

The fruits of Jim Johnson's labors and logic are on the walls (and vitrines and tables). The key to Johnson's thought, however, is on disk and on-line. His interactive CD-ROM and his Website carefully set out Johnson's modus operandi, not so much through explanation as demonstration, inviting the visitor into the game-playing and icon-building with which the artist constructs the seemingly errant appearances, arrangements, and relationships of symbols that comprise the crux of his oeuvre. The formal and technical range of that oeuvre, from paint to print to postcard to pixel, is impressive, but secondary to the consistent, even unified, but staggeringly varied nature of its content. Picture, image cipher, sign; these are not simply the manifold building blocks of Jim Johnson's art, they are its *raison d'être*, the provocations as well as the equipment for the elaborate structures that comprise his work, work that well predates and in many ways prefigures, the desktop cybernetics of our time. The structures may be elaborate, but the artworks themselves seem simple; information-laden, perhaps, but relatively easy to see and to 'read' or at least acknowledge as legible. If a viewer is foreign to any apparent code, the fact that there is a process of encoding is quite evident as are the visual components of that code. Indeed, the visual components may be as familiar as the code itself is opaque. That familiarity serves to assure the viewer that the code is not as foreign as it may seem. Such assurance is not always genuine; the ever-present element of play sometimes prompts the artist to tweak our expectations – but Johnson's encryptions, word plays, concrete poems and typographic rhapsodies are normally little harder to decipher than a good crossword puzzle. What might throw one off, at the same time that it leads one on, is the self-contained, self-sustaining, and in-and-of itself satisfying visual presence of the image.

Johnson would have image and language conflate. He returns our attention to the iconic quality; indeed, the hieroglyphic origin; of writing. Likewise, he reminds us that the image itself is a loaded icon; nuanced, certainly, by its context(s), but possessing a fundamental power, one that derives from the fact that we read and see such an integer of meaning at the same time. This is the small revelation afforded us by the art of typography, and that revelation is writ large by Concrete poetry.

The intermedium (i.e., hybrid discipline) of Concrete poetry emerged; in such disparate places as Brazil, Switzerland, and Japan; after the Second World War, based on models provided by writer-artists associated with early twentieth century movements such as Futurism, Dada, and Constructivism. By the mid-1960's Concrete poetry had established itself as a worldwide movement and a durable means of making (to use Marshall McLuhan's term) verbo-voco-visual artworks, works designed for the page and the wall alike. Coming upon Concrete poetry as a graduate student, Johnson discovered a place where letter, word, and image meet, where they not only gain equal emphasis but merge into; or emerge out of; one another.

Still, for all his interest in language, Johnson was, and remains visually oriented. While other artists and theorists of our time begin with the linguistic; in effect, with the premise that humans are, as Noam Chomsky avers, biologically hard-wired to think in meaning-coded utterances; Johnson remains primarily engaged by the optical. He does not dispute Chomsky's premise, but mitigates it with an understanding of language as seen as well as; perhaps even sooner than; spoken. An image is an utterance, and a visual style is a style of speaking. This point of view explains the significant role that otherwise banal commercial illustration and, especially, cartooning play in determining Johnson's approach to painting, and for that matter, to typographical design, bookmaking, and various other aspects of his work.

Concrete poetry itself was not the only manifestation of the 1960's to leave its mark on Johnson. He much admired Pop art and underground comics (a/k/a "head comix"), and recognized that they constituted parallel revolutions: Pop raised the lowly comic strip to the level of fine art; subverting 'fine art' in the process; while Zap Comix and other cartoon narratives infused the comic strip with a new sophistication and timeliness; in the process subverting the tradition of cartooning. By the early 1970's Johnson had begun painting a kind of cartoon conceptualism, employing Pop simplification in the limning of unlikely but compelling narratives (some structured in typical cartoon; and linguistic sequences, others single-frame stories maintaining, however parodistically, the discursive character of Renaissance picture-making). Aspects of this formally stylized method fed into Pattern Painting, and, in turn, certain early forms of Pattern Painting; notably the systematic abstract patterning developed by the artists in the Denver-Boulder area around the time Johnson moved there in 1973; fed into this approach.

Other painters at this time, also influenced by Pop and especially Pop-adjacent artists such as Peter Saul and Red Grooms, were also developing cartoon-based painting styles. Johnson found himself in correspondence, figuratively and literally, with more than a few of these painters, notably as part of yet another artistic phenomenon emerging at this time, Mail Art. Among other things, Mail Art provided artists not working in major cultural centers; artists in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the interior United States; with a rich and endlessly promising means of exchanging ideas informally and intimately, as if they were studio mates in the same building rather than artistic soulmates at opposite ends of the country.

In its format, of course, Mail Art took over a primarily verbal medium, postal communication, amplifying its potent properties of visual display. As a verbal-visual nexus, especially one capable as much of great casualness as of great formality, Mail Art naturally appealed to Johnson. And, as with so many other artists, Johnson segued in his Mail Art from the handmade to the printed, and thence to artist's books and printed matter; yet another genre in the great format explosion of the '70's. The proliferation of means and media in fact suited the versatile and technically restless Johnson quite nicely; the more formats to work in and experiment with, the better.

In the last two decades, the personal computer, image programming, and the Internet have come to dominate our lives, reshaping the way we do and think about virtually everything. Many artists have resisted these changes, but many more have embraced them. Not surprisingly, Jim Johnson took to them early and has made it his business to exploit them in every way he can imagine. He views them, McLuhanistically, as the natural extension of his painting, publishing, and mail-art making. The CD-ROM now serves as his canvas, the Website as the artist's book, and the Net as the perfect transmitter of e-mail art. Does that mean that Johnson has given up painting and printing? Not at all; he has, typically, only added to his repertory. If it can be looked at, and if it can be written on or in or to, Johnson is going to get involved in it. And his very likely to take it apart, put it back together a little differently, and use it to send a message to us.

The message is, 'This is not a message.'

On the occasion of the exhibition, "Open Workyards", curated by Cydney Payton for the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001.