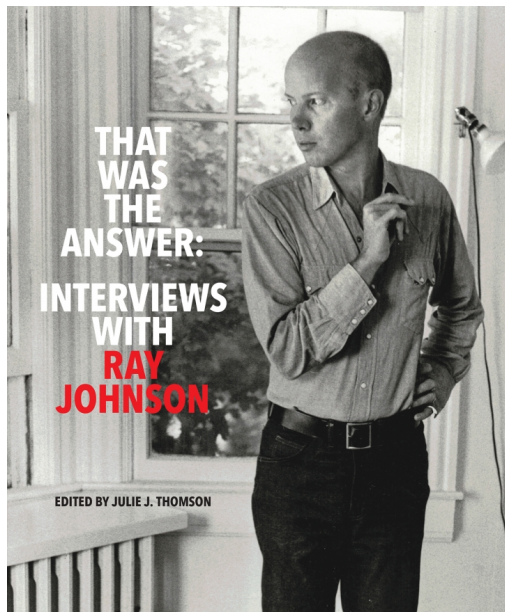


INTERVIEWS

A Portrait of Ray Johnson in His Own Words

Soberscove Press has released nearly 200 pages of interviews with renowned mail artist Ray Johnson, and a preview excerpt can be found [here](#).

Sarah Rose Sharp 3 days ago



That Was the Answer: Interviews with Ray Johnson was released by Soberscove Press on September 4 and offers readers nearly 200 pages of assorted interviews with the artist (image courtesy Soberscove Press)

Artist [Ray Johnson](#) spent much of his career carving out an odd little niche as a counter-culture darling and sometimes unsung interlocutor within an epic and influential generation of New York artists. The Detroit native achieved his particular brand of insider-outsider status through a number of collaborative relationships, enabled by the New York Correspondence School (NYCS) — a network of people who sent each other mail. Johnson was founder of the NYCS and served as a sort of human switchboard operator. The NYCS allegedly included participants like Joseph Cornell, John Baldessari, and Now [sic] June Paik (based on a series of labeled envelopes found in the “Bob Boxes” archive of

NYCS, following Johnson’s death in 1995).

Johnson was a contradictory character, and much of what he has to say about himself must be taken in the context of his penchant for self-mythologizing. But his status as, in the words of critic Grace Glueck, “New York’s *most* famous unknown artist,” must be at least marginally disputable, based on a new collection of roughly a dozen interviews with Johnson. The collection compiles nearly 200 pages with the eccentric and enigmatic mail artist between 1964 and the mid-80s.

That Was the Answer: Interviews with Ray Johnson was released by Soberscove Press on September 4, and provides a trove of information and explication from the man himself — inasmuch as Johnson was prone to provide answers, rather than raise more questions, coincidences, and ambiguities. Such was his way, and those interested to learn more about this singular art world figure will surely delight in reading the preview excerpt presented below, with permission from Soberscove Press and the University of Colorado Press, which originally published the interview in 1980. Ray Johnson is in conversation with Richard “R.” Pieper on the subject of “Mail Etc., Art: A Traveling Correspondence Art Exhibition.”



New York Correspondence School archives, part of the “Bob Boxes” given to artist and NYCS participant Robert Warner, leading up to and following Johnson’s death. This suite of envelopes appeared to serve as a sort of index for people involved (some, perhaps, only in Johnson’s imagination) with the Correspondence School over the years (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

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Richard “R.” Pieper: I remember reading, years ago, that you did a piece which involved taking a taxi from Barbara Bar to Harbor Bar to get the conjunction in sounds — just to pun. I have related that anecdote many times, which is the reason I remember it. So, were you, or are you now, a purer conceptualist? Did you come to Mail art from there?

Ray Johnson: No. The *New York Times* did an article on Conceptual art, and it said that Joseph Beuys and I were “unclassifiable.” And

Lucy Lippard, in her introduction to her book *Six Years*, states that Arakawa and I are impossible to include or write about as conceptual artists because of the bizarre nature of what we do. I don’t document or classify, or associate. I simply live from day to day, and write letters.

When people like Mike Crane say I am a “naive draftsman,” I use that as a vehicle to state that Mike Crane says that I am a “Navy draftsman,” because of the Village People singing, “In the Navy.” Also, one of my poems is addressed to the Canadians, asking them if Canada has a Navy, and are all people from Canada

“knaves?” So, I do a kind of Gertrude Stein twist and turn of words and meanings. But *Harbor Bar and Barbara Bar* was an action, which was also recorded by William Wilson, in which we went from the Lower East Side to New York’s West Side by taxi, just to go from one place to another with a similar-sounding name. We subsequently, at my fiftieth birthday party at William Wilson’s house, had a meeting of the — are you ready for this — Michael Cooper, Michael Cooper, Michael Cooper Club. There are two Michael Coopers who knew each other, and we had a third Michael Cooper meet, and all these Michael Coopers met the other Michael Coopers. Now, there might have been four of them, for all I know, I can’t even, at this point, remember, because there was a possibility that there would be five at the next meeting. At the last Correspondence School Meeting at the Artists Space Gallery here in New York, somebody mentioned that a Michael Cooper had committed suicide, so I made a lot of phone calls to find out which one, and it turned out to be another Michael Cooper in London who we didn’t even know about. So I said, “Well, we’re not interested in that one.” Which brings us up to the Ray Johnson who streaked the Vatican and was kicked out of Italy and had to go back to Trinity College in Hartford.

I had an exhibition of drawings at the Walker Art Center last year, and I mention this because of the Ray Johnson who streaked the Vatican. I began my lecture (since *Art in America* said I was the “master of the throwaway gesture”) by streaking the Walker Art Center. As I was being introduced, I appeared naked, and ran across the stage and down the aisle, which was a reference to the other Ray Johnson, who I met in Hartford at the Wadsworth Atheneum. It was a meeting of Ray Johnson and Ray Johnson. Someone in Utica or Ithaca wanted me to appear on *The Johnny Carson Show* with another Ray Johnson who wrote a book on solitary confinement. He spent half of his life in jail, and he appeared rather frequently on *The Johnny Carson Show*; so, they thought it would be something to have two Ray Johnsons —

RP: On *The Johnny Carson Show* at once?

RJ: Yes. Did you ever meet Buster Cleveland?

RP: No.

RJ: Oh.

But, the *Harbor Bar and Barbara Bar* is not conceptual, and it’s not an artwork. It’s a participatory action. I keep saying to people who want to find out about the Correspondence School that the only way to truly understand it is

through participation, because what I do is made for each person. When I'm speaking to you, I am creating this composition for you by telephone, on the spot. If you are in New York, we should meet sometime. I'm sorry that you couldn't get to that Artists Space Meeting a couple of weeks ago. It was one of my favorite meetings. The last one, two years ago, was a Shelley Duvall Fan Club Meeting. This was the second Shelley Duvall Fan Club Meeting, and it was a pretty good one. I enjoyed it immensely. If you had gotten me a few weeks ago, I would have made a special point of inviting you. We could have met, and you could have participated by walking through all these legs.

That Was the Answer: Interviews with Ray Johnson was released by Soberscove Press on September 4 and is available for order on Amazon and other online retailers.

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