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RAY JOHNSON

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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Despite the fact that his career spanned nearly fifty years, much of it spent in New York and in contact with the most important artists of his day, Ray Johnson has long been famous for being famously unknown. If at times he resented this contradiction, it was also something he relished, refusing to behave in regular-artist ways. He turned down shows, declined interviews, and refused sales. And even though he produced a few trademark images and techniques (his Ignatz-like bunny heads, his clunky yet precise calligraphy, his rubber stamps), none of his works has passed into the common image bank like those of so many of his peers.

More often than not, Johnson's obscurity was deliberately and lovingly cultivated, and his hermetic systems, running gags, and visual twists and turns, can be off-putting at first encounter. When this motley group of oddball items are seen as a group, the logic of his aesthetic begins to make much more sense. Organized by Donna De Salvo (curator at large of the Wexner Center for the Arts, where the show will travel), the Whitney's retrospective, the first comprehensive look at the artist's multifaceted output since his death in 1995, offers a valuable opportunity to glimpse the scope of Johnson's project. Yet it also seems clear that for Johnson meaning resided in his practice, in the circulation of his work. This aspect of his art is nearly impossible to capture in a musuem exhibition, and in some ways this show doesn't even make the attempt. It strives to present Johnson as a fit object of study—a serious artist. It's clear that he was that, but also much more.

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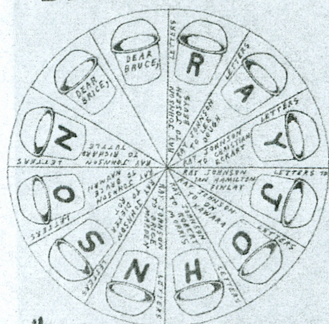


On one level, walking through the Whitney's show makes for a revealing recap of the concerns and formal approaches common to artists of the '50s and early '60s. Like Johns, Rauschenberg, and Warhol, Johnson belonged to a generation that found a way out of Abstract Expressionism though a democracy of content and artistic influences as well as styles of working that, for all their playfulness, were deliberate and controlled. This generation had no qualms about looking at comic strips or experimenting in graphic design. Johnson attended Black Mountain College and claimed to have studied "mostly with Josef Albers." Once he arrived in New York, he developed friendships with Warhol and Joseph Cornell. This unlikely triumverate seems to have served as his most important set of influences. But Johnson's work is interesting less for the ways in which he honored Albers, Warhol, and Cornell than for how he disrupted every artistic idea he dealt with. His formalism is laced with in-jokes and cartoony imagery, his pop personal and intimate, his surrealist tendencies pursued at such a glacial pace that they end up having very little to do with the unconscious. He took the Zen-derived notions of acceptance and impermanence that Cage pursued and stood them on their head. He delighted in mistakes, slips of the tongue or pen, yet maintained a tight control over everything that subsequently happened to his work.

Shortly after moving to New York in 1948, Johnson abandoned painting, destroyed many of his previous works, and focused his talents on collage. He continued to explore this medium for the rest of his life, developing a highly idiosyncratic approach both to his content and materials. Early on, in works

Opposite page: **Ray Johnson, *Elvis Presley 1 (Oedipus)*, 1956–57,** collage, 11 x 8¼".
This page, left: **Ray Johnson, *Letters $10,000 Each Mailing*, ca. 1980,** offset print, 11 x 8½".
Right: **Ray Johnson, *René Magritte*, 1971,** collage, 21 x 18½ x 1¼".

he dubbed "moticos," Johnson worked directly, cutting and pasting images from magazines and newspapers. As time went on, however, each gesture became more considered and distanced from the source material. He would draw a squiggle and then photocopy the drawing, paste the result onto board, and sand the image until it nearly disappeared. This procedure would be repeated over and over until the gesture and the chronology of the piece became impossible to disentangle. Johnson would work and rework his collages, which ultimately left many of them airless in their intricacy. These pieces were his official art, the stuff he showed and sold. It was clear that Johnson wanted his talent recognized by the art world at large, but he chafed at the closed nature of the gallery system, and developed a way out through his mailings. This split is quite marked in the Whitney show, where the early rooms, dominated by the collages, feel pious and a little dull. The show picks up energy once it moves into the early '60s, where a series of vitrines, filled with Johnson's correspondence, make the energy of the entire show jump a few notches.

Johnson had been sending things to friends and acquaintances for years, but by the late '50s, this activity began to take on new dimensions in his work. The messages in individual pieces became

Clockwise from left: **Ray Johnson, *Toad/Water*, 1958,** collage, 7⅞ x 7⅜". **Ray Johnson, *Joe Buck Dollar Bill*, 1970,** collage, 30½ x 21½ x 1¼". **Ray Johnson, *Untitled mailing (If Tears Are Dropped...)*, 1960,** offset print, 11 x 8½". **Ray Johnson, *Untitled mailing (Bunnyhead)*, ca. 1980s,** offset print, 11 x 8½".

more complex and allusive, and more people were let in on the game. He regulated his mailing activities by having one person send mail to another. Dubbed the "New York Correspondence School" by one of its participants, the roundabout method of distribution became a way for Johnson to include admirers or banish detractors as well as dole out gifts. Bits of imagery, reviews, other people's letters, all found their way into Johnson's mailings in ways that highlighted the unique that lurked below the mundane. He collected stories of bizarre deaths (one collage includes an item about a girl who choked to death on a peanut butter sandwich) and celebrated the draftsmanship of comic artists like Ernie Bushmiller. (Johnson shared this taste for the tabloid with Warhol, yet their treatment of similar subjects could hardly be more different. Where Warhol enlarges, Johnson reduces.) The correspondence school stands in opposition to the traditional art world; perhaps its closest analogue (in the sense that it challenges the usual ways art is made, distributed, and consumed) is Warhol's factory.

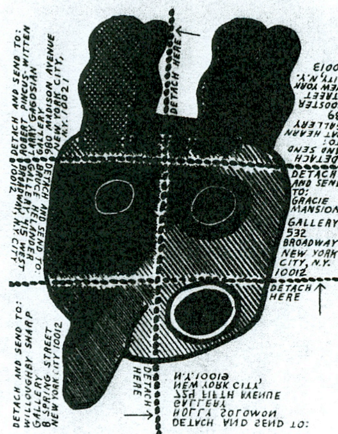
In many ways the NYCS was a performance, an elaborate three-and-a-half-decade dance choreographed by Johnson. He used it to weave together his past and present, to entertain friends, to construct an encyclopedia whose definitions were the resistance to definition. The NYSC was also redubbed "clubs" or "fanclubs" (as in the "Shelley Duvall Fan Club"), pointing up Johnson's enthusiasm for both the obscure and the mundane. Rather than an artist stuggling with weighty ideas, he became a fan among fans. The fanclubs also allowed him to be picky. His Picasso fanclub included nearly everyone in Picasso's circle but Picasso. A similar tension charges his thinking about Duchamp. One collage, entitled *Untitled (Mona Lisa with Coil)*, 1966–81, consists of a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, the figure sprouting rabbit ears, her face obscured by a spiral coil of string. Tucked to the side is a newspaper story of a man with a five-foot mustache; his photo shows the mustache curled into the same spiral, a shape that echoes Johnson's potato-masher drawings as much as *L.H.O.O.Q.* One mailing includes a picture of a young man at the doctor's. The speech balloon above the man reads, "Oh doctor I detest being told i have that con-ceputalism," while the doctor replies, "Mr Andre, you seem to have a slight case of concept-ualism"; the whole absurd piece is titled the "Marcel Duchamp Club" (note the missing "fan"). For all his Duchamp references, it seems Johnson had little use for those who claimed to be continuing Duchamp's work.

By contrast, Johnson seemed eager to embrace Gertrude Stein. Her image appears in several collages in the show, notably as a stand-in for Jackson Pollock in Johnson's portrait of the painter. Stein was, of course, another ringleader, the doyenne of an avant-garde circle, but her influence on Johnson also extends to the language in his collages, his use of repetition and variation. Like Stein, he strings his words together with equal stress and uses the device of naming and misnaming as a method of description. In *René Magritte*, 1971, the one recognizable face is also the one "misnamed": Montgomery Clift substitutes for Magritte while in the background are an array of Johnson's signature fetuslike figures, each bearing different names—Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, John Gunther, Erich von Stroheim, Charles Boyer, etc.

It's a shame that the freewheeling spirit that pervades this work isn't more appparent in the Whitney's presentation. "Ray Johnson: Correspondences" perhaps inadvertantly emphasizes the chilly formal side of Johnson's production, and in this

light, the gambols of the New York Corresponence School seem an awful lot like homework. Some of this is inherent in the limitations of the material. It is difficult to exhibit many pages of the correspondence and still maintain visual interest. But some of the problem is that the meaning of much of Johnson's art was in how he did things, not what he did. Did Johnson ultimately outsmart himself? He left behind a body of work so complex that enormous amounts of it need to be seen in order for it to be understood. The same strategies Johnson used to dodge the art world also close him off from the recognition he craved. This show takes up the admirable task of trying to sift and shape the sprawl. It also makes evident the difficulty of bringing it all back together again. □

Nayland Blake is an artist based in New York.



IF TEARS ARE DROPPED ON A DRY PIECE OF PAPER, STAINED WITH THE JUICE OF THE PETALS OF MALLOWS OR VIOLETS, THEY WILL CHANGE THE PAPER TO A PERMANENTLY GREEN COLOUR.

Ray Johnson