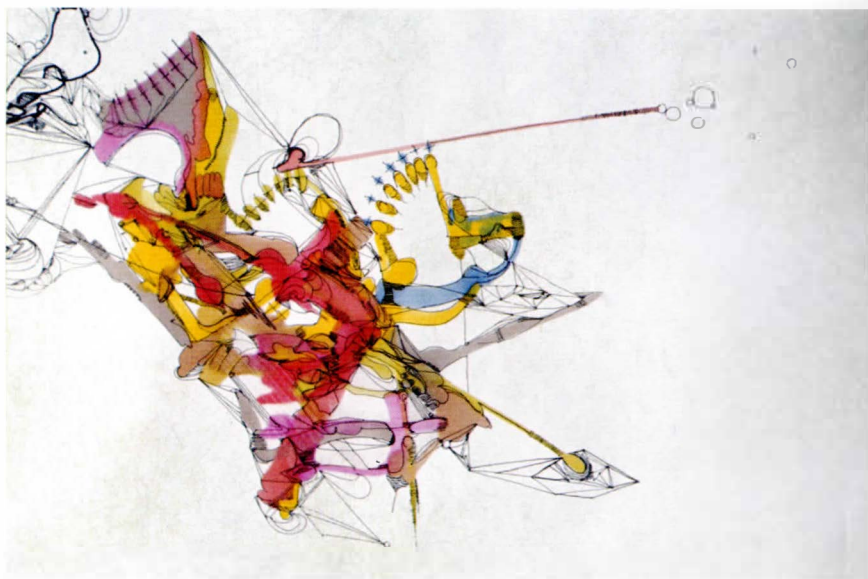
INTRODUCTION

The True F. Luck Gallery's mission is to "feature both emerging and established artists, with a specific focus on the use of innovative materials and processes." Martin Johnson's career history and artistic methods offer a unique opportunity to execute this mission in its entirety. A prolific, established artist whose early career garnered critical attention in New York in the 1980s, Johnson has reemerged after a considerable hiatus from the art world. Although he last exhibited publicly in the mid 1990s, he never ceased his steadfast production

of paintings, sculptures, collages, and low relief constructions that define his massive oeuvre. This mid-career survey presents an important fragment of his life's work and a glimpse into several archetypes of his studio practice. Since the early 1970s Johnson has employed unconventional techniques, nontraditional materials, and innovative creative processes in his consistent, original approach to crafting images and objects. *Martin Johnson: FORward* aims to impart the artist's stylistic and conceptually unwavering forty-year continuum.

Inside cover: *Piles of For (Poem)*, 2000–2011, silver solder, sizes vary Above: *Pile of For Timepiece*, 1979, pink wire, cardboard, acrylic, 8.5" × 5" × 5"





ALL THERE, ALL SIGNIFICANT, ALL EQUAL

Martin Johnson collects found objects, consumer debris, recycled art, and fragments of language. A fervently prolific maker of complex sculptures, constructions, installations and paintings, he transforms everyday words and objects into masses of unconventional and unexpected visual, linguistic, and conceptual art forms. Johnson methodically removes objects and words from their original context, dislocating them in time and giving them new resonance as manipulated, juxtaposed, and often replicated subjects that convey his ideas and allow concepts to shape themselves. Employing nontraditional materials with the sensibility of a self-taught artist tackling his medium with inherent compulsion and intent, Johnson offers a distinctive assessment of language, consumerism, and the passage of time.

Johnson developed his lasting, personal iconography and experimental

approach to crafting art and language in the early 1970s when he was an architecture student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. There his intuitive, abstract sketches caught the eye of his mentor and professor, Olivio Ferrari. Ferrari dubbed Johnson's drawings *emographs*, short for "emotional graphics," and suggested he make larger versions in ink and in paint. With Ferrari's encouragement, Johnson began to study books on twentieth century art history and developed a keen interest in Abstract Expressionism, specifically the powerful gestures of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Abandoning his early aspiration to become a Bauhaus-inspired architect, Johnson diverted his energy toward studio art and produced hundreds of impulsive *emographs* using preparatory methods he continues to apply today. Johnson recalls, "I began each *emograph* by making small points on paper that represented moments in time. Then I connected the points with

Emograph, 1971, ink and watercolor on paper, 12" × 16"

marks, creating volumes, connecting time.”¹ Johnson layered these volumetric drawings with ink washes and rhythmic gestural drawings, repeatedly veiling the original dots and connecting lines of his structured foundation. Consciously forming and then obscuring the underlying grid “of moments and the passage of time” within his *emographs*, Johnson developed a lasting studio practice that became his personal, repetitive process for beginning every drawing, painting, or sculpture.

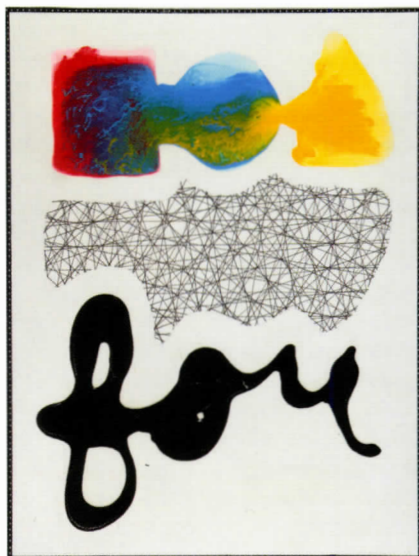
As his early *emographs* evolved from ink on paper into low relief constructions, Johnson intuitively began to adhere objects and painted material fragments to canvases and panels as his “points.” Similarly, he began weaving and knotting string, wire, and twine in place of drawn lines to connect and entrap his collages of found objects. The string and twine, sheathed with triangular cuttings of cheesecloth and glossed with a clear acrylic binder, created constellation-like nettings that encased Johnson’s dimensional foundation and layered to form architectural assemblages. Inspired by Ferrari’s term *emograph*, Johnson coined his

new dimensional constructions *unises*, explaining that, “*Unis* is short for *unison*, a word that encompasses everything while simultaneously combining the negative prefix *un* and the adverb *is*. The joining of *un* and *is* stands for my belief that nothing really is. Everything is in the process of changing and becoming. *Unis* is a word that connotes both the object and that process.”

While continuing to make *emographs* and *unises*, Johnson’s collegiate foray into conceptual art and wordplay intensified during his senior year at Virginia Tech, taking permanent root in his discovery of a personal aphorism that forged his developing union of concept and image. On December 10, 1974, Johnson painted an abstract, textured panel reflecting his vision of infinity and an expansive universe. In the lower left corner of the painting, he spontaneously scratched the word *FOR* in green paint. Johnson immediately accepted the word as a creative revelation that articulated his newfound understanding that everything in the world—every action, every being, and every object—exists solely *for* something else. He adopted the word *for* as his



Left: *Unis (Floor)*, 1982, chairs, metal shelf, string, cheese cloth, acrylic, spray paint, polymer, 69" × 50" × 20" Right: *First For Painting*, December 10, 1974, enamel, acrylic, and canvas on masonite, 24" × 24"



personal talisman, and therein initiated a nearly forty-year span of depicting *for* as both image and object in a multitude of scales and media.

Further expanding his use of the word *for* by conveying meaning through symbolism, Johnson eventually prescribed a written and color-coded formula to his talisman, incorporating derivations of color theory principles he absorbed from the writings of Goethe and Kandinsky and altered to define his own. He assigned a red square to "F," a blue circle to "O," and a yellow triangle to "R." He then prescribed words to each letter, articulating definitions for his formal rules of composition: "F" symbolized "Feel Frame," "O" signified "Order," and "R" denoted "Rhythm." Using these colors and shapes to imply letters and concepts, Johnson thereby developed notations to convey *for* without actually writing the word. Presented as written text, a cryptogram, and sculpture, Johnson exploited the production of the word *for* and its symbolic meaning in staggering variety, ultimately gathering his stream-of-consciousness notes in a personal manifesto titled *FORTEXT*. By the time he graduated from college, *for* became his personal mantra and artistic

signature: a word-symbol-image that served as a touchstone for his conceptual approach to art.

Johnson boldly traded minimalist Bauhaus ideals for a maximalist approach to linguistic assemblage art, but his absorption of architectural principles visibly materialized in the structural components of his works. Preparatory *emograph* drawings evolved into three-dimensional freestanding versions of the same forms, and *unises* integrated woven, triangular components resembling sections of a geodesic dome. Perhaps noting the creative, original development of his architectural training, Johnson's professors at Virginia Tech permitted him to submit drawings, paintings, and sculptures for his senior exhibition. More surprisingly, they allowed him to graduate with a degree in architecture without having produced an image or a model of a building for his final thesis. This seemingly improbable scenario of unstructured, self-directed creative freedom within the academic system defined Johnson's studio art education. Upon graduating from Virginia Tech, Johnson earned a two-year Master of Fine Arts fellowship at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Without

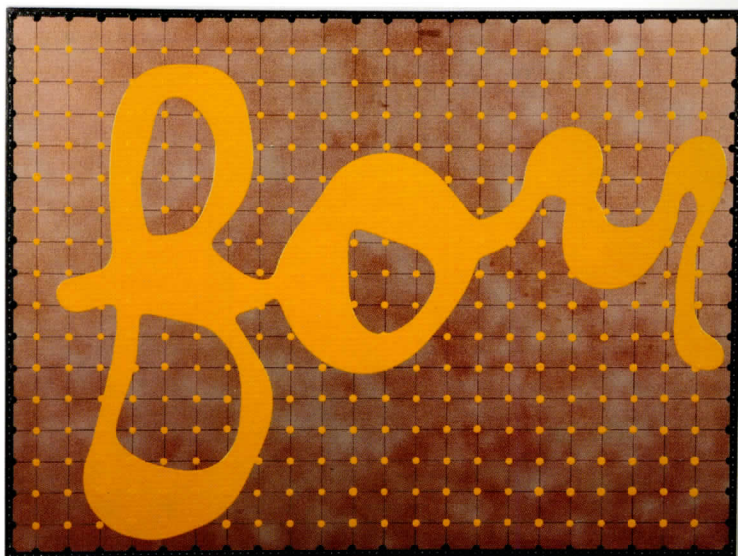
For Painting, 2005, acrylic and ink on canvas, 48" × 36"



the constraints of class requirements, he received a sizeable studio, a stipend, and two years of free time to develop the ideas he originated as an undergraduate. This opportunity allowed him to work independently while benefitting from studio visits and critiques by visiting artists and lecturers. During these two years, Johnson received influential personal encouragement from curator Marcia Tucker, artist Lucas Samaras, poet Alan Ginsberg, and critic Donald Kuspit—all prominent participants in the contemporary art culture of New York City. Collectively, they convinced him to move to New York upon finishing his MFA. Kuspit persuaded Johnson to apply to PS1, a newfound international studio space and artists' collaborative in Queens; in 1977 he was granted one of PS1's first studios.

Johnson maintained his studio space at PS1 for several years—well beyond the initially suggested twelve-month residency period. Now a world-renowned contemporary satellite exhibition site for the Museum of Modern Art, initially PS1 housed an important community of emerging contemporary artists working in adjacent studios. Collectors, artists, and critics wandered in and out of the

studios regularly, gaining exposure to new talent and styles of art and to the active pulse of the late 1970s and early 1980s art scene in New York City. Through his studio at PS1, Johnson caught the eye of contemporary art collectors Don and Mera Rubell and Herb and Dorothy Vogel and began to garner critical attention. The Vogels became Johnson's steady patrons and trusted friends, acquiring more than forty of his *unis* sculptures and paintings over several years. Phyllis Kind, director of her eponymous galleries in New York and Chicago, also discovered Johnson at PS1 and acted as his dealer for more than ten years. "Phyllis came into my studio and shrieked," Johnson recalls. She found in Johnson an artist whose work conjoined her equal interests in contemporary surrealist work and under-recognized Outsider Art. Kind, whose second gallery opened in New York in 1975, represented two stylistic groups of artists: young avant-garde members of the Chicago Imagists group and unknown self-taught artists categorically defined under Art Brut (a term invented by French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe artists without formal training). Alongside the contemporary paintings of Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke,



and Johnson, Kind exhibited works by Henry Darger, Howard Finster, and Martin Ramirez, three of the most recognized Folk Art/ Outsider Art/ Art Brut artists. Johnson's stylistic relationship to Outsider Art, coupled with his MFA and participation in the New York scene, enabled him to present an original hybrid of conceptual art and Art Brut that set him apart from his New York counterparts. Phyllis Kind recognized that indisputable visual distinction and granted Johnson a decade of successful solo shows.

Johnson continues to defy categorization as an artist. He declares himself an "untrained educated artist" working in the style of Outsider Art, yet he is engulfed in a complex, visual investigation of avant-garde and kitsch. Although he openly admires artists Jonathan Borofsky, Lucas Samaras, Marcel Duchamp, and Paul Klee, his work reveals the assimilated influences of Dadaist theory, the patterns and mystical symbolism of Navaho sand paintings and Eastern mandalas, 1970s psychedelic posters, East Village graffiti, surrealist stream-of-consciousness techniques, and gallery installations of eighteenth and nineteenth century academic salons.

Johnson's integration of cross-cultural concepts and styles in haphazard, often-unedited juxtapositions are intentionally overwhelming and enigmatic. His unique presentations seemingly allow concepts to shape themselves; the viewer is forced to make connections of time and content from his packed display of fragments. Nowhere is Johnson's dependence on the viewer's willingness to participate in his game more profound than in his mastery of word play and linguistic exercises. In one of his paintings from the early 1980s, Johnson dissected and altered the word *mysticism* to read *missed his ism*, perhaps suggesting a stylistic interpretation of his own work. Since the late 1970s he has incorporated countless similar explorations of the plasticity of language and its meaning, often stenciling fragments of words and language to the bottoms of his paintings. Some of these fragments serve as titles while others are completely disconnected from the subject or the image. For Johnson, *avoidance = a void dance*; *sincere = sin seer*; *formalize = for my lies*; *apocalypse = a pack of lips*.

Johnson collects, dissects, and juxtaposes words in the same manner that he gathers found objects, utilizing them

For painting, 2007, acrylic and ink on canvas, 48" x 36"

as crucial sources for his studio practice. "Both words and images are elements of communication. Both can be clear, both can be mysterious." Johnson explains, "For me, the word can often be the device to cope with the images. I mainly try to create things and experiences that cannot be named."

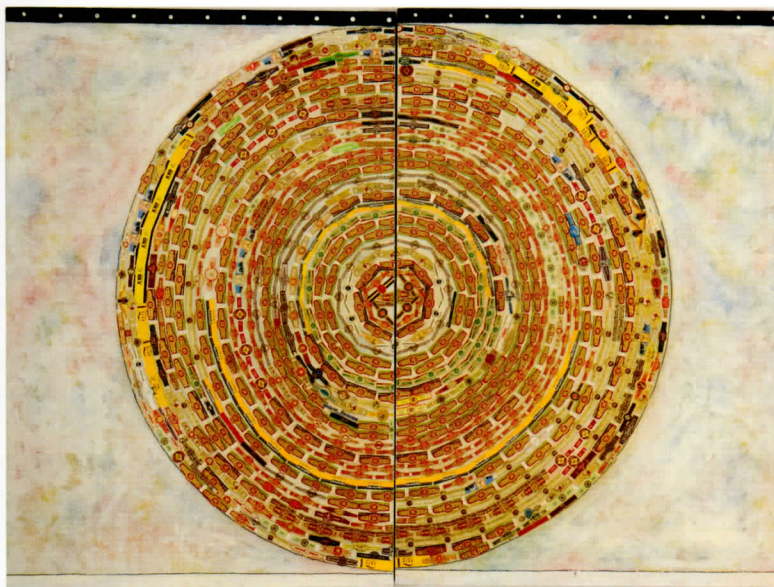
Johnson's fascination with language and its conceptual possibilities culminated in his early career with his explication that *aphorism* = *a FOR ism* and *metaphor* = *met a FOR*. Actively developing his play on words and written language, Johnson hosted a fourth birthday party for his original *for* painting on December 10, 1978 in his studio at PS1. He prepared an installation to honor his landmark revelation, and one of the creations in his celebratory shrine was a tangible *for*: a token-sized, hand wrought ontology made of wire that offered a physical and conceptual manifestation of his written talisman. Using four miles of colored electrical wire, he repeatedly twisted the word to amass a pile of *fors* on the floor, mounding them like a haystack. For more than 30 years Johnson has

continued to fabricate countless wire *fors* by hand, referring to his repetitive production as a "gestural meditation," or "macho knitting." Shown *en masse*, the multiplicity of the word *for* embodies Johnson's concept that everything exists *for* something else; in tangible, visual terms, that theory mushrooms into endless replications.

Today, Johnson crafts three-inch wire *fors* by the thousands in shimmering silver solder, a common material plumbers use to solder copper pipes. Likewise, he paints *for* repeatedly in zen-like repetition on canvases and panels. Pouring acrylic media onto wet surfaces, his fluid application bleeds and dissolves, evoking gestural immediacy and spontaneous production. Within his two-dimensional framework, Johnson continuously incorporates his early color theory formula by using red, blue, and yellow as dominant subjects. Often he integrates his symbolic reference for the passage of time into the borders and backgrounds of his *for* paintings as well. A black line represents time; white dots evenly spaced across the line signify



Piles of For (Poem), 1979–2011, plastic covered copper wire, sizes vary



soda boxes manage to hold a mirror to our materialism, showing us a target of addictive consumerism and a vivid blizzard of consumption.

A keen observer of popular culture with a compulsion to make his visionary ideas tangible, Johnson creates intentionally mysterious and overwhelming accumulations of language, sculpture, paintings, constructions, collages, environments, and puns. His carnival-like installations, composed of diverse works coated in a unifying, seductive sheen, lure us into ideas that are both playful and menacing, high and low, simple and profound. For forty years Johnson has maintained a thriving career centered on his recurring motifs and techniques, despite several relocations and an irregular exhibition history. In 1987 he left New York and moved his young family back to Virginia to take the helm of a family sales agency, and since then he has sustained an inconceivable double life as successful executive and prolific artist. Johnson's divergent professional ambitions require feats of multitasking discordant pursuits, not at all unlike his approach to creating art. That pen-

chant for synthesizing dissonant fragments has fueled and informed his life's work as an innovative artist who encourages and challenges the viewer to ruminate his oeuvre—a massive repository of intricate allusions to universal truths and time, perpetually referencing the past while simultaneously pressing forward.

— Caroline Cobb Wright

NOTES

- 1 All quotations attributed to the artist derive from a conversation with the author on July 14, 2011.
- 2 Linda McGreevy, "Cryptographic Glossolalia: Martin Johnson's Double-Edged Games," *Arts*, May 1988, p.64.

BIOGRAPHY

Martin Johnson was born in Elmer, New Jersey, in 1951, and moved with his family to Richmond at age five. He earned a degree in Architecture from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (1974), and an MFA in Studio Art from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (1977). Upon graduating from UNC, Johnson moved to New York City where he was granted one of the first studios at PS1, the landmark institute of contemporary art that is now a permanent exhibition site for MoMA. Johnson's early career garnered critical acclaim, including support from curator Marcia Tucker and gallery owner Phyllis Kind. He was represented by Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago and New York from 1979 to 1987, during which time his work entered numerous private collections, including those of famed contemporary art collectors Donald and Mera Rubell and Herbert and Dorothy Vogel.

In 1987, Johnson abandoned his thriving career in New York and moved his young family back to Virginia. Since then, Johnson has continued to work prolifically in his studio while maintaining a full-time career as President of Virginia Marketing Associates, a successful sales agency based in Richmond.

Recently, as part of Herbert and Dorothy Vogel's "Fifty Works for Fifty States" gift to museums and art institutions across America, Johnson's work entered the collections of 35 museums throughout the United States, including the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery of Art.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1994	<i>Forty-Four Four by Fours</i> , Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA	<i>Enigmatic Constructions – (Retro) Active Art Work(s)</i> , Portsmouth Museums, Portsmouth, VA
1993	Site installation, Virginia Beach Center for the Arts, Virginia Beach, VA <i>Faces For(body)politic</i> , Glass Gallery, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC	1987, 1985, 1984, 1983, 1981, 1980, 1979 One-artist exhibition, Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York, NY
1992	<i>HESHEUNISALLFORONE</i> (44 4x4's 30 PART), Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC	1981 Site installation, Florence Wilcox Gallery, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA
1990	<i>Glimpsastone</i> , Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, VA	1978 Site installation, Appalachian Center for Contemporary Art, Charleston, WV
1988	Site installation, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC	

Selected Group Exhibitions

2011	<i>Textural Structures: Selected works from the South Dakota Art Museum</i> , South Dakota Art Museum, Brookings, SD (Catalogue)	1994 <i>New Works Fellowships: Northern Telecom</i> , City Gallery of Contemporary Art, Raleigh, NC (Catalogue)
2010	<i>An Economy of Means: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection</i> , The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI <i>Living for Art: The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection</i> , Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ	1990 <i>Un/Common Ground: Virginia Artists 1990</i> , Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA (Catalogue) <i>The Portrait in America</i> , The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA
1995	<i>New Works Fellowships: Northern Telecom</i> , Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX; Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville, TN; Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA	1989 <i>Sculpture Now: 10 Virginians</i> , Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History, Danville, VA
		1988 <i>Household Media</i> , Virginia Beach Arts Center, Virginia Beach, Virginia Site installation. Newhouse Center for

- Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor, Staten Island, NY
- From the Collection of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel*, Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, New York Artists Sketchbooks, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC
- 1987 *Four Sharp Artists*, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
- Animals*, Peninsula Fine Arts Center, Newport News, VA
- 1986 *Drawings from the Collection of Herb and Dorothy Vogel*, University of Arkansas Fine Arts Center Gallery, Little Rock; Sarah Moody Gallery of Art, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park (Catalogue)
- 1985 *Insider/ Outsider*, Virginia Beach Arts Center, Virginia Beach, VA
- Erotic Art*. S.P.L.A.T. Alternative Art Gallery, Norfolk, VA
- Martin Johnson: Installation*, Old Dominion University Gallery, Norfolk, VA
- 1984 *Visiting Artists 1977–1984*, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC (Catalogue)
- Dozen/ Half Dozen*. Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York, NY
- Michele Feder-Nadoff, Martin Johnson, Ireen Kubota*, Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1983 *Dialect = Dialectic II*, Phyllis Kind Gallery, NY
- 1982 *P.S. . .P.S. 1*, 1708 East Main Gallery, Richmond, VA (Catalogue)
- New New York*. University Fine Arts Galleries, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL; Coral Gables Museum, Coral Gables, FL; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ (Catalogue)
- Twentieth Anniversary of the Vogel Collection*, Brainerd Art Gallery, State University at Potsdam, Potsdam, NY; University of Northern Iowa Gallery, Cedar Falls, IA (Catalogue)
- 1981 *Ikon/ Logos: Word as Image*, The Alternative Museum, New York (Catalogue)
- Former North Carolina Artists*, Charlotte and Philip Hanes Gallery, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC
- 1980, 1983
Group exhibition, PS1 – Queens, NY
- 1979–1980
Painters from New York Galleries, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA; Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA; Roanoke College, Salem, VA
- 1979 *Annual Drawing Exhibition*, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC
- The Intimate Gesture*, Visual Arts Gallery, School of the Visual Arts, New York, NY
- One Hundred Artists Show*, Ten Windows on Eighth Avenue, New York, NY
- 1977 *The Magnetic Image: Invitational Video Showing*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
- 1976 *Exhibition 280*, Huntington Galleries, Huntington, WV

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- Barnet, Vivian. *Introduction to Drawings From the Collection of Dorothy and Herb Vogel*. Little Rock: University of Arkansas Gallery, 1986, 62.
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Grants and Awards

1993 Northern Telecom Fellowship,
City Gallery of Contemporary Art,
Raleigh, NC

1975 MFA Fellowship, UNC Chapel Hill,
Chapel Hill, NC

Public Collections

Academy Art Museum
Easton, Maryland

Akron Art Museum
Akron, Ohio

The Arkansas Arts Center
Little Rock, Arkansas

Birmingham Museum of Art
Birmingham, Alabama

Boise Art Museum
Boise, Idaho

Cedar Rapids Museum of Art
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Chrysler Museum
Norfolk, Virginia

Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Columbia Museum of Art
Columbia, South Carolina

Delaware Art Museum
Wilmington, Delaware

Hood Museum of Art
Dartmouth College
Hanover, New Hampshire

Huntington Museum of Art
Huntington, West Virginia

Joslyn Art Museum
Omaha, Nebraska

Las Vegas Art Museum
Las Vegas, Nevada

Miami Art Museum
Miami, Florida

Milwaukee Art Museum
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art
Memphis, Tennessee

Mississippi Museum of Art
Jackson, Mississippi

Montclair Art Museum
Montclair, New Jersey

Museum of Art
Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island

National Gallery of Art
Washington, DC

Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art
Utah State University, Logan, Utah

Oklahoma City Museum of Art
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Phoenix Art Museum
Phoenix, Arizona

Portland Museum of Art
Portland, Maine

Saint Louis Art Museum
St. Louis, Missouri

South Dakota Art Museum
South Dakota State University
Brookings, South Dakota

The Speed Art Museum
Louisville, Kentucky

Spencer Museum of Art
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas

The University of Michigan Museum of Art
Ann Arbor, Michigan

University Museum
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, Illinois

University of Wyoming Art Museum
Laramie, Wyoming

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
Richmond, Virginia

Weisman Art Museum
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

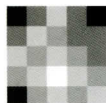
Yale University Art Gallery
New Haven, Connecticut

Yellowstone Art Museum
Billings, Montana

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