

frieze

Larry Johnson's malicious muzak

Larry Johnson

Pop art is a way of liking things.
Andy Warhol

David Rimanelli: So the best way to describe your relationship to your texts is that you like them?

Larry Johnson: Yes.

One of the impediments to writing smoothly about art as shrewd and subversive as Larry Johnson's is that your attention is always being distracted by the public response to it. Finally it is like watching a tennis match in which finesse competes with power, since, however much you might wish to admire Johnson's insouciant form, you can't help but notice the heavy breathing on the other side of the net, the strenuous efforts being expended on behalf of the culture to change the artist's game. And power, of course, has taken the first set - at least to the extent that Johnson's art, at present, is purchasing its notoriety at the price of being wildly misconstrued and routinely typed with the most academic and reactionary strain of art that uses words. This parental wing of 'text art,' beneath which Johnson's work seems such an odd and lovely duckling, concerns itself almost exclusively with the didactic content of the utterance - or with the content of the 'appropriated' utterance, didactically recontextualised. Critique is this genre's metier; desire is its adversary, and Protestant iconoclasm lies at the heart of its agenda. Jenny 'Protect Me From What I Want' Holzer is the Joan of this crusade and for many critics there could seem to be no other - probably because its programme fosters the rather depressing but ultimately self-congratulatory illusion that art and criticism perform essentially the same function at different stations along the path to cultural redemption.

There is, however, an alternative 'art with text' that provides a more congenial setting for Johnson's frozen bits of pop-speak - an art that loves the image and finds analogous pleasures in the fluidity of the text. This art is beguiled by the

non-linear dynamics of language itself, by the sublimity of its low vernaculars, and would dissolve the lapidary diction of power and taste back into its palimpsest of liquid desire - into Edward Ruscha's plangent atmosphere's, or Andy Warhol's soup. Transgression is the metier of this wild strain; and since its great subject is the complexity of the broader culture and our complicit lives within it, the stratified moral reifications of refined culture are its perpetual adversaries. This art loves the language and hates The Word. It aspires to the vernacular as poets do and conspires with it - and seeks to redeem it by infecting it with felicity.

This art is about levelling, then - about attraction rather than critique - about likening things and liking them too. In Warhol's cosmology, it is about likening the tasty soup on the supermarket shelf to the tasteful paint in the beaux-arts picture, to the detriment of neither and in praise of both, and about likening, as well, the transcendental Rothko and the label on the soup can, by virtue of their trade mark, two-tone paint-jobs. For Ruscha, the act of liking and likening most often infers an analogous sublimity between the ghostly, Friedrichian atmospheres that he paints and the fugitive scraps of street vernacular that he floats within them. In the work of both artists, the image is informed by a knowing generosity, a cool sensibility that routinely levels the high-rise of cultural production and addresses all of its products with equal irony and affection.

When Larry Johnson nestles a scrap of fluff from *People* magazine (recounting the travails of Patty Hearst into the centre square of an Albers colour study, I would suggest that he is implementing his own version of this levelling agenda, which is about as far from cultural critique as one can get. Simply, Johnson likens the low text to the high image because of their smooth corporate charisma and interrogates, if anything, his own affection for such over-determined banality - blithely assuming, as Warhol always did, that his low affections are ours as well. Like a confident hustler, he takes our desire for granted; we will be attracted, in spite of ourselves. So, when asked whether we should regard his texts as grounded in 'cultural appropriation' or in his own experience, Johnson dismisses the question and suggests that people should 'examine their reasons for liking the same stories as I do.'

Thus, in Johnson's images, there is always the cool insinuation that, if we could but divest ourselves of our elitest defences and acknowledge the tabloid Jacobin within, we might come out of the closet and openly appreciate the saga of Patty Hearst that we have hitherto so secretly savoured. Like many gay artists, then, Johnson places a high value on

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'comin out' and admitting the 'worst,' but unlike most of them, he does not construe 'coming out' as an exclusively homosexual imperative. As he succinctly states: 'I'm not a one-man celebration, and I don't think that difference is about sucking cock.' As a consequence, a good deal of the uneasy frisson that accompanies our perception of Johnson's work, derives from its covert, aggressive insistence that we acknowledge the darker pleasures of our common culture and humanity - and own up to our common difference.

So the closet door that swings open in Johnson's work as often as not connects the artworld to the street; and, to judge by the critical notices that have followed in the wake of his exhibitions, this has created a somewhat disconcerting draft. Nearly all of Johnson's reviewers, for instance, comment so breathlessly on the artist's concern with sex, death, power and vanity that one is left wondering what they might have been expecting - what else is there beyond sex, death, power, etc.? One wonders if they have seen *Blow Job* or *Chelsea Girls*. Unfortunately, the presumption of 'critique' is so strong in these commentaries that Johnson's habit of photographing of photographing banal pop-texts in equivalently banal beaux-arts formats is taken almost entirely for granted - on the presumption, I suppose, that while banality in a 'high image' almost certainly signifies seriousness and critical distance.

Johnson, on the other hand, rationalises the appeal of such images at the same experiential level that he justifies his texts from *People* magazine: he likes them - and suggests at one point that 'the reason abstract painting exists is that people inherently like to look at nothing. So I'm above reproach. I'm only human.' Being only human, Johnson equates and conflates two distinct idioms of therapeutic vacuity (the tasteful design and the pop-narrative) that have traditionally stared at one another, like cows in adjacent fields, through the fence that divides high culture from low. Further, the moral neutrality with which Johnson combines these two forms of vacuity seems to suggest that he views their blankness as the by-product of cultural production itself - a consequence of their objectification.

At any rate Johnson's use of photography seems designed to hold his work at one remove from this redolent objectification. The photograph reifies neither the image nor the text, but represents them both as retinal moments - 'freezing' them, as it were, in the same way that a photograph will freeze a cloud or a gesture, leaving the implication of their continuing permutation in phenomenal reality. This sense of having frozen the flux of vision and language is rendered explicit in Johnson's recent

photographs, wherein cool, urban narratives are deployed on story boards situated like historical markers in snowy Japanese/Disney landscapes. In *Untitled ABC 1990*, the letters of the alphabet, the numerals '0' through '9' and various punctuation marks are portrayed as melting down the face of a panel set in a thawing winter landscape.

Johnson's evocation of cultural flux 'frozen' by the shutter-click seems obvious in these pieces; and the relative advantage of 'freezing' an image over objectifying it would seem to be that the covert sentiments that accrue behind (within? in front of?) the objectified image and the printed page are emptied from the photographic trace. With this photographic retreat from 'authenticity,' then, Johnson dispenses with the woozy cultural 'aura' that apparently accrue round objets d'art and neutralises, as well, the theatrical melancholia that all too often lurks behind camp transfigurations of popular culture. Thus, when Johnson confides in us, sotto voce and tongue-in-cheek, that his work has been most influenced by the art of Al Held and Sherrie Levine, he is suggesting, I think, that the funereal vacancy that might, perhaps, be construed as a defect in the work of Held and Levine, is, in fact, the living subject of his own.

The plain 'truth of masks' concerns Johnson, not what purports to lurk behind those masks. The pleasures and uses of this complex emptiness, in Johnson's aesthetic, would seem to define art's singular virtues. As Johnson remarks about Madonna: 'I like [her] because she's truly user-friendly. She can stand in place of nostalgia without necessarily being nostalgic. She's reinvented celebrities without the sticky parts. She's Garbo without wanting to be alone, she's Marilyn without that messy murder/suicide thing. And now she could be Frieda Kahlo without the painful politics and back problems.'

From this tribute we might infer Johnson's aspiration to a user-friendly, if slightly bitchy, art - bereft of interiority. ('without the sticky parts') and custom-tailored to intensify those pleasures of the text that Roland Barthes extols. Certainly, in Johnson's coolly distanced oeuvre, questions of authority are considerably mitigated. The dance creates the dancer in these images, and the author is the supreme fiction of the texts. Meanwhile the artist, in this duplicitous atmosphere, may indulge himself if he wishes, in the double irony of full disclosure, confident that the more plainly he reveals himself, the more rapidly the 'real' subject will seem to be displaced - the more elusively it will seem to recede just beyond our outstretched hand. In *Untitled (Sampler) 1989*, for instance, a short, first-person narrative is introduced by an enormous, phallogocentric 'I':

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I am not interested in conspiratorial theories, in automatic theories of dominance and oppression which make me the victim of dominant social codes. I have internalised a structure where I legislate my own behaviour - my speech, my actions, my inclinations. I don't trace myself back to an essential self. I see myself as a by-product of the conditions that I find myself in.

The autonomy implied by that looming, phallic 'I', of course, would seem to be contradicted by the content of the text. However our appreciation of this graphic irony posits an 'ironic' author behind it, assumes some conscious presence who is 'ironically' expressing his 'true' sentiments. And yet in the creepy, distanced 'user-friendly' environment that Johnson provides, any determination we make about the 'authority' of this sentiment depends absolutely on our own fiction of that author's persona - which depends on our reading of his work, and our interpretation of Foucault, and our construction of narcissism, and our feelings about Marx, and so on, and so on. Thus, we are set free, upon our own recognizance, with a frozen image of text that floats as freely on the torrent of cultural information as we do ourselves.

This, I think, is a close approximation of how we must, almost of necessity, apprehend Johnson's images - especially since 1988, when he cut them free of cultural marker-buoys and began composing his own fluff. It is not, however, a close approximation of the way that Johnson's work enters the discourse, since this discourse is dominated by iconoclasts who are loathe to do without the 'sticky parts', which serve to locate the work in its historical moment so praise and blame may be dispensed. The problem, finally, is theological, and the question is: how does a discourse which cleaves unto the chastity of the Word Inviolable deal with images that celebrate the promiscuity of the Word Incarnate, frozen in flux? The answer is: not very well. Thus, in 1990, not long after the artist began composing his own texts, *The New York Times* could not help but wonder 'whether Mr Johnson's point came across more clearly (and more amusingly) when his texts were borrowed from pop culture sources. By relying on his own ability to mimic the textures of mannered writing, he runs the risk of seeming mannered himself, and of courting the narcissism he seeks to criticize.'

It is amusing that *The New York Times* expects Johnson to flinch at the prospect of 'seeming mannered' and then to blanch at the prospect of 'courting narcissism', but this is just standard Puritan twaddle. The Times' anxiety about Johnson abandoning 'appropriation' for 'invention', speaks of deeper issues. It betrays the assumption that all true works of art are grounded either in critical evidence or the autobiography of

the artist, since all other strategies involve 'representation' and 'invention'. And 'representation' and 'invention' as we all know, entail dissolution of the artist's sensibility into the texture of the prevailing culture; and this, of course, results in a precipitous decline in 'authenticism' marked by a concurrent surge in ambient 'narcissism'! Yikes! (There will be a short pause here, while we all try to visualise works of art which eschew narcissism.)

Further, it would seem that an artist who deftly 'appropriates' from popular culture may remain a constituent of the elite cadre - who is merely stealing from the peasants for the good of us all. Whereas, an artist who betrays any commitment to, affection for, or involvement with these low materials is presumed to be infected. And should an artist actually participate in that low vernacular, as Larry Johnson does, and bring it in to the house, well, this is no longer 'appropriation', this is 'transgression with intent to level', and it will be dealt with. Serious artists do not work out of the broader culture, they work on behalf of it; and apparent analogies between the hermeneutic proclivities of elite practice and those of the supermarket tabloids are purely coincidental. Please ignore the man behind the curtain.

Thus does the cautionary rhetoric of late modernism segue neatly into the critique of 'late capitalism' under the guise of commodity anxiety - and thus the politically correct *New York Times* may comfortably make the same priestly assumption about Larry Johnson's text that Barbara Rose made, 30 years before, with regard to Warhol's soup cans: that there is no reason to transport the vernacular of popular culture into the realms of high art except to critique it - to make an amusing 'point' about that degraded domain to the elite beholder. To presume otherwise is to invite the deluge, since the real issue here is the uncanny ability of displaced cultural fictions to implicate and indict the contexts into which they are improperly inserted.

When Warhol strolled through the front door of refined culture, with his entourage of Marilyns and Elvi, of soup cans and drag queens, their fictional aura of demotic commercial celebrity immediately implicated and indicted the fictions of elite commercial celebrity already in place - because, as Andy once remarked, the difference between a can of Campbell's and a Rothko is that Mr. Campbell's signature is on the front. This is a powerful indictment, of course, and so I would suggest the term 'appropriation,' was quickly invented and employed to literalise the transgressive and competitive fictions that Warhol introduced into the court of high culture. For, if these impudent fictions can be literalised, robbed of their fictive aura and reduced to the status of evidence (of

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decadence, of narcissism) they will cease to challenge the cultural fictions already in place. They will simply be artefacts of primitive otherness. Thus the literal, low provenance of Larry Johnson's texts is of institutional concern.

In any case, I can find no references to Andy 'appropriating' anything before 1971, as the protestant counter-reformation began gathering force; and the best evidence I can offer that it did indeed gather force in the visual arts is that Larry Johnson's fictions as fictions fit seamlessly into a broad and currently ongoing literary practice of 'cultural fiction-making' that first became visible, I think, in 1967 with Donald Barthelme's antic, junk-sculpture novel, *Snow White*. Therein the adventures of Snow and her diminutive cronies are recounted in a panoply of outé genres: laundry lists, job applications, news releases, encyclopaedia entries, menus, prayers, recipes etc.

Within this practice, Johnson's genre of choice, the 'tabloid blurb,' is almost canonical. It has its conventions and its parameters. It is usually longer than the 'squib' and shorter than the 'sidebar' - as the sonnet is longer than the lyric and shorter than the ode - and, since it must fit into the space available, it must adhere to Tom Dowd's prime directive of pop songwriting: 'Don't bore us. Get to the chorus.' Finally, as the prime instrument of the Lumpen-Panopticon, the 'tabloid blurb' must fiercely deconstruct the powerful façades of cultural icons with ebullient, Foucaultian cruelty. Johnson's first effort, in *Untitled (John-John and Bobby)* 1998, provides an admirable paradigm:

The first tape was rough. Slightly out of focus images become tougher to discern as Bobby fumbled with the hair-trigger zoom. What could be made out was John-John naked, in a masturbatory frenzy. Behind him moved a blur of people against the bright fluorescence of shopping mall signage. The tape lasted about three minutes, beginning with a jumbled effort to locate the figure in the centre of the viewer and ending with a rapid zoom and close-up of John-John's ejaculating dick.

Each tape had the same premise. John-John would star, first as a solo performer and later with other hustler-boy co-stars. Bobby was cameraman. The location was always public with opportunities for rapid getaways. Fucking, sucking and masturbating in two's and three's, John-John and Bobby made their way through some of the best parking lots, shopping malls and business districts of Los Angeles.

As redolent as this text is with literary niceties of nuance and concision, however, Johnson's practice is not an exclusively literary one. It involves the interplay of seeing and reading,

and, consequently, I would propose rock and roll as the most descriptive analogy for Johnson's endeavour. Rock's edgy imbrication of music and lyrics, of hearing and listening, closely approximates the visual experience of Johnson's work, in which two essentially distinct entities, image and text, interact roughly, in forced contiguity - one gaining ascendancy, and then the other. Thus, the effect of reading Johnson's multi-coloured texts like *Untitled (I had never seen anything like it)* 1988 is eerily evocative of the disorienting effect one experiences while trying to 'listen' to a dance tune in one of those discotheques where the lighting shifts colour, cued to the thud of the bass drum - an analogy that Johnson admits is not totally infelicitous, nor totally alien to the sources of the work in the watering holes of West Hollywood.

So, although Johnson's work is not exactly 'visual rock and roll' (it is too cool for that), it is almost certainly 'malicious Muzak'; and Johnson's truest soul-mate, I would suggest, across the whole field of cultural production, is Lou Reed, who, like Johnson, is the Jane Austen of his genre, specialising in the middle range of everyday malice: in pettiness and spite, petulance and envy, vanity and grief. Johnson, however, aggressively deploys his fictions in venues of high culture that proclaim allegiance to competitive fictions of virtue. As a consequence, Johnson's texts are rarely allowed to retain their power as 'cultural fictions'.

If they were, I suspect, we would eventually be forced to acknowledge that John-John and Bobby does nothing to the powerful façade of Kennedy mythology that Lacanian deconstructionists, in their own idiom, have not already done with equal malice to the equakky powerful and equally deserving façade of John Milton. And having acknowledged that we would confront the possibility that the culture is less bifurcated than we ever would have wished - that we all hate other people's power and, certain of our virtue, will employ any available method to deconstruct its shining façade. Which would not discredit the project, necessarily. It would only mean that everybody does it and that we are less special, less virtuous and less altruistic than we would wish to appear in our radical critique. And a little more bitchy.

Dave Hickey