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Ray Johnson

**HOW TO DRAW A BUNNY**

John Walter, 2002

Our rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

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### *Drowning by numbers*

Did enigmatic collagist and performance artist Ray Johnson's lifelong body of work culminate in an actual body? John Walter's documentary suggests that Johnson, who made no distinction between his life and his art, designed every detail of his own mysterious 1995 suicide with the same whimsical care that went into his painstakingly assembled pieces, and provides an engaging overview of Johnson's eccentric career in the process. Born in Detroit, Mich., in 1927, Johnson studied at North Carolina's experimental Black Mountain College (his classmates included Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly) and in the early 1950s moved to New York, where a loose-knit community of abstract expressionists and soon-to-be pop and fluxus artists thrived. Johnson's early paintings were controlled, formal abstractions, but he soon discovered collage and began appropriating, altering and recontextualizing pop images. He staged happenings — which he called "nothings" — and pioneered mail art, disseminating images and found objects to friends and strangers, often with instructions to add to the work and send it on. In 1968, spooked by the shooting of Andy Warhol and his own mugging, Johnson retreated to a small house in Locust Valley, Long Island. Despite the prodigious output of his fertile and fashionably intertextual imagination, Johnson showed little work and remained an "artist's artist." He counted hundreds of people among his circle of friends and acquaintances, yet remained a mystery to them all; the Sag Harbor police chief who investigated Johnson's death remarks that he'd *never before encountered* anyone who knew so many people and was so little known by them. Walter's film is itself a contradictory collage of impressions: Johnson was aggressive, Johnson was shy; he went to everything, he was a near-recluse; he didn't care what people thought, he was wounded that contemporaries like Warhol became celebrities while he was unknown. Walter also documents Johnson's fascination with numbers, and the number 13 figures prominently in his death: He died on Friday the 13th, aged 67 ( $6+7=13$ ), after staying in room 247 ( $2+4+7=13$ ) at the Baron's Cove Inn in Sag Harbor Cove, both of which 13 letters. Such trivialities appear irreverent in connection with suicide's finality, yet in the context of Johnson's life — even his "suicide note" was a collage, carefully placed where it would be found during a search of his house — they take on a playful significance that seems thoroughly apt. — *Maitland McDonagh*

