Post Modern

How Ray Johnson's contrarian sensibility inspired mail art

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THE PAPER SNAKE BY RAY JOHNSON, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY FRANCES F. L. BEATTY LOS ANGELES: SIGLIO PRESS. 48 PAGES. $35.
NOT NOTHING: SELECTED WRITINGS BY RAY JOHNSON, 1954–1994 EDITED BY ELIZABETH ZUBA, WITH AN ESSAY BY KEVIN KILLIAN LOS ANGELES: SIGLIO PRESS. 380 PAGES. $45.

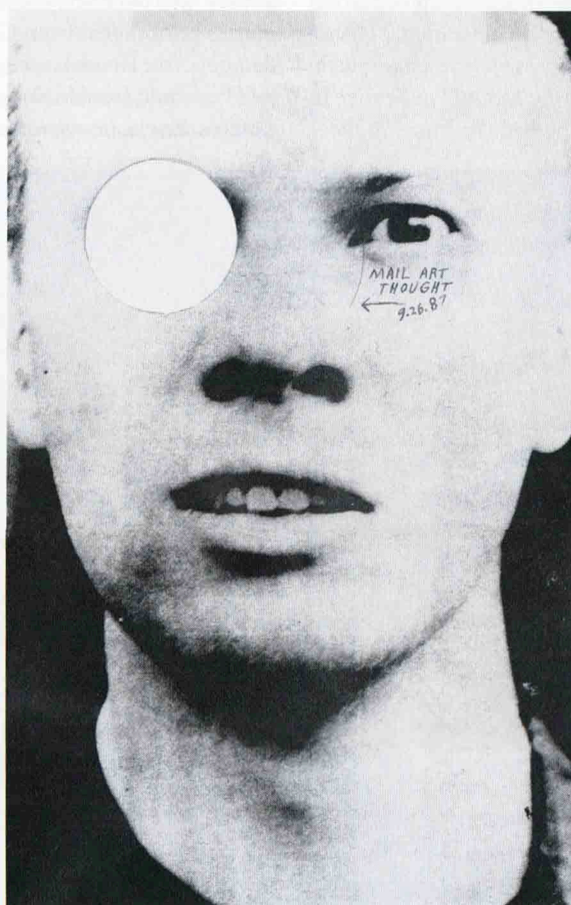
From our current vantage, it's not hard to acknowledge that one of the presiding spirits of early-twenty-first-century art is Ray Johnson's. Collagist, painter, poet, and the originator of mail art, Johnson took up the appropriative strategies of Marcel Duchamp and Jasper Johns, infused them with John Cage's ideas about Zen and chance, and energized the mix with his own brand of deadpan Conceptualism. The art he made beginning in the early 1950s until his death in 1995 purposefully merged artist, artmaking, and art object in ways that were once disquieting but are now considered routine. The strong strain of performativity and self-reflexiveness—qualities that mark the work of artists such as Matt Freedman and Ryan Trecartin—was the animating force behind Johnson's collages and texts and, more pointedly, what he chose to do with them. Rather than show in galleries, he mailed his work (often multiple Xeroxes) to hundreds of people, and encouraged them to embellish it and send it out again. The republication of his artist's book *The Paper Snake* and the selection from his voluminous letters in *Not Nothing* are an opportunity to sample one of the most subversively witty intelligences to paste, draw, and type in the last half century.

A twenty-two-year-old Johnson arrived in New York in 1949 after studying at Black Mountain College, where he met, among others, Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Willem de Kooning; in the city he soon made contact with like-minded artists such as Johns, Cy Twombly, and Robert Rauschenberg. Within a few years, he knew everyone on the scene. No less ambitious than any of his contemporaries, Johnson nonetheless chose to work small—he began making collages on the 8 x 11" cardboard sheets that came inside laundered shirts. He juxtaposed glamour shots of movie stars, advertisements, photos of writers, newspaper text, and images from physical-culture magazines in suggestive, slyly humorous ways that made clear there was a joke, but one so recondite that maybe only Johnson laughed.

Despite his art-world pedigree, or perhaps because of it, Johnson poked at the myth of the autonomous, heroic artist. One of his more famous pieces shows the Lucky Strike logo pasted onto an iconic photo of James Joyce; the ad hovers next to the author's head, and he seems to be contemplating the bright red circle and its slogan, "It's toasted," with placid disdain. Another untitled piece from the series "The Luckies" sets two of the bull's-eye logos on either side of the words "F. Scott Fitzgerald Crack-Up." The recognizable names and images are put into dynamic play—one icon is set to playfully duel the other for visual dominance, even as a more covert tension animates the field of potential meaning: Is Johnson commenting on these writers' careers, the haphazard distribution of fame, or the variable nature of aesthetic judgments?

Johnson's fascination with authors is no surprise given his own prodigious writerly proclivities. *Not Nothing* offers a small portion of his mail art—a conceptual project that remains his signal accomplishment. The process—one public yet intimate—by which Johnson put his collages and letters into circulation embodied his core aesthetic of motion and mutability. He dubbed his collages "moticos," an anagram of *osmotic*, and thought of them as recombinations designed for further recombination—by him (he constantly altered his own work) and his correspondents. A sampling from a mail-art list titled "102 Moticos" from the early '50s gives some sense of the deeply poetic, unsettling ambiguity of the notion: "machine for them," "two pound one," "Australian contemplating a ladder," "the fan can name," "bearer away," "the Zebra feet girl," and "used Switzerland." None of these, or any of the other items, in any way define a moticos, and indeed they can each (and in aggregate) be regarded as antidefinitions. The move is characteristically Johnson's—he also staged Zen-inspired events called "Nothings" in response to the '60s vogue for Happenings.

This oppositional impulse guided Johnson's approach to his letters, which are in fact metatexts, letters that parody and undermine not only the genre's forms but the very notion of person-to-person communication. The New York Correspondance School (Johnson's spelling) was the official-sounding name he gave to his postal round-robin; the moniker mocks the idea of artistic "schools" while alluding to actual correspondence schools, institutions that once offered high school degrees or certificates in, say, appliance repair. (The ritualized impersonality of sending homework back and forth between students and instructors no doubt intrigued Johnson.) His correspondents were artists and writers (Joseph Cornell, Christo, Marianne Moore, Andy Warhol,



Ray Johnson, untitled, ca. 1987, photocopy, pencil, tape.

Lynda Benglis, James Rosenquist) who were teachers of sorts, providing him with inspiration (he asked to trace Moore's tricorne hat; she declined) and encouragement.

A glance reveals that this is no ordinary collection of missives: Every page is distinct, as variations on collage, drawing, handwriting, and typography are all energetically exercised. Styles and forms also run the gamut; there are lists, poems, diary entries, koan-like tales, and annotations. Some are addressed to particular people, others aren't addressed to anyone; some employ plain paper, others use loose-leaf, or stationery from hotels, businesses, and government offices. Johnson's calibrated deployment of these elements demotes meaning in favor of the mode of presentation. The entirety of the mail-art experience—the use of the postal system, the process of opening an envelope, puzzling over the contents, the choice about whether to respond or discard—trumps the quaint idea that Johnson had something he wanted to say to someone.

What might art historian Gregory Battcock have made of the 1967 note Johnson sent him, which reads: "An exhausted mushroom hunter from Leghorn, Italy was captured in Helsinki. The mushroom hunter was found in a zoo, catching its breath after the flight from Leghorn, more than 1,300 miles away. An identifying band was found on its leg. An exhausted musroom." This absurdist tale, with its deliberate misspelling and confused pronouns, surely delighted Battcock as a send-up of the newsy missive, but its underlying premise—that its personal communication is ultimately uncommunicative—offers a more profound insight about human relations.

The same gibe registers graphically in "Poem in 64 Word Form – for Larry Poons – by Dick Higgins," a numbered list that repeats a hyphenated version of the word *tidbit* ("tid-bit") eighty-six times; the neologism, though, has been overtyped in about half the instances, rendering much of the letter illegible. But not really—while straining to discern the typed-over text, you still know "tid-bit" lurks within the palimpsest. Johnson's game cuts to fundamental questions about how we use language and how language uses us. His affection for enumerated lists and even letters entirely composed of numbers (the only constant feature in these documents is the standard epistolary inclusion of dates and the address of the sender) may testify to faith in digital accuracy over verbal nuance. Or it may be nothing more than Johnson's love for the contours of numbers. The author's intentions are as indeterminate as the texts.

In 1965, poet Dick Higgins collected some of the many items he had received from Johnson in *The Paper Snake*, a volume meant to solve the problem, as articulated by Higgins, of how to present mail art, works "so rooted in their moment and their context" that nonetheless "seemed to acquire new and larger meaning as time went along." The essentially poetic nature of Johnson's expressive range comes clearly into focus in this compilation of pieces addressed to a fellow poet. The Steinian wordplay and disruptive grammar appear to be the most natural means of rendering his contrarian sensibility, one that delights in all manner of incongruity:

> Dear Dick,
> I enclose some fur. I enclose my signature.
> I enclose a novel of suspense.
> I enclose a three-legged animal. I enclose a Lucky Strike.
> I enclose a Y (a fragment of RAY).
> I do not enclose a man with his left hand in his jacket pocket with a black shoe on his left shoulder.
> I do not enclose Jesus Christ.
> I do not enclose Luck Str
> I enclose hands stirring and hands mixing.
> I enclosed a highly magnified view of potato rot.

The comic collision between a business letter's formal diction and the ridiculous ("shoe on his left shoulder"), the improbable ("three-legged animal"), the pseudoprofound ("Jesus Christ"), and the just plain weird ("potato rot") owes as much a debt to Dada as Monty Python might owe these lines. This is the spirit of the moticos—moving in many directions at once, everywhere and nowhere.

In January 1995, Johnson drove to Sag Harbor, Long Island, and apparently committed suicide by leaping off a bridge. He was last seen lazily backstroking toward open water. His lifelong obsession with numbers appears to have determined the date (the 13th), his motel number (247: 2 + 4 + 7 = 13), as well as the decision itself—he was sixty-seven years old (6 + 7). At his home, friends discovered all the artwork turned to the wall or covered, all except one large photo of Johnson himself. It was the self-portrait he had repeatedly distributed, typed over, and collaged—one in which his round face and close-cropped hair lend him a lunar aspect. His intense gaze and parted lips denote apprehension—the moment just before. A handwritten letter from 1977 ("Dear Dick Higgins, I'm sitting here waiting for something to happen") serves as a gloss both for the image and for Johnson's career. The anticipation of opening an envelope before reading a letter, the shape of the words before their comprehension, the nothing before the something—these are the experiential locales that his art maps with aptly fluid boundaries. His work is self-regarding and hermetic, to be sure, but Johnson's interiority is carefully positioned just—but not quite—out of reach. To appreciate the joke, you have to *not* try. It's like the mail: It comes when it does. And then you get it. □

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