

RAY
JOHNSON



RAY
JOHNSON

Bill Wilson, We were born
in Detroit, Michigan on
October 16, 1927 in a
library in a library.



RAY
JOHNSON



HIS
TWIN
BROTHER

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RAY JOHNSON *Elvis Presley*
1957 Collage, 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ ×11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ins

The Something Else Press, Inc.
160 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10010

RAY JOHNSON

by William Wilson, M.A., Ph.D.

What is beautiful in the work of Ray Johnson is what he sees in the way he sees it. What is meaningful is not so much the content as the parallels and intersections of the style. And what is real to Ray Johnson is not *what* so much as *how*. For him, a thing is attractive when it resembles something else. These resemblances constitute the incidents of his world and form the coincidences in his design. These designs, from intimate fragments of our lives, point out unsuspected resemblances of form or line or color; design, based on such accidental similarities, stops the ticking clock. His works are surely not eternal, but they are moments without time. They are to time as echo is to sound.

The meaning in Ray Johnson's work is not logical, like an Aristotelian syllogism, but counterlogical, like a psalm. All art represents reality, there is no non-representational art. It just depends on what the artist thinks is real, and on what he can prove to be real. For Ray Johnson reality is in coincidental resemblances. When one thing resembles something else, design is possible for beauty, and metaphor is possible for meaning. Fact is freed into image.

Ray Johnson tells parables. He finds a use for coincidence. He pounces on and proclaims a day-by-day order and meaning in events; the order is design, the meaning is coincidence. This orderly coincidence—this coincidental design—is sufficient meaning. Ray Johnson picks up crumbs and hands back bread.

In an age when people live allegorically, allegory is naturalistic. In an age when people live symbolically, symbolism is naturalistic. Realism could not depict Ray Johnson realistically. Since Ray Johnson lives a life that is a continuous revelation of pure and radiant design, the image of that life is art. Since the life itself is designed of coincidences, like a walk taking a line, the aesthetic reciprocal of that life is a Ray Johnson collage. Ray Johnson is not neo-dada or abstract or extract: he is an artist representing the reality of his life; it happens that his life is a collage. At least it happens that he works at his life until it is a work of art, and he works at his art until life catches up with it.

The first principle of Ray Johnson's art is that anything isolated is beautiful, albeit

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opaque. The second principle is that meaning awakens in that isolated beautiful thing when it is juxtaposed to something like it (counterparts, like rhymes, for the romantic; counterpoints, like puns, for the ironic). Ray Johnson said, "I deal in invisibilities and anonymities." He said, "Andy Warhol says my snakes aren't snakes—they're worms because they aren't life-size. But some of my snakes are imaginary and inarticulate snakes, and what is life-size about inarticulateness?" To Dick Higgins he has written, "I want to live and die like an egg." Ray Johnson's art is always *see and say, show and tell*; it is also imaginary, inarticulate, and eggshaped.

Ray Johnson is the master of the form or line or color that corresponds with another form or line or color: hence the New York Correspondence School of Art, in which he mails to friends and strangers his correspondences. Ray Johnson plays the U.S. mails like a harp. His art is not of social comment, but of sociability. The equations in this intimate algebra cannot always be explained; they usually seem self-evident at the time, although Ray Johnson likes to make sure people catch on. Since a change in style is a change in meaning, this book is a translation of Ray Johnson into Dick Higgins; reading these is like reading over Dick Higgins' shoulder, or hearing him read them aloud. Ray Johnson makes eggs out of omelets and Dick Higgins eats them.

william s. wilson

ray johnson

vibration and reverberation

« Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation ».
Wallace Stevens

When people live allegorically, allegory in art is naturalistic. When people live symbolically, symbolism in art is naturalistic. When people feel that life has no meaning other than itself, naturalism in art is as good as they can get. But none of the conventions of naturalism could depict the life and times of Ray Johnson realistically, and it is doubtful if surrealism or dada could do much better.

Since all art is representational and realistic, any departures from naturalism suggest a theory of reality. The blank cardboard or canvas is a sample of the void, and what the painter places in the emptiness is a sample of what is real (if he has the techniques to prove its reality). For Ray Johnson, reality is in coincidental resemblances. When one thing resembles something else, design is possible for beauty, and metaphor is possible for meaning. Two things that are similar can be filed away together in a collage. Ray Johnson fills the void with measured coincidences, parallels, intersections, and self-reflection-approaches to oneness. He is a gridiron hero.

The collages resemble moments of meaning in life. There are the vibrating parallels of space, the lines that appear, disappear, and reappear elusively across the surface of experience: strange encounters, chance meetings, odd connections, and deliberate appointments. « Fancy meeting you here ». Ray Johnson used to taxi from the Harbor Bar across lower Manhattan to the Barbara Bar, just for the sake of a bad rhyme, a coincidence of sounds. He brought a thirty year old man named Ara to have tea with a two year old girl named Ara (they took to each other immediately), and then he did a collage on which is written THE BAD ARA, an anagram for Theda Bara. Thus he discovers symmetries and counterparts, and uncovers plots and counterplots. He patterns things in parallels, and found it droll that his cousin could not remember the author of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Beneath and within and above these parallels vibrating in space, the surface is disturbed by lost images from the past, or stray images from the present. Thus the vibrations in present space, and the reverberations of image-laden time, meet in pulsating encounter. The void has been filled with spatio-temporal symmetries: one place is much like another; each moment mirrors

moments from the past. Time and space are married in an instant; here and now make one flesh.

The collages and writings of Ray Johnson occur at that angle in the pie of art where poetry borders on painting. He does not use words musically, but visually, or pictorially, the letters forming a shape as well as a word. In 1957 he doctored a photograph of Elvis Presley with red drips from the eyes, and called it *Oedipus*, saying, « I'm the only painter in New York whose drips mean anything ». From the mouth of Elvis-Oedipus pour forth what look like words in a language that uses picture writing. These ideograms are drawings of his own collages; they are neither English (Elvis) nor Greek (Oedipus), but letters in a personal alphabet, or words in a private language. When Ray Johnson uses English words, they disappear from English into his visual language, to hover there, suspended in momentary space.

One strategy of the early collages, like the strategy of envelopes in the New York Correspondence (sic) School, is to repeat a motif - a baby, another baby, a third baby. In the N.Y.C.S., the contents of an envelope usually refer to something Ray Johnson associates with the recipient (the U. S. mails, technologically obsolete as means of communication, are turned to aesthetic, not pragmatic, purposes). The repetition - a horse, another horse - would be merely a repeated mentioning or a decorative motif, a network with some fretwork, except for the afterimage. After repeating an image - X X X - a different image, Y, will resemble X because it is viewed from the same mental angle. As Toby Spiselman puts it, « Ray Johnson can find an intersecting subset of identities ».

In this quest for identity, angle of vision overpowers differences of form. Other becomes same, and many become one, as vision rides roughshod over logic. The more recent collages paint over or sandpaper away these images, and present the coincidences more abstractly, in line and form and color: lines compatible, forms companionable, and colors concurring. The large collages of autumn 1965 attempt to make a whole image out of fragments of his own collages. Once he made art out of coincidences in life; now he makes it out of coincidences in art. These latest collages, like the earlier, demonstrate that the meaning is in the focus, not in the fact or form, and that what is real in life are the measured symmetries, parallels, identities, and reflections that make it look like design.

New York October 16, 1965

April, 1965
Invoice #4

I mailed to May Wilson a collection of collage fragments by myself which had been strung on a piece of string like dried mushrooms or apples and they were mostly on gray cardboard. I once made a large painting of many strings of these which were old work cut up into small cardboard squares.

One day, early in 1958, I walked to the mailbox and found a large carton from Ray Johnson. I hurried back to the studio, opened it, and found it full of cardboard scraps from his collages. One rainy day I strung the pieces of cardboard on a piece of twine and had about three feet of cardboard necklace. My eyes hit on a cigar-box, so I cut a length of the necklace, dipped it in glue, stuffed it into the box, and painted it. The rest of the strung cardboard became twisted into a figure eight, and is now painted red. It was originally white.

I mailed to May Wilson a Ruth Asawa wire sculpture I had exchanged with Ruth for a painting. It was a series of wire ball shapes within one another & there were about four of them enclosed one within the other. It hung from an attachment at the top. Made of coiled wire knitted.

Another day in 1958 I found a large carton from Ray Johnson in my mail-box. This one contained a wire mesh object, of three graduated spherical shapes. I did not know what it was, except bulky. At the time I had a triangular 2x4" wood shape, open in the center, so I sat on the wire thing to flatten it, nailed it to the triangle, and painted it black.

I received a postcard from May Wilson asking what was it a Victorian string holder? and then a letter saying she had sat on it, flattened it down to a board, nailed it down and painted it black.

I was amused by this and thought it witty to associate Asawa with the act of sitting.

I mailed to May Wilson a Robert Bucker painting he had given me that I admired because of the unusual proportion of about 3 inches wide by two feet long. It was a solid black painted area with none of his usual line divisions. It was enclosed in a wooden frame.

There was the day I found a long narrow package in the mail-box which was an oil painting, an icky tan, about

1" wide and 2 ft long. I happened to be working on a wooden assemblage of a half-circle of wood, with short horizontals and here was the vertical I needed, so I nailed it down, painted it white, and it is out on loan.

She wrote me saying she had nailed it down to a round wooden table top. I think that's what she said. I don't remember too well what happened.

I mailed to May Wilson a Larry Poons painting. It was an early one I had around my studio for quite a while and it was yellow and white circle about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet square.

I received a long round package which turned out to be a painting of a large circle. The paint was ineptly applied, going in all directions, and I thought, no loss if it is lost in my work, so I stapled it in sharp creased folds to a wooden panel, painted red, and this is out on loan.

I don't remember what she did with that but I think it was used in one of her works. I never had the courage to tell Larry about what happened and said it was on tour when he asked where the painting was.

I mailed to May Wilson a small rubber stamp reading DRIP that I found in an abandoned coffee factory in New York City and thought it should be sent to her because of her interest in drip painting at the time also push and pull Hoffman terms of painting. I asked many years later if I could have the rubber stamp back and she said she had nailed or glued it down in a work years ago.

I recently received a carton filled with rubber baby-doll shoes and spent much time gluing them down in a child's suitcase. When the glue dried, several days later, I examined the work, gave a yank at the shoes and they all came apart.



Grandma Moses of the Underground

MAY WILSON WORKS with discarded objects, whether shoes, cups, dolls: whatever is brought to her by other people. The objects are likely to have brimmed with emotion once, but by the time she gets them they are ghosts of their former selves. Where the things may once have imposed emotions or styles on the person giving them, they impose no emotion on May Wilson, who sees the objects not in terms of their former uses, but of their future in her work. She can be counted on to exorcise objects of accumulated feelings by using them in any way that she sees fit — gluing, nailing, painting. She cares nothing about their emotional meaning: an object might be the objectification of someone's emotion, but if it is a



Yoo Hoo *Mixed media* Henri Gallery, Washington

shoe she throws it in a box with shoes until it is precisely the shape that fits her needs.

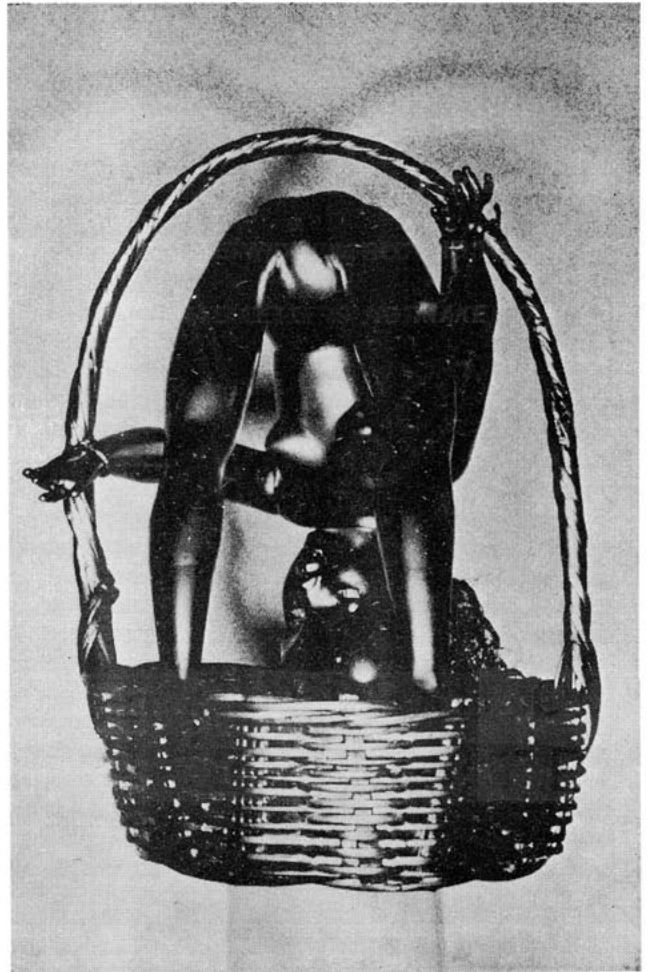
This condition, of accepting without judgment the cast-off images that are brought to her, guarantees the distance of the object from her own emotions, and having exorcised the objects of other people's feelings, she does not clutter them with her own. The first step in this liberation of things from emotional needs and practical uses is to relate things to other things as part of a class, as neutrally as a scientist, as pointlessly as an archaeologist separating potsherds into neat categories. This application of the arbitrary classification overrules the feelings hovering around the objects

(my glove becomes one among a dozen old gloves) and the classification could be elevated into a feeling in its own right — the coarse satisfactions of a Dewey-decimal system, with the Chaplinesque touch that the objects are junk. But this objectivity is usually kept at a preparatory stage, and just as it erases emotions, later stages of work will remove any trace of it.

The objects which were emotionally charged have been treated to the cool classifications of good house-keeping. When two or more objects are taken out of their groups to be assembled, they do not take on any of the meaningful irrelevance of dream objects, nor are they assimilated to autobiography: they



Bottle Mixed media Museum of Modern Art Lending Service



Basket Mixed media Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit

remain, intractably and recalcitrantly, objects. They remain free of both dense emotion and shallow rationality because the principle of selecting objects to be assembled together derives from neither system nor feeling but from the principle that what fits together gets put together. So the work pertains to what fits, and to what is fitting, and this working hypothesis, applied to objects accumulated by chance, means that the relationship between things will be unprecedented, and unpredictable, with neither the easy incongruity of dream, nor the rigid groupings of science. Out there the objects stand, unaccommodating and unassimilable, constructed of things that have staged a

come-back by accepting a small part that happens to fit their plans.

This fitting sometimes means an apparent discomfort, or uncomfortable-ness, of the relationship, with hierarchies ignored, and unexpected misalliances turning into vaguely uncomfortable arrangements. This feeling of the parts being visibly uncomfortable underscores the point that comfort, or other need, is subordinated to the need for order. The work has the exhilaration of elevating a relative term, *fitting*, into an absolute. It offers a liberation from reason, without a surrender to dream, and it keeps a middle-way, sometimes teasingly close to our ordinary awareness of things, but with a

single-minded concentration on *fitting* as the one human necessity, a monomania, that lifts the familiar into the unfamiliar of magic and fetish. May Wilson makes dead objects into a new source of energy by fitting them into assemblages that hover between dream and reason — works that resemble the workings of the mind when it fits things together under a single economical principle. The work, and the workings of the mind which the work illustrates, are called beautiful by virtue of the increase in available energy which they make possible.

BILL WILSON

THE NEW YORK Correspondance School is an art of witty resemblances; it originates with Ray Johnson, but any number can play. It takes the 'New York school' of painters, an invention of careless art historians, and schools of art by correspondence in which famous artists teach commercial art through the mails, and it combines them into a satiric portmanteau that carries still other meanings.

Correspondence is spelled *correspondance*, not in the French manner, but because a Ukrainian poster from the Lower East Side of Manhattan announces a *dance* in a word that looks like *3AbaBy* (three-a-baby). This poster (*dance*, *3AbaBy*) became an image after Ann Wilson gave birth to twins and M.T. became pregnant; three-a-baby seemed a sign of the times.

In the same spirit Ray Johnson invented the Robin Gallery as an answer to the Batman Gallery in San Francisco (Robin was Batman's youthful companion in the comic as we now all know). The Robin Gallery not only held 'robbin' events (in October, 1963, Ray Johnson and Sari Dienes stole a painting back from friends at Haverstraw), it also held (at least announced) an eight man show with only three artists, because 3 and its inverted reflection ε make an 8. Clearly the truth for Ray Johnson is not correspondence to actuality (verisimilitude), but is correspondence of part to part (pregnant similarities that dance).

Now *correspondence* belongs in a thesaurus not only with 'correlation, agreement, symmetry, and concord', but also with 'epistolary intercourse, written communication, and letter writing'. So the NYCS uses the US mails as part of its method or médium.

Ray Johnson first notices something about a person, an image which might be central or marginal, and then he fills an envelope with scraps of images that comment on or add to or combine with that image. This process begins with a fondness for filing things, so he sends horses to Billy Linich, lobsters to Henry Martin, balloons to Karl Wirsum. He files a person under something in his mind, and then sends along through the mails whatever he feels belongs in the same file.

The use of the US mails, a sanctimonious institution with pretensions to heroic purity and endurance, offers

the delight of turning to aesthetic purposes a practical outfit with ethical ambitions ('Report obscene mail to your postmaster.') The slow daily post is still useful, but technologically as obsolete as the nineteenth-century middle-class family in which grandfather seems to have devoured bacon and the morning post together. Now that data can be communicated electronically, the old fashioned mails begin to yield aesthetic possibilities. At just about the time that mailboxes ceased to be painted drab green, as nature intended them, and became red, white and blue, like US hybrid petunias, Ray Johnson founded the NYCS.

With correspondence as content (similarity) and as method (epistolary intercourse), many otherwise flat details come into relief. The bombastic statue of Samuel S. Cox, 'the letter carrier's friend', at Thompkin's Square off 10th Street in Manhattan, becomes a work of art when it is drawn by Karl Wirsum for page 7 of the Book About Death, a series of multilithed sheets Ray Johnson has mailed around. An envelope becomes part of a work of art, and the typical envelope of NYCS missive has been found discarded by a commercial firm or municipal agency (in truth, some filched by friends). Envelopes carrying the crest of TIME-LIFE INC rather deflate that afflatus of editorial wind, and envelopes from IBM turn up as truants from commerce playing a part in art whose value cannot be computed. The envelope usually has a commercial history, then, but its future lies as an unsalable part of the NYCS taking its chances in the unassailable US mails.

On the envelope is usually a correct return address for Ray Johnson (176 Suffolk Street, New York City, 10002), the address of the recipient, and stamps. The picture on the stamp can correspond to something, and the position of the stamp, and of the cancellation, is important formally to the success of the envelope. Stamp and cancellation are as significant as the position of a collector's seal on an oriental painting—sort of New York Chinatown Dada. (Ray Johnson has lived at Munroe Street and Dover Street, both near New York's Chinatown and City Hall. He has collected scraps of paper, pictures, and other trash from both. Chinatown has provided words—probably the

NY correspondance school

by william wilson

price of chop suey—which are opaque, beautiful, and unintelligible, and which easily become part of a visual language of articulate design. City Hall has provided examples of English so stupidly depleted by municipal misuse as to be ready for resurrection in art.)

Some envelopes in the NYCS contain items that are, like a poem, overheard, since they are inscribed, 'Please send to John Doe, 123 4th Street, New York City 5'. The envelope, having passively passed through the mails, is now at the mercy of the first recipient. Some alter, some add, some subtract, some detract, some discard, some hoard, and others conscientiously forward the materials on their appointed rounds. Ray Johnson says he doesn't care what is done, that there are no rules, but he once circulated a list of people dropped from the NYCS for various offenses.

The relationships can get rather complex, as Ray Johnson directs to someone an image which he mails to someone else first. The first recipient, the middle-man, might or might not see something in what is passing through his hands. Knowing that people have been tampering with the mails, the final recipient cannot be certain what Ray Johnson originally sent.

He was once questioned by Lieutenant Johnston of the New York City Police department because a young woman received an envelope of indecent pictures with his return address. He explained the NYCS to the lieutenant and was *not* arrested. Even apart from hysterical females afraid of photographs, the possibilities are complicated, and in each case unique; what arises out of the NYCS is a curious tissue of relationships, a society of sorts, associating people who might think in images.

One of the sources of the exhilaration and liberation in this game is the lack of respect for privacy. We all came from homes in which even our sisters could be trusted not to read private letters; now letters most private get dumped into the NYCS, but these expressions of emotion are treated as abstractly as a triangle, as parts to be combined with other parts. Cries of the heart are examined for form and pattern, not sincerity. Personal letters are not sacred, because what is real is not the self or emotions (see Abstract Expressionism), but the special moments of

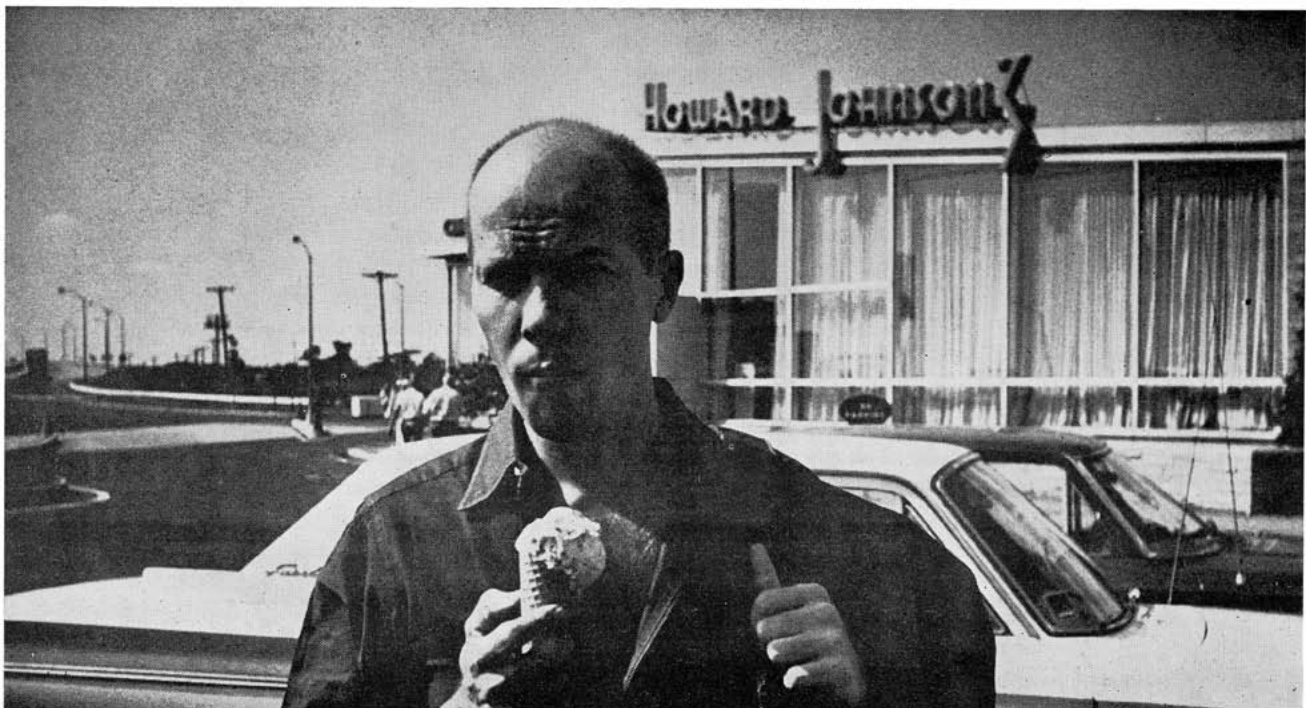
discovery in which the apparently random forms parallels.

Ray Johnson is not accepting the lukewarm pleasures of a thermodynamic and chance distribution of junk through the mails. (Nam June Paik, a disciple of John Cage, once kept on his mantelpiece a mailing from Ray Johnson, who told him he had it wrong-side-out. For Paik, all sounds are music, but Ray Johnson turned the mailing to the significant side.) He is not shooting dice, he is creating possibilities for pattern, metaphor, and meaning.

We are familiar with metaphor that illuminates or enhances existence, but metaphor is not only a way of thinking about things, its use can be a theory of reality. Ray Johnson is a realist for whom reality is in designed or coincidental resemblances, a tissue of correspondences, a fabric of metaphors. These correspondences imply no 'higher' reality. The images do not bring forward invisible worlds in the way that the Visible Church embodies the Invisible Church. The envelopes and images do not clothe an underlying *ens*, nor are Ray Johnson's collages a shadow of the real. The mailings and collages, however deliberately the image may be veiled or obliterated, present that which is real because it is sufficient: correspondences. This real world of parallels and resemblances works with at least three principles:

Identity: Ray Johnson never read Leibnitz, but he plays with the problem of the identity of indiscernibles, renewing excitement and wonder that two things are identical, or almost so. He often uses 1c stamps so that several identical images are repeated on the envelope—George Washington George Washington George Washington George Washington—to make the 5c postage. Inside the envelope there may be two copies of the same photograph, or one photograph of James Dean in different sizes reproduced on different paper in different magazines. The photograph is the same, and yet it is other, and this fluctuation of same-and-other speaks to us of images enduring in the flux of things when they resemble other images.

Analogy: Sometimes Ray Johnson sees with a biologist's eye resemblances in form or function, but he works out his own genera and species, cutting not at the joints of scientific distinctions, but carving out his own 'impertinent



correspondencies' (Lamb). To him, a photograph of Buster Keaton leaning over the side of a ship belongs with a postcard of a gargoyle leaning over Notre Dame. An Indian drawing of a woman, seen sideways, looks like a photograph of a pistol in the same envelope. The equation, woman and pistol, relates to a whole theme of 'Annie Get Your Gun', Ethel Merman, muff pistols, and Connie Francis in a recent movie in which she plays a female mailman with guns hanging above her mantelpiece.

Focus: A horse does not resemble, however abstracted, a cup and saucer, in the way that the Indian woman resembles the gun. But Ray Johnson can find a horse that is seen in the same way that a cup and saucer is being seen (Fernande Olivier painted by Picasso looks more like Kahnweiler painted by Picasso than like herself painted by Kees van Dongen). Ray Johnson finds resemblances between two things that are being imagined from the same point of view, or photographed from the same mental focus, and offers the resemblance as correspondence, and correspondence as meaning.

What suffices for Ray Johnson is a mind that makes metaphors and a world that yields them. He perceives identities in spite of obvious differences, and holds a tension between identity and difference in his work. The meaning of most envelopes in the NYCS is partly in the content (a picture of a horse conveys an idea), but more is in the method, the use of correspondences. These correspondences are not part of a cosmic design with metaphysical consolations. They represent a temporary balance between an unsatisfying common sense world and an imaginative mind, moments when miscellaneous items are shown to be a coherent motif: moments that rhyme.

Ray Johnson finds it sufficient to discover correspondences, and he corresponds with people by mail to convey to them images that correspond to some image they will recognise as appropriate.

His address is: 176 Suffolk Street, New York City, 10002.

(left) *New York Correspondance School, 1964, using an envelope as the background of a collage-letter; note the variety of type and means of printing. The entry on Pope is clipped from a dictionary and attached with tape*

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Pope, Alexander, 1688-1744, Eng. poet and translator, b. **London**, son of a prosperous linen merchant. He wrote in poetic form from a very early age. In 1714 he pub. his *Rape of the Lock*, which brought him instant fame. He is particularly noted for his translation of Homer's *Iliad*, 1715-20; the *Odyssey*, 1725-26; and an edition of Shakespeare, 1725.

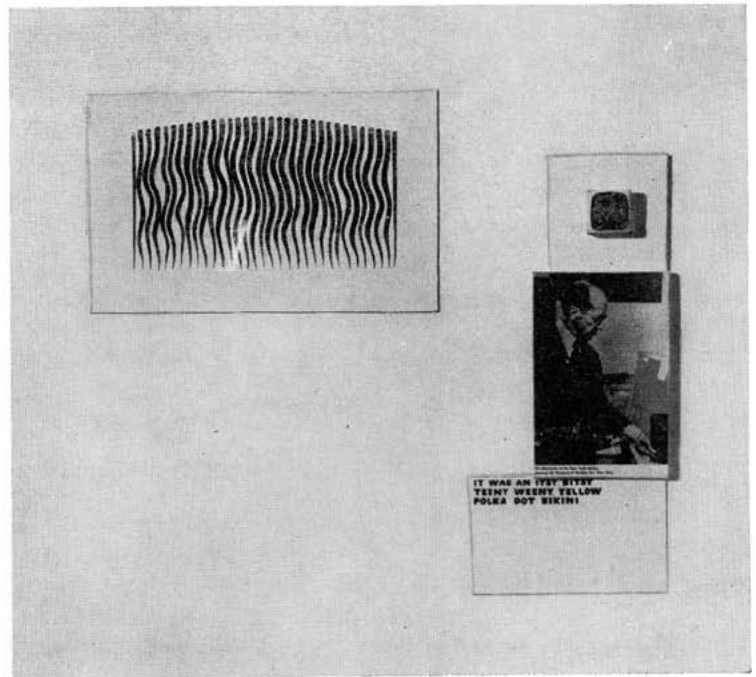
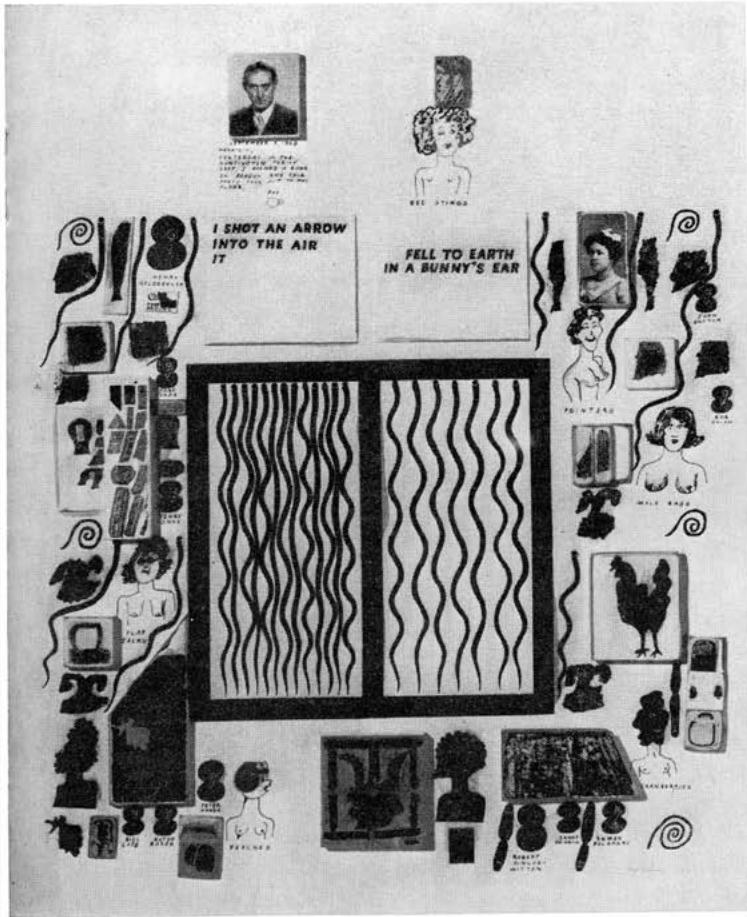
COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON

Ray Johnson
176 Suffolk Street
New York, New York

R

Ray Johnson is an American collagist born in Detroit, Michigan, October 16, 1927. He studied under Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, before working and living in Manhattan. His first one-man show at the Willard Gallery in 1965, hailed him in the New York Times as 'New York's most famous unknown artist'. His one-man show this April, '66, should bring his public reputation into line with the private reputation he has had for a decade as an artist ranking with Rauschenberg and Johns. A book of Correspondance School material was published by 'Something Else Press', 160 Fifth Avenue, NYC.

Ray Johnson: Letters of Reference



Ray Johnson, *Mondrian Combo* (1969), collage 24" x 27". Richard Feigen Gallery.

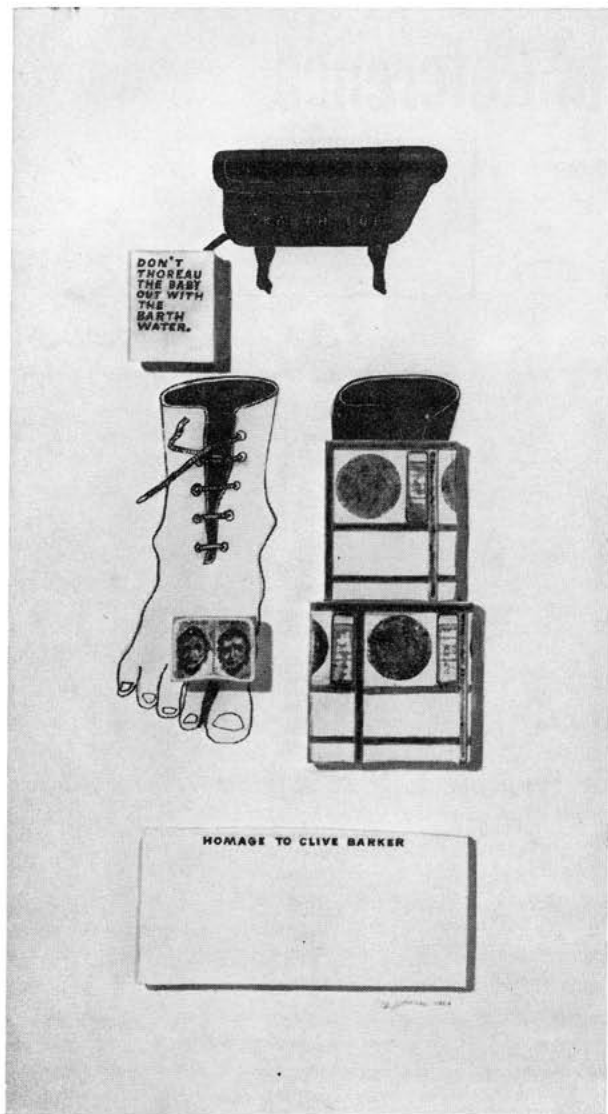
Left: Ray Johnson, *I Shot an Arrow* (1969), collage 23¾" x 19¼". Richard Feigen Gallery.

by WILLIAM WILSON

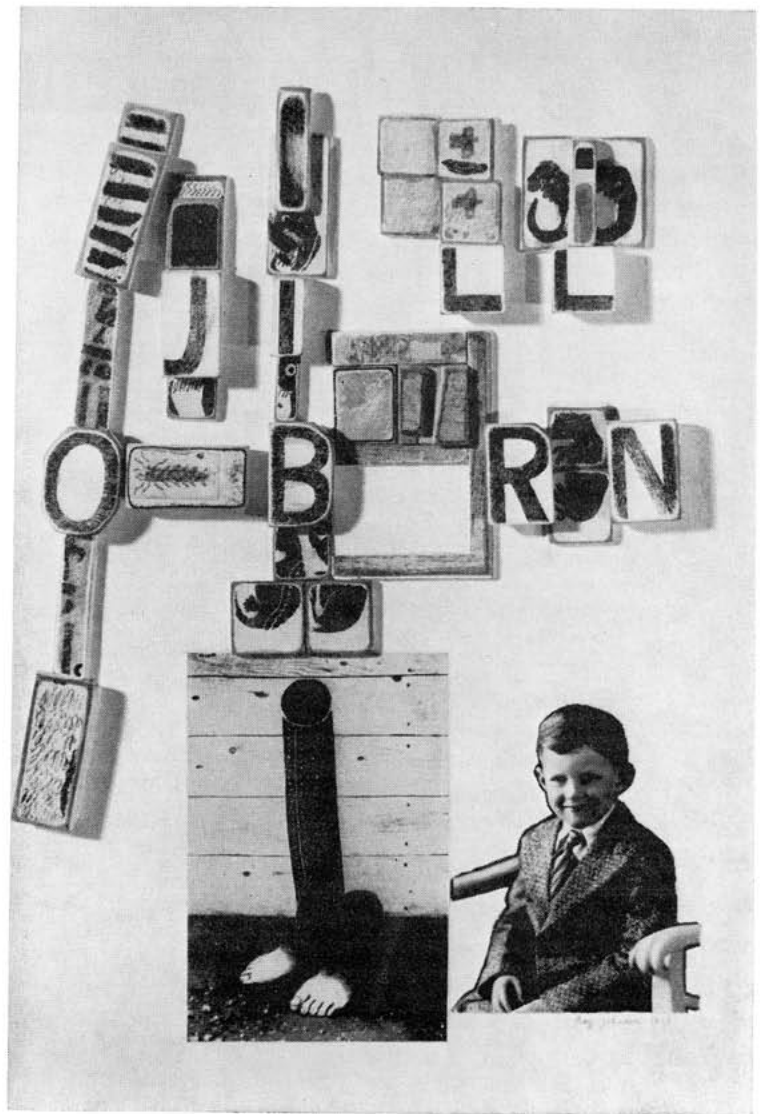
Ray Johnson thinks with resemblances as in homonyms, synonyms, coincidences, analogies, and identities. He develops his ideas with mirrorings, reflections, symmetries, and repetitions. This way of thinking has an ancient and worthy history; "The sum of wisdom," Joseph Needham has written in *Science and Civilization in China*, "consisted in adding to the number of intuited analogical correspondences in the repertory of correlations." Ray Johnson's art, which arranges and creates correspondences, is his way of thinking about his reality. The art proposes that an event or thing or image is real insofar as it contains a reference to another; *reference* becomes the common denominator of the terms used above: analogy, correlation, repetition, pun, et al. *Meaning* occurs when two things meet which contain a reference to each other. While existence was once read as a book of *revelation* in which each image bore a transcendent meaning, Ray Johnson reads existence as a book of *references* with "see above," "see below," "op. cit.," "idem," and "ibid" written all over things. These references intersect and overlap, and lead backwards or forwards, with no end in sight, and no purpose in view; they are too reversible to lead to any conclusion.

Thus attention is focused on *referring to*, and *referring to* is isolated as a quality or property experienced in a thing as immediately as color or weight. The formal arrangement of his collages supports the proposition that a thing is real as it refers to another thing, or to make the same point in other words, meaning means *referring to*.

One way to create meaning in a work of art is through the creation of a self-sufficient wholeness, a significant form in which the parts derive their meaning from their relation to the whole. Johnson's recent collages suspend that wholeness and therefore suspend that kind of meaning. His finished collages look haphazard, or undesigned, or unfinished, so that they do not make a claim to significant form; by not being a whole, they can be a raw clue, a fragment or episode in an intimate unraveling. He sends much of his work through the mails, sending images which correspond to other images as his form of epistolary correspondence. In this New York Correspondence School of Art, he takes public images (e.g. clippings from popular magazines) and sends them to friends for their private references. In the *public collages*, private references are made public; but they



Ray Johnson, *Homage to Clive Barker* (1969), collage 30" x 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Richard Feigen Gallery.



Ray Johnson, *Jill Born* (1969), collage 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Richard Feigen Gallery.

remain private; and thereby remain references. Anyone who gets all of the references does not get the collage, which uses opaque references in order to call attention to *reference* per se. The universality of significant form and of public reference are both sacrificed in order to allow *referring to* to surface as a universal, an essential part of experience.

Referring to has many forms. A comparison between two things makes something in one thing refer to something else. So a metaphor is a reference, and a bad metaphor successfully calls attention to reference in a way that a good (transparent) metaphor does not. The comparisons of breasts copied from a crudely drawn cartoon are vulgar; Michael Findlay speaks of Ray Johnson's "willing suspension of taste." What a way to refer to a lady's bosom! *Watermelons, cranberries, bee stings, cucumbers, mail bags!* But because of the vulgarity, the feeling of reference itself is part of the experience. The parts of the collages labeled "please send to" are quotations of items in the New York Correspondence School, sent to someone to be sent on to someone else. When he copies these correspondences, the copy or representation becomes a reference to a reference. He

creates a field of referential force and anything which enters that field yields a reference or disintegrates. One painting-collage (*Mondrian Comb*) has a part that looks like a comb, or snakes, or a Bridget Riley painting, and a photo of Mondrian on the other side, and as a whole refers to the juxtaposition of two earlier collages in a catalogue, *Pop Art Redefined*. Another collage, *Jill Born*, refers to Jill Kornblee. Jill and Born both contain four letters; the feet quoted from a painting by Margritte refer to each other, and then to the hand of the boy in the photograph, and to the claw-like arm of the chair, making four shapes which refer to each other. The most obscure reference in the collage is to another collage, yet to be made, using the other four letters from Kornblee: Klee.

In this context a photograph works as a reference to something, not a representation of it. Some of these references are to a past known only by memory and rearranged by the logic of reference. Memory and logic are reformulated into a single language of cross-references.

The actual formal structure of these collages depends upon letting one's attention be directed by the references. There is



Ray Johnson; photo by William Wilson.

of course no picture plane and no single focal plane. The separate items, in high and low relief, have different physical depths and different illusory depths. The mind's eye can follow the formal references in the paintings, the relation of part to part, the echo and rhyme of diagonal and ellipse. But the inward pull of the internal formal references is countered by the outward thrust of the external references. Or to use another image, there is a smaller orbit of attention to visual forms, and a larger orbit of attention to non-visual references. Attention jumps from one orbit to another, with an increase of visual energy on the lesser orbit, and a decrease on the larger. But this visual and visible slackening is compensated for by the increased energy of identifiable meanings: things do mean something, and they do so by referring to something else. Nabokov describes this feeling in *Pale Fire*: "There are events, strange happenings, that strike the mind as emblematic. They are like lost similes adrift without a string, attached to nothing." This non-visual, non-painterly energy can go back into the collages, reabsorbed as attention to the purely visual emissions.

These paintings (collages) prove that one thing does indeed lead to another, that one chair suggests another chair, one duck (quack) another duck (canvas), one star leading to starfish, chicken-with-stars soup, and a sheriff's badge. Images multiply like rabbits (cf. Rabat): jilt, stilt, kilt, tilt; Hi, Cowgirl, haiku girl. Words come into this process because events in fact throw up words which, although they might not be the name of the

meaning of the event, can be the nickname of the event. Ray Johnson often uses nicknames to refer past a person to the meaning of the person. He can handle words so that they are not the names of things, but are references to other words. He can also make names into words. The principle in these transformations is that meaning is the *referring to* of something.

The question remains about the importance and validity of *referring to* as a quality in our experience of things. The strength of this quality is proved by the difficulty non-objective artists find in excluding references. Some artists control references by locking forms into self-referring arrangements, or by remaining dead-pan. Some include references as an impurity which they hope to control. Others release the references which are contained in their experience of things, as Oldenburg relates a toilet to Detroit and to Mt. Ste. Victoire. Reference is an enemy of formalist art, or of formalist art criticism, but Ray Johnson blithely accepts it, yields to subjugation, cuts it up, draws it out, glues it down, and lets it walk all over him.

The value of these collages will depend on several points. Let it be granted that an artist has the right to his own proposals about what is real. There can be no question that Ray Johnson demonstrates his reality to his satisfaction and there is some pleasure in looking over his shoulder and seeing him do it. There is the larger question of the sufficiency of his proposals: does he prove anything true or useful? First consider that his *Homage to Clive Barker* refers to a work by Clive Barker as reproduced in *Pop Art Redefined*, and that Barker's work refers to images from Magritte with their own mysterious references. Elsewhere Johnson refers to Magritte's painting of a pipe inscribed "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Magritte's painting already plays with the idea of how images and words refer to things. The proposal about reality implied by Ray Johnson's personal references is that *referring to* is a quality experienced in things as well as in words and that art, as an imitation of reality, can imitate this experience. His quotations of earlier art show that art has imitated that experience, which is a strong witness to its truth, and certainly evidence of its usefulness.

Since we find ourselves already dwelling in a language, not only has a name the quality of *referring to*, but a thing has the quality of referring to a name. Experience occurs within this interchange of reversible referrals. Within Johnson's art, his disinterested *referring to* has no goal or purpose any more than being red has a goal; his style allows that everything refers to something other than itself, without meaning anything beyond reciprocal referring. Things, people, words and image can be brought together for a meeting, but not for a fusion; they can meet because they bear a common reference, but they have other references in reserve and must be sent on. Events bear a punning relation to other events, and people a punning relation to people. He makes a telephone call at a certain time knowing that Jay Johnson will answer the phone, but not to speak to him. Thus implicit in *referring to* is a distance, cold as a pun, between points of reference. You can come closer and closer to these paintings, and never be intimate with them. Their meaning can be suggested in a few words, but the effect of trying to grasp this work is like grasping a piece of ice which begins to change shape even as you touch it.

William Wilson, who teaches at Queens College, is a frequent contributor to current art publications.

Ray Johnson will show at the Feigen Gallery from February 17 to March 21.

MAKE LOVE LETTERS NOT WAR.

MEET "DEAR RUTH"

WHOSE LOVE LETTERS SHOULD HAVE BEEN MAILED

IN ASBESTOS ENVELOPES...WHOSE SISTER GOT

HER ENGAGED TO FIVE MEN AT ONCE! BROADWAY

ROARED AT HER FOR 680 PERFORMANCES, CHICAGO

LAUGHED FOR 15 MONTHS, LOS ANGELES HUGGED HER

FOR 252 DAYS. NOW IT'S A WONDERFUL MOVIE AND

THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD CAN LOVE "RUTH", TOO.

MAKE LOVE LETTERS NOT WAR.

September 2-October 6, 1970

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue
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Telephone (212) 249-4100

Ray Johnson

NEW YORK
CORRESPONDANCE SCHOOL
EXHIBITION

EVAPORATIONS BY RAY JOHNSON

Drop a Line

When I met Ray Johnson in 1955, he took my address and mailed me some mimeographed sheets of cut-up phrases, mock letters, and epistolary manifestoes. When I wrote him a letter, it was returned promptly, torn up and pasted down. I was shocked and pleased at this small liberation from the conventional uses of the mails, and learned to see how his mailings called attention to the conventional processes of correspondence—envelopes, stamps, cancellations, complimentary closings—to make an unconventional point. His communications called attention to the charms and irritations of any communication, in which there are arbitrary restrictions, bourgeois interferences, and compromising self-stylizations, which limit communication even as they make it possible. Some distance is necessary for some closeness. Ray Johnson's friendships were mediated by the post office.

Everything Ray Johnson sent to me was a reference to something, a recapitulation, an illumination, and an increment. So he used *correspondence* (letter writing) as the style in which to convey a content of *correspondence* (correlation).

In the early 1960's, *correspondence* became *correspondance*, and the New York Correspondance School began in earnest. He spent hours every day mailing images to people, some labeled to be mailed to someone else. So a tissue of witty resemblances was enlarged, and a community emerged of correspondents who were willing to risk something to the mails, to send something freely to a stranger, to keep in touch by dropping a line.

This free exchange of information, images and junk parallels and parodies the commercial art market. Such an informal art exchange takes only a willingness to participate, some skill with a throw-away line, and the confidence to trust part of oneself to whisper through the immense impersonal system of the mails. The feelings accompanying this participation are like those in a play by Chekhov: the excitements of arrivals and departures, with little theatrical action, some disappointing surprises, much apparent inconsequence, and a feeling that perhaps nothing much more is possible nowadays anyway.

William S. Wilson

Ray Johnson
**WHY I DON'T MAKE SCULPTURE
LIKE ALEXANDER CALDER**
For Norman Solomon

A manuscript by Kafka titled "*Two Frogs*" were stolen from a Book Museum in Prague.

"*Two Frogs*" were stolen by a handsome young man with very little hair. It wasn't Me.

He had a collection of Nazi buttons and steak knives. When He committed suicide the Kafka manuscript fell into a kitchen trash can with some orange peels reading "Sunkist" and egg shells.

His suicide was unusual. He stuck a steak knife into his arm and died in a room with red light bulbs flashing.

After the removal of the body the wind did blow through the open windows and doors and there was no one there except the Mother, who cleaned the floors.

We arrived Nazi button and I. My eye happened to see the Kafka manuscript in the kitchen trash can. It was bent and red and yellow and signed "*FK*".

It was in my for several years. Until I stuck two steak knives into my arms and was taken away.

"*Two Frogs*" by Kafka was about two body guards who wear t shirts with frog designs. They guard bodies. Their bodies wear tea, who cleaned the floors.

My doctor's name was Francis Kott. "It's Kott To Be Good". "Those cotton-picking days are *over*". (Applause).

I called him Francis Kind.

"Dr. Kind, you saved my Life. In payment I give you this manuscript "*Two Frogs*". I have nothing else".

I forgot to say that I was haunted by the handsome young man's ghost. One night I did drag an Xmas tree many miles in the snow with my chest bare to the cold saying over and over "*Why did you do it?*" Why did he do *what?* You might ask. Why did he steal the Kafka manuscript or why did he kill himself. We never found out why since he did not reply.

I found out recently that the manuscript went "To France". Their bodies wear tea.



Rabbit by John Wesley.



CORRESPONDENCE

an exhibition of the letters of Ray Johnson

North Carolina Museum of Art
31 October - 5 December 1976

RAY JOHNSON
THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER

BY WILLIAM S. WILSON

The letter C is comic because it represents either the hard k sound as in Carolina or the soft s sound as in dance. The visual letter mediates between k and s, and is able to participate in either sound. The letter C derives from the Phoenician sign called the gimel, meaning camel.

Cameleopard is another name for giraffe, an animal with a head like a camel and spots like a leopard. Camel and leopard have no particular relation until an intermediate, cameleopard, arises between them to make them contraries to each other.

Ray Johnson is a moderator, a mediator, a man in the middle. He decides on an image that refers concretely and idiosyncratically to someone he meets, and he sends references to the image to the person, and sometimes to a third person with the instructions "Please send to..." the other person. This action draws two people into a relation. If one is sender, and the other recipient, then they are opposites, but contraries, not contradictories. For Ray Johnson is in the middle, the mean participating in two extremes of sending and receiving. And by sending a reference to be sent on to someone else, he puts the recipient in the middle, able to discern something of Ray Johnson, and something of the person to whom the image is to be sent on.

Ray Johnson, as the one person participants in the New York Correspondance School have in common, is himself uncommon, with an uncommon caring about references. He is the mean between contrary extremes, and he is himself extreme and contrary. But he is peculiar as an artist in that his work mediates between the artist and ordinary people by enabling an ordinary person to participate in the work of art. He is the mediator, but he gives almost anyone who wants it a turn in the middle or as an extreme. Everyone gets a chance to be in the midst, to send to another person, to send another person, as an accurately remembered and precisely rendered reference can send a person into transports of delight.

The idea that extremes meet is bodied forth in actual meetings. Ray Johnson holds meetings for the pleasure of merely circulating people among each other. These meetings define people as bearers of references that meet, that refer to each other. The feeling that arises between people when they are defined as reserves of references, or reservoirs of correspondences, is a feeling not within a person but of something between people. He is quoted in the New York Times, October 12, 1975: "Our first meeting was held in a Quaker Church, and all are based on that idea, the idea of people communing together, saying something if there is something to say." Instead of mediating between two equally full realities, being and becoming, his mediation is the fullness, his mediation with a network of references is the only available demonstrable fullness.

The movement of the people in the place of meeting, like the movement of letters through the mails, or of people going to get their mail, is a dance. Ray Johnson is a mild-mannered choreographer who sets people in motion. He starts the dance of others but does not seek power over them, as the meaning of much dance is the invisible power that moves people. The New York

EXHIBITION ORGANIZER
RICHARD CRAVEN

Correspondance School is "...like the spontaneous yet ordered, in the sense of patterned, movements of dancers in a country dance of figures, none of whom are bound by law to do what they do, nor yet pushed by others coming behind, but cooperate in a voluntary harmony of wills" (Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China, II, 287).

The correspondence of the word correspondance with the word correspondence is an example of movement between the visual and the verbal. The puns in the word, which are both seen and heard, recall the statement in Baudelaire's poem, "Correspondances" -- "...les couleurs et les son se répondent..." Baudelaire's claim that "colors and sounds correspond" is not an influence on Ray Johnson; it is a statement that corresponds with his method of thinking with correspondences, a method that closes the interval between the visual and the verbal.

In ordinary reading language is transparent as we focus past the printed letters on the meaning. But as we read we usually hear, especially if there are obstacles to the transparency, as when I say I was reading on the Reading Railroad. A work of art with letters or words in it is both visual and aural. Ray Johnson's collages and letters must be heard as well as seen. The aural effect affects the spatial effects. One might hear in the picture of a musical instrument its name, mandolin, and then recognize that the sound of mandolin echoes the woman's name, Madelaine, which itself revives the memory of Proust's teacake, the taste of which revived his memory of a childhood scene. A letter from Ray Johnson, and almost any item in the N.Y.C.S., mediates between sight and sound, visual and verbal, doodle and riddle.

The references in the N.Y.C.S. are the meaning, and the spectator in the North Carolina Museum of Art might not get the references and might feel left out. Who could know that a reference to Toby Spiselman's legs is equivalent to a reference to a camel? Has Ray Johnson constructed only another esthetic élite, a collective of curious correspondents? The answer is that those who get the references might not get the meaning, which is reference itself. The point, when references are clearly references, but the point of the reference is unclear, is that reference is a quality in our experience. We do not live as individuals among meaningless isolated facts; we rise in the midst of references, of correspondences, that carry us toward other people. The meaning of Ray Johnson's art is to call attention to reference as such, as the meaning of his correspondence is to call attention to correspondences as such, as part of the fabric of experience. The spectator here in Raleigh, North Carolina can judge for himself whether or not the work corresponds with his experience of correspondences.

And thus he tossed
Between a Carolina of old time,
A little juvenile, an ancient whim,
And the visible, circumspect presentment drawn
From what he saw across his vessel's prow.
Wallace Stevens, "The Comedian as the Letter C"

RAY JOHNSON SPEAKS IN A LONG ISLAND KITCHEN TO TWO WOMEN

"The New York Correspondence School is a triadic relationship."

"We respond differently to this one, to that one. The only way to understand is through participatory actions. What we understand is through the way we are participating."

"It is a consistently closed circle which can be viewed."

"The events in North Carolina for two and one half days were a continuous flashing light."

"There was a girl in white face makeup and a guy in a kabuki outfit."

"For my performance I take a one half hour warm-up. I give the audience love, a view of what the artist is like, how he works, whatever comes into my heart."

"At the University of Western Illinois it turned out that my lecture was really the entertainment at a Valentine Party. I went into the middle of the floor. The students sat looking at me there. They were there to be entertained. I began the lecture. I lifted a foot. I put it down. I exorcised on Valentine's day. I removed my shoes. I burned neckties. Did arrangements with shoe things. I spin bottles. I begin with no plan. I face the void."

"I express what I feel or think in relation to those who are strangers to me. I express the difficulties of what to do with people like them."

"In Macomb, Illinois I got to the sublime point where I had nothing to say to them. I just sat there looking at them. Some of the younger poeple began to play. They began dressing me up. I became an object."

INTERRUPTION
FIRST INTERRUPTION: "Didn't you give them a clue?"

"No, I was spontaneous. I want them to be spontaneous. Finally one boy said to me: 'Mr. Johnson it's like we are a family!'"

"Yes, Exactly like when we were young. I played with my grandmother who spoke no English. I put her in chair and dressed her up. She put me in a chair. That is what I do in my lectures. I play."

"People come to these things bringing things. I do nothing."

"At the meeting for Miss Fredenthal I walked back and forth to a bathtub which was on display. This is a stupid pasttime, ~~walking~~ ^{walking} to a bathtub and back. It has no artistry. Just banality."

"I like to work with children. They just do it. They have their own logic."

"We had a Paloma Picasso Fan Club Meeting. Lots of glamorous people came to that meeting. They wanted to know why they were there. I told people I was trying to create a room with a certain number of people. But magically the right number of people did not come."

" In the Onnasch gallery at the Buddha University Meeting there was an incredible convergence of two hundred people. Someone asked me: 'Do you want your eyes painted blue?' "I said 'Sure'!"

" At our meetings those who attend stand around with nothing to do. The Shelley Duvall Fan Club Meeting at the Iolas Gallery was such a meeting. People were standing in a very heavy fashion. Then things changed when Steven Varble came in full drag and a completely naked body. He decided to be the star of the show. Whether something dramatic or nothing happens. It is all the same to me. "

SECOND INTERRUPTION: "Does performance make you vulnerable?"

"Oh I certainly go through a wide range of feelings. But it is not me that is personally unprotected. I am Ray Johnson, artist, performer, poet."

" ... when I was pushing that big stick with the clay ball on the end of it around and around the room, down in Georgia this week, I felt the force in the room beginning to build like the force....the fusion of energies...that was there when we were all walking up and down, up and down, on West Broadway. "

January, 1977

May 11, 1976

This was sealed and ready to mail
when I received your May 6th poem
for Toby:

Toby R. Spiselman

inner, inner, inner,
inner, inner, inner,
inner, inner, inner,
inner, inner, inner,

Ray

May 1111 poem for Ray

inma, i ma, inna,
inma, i ma, inna,
inma, i ma, inna,

Toby



RAY JOHNSON *Elvis Presley*
1957 Collage, 15×11½ ins

Reference and relation

Allowing that we remain in the quandries of nihilism, the artist, living two lives, the life that makes no sense; and the

That crib had wooden bars and the gate went up and
and down and I remember being locked in
and looking out. It made noises. There was
like chicken wire under the mattress.
I guess there was the usual
wet diapers and sheets as a baby.

I used to make drawings of cousin Robert when he was a baby
Cousin Robert is in Finland.

life of art that makes sense out of the other life, has the choice of going for everything, to fill up the emptiness, or going for nothing. The apparent choice of Ray Johnson's work, whether in collages, correspondence, or meetings, is everything. For two thousand years in several civilizations, complex systems of correspondence were set up, analogies were established, until the great fragmentations of the modern period. Ray Johnson's first response to this nihilism is to include references to everything: his work would eventually mention everything in the world through a chain of resemblances, although the resemblance might be arbitrary, not socially established. This chain of resemblances constructs a structure that has no foundation, it stretches across emptiness, but it stands, a fullness that eerily reminds one of the emptiness it is supposed to divert attention from. The more minute and concrete the cross-references of the dense specific references, the stronger the construction, but it remains groundless. One could, in some desperation, argue that a construction such as Ray Johnson builds constructs its own ground under it, but that would be a premature attempt at consolation and would falsify the meaning of groundlessness, which in Ray Johnson's work is the ultimately groundless emotion, love.

Now if Ray Johnson's work on the surface is a tissue of resemblances and references, in its depths it is abstract relations, and the relations of relations, and these abstract relations, which interrelate in more and more complicated relations, recede toward an infinity, which is empty, or toward a oneness, which is the same as nothing. So the nothingness or emptiness, obscured by the references to references, is found again in the relations of relations. The everything of references includes the truth of the nothing of relations. In the 1960s Ray Johnson did some performances which were entitled *Nothings* ("an attitude as opposed to a happening," as he defined a *Nothing*, January 10, 1977), and he mailed out printed sheets called *The Book about Death*. At the most abstract level of meaning, his work is about love as reciprocal references, an emotion constructed of references to references, and his work is about death as the most abstract of relations, and so his work defines life as correspondences between love and death.

Reference: Elizabeth Sewall, "Everythingness, Nothingness, and Poetry," *The Structure of Poetry*, London, 1962, pp. 102-112.

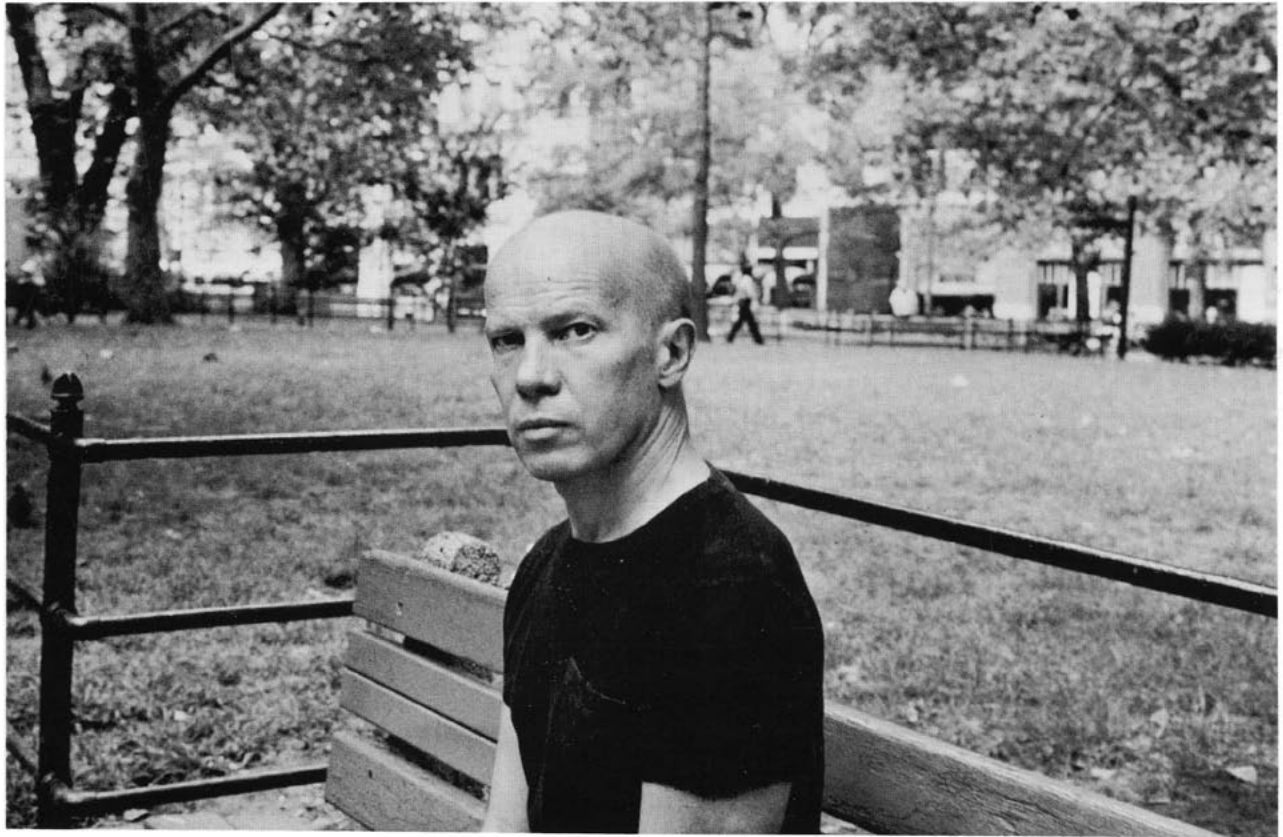
—William S. Wilson

Bill I wasn't born in a hospital
I was born at home. There was a
nurse-midwife present I believe.

It was the time after or during the
Depression. See Ellen Johnson's
dedication page in her book *Modern
Dedication
Art & The Object*.

Did I cry when I was born?
cry

Cafafy



Toby Spiselman

Sept. 16, 1977

Bill,

I was born in Detroit, Michigan October 16, 1927.

I have somewhere in my papers a birth certificate.

Which I could xerox if I could find it.

I remember the crib I slept in.

Ray