

How to Draw a Bunny**Dir. John Walter. 2002. N/R. 92mins. Documentary.**

Collagist Ray Johnson may seem to have been more obsessed with the props and processes of art-making than with the end result until you consider what some call his final work: his own death. *How to Draw a Bunny*, named after a simple Johnson sketch, assures us that the almost famous art-world eccentric was no poseur, that his mysterious death by drowning was a deliberate piece of performance art that brings context to his entire body of work.

After Johnson's body was found floating in Sag Harbor in 1995, the police investigation was shocking—not because it uncovered any foul play, but for exposing just how little anyone knew about the 67-year-old artist. Though he had friends around the world, none could claim to understand what made him tick.

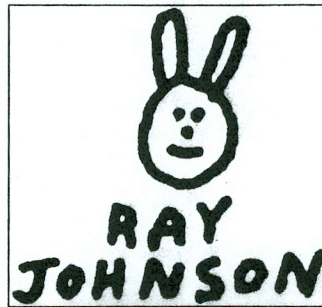
Johnson's art projects rattled the rickety footbridge between art space and workaday reality. His primary medium was collage, but his range of tools went far beyond glue and newsprint. Business letters, coin-operated Xerox machines, aircraft and even his own ever-smirking face were some of the instruments he

used to make wry observations about life and art. Whenever Johnson was awake, he used his environment as his studio. To the uninitiated, some of these projects might seem to be the work of a psychiatric outpatient. He once hired a helicopter to drop link hot dogs on Rikers Island prison; in another piece, he engaged in what looks like a sleepy S&M session with a cardboard box.

Sharing often-funny reminiscences, some of his contemporaries express admiration, others mildly condescending bemusement (Roy Lichtenstein refers to what Johnson "thought he was

doing" in his work), but all seem to light up at the mere mention of his name. Johnson was an artist's artist, and he benefited from the respect of more commercially successful colleagues. (His "moticos"—photographs of art and artists that he rephotographed in disorienting spaces—were part homage and part parody, relying for their effect upon an art insider's eye and grasp of references.) Old photos, home movies and video footage taken not long before his death also reveal how a bizarre charisma smoothed the Detroit-born artist's path into the Pop Art elite.

The filmmakers adopt a Johnsonian sense of whimsy, scoring this visually rhythmic work with a playful drum solo and a selection from one of Johnson's favorite singers, Al Green. Early on, an orchestral screech out of a '50s thriller mocks any attempt to look for scandal in Johnson's death. But the chronicle ends with a series of revelations about how Johnson's art appears to have predicted his plunge into the harbor, and speaks volumes about the ascetic loneliness underneath his mischievous grin. (Now playing; see Index for venues. See also "Tails from the dark side," page 85.)—Steven Boone



HARE LINES It was always rabbit-drawing season for artist Ray Johnson.

TIME OUT NEW YORK

OCTOBER 17-24, 2002

How to Draw a Bunny

Dir. John Walter. 2002. N/R. 92mins. Documentary. Named after a simple sketch by its subject, collagist Ray Johnson, *How to Draw a Bunny* assures us that the almost famous art-world eccentric's mysterious death by drowning in 1995 was a deliberate piece of performance art that brings context to his entire body of work. *Bunny* shows some of his contemporaries (Roy Lichtenstein, Christo, etc.) expressing admiration, others bemusement, for Johnson's art—which rattled the rickety footbridge between art space and workaday reality—but all of the commentators evince genuine fondness for the artist. The filmmakers adopt a Johnsonian sense of whimsy, using photos and home movies to examine how the bizarrely charismatic Detroit boy entered the Pop Art elite. —SBo

TIME OUT NEW YORK

OCTOBER 10-17, 2002

Art | Listings**Felgen Contemporary**

535 W 20th St between Tenth and Eleventh Aves (212-929-0500). Tue-Sat 11am-6pm. "Ray Johnson: *How to Draw a Bunny*." Works by this artist whose mysterious 1995 suicide is considered by some to be his final "performance." A documentary about Johnson is also playing at Film Forum.



THE KING AND I Artist Ray Johnson's rendering of Elvis Presley can be seen in the documentary *How to Draw a Bunny*, playing at Film Forum through Tue 22.