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The Prime of Mister Larry Johnson

BRUCE HAINLEY on the art of [Larry Johnson](#)



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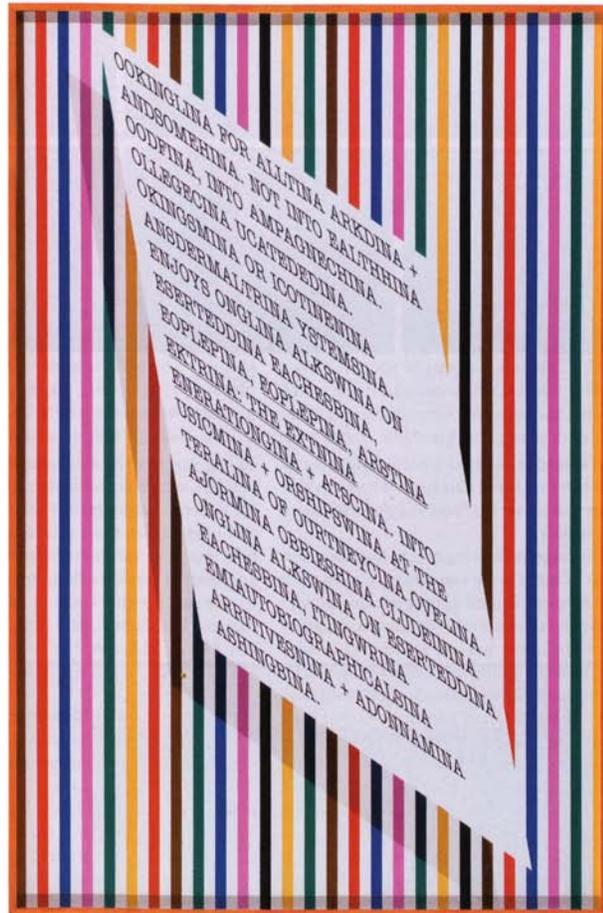
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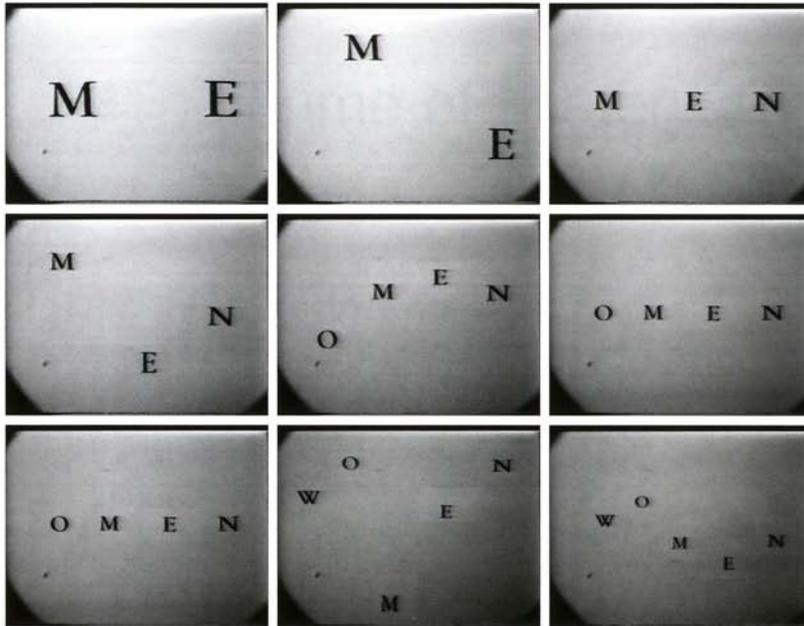
—Larry Johnson, from *Untitled*
(The Perfect Mensa Man), 1994

ARE YOU TALL, DARK, AND HANDSOME? College educated? Not into health food but into champagne? Do you like cats? Courtney Love? Do you like people and *People* magazine, or *Star Trek: The Next Generation*? Running slant on a white bulletin and floated against vivid, vertical, Paul Rand–y stripes, the personal ad in Larry Johnson's *Untitled (The Perfect Mensa Man)*, 1994, provides a pig-latin-esque portrait of the type of person who might place it and the type of man who could read it. It is a classified, classy portrayal of mid-1990s hooking up. So let's not Twitter something about Roland Barthes (and how, forty-some years ago, he momentarily stabilized the "particular status of the photographic image: *it is a message without a code*") but rather respond to the sex part, which via the word *enjoys* remains a pleasure principle needing no translation.

Johnson produces a photographic image that is a message *with* a code, in which caption and picture, reading and looking, are all embedded. Rather than literally revealing the auto- and/or biographical "heart" of the artist or anyone else—which is not to imply that some of the desires couldn't, perhaps, sync up with the artist's own—the fact of being able to read the piece only relays another code and codification: the production of a picture of the "personal" as a vernacular or a genre, something that certain kinds of texts and images are seen to convey, using a certain rhetorical pitch and syntax (i.e., the string of looks, likes and dislikes, hobbies). Are you the type of individual who finds the significant gap between the personal ad and its clichés both a turn-on and a downer, comic as well as heartbreaking? If a pig-latinized IQ test doesn't already give pause,

Opposite page: Larry Johnson, *Donkey*, 2007,
 color photograph, 57 1/2 x 62 1/2". This page:
 Larry Johnson, *Untitled (The Perfect Mensa Man)*,
 1994, color photograph, 68 1/4 x 45 1/4".





This page: Larry Johnson, *Paul Rand's Women*, 1948, 1984, stills from a black-and-white video, 7 minutes. Opposite page, from left: Larry Johnson, *Copier*, 2007, color photograph, 55 1/2 x 65 1/2". Larry Johnson, *Projector*, 2007, color photograph, 34 1/2 x 67 1/2".

then, hey, someone really is a perfect member of Mensa, not Densa. Being able to read it shows that the message was meant for "you"—by which I mean, of course, *ouyina*.

Too often tagged as making campy, homosexualist photos (as if there were something wrong with that) that dote on piquant appropriation and textuality, Johnson since the mid-'80s has paid faggoty attention to the status quo—of a medium (if such a thing still exists) and its mediation of the world. His C-prints look like what they simply aren't: animation cels, camera-ready pasteups. Part of their eerie magic is achieved by the artist's trafficking in complex production techniques, akin to the traditional and "tradigital" animation and phototype-setting processes that have given Tinseltown and Madison Avenue a lot of their twinkle. The artist often forgoes "anything but the blurp," as he calls it, in order to maximize the contemporary attention span for a work of art, which he imagines "to be equal, say, to that of a daily horoscope or beauty tip." Or personal ad. Johnson's pictures—in variations both confectionary and pharmaceutical—thus operate like urgent bulletins, often for an item

called, just like the magazine, *Self*, promoting its benders, escapades, and after-hours aperçus. That the bulletins are frequently taken as autobiographical only makes their effects more pointed and hilarious. The vanishing subject, its photographic and textual tracks fading, feels a lot like anomie on the rocks with a cocktail umbrella. How does that go? Oh, right: "Heh. Heh, heh . . . Ah yes . . . HA, HA . . . HA, HA, HA" (as he served it up in a 1987 C-print).

TYPOGRAPHY, ORTHOGRAPHY; photography, animation, and montage; typesetting and pasteup—the techniques and technologies around which Johnson coordinates much of his work—are all put through their paces in an early black-and-white video from 1984. The opening shot centers on the letters M and E. Haltingly, the letters begin to move up and down to the rhythms of delightfully menacing circus music. An N enters the scene and the letters settle on an absent horizon line to convert the first-person objective pronoun into the word MEN. The Mallarméan merry-go-round continues, an O rising into view on the left; again the figures line up: OMEN.

Cue music—and more alphabetic bobbing, as a w works it way into view. But when the letters finally stop, instead of lining up, they're staggered as if notes on an absent musical staff. The sequence repeats four times from the beginning (doesn't everything always come back to ME?), but the word WOMEN, repeatedly built up from the discombobulated orthographic configurations of identity, masculinity, portent, and lament—me, men, omen (oh, ment!)—never rectifies. There's a joke in there somewhere about somebody being so gay that he can't spell straight.

The piece was produced with an almost instantly obsolete *video* animation technology, what the artist has referred to as "the Lion/Lamb system," which was briefly used by professional animators in the '80s to test-run their works in progress in black-and-white; as with so many of Johnson's photographic interventions, what bears all the signs of one medium (film, specifically the jumpy frame-by-frame dynamic of stop-motion animation) is delivered by another (video). Johnson titled this elegant lexical short *Paul Rand's Women*, 1948, its typeface and nonlinear arrangement of letters taken from the

cover and title page of Rand's midcentury book design for a joint venture between the Museum of Modern Art and Samuel M. Kootz Editions, *Women: A Collaboration of Artists and Writers*. Rand remains famous, of course, for designing some of the most illustrious American corporate logos of the twentieth century—ABC, IBM, UPS, Westinghouse, and even Enron's crooked *E*; he should be equally famous for always trying to activate design's political potential. His first cover for the magazine *Direction*, in 1938, alluded to the Nazi invasion and partition of Czechoslovakia, and in his view, his decisions clearly established "the distinction between abstract design without content and abstract design with content." That crooked *E* "said" something from the get-go. Yet of the twenty-some artists and writers collaborating in the designer's *Women*, not a single one was a woman. Whether or not this escaped Rand's attention (perhaps it's the reason the word *women* can't be straightened out), it certainly can't have escaped Johnson's, since tracking absent meanings, absent bodies, and buried content is part of his fun.

Playing with the *ME* involved with *MEN* as much as the *MEN* contained within *WOMEN*, the artist teased out ways in which subjectivity is construed and constructed through language and technological media. Around the turn of the past millennium, however, most of the typographic and textual shenanigans started to disappear from Johnson's work. Technological changes throughout the previous decade had made pasteup, phototypesetting, and

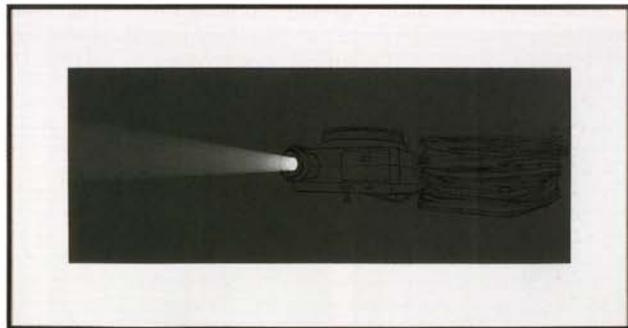
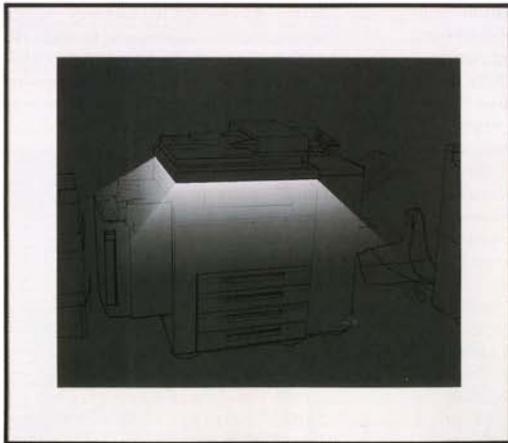
their part in printed culture an anachronism—digital publishing had no need of it. But it was the fiasco known as "Abu Ghraib" that marked a related, more definitive kind of rupture that might be brought to bear on Johnson's turn. Indeed, it seemed that "the unconscious of a refusal to read erupts in the form of a crime," as Avital Ronell has written. Abu Ghraib demonstrated a deep misunderstanding of the communicative and the indexical, of the photographic in relation to the digital: For if the cameras the American soldiers used to take their travel pictures had required film to be chemically developed, those images never would have seen the light of day. Cauterizing something about the obsolesced—technologically and otherwise—and the way in which it affects certain bodies more than others, the event also demonstrated that gaming with M4M anal erotics still trumps just about everything else as one of America's favorite ways to telegraph shame. The (technological) conditions that made Abu Ghraib possible shadow Johnson's most recent work and its own production of questions about obsolescence, media, men—and, uh, "me."

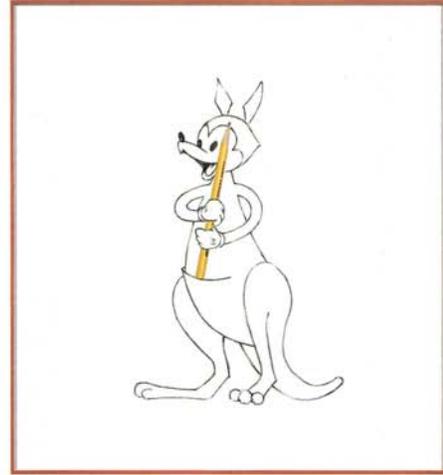
IN 2007, JOHNSON ASSEMBLED two kinds of works for a bicoastal show at Patrick Painter in Los Angeles and at Marc Jancou in New York: three large black-and-white pictures and three in color, all chromogenic prints. In *Projector*, 2007, a

slide projector—that discontinued pedagogical tool for art history—appears drawn in black outline on a slate-gray ground and projects a beam of light. The rendered machine stands in stark expressionist contrast to the verisimilar light, a glow so disturbingly pure it's as if no slides remain. Next to the projector rests a stack of papers, perhaps theoretical readings, which used to be de rigueur for art-historical study before they were designed out of the curriculum, a certain kind of pedagogy and teacher outsourced to oblivion. (But perhaps I'm projecting.) Under the guise of something so matter-of-fact, Johnson manages a noir intensity and an extraordinary conflation of media: In a manner similar to that of contemporary animation production, after the artist hand-draws the projector and papers, the work is digitally scanned; it is then colored and adjusted; and finally, the beams of light are digitally added, like postproduction special effects for a blockbuster.

The projector and stack of papers—outlines darkly "chalked" around the evidence—suggest a sinister art school setting, implicating the academy in the photographic crime scene that Walter Benjamin noted had bled everywhere, "every passer-by a culprit." Copying in process, residual light spilling down from the document bed, *Copier*, 2007, depicts a standard machine found in any academic department office, necessary equipment for all kinds of

Johnson's pictures operate like urgent bulletins, often for an item called, just like the magazine, *Self*.





pedagogical paperwork; other machines encroach on the forensic frame, linked by electric cords plugged into sockets. It's a picture of not only alienated labor but alien production: No one operates the projector or copier, and there are no subjects in sight. For the final picture of this strange near triptych, *Meters*, 2007, streaks of light from some unidentifiable source pierce an interior space housing rows of electric meters. The devices ostensibly clock the cost of powering the building as well as the projector, copier, and, judging by the number of meters and identity tags dangling from each, everything else—a relentless and anonymous calculation.

In the ominous twilight of machines providing mute, inanimate witness to their superannuation, Johnson placed three pictures of frisky critters drawn in pencil. The creatures pleasure themselves or are being pleased by the intervening hand of the artist—a truly manipulated situation, since the artist's photographed hand and illustrated art are digitally composited together. Sergey Eisenstein wrote of Disney's animations that they are "beyond any image, without an image, beyond tangibility—like a pure sensation," but the impure sensation here is of subjectivity, identity, and indexicality each being fucked with, as much as

over, by their maker. The lucky Pierre of *Giraffe*, 2007, enjoys a *brun foncé*—translate it, swankily, as "fancy brown"—colored pencil in his ass as he felates a lighter one, both "dildos" held by the artist's hands, pictured in lifelike color. In *Donkey*, 2007, an Eeyore type cranes his head back, giving an experienced but blissed-out glance at the photographic hand teasing his butt with the eraser end of a pencil; Eeyore is usually cranky, but the pencil poke's apparently, at the very least, acupunctural.

Johnson's hand jobs climax by conjoining drawing and photography—poking fun at the handheld pencil and at photography as the infamous "pencil of nature."

Of course, the "outside" hand of the artist entering the diegetic frame of an animated cartoon is a staple: Think of Daffy Duck's encounters with artistic "correction" (pencil, eraser, paintbrush), retribution for his sass. In *Duck Amuck* (1953), Chuck Jones puts not only the concept of the cartoon character (its indelible consciousness and identity paradoxically arising out of nothing at all) but also the entire animated world through screwball ontological mayhem, tearing apart figure from ground, voice from presence, and finally stationing an animated Bugs Bunny himself at a sadistically "real"—in other words, filmed rather than illustrated—drawing table. Matt Groening turns the Jones trope brilliantly in the *Simpsons* episode "Mom and Pop Art" of 1999, implying an artistic

intrusion that never actually occurs: In the midst of Marge giving Homer a tour of the "Springsonian Museum," a huge pencil eraser butts him in the head—but rather than a nudge into oblivion by the hand of the creator, it turns out to be a cartoon Claes Oldenburg sculpture being moved by two preparators. In the Jones and Groening creations, however, the menacing tools remain animated. Johnson amps up the game by having his photographic hand collapse the two modes of representation, cartoon drawing and photography—all the while drawing attention to pleasures found in the end, in ending. The artist is keenly aware that the aperture probed is where *jouissance* appears, only to disappear into a hole. The pencils' erasers finger a view usually sublimated and censored, picturing an almost anagrammatic erasure buried within pleasure.

But it's the figure of the marsupial in *Kangaroo*, 2007, gripping with both paws a Ticonderoga No. 2, the eraser diddling her pouch, that most intensifies the uncanny strangeness of all Johnson's photographic concupiscence. The goofy sexiness bends sinister, and the cartoon world masters the world that supposedly contains it: Not unlike the projector and copier operating without assistance, the kangaroo laughs, onanistically oblivious to any notion of the artistic labor that produced her; the artist's hand is withdrawn or deleted, his tool gripped by a creature (or technology) incapable of

quid pro quo, sexual or any other kind. Johnson's hand jobs climax by conjoining drawing and photography—poking fun at the handheld pencil and at photography as the infamous "pencil of nature." With exuberance worthy of a furvert (as fans of furry avatars winkingly refer to themselves), Johnson proposes a radical saming or homosexualizing, in which the supposed indexicality of photography copulates with the iconicity of the drawn or painted, courtesy of the digital (whose own innovations are often pornographically induced).

So Johnson gumshoes obsolescence as it troubles the photographic. But his handy use of cartoon critters and manual labor reaches around to an earlier interrogation, *Untitled (Land w/o Bread)*, 1999–2000. A photographic limit case in the form of comic relief, the four parts making up *Land w/o Bread* would break down into two pairs of identical pictures—a smirk at photographic reproducibility—of a cartoon donkey and a cartoon goat, if it weren't for the cheeky, shadowy "fingertips" blocking out half the image in the parenthetical first and last panels. Hijacked from Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* (1933) and repurposed, the animal figures beam cartoon smiles. I'll skip the recap of how Buñuel used the style of a newsreel-cum-anthropological study to indict the "objectivity" of the documentary and just say that Johnson's *Land w/o Bread* finger-fucks pieties of his medium with a similar rapacity. A supposed photographic sign of realism and authenticity (ubiquitous in both art and fashion photography in the '90s, like "red eye"), the blurred digits ineptly holding the camera and interfering with part of the lens—markers of "I was

thereness"—not only are digitally simulated but also block out pertinent information. They bracket any narrative within a mooning parenthesis of self: In the first picture, a stubby fingertip obliterates the bee, scout to the hive that will soon sting the donkey to death; in the final picture, two digits almost snuff out the goat, dislocating him from any precipice from which he might fall. It's as if the bumbling photographer—identity's "thumbprint" cock-blocking the pursuit of what might be seen—trusts that picture taking necessarily verifies something, which is exactly what his bodily appendages and the drawn creatures upset, deranging any notion that an index can ever abide untouched.

In 2001, the artist wrote of similar occlusions:

A decade or so back, when such things were still legal in the States, Kool cigarettes (or was it Salem?) launched a print campaign in which smokers were pictured doing what smokers did in ads: flying kites, raking large piles of autumn leaves, indulging in good natured, cough-free frolicking. There was, however, one other somewhat disquieting detail that distinguished these ads. The figures were whited out. As a California boy who had tried out my first driver's license by making a pilgrimage to North Cielo Drive, I could not help but notice the resemblance these images bore to the doctored crime-scene photos in *Helter Skelter*, Vince Bugliosi's account of the Tate-LaBianca murders. This shift within the photographic frame may be ominous by association, but something else occurs at a deeper level. What has taken place is really a shift from the specific to the general, from the indexical (photograph) to the iconic (painting). The traces of life—"the having been thereness"—have been erased or covered over.

In *Land w/o Bread*, this situation is reversed, since it is the opaque "trace of life" that blots out the animation-cel animals already dwelling in complicated relation to the real. Johnson joins within the photographic frame the indexical and the iconic, lensing the turn from darkroom and pastep to the (in every sense) digital. He draws back the sheet covering the corpse of "having been thereness," reanimating sensibilities and subjects thought to have been left behind.

AS YOU KNOW, THE MAINSTREAMING of gay life—call it, for whatever the chuckles, *Will & Grace*-ing—has occurred with a withering desexualization. Against this current, Johnson relibidinalizes the anus. Yikes, let's not put it like that. Rather, let's say he makes the anus fun again. He lets it speak its "mind" (the fart a comic thought bubble?), transvaluing the orifice of public communication, the mouth, with the erotic, private orifice of waste, just as he deflowers the holy concepts of "hand" and "touch" (especially as they relate to the conventions of working with a photograph or from a drawing).* The artist articulated much of the specificity and complexity of his desublimating activities in an interview with David Rimanelli in *Flash Art* in 1990, under the title "Highlights of Concentrated Camp." Almost two decades later, I quote from the interview—not in any kind of belief that Johnson could or should be held to what he said, but to introduce how he was thinking about certain things *then* and how his most recent work might propose to deal with them *now*.

Rimanelli asks Johnson about his "Fag Show" of 1989 at 303 Gallery in New York. To which the artist responds:

Opposite page, from left: Larry Johnson, *Giraffe*, 2007, color photograph, 45½ x 92". Larry Johnson, *Kangaroo*, 2007, color photograph, 60 x 56". This page: Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Land w/o Bread)*, 1999–2000, color photographs, four parts, each 43 x 43".





I had found all this pre-AIDS pornography. There seemed to always be this threat of danger, these allusions to death. For example, one story had these guys in a sixty-nine and one was passing a joint while the other was passing poppers and the poppers spilled and ignited and one guy's face was burned and so was the other guy's cock. In another this guy has sex with a merman and then he turns into one through a sort of merman virus and so he has to go live with the other merman in some strange non-stop undersea orgy. So it was my desire to restate these themes of personal risk, violence, and never-ending nightlife not as some allegorical AIDS romp but as revolutionary acts presented in a high camp style.

One way to read this: Johnson places "revolutionary acts presented in a high camp style" into a dialectical relation with "some allegorical AIDS romp," privileging the former. Such dialectical possibility and responsibility remain frequently forgotten when the term *camp* is used today. Not only is Johnson aware of the revolutionary tensions available in camp, he also considers how to confront, with a sense of gallows humor and punk chic, the atrocity of the moment.

Take, for example, *Untitled (Something Quite Atrocious)*, 1995. In this work, Johnson printed the word SUPERCALIFORNIAFAGGOTEXPIALIDOCIOUS, as if damascened, on alternating bands of freezer-burned Creamsicle hues, its chameleonic letters blending with the color on which they appear. As much as I'm interested in how precocious I or Julie Andrews or anyone else sounds using the term, I wouldn't want to ignore that the artist is also emphasizing

something quite atrocious. Helpful, perhaps, to think of *supercaliforniafaggotexpialidocious* as Johnson's version of the revulsive, the kind of movement that Barthes argued "reverses the course of the thing"—and to remember that the atrocious, the possibility of revolution, and some kind of historical materialism should all be engaged before you call what Johnson or anyone else is up to *camp*. It's a term you'd better use carefully or it may change your life.

Regarding the radioactive atrocity of the word, it might be good to note that when Susan Sontag . . . OK. I know. I'm groaning too, just at the thought of having to bring it up, but please bear with me. So when Sontag assembled her "Notes on 'Camp,'" her objective was not to quarantine a mode of being, much less a mode of sexuality, but (however tentatively and nimbly) to "snare a sensibility . . . that is alive and powerful." Into the mainstream, pre-Stonewall, way pre-AIDS, she let loose what she snared. With an asterisk after the word *powerful*, leading to a frequently ignored footnote, Sontag emphasized a crucial fact about the difficulty of such a pursuit and its temporal parameters:

The sensibility of an era is not only its most decisive, but also its most perishable, aspect. One may capture the ideas (intellectual history) and the behavior (social history) of an epoch without ever touching upon the sensibility or taste which informed those ideas, that behavior.

Has anyone stopped to consider the expiration date of this perishable? Published in 1964 in *Partisan Review*, by the time "Notes on 'Camp'" appeared in *Against Interpretation* in 1966 (Sontag

dedicated her volume to the artist Paul Thek, who was already transmuting whatever "camp" might never have been into something even more vicious), by which time the sensibility's sell-by date had perhaps passed. Soon after, John Waters, along with Divine, Van Smith, Vincent Peranio, and the Dreamlanders, would do for camp what they did for drag: rip it to shreds and deploy the remains for terrorist activities, alive and powerful.

What Johnson accomplishes, the term *camp* no longer covers. Bromance is one reason it no longer covers it. The thumbs-ups of the Abu Ghraib pics are another. But the artist dwells in camp's violent and volatile remains, and he isn't the only one. In fact, whatever it's called, any such sensibility today would necessarily be colored by this kind of delightful data: The Centers for Disease Control recently reported that in almost three-quarters of the US, new HIV diagnoses rose as much as 15 percent per year between 2001 and 2006 among gay and bisexual men age thirteen to twenty-four; it's just as comforting to know that the next age demographic, twenty-five to forty-four, accounted for two-thirds of all new HIV cases. It is nearly impossible to comprehend something like the amnesia, disavowal, denial, and sloppiness involved in how a community, not to mention a nation, could allow this to happen, or continue to happen, again.

Anyone still wishing to use the word *camp*, then, would have to step carefully into the minefield of the term and its current context. Rimanelli and Johnson gestured toward these registers with the very title of their interview, "Highlights of Concentrated Camp," engaging the word's involvement with

focusing cognition, pressing its resonance with *concentrate* and *concentration*, recognizing the zenith of its revolutionary potential and style, alluding to its involvement in the terrifying eradication of the subject by capital and by force—and thus showing its economy to operate (now, would this be to put it *campily*?) between frozen Minute Maid orange juice and Bergen-Belsen.

WHILE COMING TO TERMS WITH Johnson's photographic work, a menagerie as much as a ménage à trois, I keep fixating on another quotation from Ronell: "Still, there is a sense in which *writing* has been obsolesced, divested, leaving us with the question of what to do with the remainders of writing. In my case, I would not hesitate to assert that I am writing for writing because it died. This is why, at least in part, writing is necessarily bound up with mourning." Something like finding yourself interpolated into the transcript of a black-box recording.

Likewise, it seems that text—the captions that for so long made up the whole of his images—has been all but remaindered in Johnson's recent work. In one of the last *writing* pieces the artist produced, *Untitled*, 1998, text shimmers, hard to read, blank on blank, white sans-serif font photographically sutured to a white field:

THE
THINKING
MAN'S
JUDY
GARLAND

For the longest time I thought the words buried in the white—cocaine scattered on snow—implied a question, as in, Who is the thinking man's Judy Garland? Perhaps Nina Simone? Marianne Faithfull? Of course, for some, the artist "herself" could be the thinking man's Judy Garland. Yet the apostrophe in MAN'S, not necessarily genitive or possessive, could just signify contraction, something no longer there, sped through, superfluous: *is* contracted into a visual ellipse. But this omission of *is* is also haunted by "has become"—the has-been, overly dramatic, intoxicated, never "to be" again.

The epitaph insinuates a lot. An apparently breezy, barely there, ambivalently grammatical death sentence. 1) The thinking man's a drama queen, sure, but the punctuation produces other consequences, since a transgenerating, queering, and/or estranging, not only of perception, has occurred: Dude looks like a lady. 2) The thinking man's Judy Garland, just as intellect's divested for sheer emotionality; cerebration's jettisoned for the gut. It would be tempting to end there, mourning the transformations (the art, the artifice) required to become the other, all hanging on an apostrophic hairpin. But in a shift from the specific to the general, text to image, "thinking" to Judy—stand-ins for other referential systems?—what's postulated is a total whiteout. The traces of life erased, erasing.

The photographic, its remains, may now only be a laminate or sheen, a gleam of what no longer exists. Jack Smith insisted, "What doesn't exist is important." I'm trying to resist the melodrama, and

I thought I'd found a way out of the dilemma, an exit in what's not spelled out. So what? So the "I" is over, elided, deceased, absented in the contraction. So there's no thinking "eye" to see or read, no more subject to leave a trace, everything disappeared into nevermore, into névé. Isn't history nothing but ending after ending? I was about to Twitter this realization—"FOD's DOA"—until I remembered that this would be legible only to someone who got the gist of being a Friend of Dorothy. □

"Larry Johnson," the artist's first US survey, will be on view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, June 21–Sept. 6.

BRUCE HAINLEY IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

* Hemorrhoid: In the early 1980s, around the time Roland Barthes ended *Camera Lucida* by leading his readers into a porn shop and leaving them there, Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine were collaborating as A Picture Is No Substitute for Anything. In their single published appearance as collaborators, in *Wedge*, no. 2, 1982, the artists printed instead of their contributor's note the entirety of section 210 of chapter 8 ("Negation and Consumption Within Culture") of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*: "Only the real negation of culture can preserve its meaning. It can no longer be cultural. Thus it is what in some way remains at the level of culture, but with a completely different meaning." The Lawler and Levine affair repeats, insistently, the homoerotics of Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton's collaboration, published in 1980 as *12 Dialogues 1962–1963*, from which the ladies appropriated their collaborative namesake—especially if it is recalled that an artist or writer, as Wayne Koestenbaum has discerned, "turns to a partner not from a practical assessment of advantages, but from a superstitious hope, a longing for replenishment and union that invites baroque sexual interpretation."

Let me put this another way entirely: I have always grooved on the alimentary canal as a potential pinhole camera. Instead of, as Morrissey (and Bataille) sings, letting the sun shine out of our behinds, imagine a guy bent over, his sphincter controlling every f-stop of the anal aperture. What develops from the exposure is called An Anus Is No Substitute for Anything. Which is only a way of saying that around the time Johnson attended CalArts, the porn-shop possibilities of the photographic—its potential cultural negations, its revulsive ecstasy, its wedge cleaving completely different meanings—were available and in the air. And open to baroque sexual interpretation.



Opposite page: Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Something Quite Atrocious)*, 1995, color photograph, 35 x 105". This page: Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Unfinished Fome-Cor Factory)*, 1999–2000, color photograph, 28 x 54 1/2".