



■ Ray Johnson: Please Add to & Return

Raven Row London February 28 to May 10

It is rare enough to see any of Ray Johnson's art in a British gallery, never mind a handsomely presented, extensive survey of the late American artist's work. Johnson legendarily preferred the US postal system to the gallery system, mailing out collages from the 50s onwards, and the distribution method's mix of intimacy and distance, imposition and offering, clearly suited him. An expansive gadfly, he appears in retrospect to have been unable either to ignore the commercial art world (and the commercial world as a whole, given how permeated his art is by familiar cultural signifiers in cracked and weirdly graceful combinations) or, in good conscience, to ally himself with it.

Across three floors of Alex Sainsbury's newly opened non-profit space, in whose domestically scaled rooms baroque detailing glints through a minimalist makeover, Johnson's story replays roughly chronologically, with multiple flashbacks. We begin with his 50s 'Moticos': thrifty collages on those cardboard rectangles that laundries fold shirts around which Johnson hawked to galleries and, apparently, to pedestrians on Manhattan's Bowery. This was proto-Pop, clearly, but of a darkly dreamy, irrational stripe. Shirley Temple's outline meets a wire-scrubbed background of cardboard slats; a heart-shaped outline encloses a gun, while below it discharges a volley of black, hand-cut abstract shapes that have seemingly wandered off a Blue Note album cover. Camp and sour by turns, Johnson's early art half embraces commerciality's surfaces and shapes but also dissolves their narratives and strands them, making sense only on formalist and associative levels: claim and reshape mainstream culture, it whispers, lest ye be possessed by it.

This would remain partially true when Johnson made work for galleries between 1965 and 1973, but meanwhile his art became increasingly ripe, gnomic, codified. *Henry Fonda Foot Dollar Bill*, 1970, is organised around a large foot-shape containing a surfeit of small rectangles, each holding short, neatly inked lists of famous names (eg Bob Dylan, René Magritte, Mama Cass) like some celebrity cemetery map; pasted-on dollars; drawings of women with a taxonomy of slang for breasts; appropriated vintage cartoon strips; and lots of ominously spreading black ink. The later collages in the show's middle stretch, which were found in Johnson's home after his death in 1995, are visually airier but, if anything, more conceptually knotty, being reworked over years. One untitled piece, an anthropomorphic graphic outline wrested from collaged imagery of

Ray Johnson
 Untitled (Long-Dance
 Diagram with Ray Johnson)
 1992



stage curtains, a miniature reproduction of a Cézanne, a woman's face defaced with a black blob and part of a 1971 cover of *Artforum*, and looks less to have been built than whittled away. It is dated 1980-86-88-91-92.

And yet if such works bespeak obsessive interiority, Johnson's character was also contradictorily gregarious, even needy. In the show's final extensive stretch of vitrined, single-sheet mail art, some of it sent out with the request that the recipient add to it and send it back, he twists reactively in several directions at once. From his perch, he mocks – as capitulation to the art-star system – the recognisable aesthetics on which careers depend: a photograph of Bridget Riley's face is decorated with undulating lines, while elsewhere Johnson asks that his musings on the 38" straight line on the

floor by his toilet seat be forwarded pronto to Barnett Newman. 'Dear Guggenheim Museum. I hate you. Love. Ray Johnson', he writes in a spiral. He mocks his own critical reception: 'such impressively concentric manifestations as Ray Johnson's use of the postal system' is inscribed on a collage of eyes and lips cut from patterns of concentric circles.

But, elsewhere, one phrase recurs: 'Failure, Failure, Failure.' It feels like an invitation to ask how much he meant it, to assess how true it is. Johnson pioneered mail art and was lionised by its adherents; he was making a naturally networked art decades before Gilles Deleuze became required reading for art students; he maintained a stance of apartness while, it would appear from the literature about him, knowing everyone. Art-making was only part of it: being here, Sainsbury suggests in the booklet-cum-catalogue that accompanies the show, entailed an 'all-consuming life performance' of which his apparent suicide by drowning, at Sag Harbour on Friday January 13, 1995, was the final act. The work, though, keeps giving. Johnson has been revived in death over the last decade, with documentaries and museum retrospectives (though not in this country). It makes sense: as a corrective and a plea for strategy in relation to blandness, celebrity and glut, Johnson's wakeful art was an apt revenant for the boom that has just passed. Given its salutes to the gift economy, to poetic density and wily recycling, it may even better besit the deepening trough to come. ■

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■ Sean Snyder

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The realm of indexicality is a dry grey world of signposts that point elsewhere. We turn to the index in order to navigate large amounts of information, because we don't have the time or the willingness to trawl through the swathes of material available. In a globalised, information-heavy world, we increasingly rely on indexical models and databases, an act of implicit trust – one has to believe or hope that researchers rake through reports meticulously noting every relevant subject – and we must accept that the same might be true of news reportage. American artist Sean Snyder acts within the role of news researcher, subscribing to the same channels of information – Reuters and