

FILM

SPOOLING THE REAL

GLEN HELFAND ON THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

LOW-KEY AND REAL. That was how most people described Sundance 2002. The crowds were smaller, the streets less clogged, the movie and party buzz down to a hum. War and recession set a more sober tone, and post-September 11 Sundance felt less like a Hollywood ski weekend than, of all things, a serious, socially responsible, artistically ambitious film festival. Fittingly, documentaries blossomed in this climate, emerging from the nonfiction-film ghetto to be discussed with as much excitement as the "quirky" indie features of festivals past.

How to Draw a Bunny, Andrew Moore and John Walter's self-described "narrative portrait" of the elusive Ray Johnson, lovingly illuminates its lead character, the little-known but influential collagist, mail-art practitioner, and perhaps life (and death) artist, earning the film a special jury prize. Johnson's unexplained suicide at the age of sixty-seven on Friday, January 13, 1995 (he drowned himself in Sag Harbor), is the point of departure for director Walter's mixture of *Rashomon*-like recollections of friends, images of artwork, and pertinent visual digressions.

The documentary is a trip into the gallery offices and homes of Pop-era art luminaries, and everybody's got a Ray Johnson story to tell. Richard Feigen, who represented Johnson, gruffly recalls how the artist evaded having a show at his gallery for years but nonetheless talked him into hiring a helicopter to drop foot-long hot dogs down on attendees of Charlotte Moorman's avant-garde festival on Wards Island in 1969, and the adorably pranksterish Christo and Jeanne-Claude, among others, reminisce on Johnson's curious strategies for selling his work. Literary agent to the ex-presidents Morton Janklow reads from Johnson's ludicrously convoluted letters negotiating a price for the (uncommissioned) multiple portraits the artist made of him. Hagglng by mail over the course of several years, Janklow finally got the price down from \$42,400 to about \$13,000. Just when all of the oddly legalistic back-and-forth would seem to have ended in a sale, Johnson wrote to inform Janklow that he had "Paloma-ized" the portraits (i.e., added images of Picasso's daughter to each) and that he must therefore double the price. The painter Peter Schuyff once inquired about a particular collage. Johnson said he'd sell it for \$2,000, but he accepted Schuyff's counter-offer of \$1,500. When the artwork arrived in the mail, Schuyff discovered to his dismay that Johnson had removed precisely a quarter of the collage, giving the buyer not a penny more than his fifteen hundred dollars' worth. Ever wonder why Johnson's career never took off quite like, say, Andy Warhol's?

Johnson's slipperiness and ambivalent relationship

to the art world is perfect fodder for Walter, who admits to a dislike of linear narratives—"They don't leave room for debris," the lanky filmmaker said at the festival. He pieced the wealth of clues/ephemera Johnson left behind in his life and art into a collagelike cinematic form that fits the shifty eccentricities of his subject. Johnson, who seemed to know everyone in the New York art world of the time, touched many lives yet lingered only long enough to add another unfinished chapter to his own murky legend. As Sag Harbor police chief Joseph Ialacci (who investigated the artist's death) perceptively remarked, "We were receiving calls from around the world . . . and everybody had a story about Ray Johnson, but nobody knew the whole Ray Johnson."



Ray Johnson on the Staten Island ferry, ca. 1954. Photo: Norman Solomon. From *How to Draw a Bunny* (2001).