

The Highlights - Untitled (Something Clever Here)

Jeff Wall noted in 1982 that "the gray volumes of conceptualism are filled with somber ciphers which express primarily the inexpressibility of socially-critical thought in the form of art."(Jeff Wall, "Dan Graham's Kammerspiel," originally published in Gary Dufour, Dan Graham, exh. cat. Perth: The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1985. The article can also be found in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro, Blake Stimson, p. 511. MIT Press, 2000) For Conceptual art, language served as the vehicle for discourse-coding and decoding information. There were layers of language: text-in-art as well as essays published in magazines by artists to supplement and unlock their works. The primary function of language was to dematerialize the art object, but it quickly became a hermetic code whose ability to engage social issues had failed.

Early Conceptual art's reliance on language often fueled criticism that it was inaccessible and insider. A new generation of artists taking form in the early 1980s sought to tackle this problem head on-morphing the use of text-in-art from the rigid applications of the late '60s and early '70s to a more humorous and pathos-filled practice. Larry Johnson is one of these artists. With a casual commitment to systems, a heavy injection of reclaimed subjectivity, and a return to image making, Johnson's work fits cleanly in the lineage of West-coast Conceptualism.

Larry Johnson's use of photography links his work to Bruce Nauman's staged photographs of visual puns, while his reliance on language places his work in company with Lawrence Weiner's stenciled wall texts and Ed Ruscha's text-heavy paintings of industrial landscapes. While Johnson's work borrows from artists of the previous generation, his approach to art making is unquestionably unique. Unlike the tautologies generated from the early Conceptualist's use of language where the image only reinforced the meaning of the word, Johnson's unexpected conflation of text and image suggests new readings to the viewer.

His use of language can be seen as a parsing of Conceptualism, leaving behind the failed strategies while adding new elements to revive the discourse. The esoteric humor, queer content, and endless pop-culture references in Johnson's work mark an irreversible shift in the evolution of Conceptualism. It should be noted here that this approach to Postconceptual art was unique to Los Angeles. New York had the Pictures Generation, happening concurrently, which employed similar strategies of appropriation and humor through quoting the images of pop culture rather than the language that Johnson focused on. Both approaches, however, shared the aim of creating work that was more socially engaged than that of the rigid Conceptualists from the previous generation.



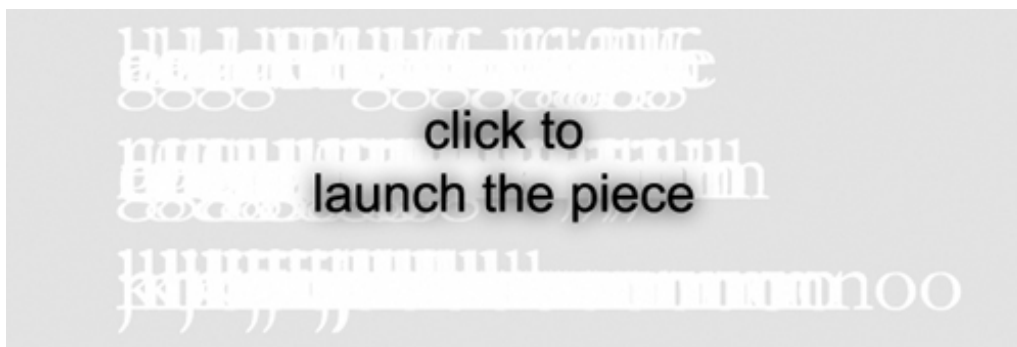
Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Jesus + I)*, 1990, Color photograph, 46 5/8 x 61 inches (118.4 x 154.9 cm), Edition of 3. Courtesy of the Artist and Patrick Painter Inc., Santa Monica, CA

Untitled (Jesus + I) (1990) is one in a series of pieces set in an anonymous snowy landscape. As with all of Johnson's work, *Untitled (Jesus + I)* is a color photograph that could be confused for a drawing or painting. It is large, somewhere between a flat-screen television and small movie screen projection, and it is rendered to look like an animation cell. The backdrop of hills and trees is colored in cool tones, while a large orange sign-present in all of the works from this series-is firmly planted in the snow-covered ground. The cartoony Garamond typeface of the sign verbosely tells the story of "looking inward rather than at externals," and proceeds to list the many "Dorian Grey, Ltd." skin care products that had been sampled before attending a dinner party. The story is circuitous; starting with "Jesus and I" and ending with "my glistening tan," the lack of logic is hysterical.

When asked about the subject of the texts, Johnson said, "the fragments are chosen for the universal or non-specific qualities of their confessions and complaints. I am the author of first-person fictions."(Interview by David Rimanelli, "Larry Johnson: Highlights of Concentrated Camp," *Flash Art*, Nov.-Dec. 1990. p. 121-23) The stories that the artist uses allow for more humor to enter the work, while the ever present "I" is firmly planted in pop culture, giving him access to something close to a collective subjectivity. While Johnson is the author of these stories, he is not the subject. The "I" is pulled directly from the pages of TV Guide, advertisements and circulars, movies and television shows, and is in essence the

voice of a shared experience.

Johnson's use of animation techniques gives visual weight to the language presented in the work and allows it to function purely as an image. Upon closer reading, the text takes on deeper meanings, separated from its placement in the landscape. Johnson's series of winter scenes from 1990 imply an infinite backdrop where one might constantly come across these first person accounts, anonymously displayed for any passerby. Each winter scene references an un-recallable animated film from our childhood, or perhaps the nether regions of our memory that store these severed bits of pop-culture knowledge. The incongruity and solitude of the snowy landscape only adds to the punch line.



_Cody Trepte, *What are you doing? (Twitter Drawing)*, 2009, Java Applet. Please note: You will be prompted to click 'Allow' to launch the java applet.

Larry Johnson's work has one foot in Conceptualism and one foot in pop culture. It is the humor and the recognizable imagery that make his photographs accessible, while the smug wit and heavy use of language display a direct link to cryptic Conceptual art. His art operates on two levels: the image and the code. This, Jan Verwoert explains, "is the promise that the embrace of the secretive holds for critical Conceptual art practice: the promise of transgressing the limits of its own discursive codes by speaking two languages at once, the didactic and the hermetic."(Jan Verwoert, "Secret Society," *Frieze*, Issue 124, Jun.-Aug. 2009. p. 137) Johnson's work does exactly this and proves that with enough flexibility, Conceptualism can continue to evolve. Its success won't come from quoting previous generations, but rather from extracting what we like and discarding what we don't.