

ART/ARCHIECTURE; A Collage in Which Life = Death = Art

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN
Published: October 06, 2002

Correction Appended

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Then there is Ray Johnson, who made no distinction at all between art and life, or in his case, between art and death. His suicide has become his most famous work. On Jan. 13, 1995, at the age of 67 (6+7=13, Johnson's friends always note), Johnson jumped off the Sag Harbor bridge on Long Island. "I like to say I'm the ocean," he once told a friend, "and like the tide, I mash up everything."

How odd that something so spectacular would come to be associated with someone like Johnson, who, though by no means a recluse, lived by choice on the margins, making mischievous little collages and other eccentrically beautiful, technically brilliant, ironic and zany works he either stored away or disseminated to friends and strangers via the Postal Service.

But then, he seemed to have calculated everything he did in life, as if all of life were a game, played by his peculiar rules, understood completely only by him.

So, who knows? Maybe he wanted to be remembered for how he died, an odd move in a singular career until you accept that he was, in art and life, a constant puzzle and sometimes a pain. A film about Johnson, "How to Draw a Bunny," opening Wednesday at Film Forum in Manhattan, shows the sculptor Richard Lippold, who was Johnson's lover for many years, saying: "Now that I think of him after his death, I don't think I really knew who he was. It's very hard for me to say that. But who was this man? He kept so much of himself to himself."

He was the stuff of a good mystery, that's clear. And though the film can hardly indicate this, he was a kind of genius as an artist, too.

The film, by Andrew Moore and John Walter, begins and ends with the death. I recount the story of it here, even though it is familiar by now to Johnson aficionados, not to play up the melodrama but to be consistent with this artist of fastidious and arcane temperament. For him, the world was made up of amazing coincidences, serendipities and karmic gags. Details mattered.

So: at 3:57 on that January afternoon, Johnson telephoned his old friend William Wilson. (There are 13 letters in Mr. Wilson's name, by the way.) Johnson said he was going to perform a "mail event." Mr. Wilson (who declined to be in the film, unfortunately for the filmmakers) remembered afterward that Johnson's first letter to him, in 1956, mentioned how Life Buoy soap floats, and that elsewhere Johnson talked about the drowning of Hart Crane and how Tennessee Williams had wanted his own corpse dropped into the sea where Crane drowned.

Johnson was fascinated with messages in bottles, dropped into the ocean like letters into a mailbox. He sometimes threw bottles with messages into the waters off Long Island. He also tossed small wrapped packages off the Staten Island ferry. (Who knows what was in them.) He thought a body floating in water was beautiful, he told his friend Coco Gordon.

Johnson checked into Room 247 (2+4+7) of the Baron's Cove Inn at Sag Harbor Cove (both of which also total 13 letters). Maybe he asked for the room because of its number, or maybe it was the only room available. He wrote "New York Correspondence School" under company name in the inn's registry. He stayed about 90 minutes.

He took nothing with him. He made no phone calls. He had already called people during the previous weeks. No one knew his call was a farewell, until later.

Shortly before 7 p.m., he drove about one minute from the inn to a 7-Eleven. He parked his old Volkswagen in the parking lot and climbed onto the bridge's walkway.

Two teenage girls heard a splash about 7:15. (The numbers add up, but the girls aren't precise about the time.) After that they saw a man bob to the surface and calmly backstroke in the frigid waters toward the cove. The temperature of the water was 39 degrees, so it would have taken between 15 minutes and an hour for hypothermia to set in.

WHO was Ray Johnson? He conceived Pop before Warhol, was a Conceptualist and performance artist before the terms were invented, although he was also none of these things, exactly. Early in his career he invented what came to be called mail art, a modest byway, which consisted mostly of his photocopied drawings and assemblages of found images stuffed into envelopes, sometimes customized for particular people, often conceived to be chain letters and passed on. He sent out thousands of these.

As a young abstract painter studying with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in the late 1940's, Johnson realized that by doing pretty much the same thing over and over, with minute variations, as Albers did, he could achieve remarkably different effects. He had amazing gifts

for color, shape and design -- he could have stayed an abstract artist -- but he was more fascinated by mundane materials, pop artifacts and Zen-derived chance effects, the sort of things that also interested John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg.

So collage became his principal medium. Shirt cardboard, newspaper clippings and Elmer's glue became his tools. He delighted in finding puns, anagrams, palindromes, rhymes, slips of the tongue, visual and verbal jokes. "Keir Dullea Gone Tomorrow," a line from the film critic Pauline Kael, became the title of a typical collage.

Warhol and Joseph Cornell were his friends, Gertrude Stein his natural soul mate. But unlike Warhol, Johnson made art that was not big, deadpan and hands-off but small, eccentric and open-ended. Impermanence was his mantra. Over the years, he recycled, chopped up and modified his collages, as if keeping them in a constant state of possibility and flux. They accumulated more and more obscure and hermetic meanings along the way. By the end, his art had become a dense, private code, occasionally morbid and sometimes very hard to decipher.

THE morning after he jumped off the bridge, Johnson's body was spotted, drifting face up, arms crossed over his chest. He had \$1,600 in his wallet, which surprised many people who knew him because it was widely assumed he had no money. In the film, friends describe how they thought he simply ate air. For years he lived almost on rice alone.

He was both obsessed with money and put off by it. In "How to Draw a Bunny," Mort Janklow, the literary agent, tells about the time Johnson made 26 collages based on Mr. Janklow's silhouette (Johnson made ghostly silhouettes of hundreds of people), then began a negotiation over their price that dragged on for years and became as comical and byzantine as some of the collages, which was evidently the point: everything, including wrangling over money, was fodder for his art. First Johnson asked Mr. Janklow for \$42,200, then halved the price, then offered 18 collages plus an unrelated work for \$13,000, or all 26 for \$18,232, with a different work thrown in and portraits of Paloma Picasso and the King of Denmark added on top of some of Mr. Janklow's silhouettes.

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One of the Janklow portraits is in a new Johnson show at Richard Feigen's gallery in Chelsea. Mr. Feigen was Johnson's longtime dealer, although the relationship seems in some respects not unlike the one with Mr. Janklow. Johnson once rented a helicopter and dropped 60 foot-long hot dogs over Riker's Island, then sent the bill to Mr. Feigen. He said that he had been tracing people's feet, which brought to mind foot-long hot dogs, as if that explained it. For decades, he hemmed and hawed about an actual show at the gallery -- until just before his suicide.

He would do nothing, he told Frances Beatty, the gallery's vice president. Because Johnson called his performances "nothings" (this was his version of "happenings"), it wasn't clear to Ms. Beatty whether he meant that he would do a nothing or would do a show that had nothing in it. What was clear was that nobody was likely to make a dime out of the occasion.

Johnson wouldn't allow money to be a measure of his value, only of somebody else's character. In the film, the artist Peter Schuyff recounts asking Johnson the price of a collage. Johnson told him. Mr. Schuyff offered him three-quarters of the amount. So Johnson sent him three-quarters of the collage. Years ago, Johnson took some collages to Harry Abrams, the publisher, who agreed to buy 10 of them for \$100 each, a fair price at the time. Then Abrams asked him to throw in an extra -- not an unheard-of request. Johnson left feeling humiliated. He wept.

It turned out that he had \$400,000 in the bank when he died, an inheritance from his parents. But he was content for people to think that he led what he described to Grace Glueck of The New York Times in the 1960's as "a life of deliberate poverty."

During his later years, that life was spent in Locust Valley, N.Y. In 1968, Johnson had decided to leave New York City after he had been mugged at knifepoint and his friend Andy Warhol had been shot. He settled into a nondescript little suburban house, about as remote from the art world as he could be.

Or to be precise, exactly as remote as he chose to be. Few people were allowed to visit him, although he kept in touch with literally hundreds of people by mail and phone, people who may have seen him rarely or never, and often did not know one another, or even very much about him. If he was a recluse, he was a recluse about town, as the saying goes. He loved gossip. He needed to be in touch. But many of his relationships were oblique and ephemeral, like his art, because they were his art. When a man in Philadelphia announced that he had predicted the death of Elvis Presley, Johnson phoned him and began a correspondence. It lasted until Johnson decided it was over. It was a performance with a limited run. Like his life.

Even Mr. Wilson, to whom he was as close as anybody for years, visited Locust Valley only with the policemen investigating Johnson's death. They found no suicide note. But the house, which consisted of shelves and boxes meticulously arranged, looked like an elaborate riddle Johnson had left behind. Beneath a poster protruding from one shelf was a green box containing collages with texts, including one about Andrea Feldman, who "plunged to her death."

"No one takes me seriously because they think of me as a joke," the text quotes her saying. It goes on, citing an unnamed source: "But Andrea was loved, and you can see this by the shocked expression on the faces of her friends who cannot believe she came to this."

Upstairs, all the art was turned to the wall, except three portraits of Johnson, including a large photograph by Chuck Close, leaning on the floor, not at eye level, but at foot level -- "a feeting, as in the foot-long hot dogs," Mr. Wilson noted -- creating a kind of shrine and spooky

joke. Leave it to Johnson to get the last laugh.

The film does not try to answer why Johnson killed himself. It has been said he threw himself off the bridge because he never received the recognition he wanted -- because he was tired of being famous for being famously unknown, the phrase always used about him. In the film, Mr. Close repeats a story about being asked to organize a show of portraits from the Museum of Modern Art's collection. He noticed that the museum had no portraits by Johnson. He called Johnson. As Mr. Close puts it, Johnson would "be goddamned if he was going to put himself in a position where they were going to reject him."

So Johnson found an alternate route: he mailed works to Clive Philpot, the museum's librarian, who he knew would keep them because Mr. Philpot didn't throw anything away. Johnson thereby insinuated his portraits into the museum's collection through a loophole.

It seems unlikely that someone so calculatedly perverse and sneakily subversive would commit suicide because he didn't fit the standard mold of the successful artist.

But why, then? Perhaps he was sick, Mr. Wilson speculates. Who knows why anyone chooses a particular moment to die?

Why may be less interesting than how. All the numerology, the sniffing for clues, may be silly and pure speculation, but it is the same mindset that Johnson's art inspires.

Collage, after all, is about piecing things together. It is also about accretion: elements can forever be added or altered; a collage to which more and more is done may become turgid and unattractive, or newly beautiful. But either way it remains a single collage. Elements join and disappear into a whole. One plus one equals one.

I recently came across a passage by Mr. Wilson in a book about Johnson. "When Ray dropped himself from a bridge," he wrote, "he was sending a message as he surrendered himself to oceanic absorptions which would overwhelm differences, at last losing his consciousness, which was necessary because consciousness is what kept him from being at one with the cosmos as he understood it."

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Ray Johnson

Feigen Contemporary,

535 West 20th Street.

Through Oct. 26.

How to Draw a Bunny

Film Forum,

209 West Houston Street.

Wednesday through Oct. 22.

Correction: *October 20, 2002, Sunday* An article on Oct. 6 about the artist Ray Johnson misattributed a wordplay that he used as the title of a collage. "Keir Dullea, gone tomorrow" is usually credited to Noël Coward, not to the film critic Pauline Kael.

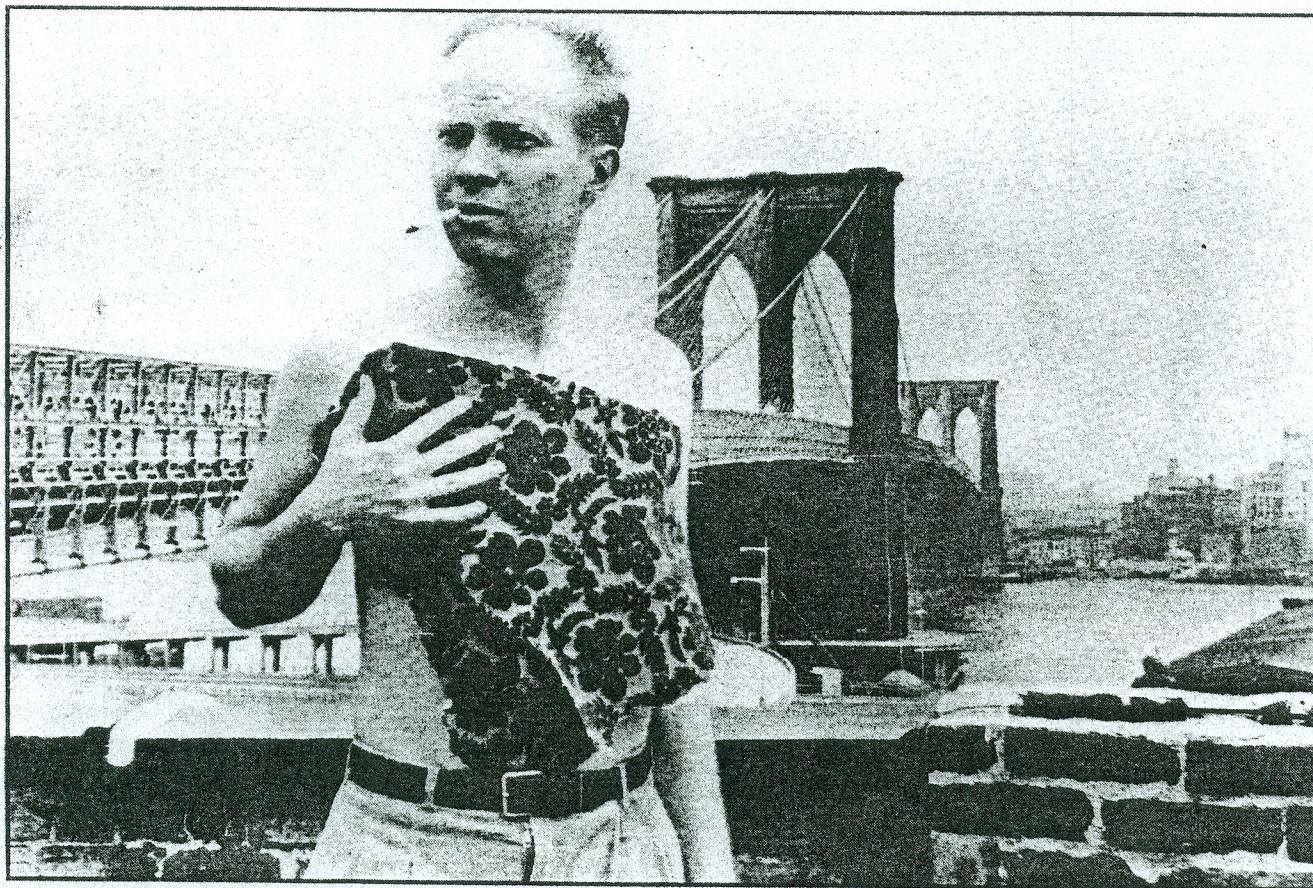
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Norman Solomon

The artist Ray Johnson in front of the Brooklyn Bridge in the mid-1950's, from a new documentary film about Johnson, "How to Draw a Bunny."

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

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Then there is Ray Johnson, who made no distinction at all between art and life, or in his case, between art and death. His suicide has become his most famous work. On

Jan. 13, 1995, at the age of 67 (6+7=13, Johnson's friends always note), Johnson jumped off the Sag Harbor bridge on Long Island. "I like to say I'm the ocean," he once told a friend, "and like the tide, I mash up everything."

How odd that something so spectacular would come to be associated with someone like Johnson, who, though by no means a recluse, lived by choice on the margins, making mischievous little collages and other eccentrically beautiful, technically brilliant, ironic and zany works he either stored away or disseminated to friends and strangers via the Postal Service.

But then, he seemed to have calculated everything he did in life, as if all of life were a game, played by his peculiar rules, understood completely only by him.

The strange story of Ray

Johnson, whose suicide may have been, to him, his best work.

So, who knows? Maybe he wanted to be remembered for how he died, an odd move in a singular career until you accept that he was, in art and life, a constant puzzle and sometimes a pain. A film about Johnson, "How to Draw a Bunny," opening Wednesday at Film Forum in Manhattan, shows the sculptor Richard Lipgold, who was Johnson's lover for many years, saying: "Now that I think of him after his death, I don't think I really knew who he was. It's very hard for me to say

that. But who was this man? He kept so much of himself to himself."

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During his later years, that life was spent



Estates of Ray Johnson/Richard L. Feigen & Co.

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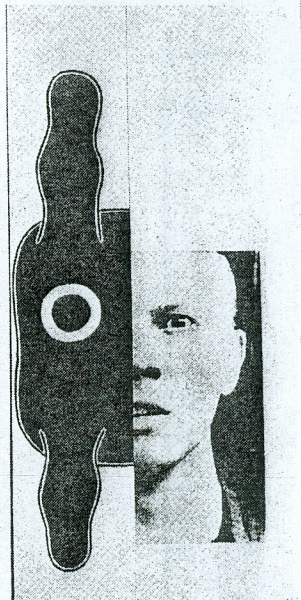
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Feigen Contemporary

Collages by Ray Johnson: "Movie Star With Horse" (1958), left, appears in the documentary film "How to Draw a Bunny." "Saul Steinberg" (1972), above, combines Johnson's standard comic symbol for a portrait with a photograph of himself.

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