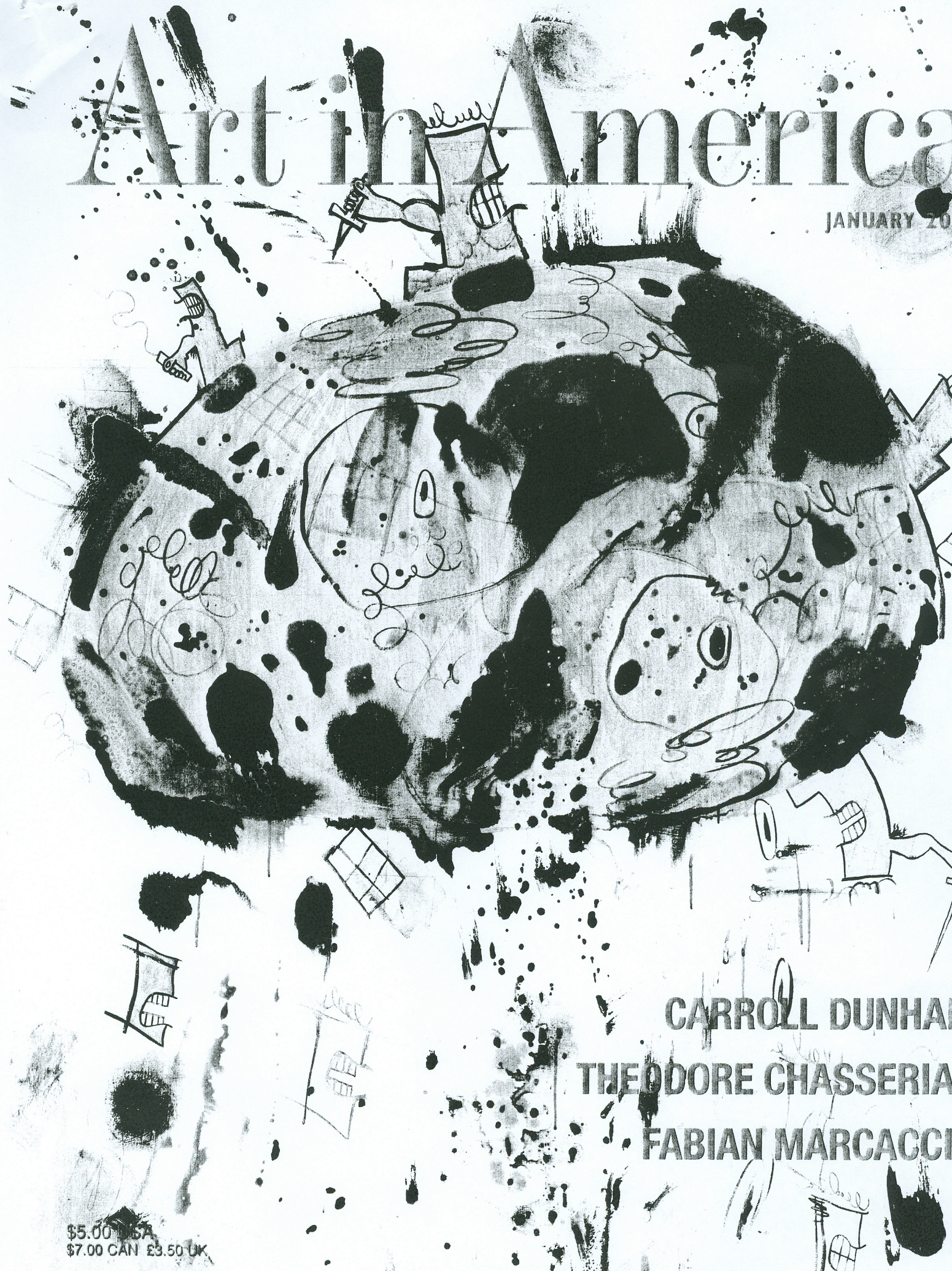


Art in America

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FILM

Ray, We Hardly Knew You

Seven years after his death at the age of 67, the influential, enigmatic artist Ray Johnson is the subject of an absorbing documentary film.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

How to Draw a Bunny, the recent documentary about artist Ray Johnson, opens with the most dramatic, sensational event of Johnson's life—his 1995 suicide by drowning in Sag Harbor, N.Y. This was also the moment when his art began to achieve the widespread recognition that it never quite found while the artist was still alive [see *A.I.A.*, Oct. '95]. For a few minutes, with shots of newspaper clippings and allusions to the numerological oddities that clustered around Johnson's death, the film looks like it's going to be a tabloid-style crime investigation. Happily, that turns out not to be the case. Instead, viewers are treated to a thoughtful, at times moving, account of Johnson's life, told largely through interviews with friends and family, along with some footage of Johnson himself and many close-ups of his intricate collages and visually punning mail art.

Yet given Johnson's elusive character, this 90-minute movie, directed by Detroit-born documentarian John Walter, is inevitably something of a detective story. Nearly everyone the filmmaker talked to admits that they were mystified by Johnson's personality. Even sculptor Richard Lippold, who was Johnson's lover for decades, says he found him ultimately unknowable. (The fact that Lippold died shortly before the film was released adds to the poignancy of his interview.) Like Johnson himself, the film is also very funny, especially when dealers, collectors and curators recount their generally unsuccessful attempts to mount exhibitions of Johnson's work or to buy some of his art. Richard

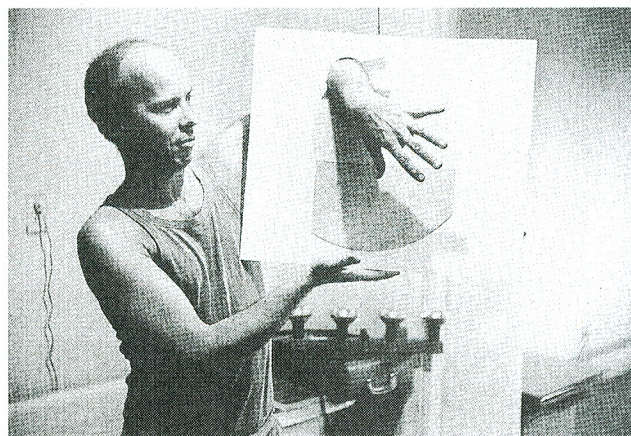
Feigen and Frances Beatty recount their 14-year-long attempt to persuade Johnson to show at New York's Feigen Gallery. Collector Morton Janklow tells how a rapid portrait session with Johnson occasioned an endless, labyrinthine correspondence regarding prices and Johnson's continual alteration of the resulting col-

lages (for arcane reasons of his own, the celebrity-fixated artist eventually merged Janklow's profile with the face of Paloma Picasso). Johnson's friend and fellow artist Peter Schuyff recalls that after offering Johnson \$1,500 for a collage that was priced at \$2,000, he received the work in the mail with one-quarter of the piece cut away. "It was a lesson," says the humbled Schuyff.

Watching the interviews, you can sense the irritation and puzzlement that people like Feigen and Janklow felt at the time. But you can also see how they gradually realized that Johnson's endless negotiations and hard-to-get pose were an integral part of his art, and finally came to treasure the frustration this superlative trickster made them endure. If much of Johnson's work drew on his cultish regard for certain Hollywood stars—something he shared with Joseph Cornell and Frank O'Hara—his disdain for easy success and gleeful subversion of the art market revealed his ethical side. At one point in the film, Lippold describes Johnson as "incorruptible" and "totally indifferent to all the machinations of life."

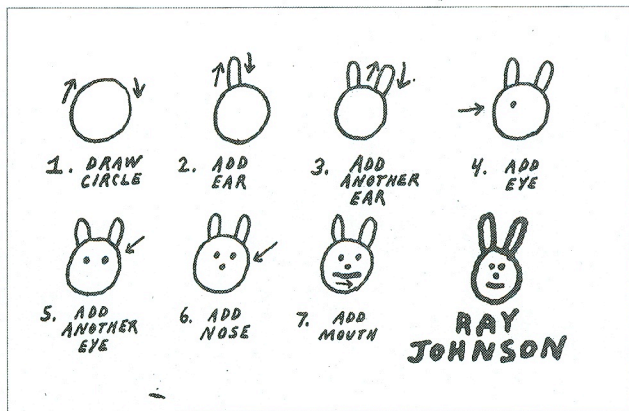
The film's cast of characters, which runs from mail-art veterans Norman Solomon and Buster Cleveland to the sympathetic Sag Harbor police officer who investigated Johnson's death, is almost as fascinating as Johnson's art, even though two of Johnson's closest associates, William S. Wilson and Toby Spiselman, are conspicuous in their absence. Wisely, the director chose to make the film without a single talking-head art critic, preferring more visually engaging ways to sketch out Johnson's career, from his studies at Black Mountain College to his innovative work with Pop images and mail art. The adroit alternation of color and black-and-white also keeps things moving along, as does the lively soundtrack with separate contributions from jazz drummer Max Roach and Sonic Youth guitarist Thurston Moore, though the occasional shots of Roach's phenomenal hands in action seem like gratuitous visual flourishes. More to the point, indeed invaluable, is fascinating videotape footage by Nick Maravell of Johnson's daily life and off-the-wall performances (categories that are practically indistinguishable in this case) during what would turn out to be his final years.

At the end of the movie is an almost forensic video sequence, made just after Johnson's death, showing his spartan living quarters. The interior of



Ray Johnson posing with a work-in-progress collage, mid-1960s. Photo William S. Wilson.

"How to" mail-art drawing, late 1960s. Estate of Ray Johnson. Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co., New York.



his suburban house seems more like an art warehouse than someone's home. In the handheld video, unidentified people open boxes, lift up framed collages and sift through neatly stacked papers. The footage would seem unbearably intrusive if one didn't have the feeling that Johnson had prepared his legacy for precisely such a posthumous encounter, carefully archiving every piece of art and correspondence. In lieu of a full-scale biography, which must surely be in the works somewhere, this engrossing film is the best imaginable evocation of the conundrum that was Ray Johnson, a brilliant collagist, deadpan wit and obsessive communicator who may well turn out to have been one of the most original artists of his time. □

How to Draw a Bunny was directed and edited by John Walter, and photographed and produced by Andrew Moore. The film is distributed in the U.S. by the Los Angeles-based company Mr. Mudd.



Saul Steinberg, 1972, collage on white cardboard panel, 30 1/2 by 14 inches. Estate of Ray Johnson. Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co., New York.