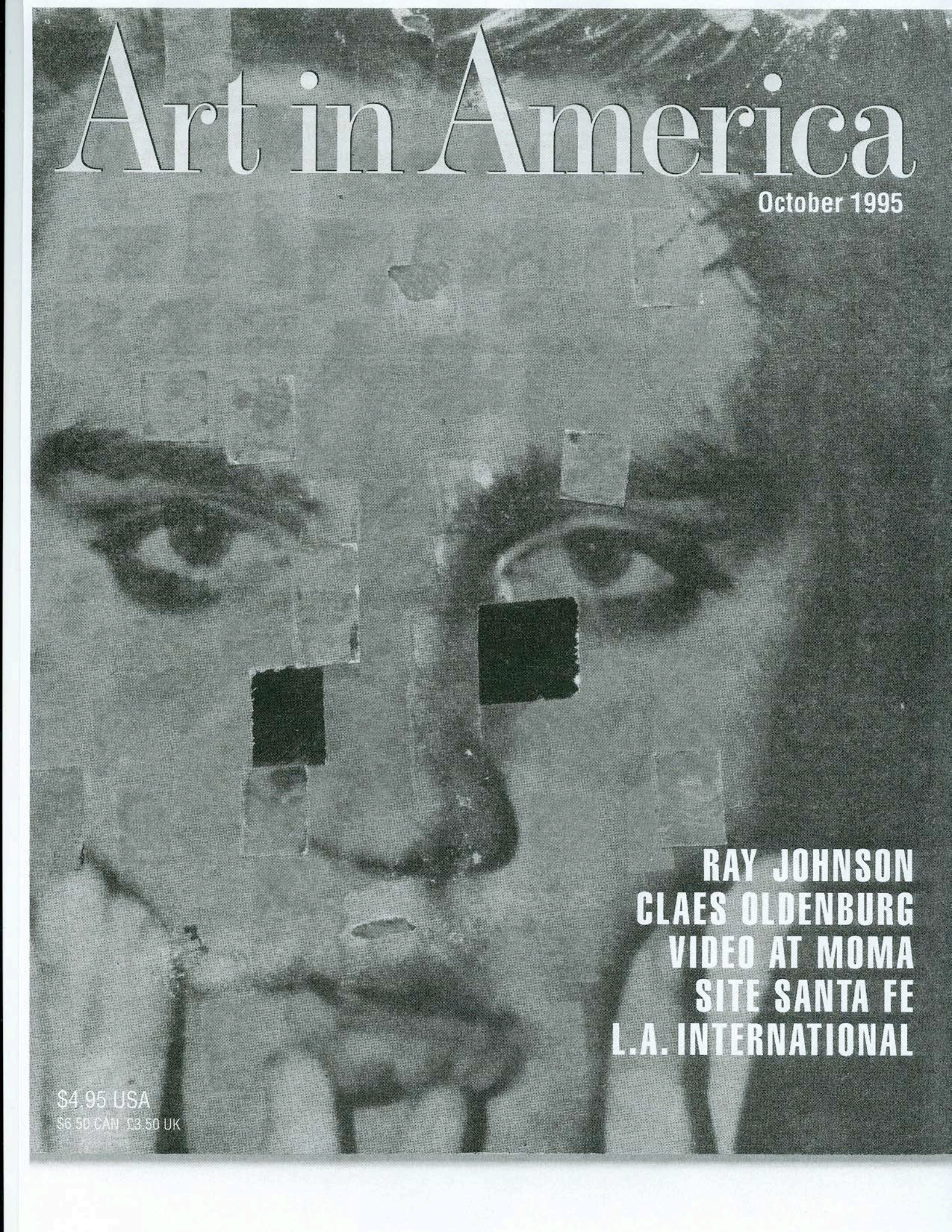


Art in America

October 1995



**RAY JOHNSON
CLAES OLDENBURG
VIDEO AT MOMA
SITE SANTA FE
L.A. INTERNATIONAL**

\$4.95 USA
\$6.50 CAN £3.50 UK

Dear Ray,

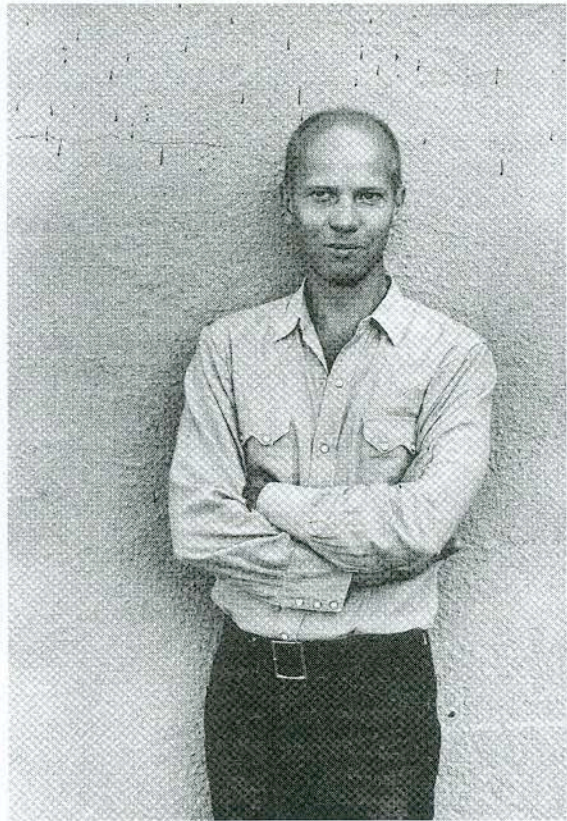
A bright moon, a bridge over an inlet, two teenage girls down by the water, and an unexpected splash: the enigmatic sound incites the girls to rush up onto the bridge, where they catch a nicely illuminated glimpse of you backstroking away from them, not calling out for help. O.K., but it would have been a better story if they had jumped into the water to rescue you. Then your bizarre performance might have turned into an intriguing variation on one of your favorite Jean Renoir films, *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932). Boudu, a scruffy tramp, jumped off the Pont des Arts in Paris with every intention of drowning himself, only to be rescued and taken home by a kindhearted neighborhood bookseller. The would-be suicide repaid the act of kindness by creating havoc in the bookseller's life, seducing both his wife and maid. You, too, could have made life miserable for your samaritans and their families. Instead, the girls telephoned the police station, got a recorded message (closed for the night), and proceeded to a nearby movie house. (Maybe they had already seen *Boudu*).

At first, when I heard your body had been plucked from the waters of Sag Harbor, Long Island, I was convinced it had to be an accident: you had slipped on a rock during your daily "nature walk" along the shore. (But you were some 80 miles from your home in Locust Valley.) Later, I suspected you had met with foul play, even though the police found no evidence of that. The French verb *décoller*—to unglue, to disengage, to take off like an airplane—began rattling through my mind. Gradually, I accepted the probability that you—ever-cunning collagist, friend and confidant for 30-plus years—had made a premeditated *décollage*.

You were always a mysterious personage, resolutely withholding information on what made you tick. I was fascinated by you from the moment of our first meeting, through Andy Warhol, in 1962. The two of you, friends from years back, were on similarly skewed wavelengths, constantly scheming, tirelessly seeking amusement, always relishing life's absurdities. It was all witticisms, gossip and laughter back then. Andy was the lighthearted, bubbly one, while you tended to be the chortling prankster.

You viewed everything from an oblique angle, detecting correspondences between words, objects and actions that had seemed entirely unrelated until you discerned a pattern of clues that only you could string together. You sleuthed your way through a dense, fanciful world of analogies, anagrams, homonyms, rhymes, puns, all sorts of formal parallels and correlations. Your sense of humor could be conspicuously morbid, and tales of freaky accidents and weird fatalities made you positively gleeful. At the time, you were producing *A Book About Death*, an ongoing project of photo-offset drawings, pages of which you periodically mailed out to your friends. Many of your mailings contained intimations of catastrophe.

From the sheer plenitude of your mailings, it appeared



Ray Johnson, ca. 1969-70. Collection David Bourdon.
Photo Dave Gahr.

In background on this and following pages, an array of works by the artist from the early '70s through 1995 on display at the recent Feigen gallery exhibition. Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. Photo Ali Elai.

that you devoted several hours a day to clipping and sorting an extensive inventory of printed paper ephemera, Scotch-taping some of the snippets together and stuffing them into "found" business envelopes that were imprinted with the names of various companies and institutions. The envelopes often revealed your careful attention to design, most noticeably in your typical use of five one-cent stamps, aligned in a row (first-class postage then cost only five cents). Occasionally, you went far out of your way to get a specific postmark: I remember how you once coerced me to accompany you to a post office in Red Hook, a not-so-visitor-friendly section of Brooklyn, where you wanted to obtain a cancellation mark intended to impress the recipient of your letter.

You annotated some of the enclosures in your mailings with instructions to "Please send to" so-and-so, as if the communication would remain incomplete until it was forwarded to a third party. Sometimes, this was your way to introduce people whom you perceived to have something in common. Thanks to you, mail art circulated among an ever-expanding network of correspondents. At some point in the early 1960s the name "New York Correspondence School" became attached to the mail art of your network of pen pals. The NYCS, you once remarked, was like a "fantastic, gigantic Calder mobile . . . constantly in motion."

I, like many others, treasured your mail art because you crammed so much imagination and wit into a simple envelope, making us, the recipients, feel clever and special. Your send-ups of Andy consistently amused me. For one mailing, you Scotch-taped a dictionary definition of "celery" to a magazine reproduction of Andy's painting of Campbell's Cream of Celery, then paired it with a label from a can of Andy Boy Brand Celery Hearts. In another mailing, you taped a review of Andy's "Drawings for a Boy-Book" show to a portion of an envelope bearing a Boys Town stamp, and addressed it to me as "D. Boyrdon."

As you developed your correspondence art during the 1960s and '70s, you continually varied your formats and techniques, ranging from unique hand-scissored snippets, earmarked for a particular recipient, to printed "mass mailings." You frequently embellished your enclosures with one or more straight-faced rubber stamps—"COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON," "COLLAGE BY JOSEPH CORNELL," "ODILON REDON FAN CLUB," etc. With the proliferation of photocopiers in the '70s, you switched almost exclusively to mechanically reproduced images based on your original pen-and-ink drawings, which have a cartoonishly playful, deliberately naïve character. Many of the photocopied drawings with their rows of "bunny heads" or wienie-nosed Kilroy-type faces are delightfully clever.

Andy enjoyed your mail art, finding it "so creative," hoarding every piece of correspondence that you sent to him. He even tried to buy up mailings you had sent to other people. He occasionally asked if your letters to me were for sale, but I never knew what kind of price to put on them—10 cents an envelope or 10 cents a pound?

Because I liked to believe that I comprehended your absurd dedication to the NYCS, I felt an ominous chill when, several years into our friendship, I got around to reading Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener," first published in 1853. Bartleby, who worked as a scrivener (or copyist) for a Wall Street law firm, was a strange, uncommonly negative character whose standard response was "I would prefer not to." After his pitiful decline into vagrancy, followed by starvation and death, it is revealed that Bartleby's derangement was a consequence of

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working as a clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington. "Dead letters!" exclaims Melville's narrator, "does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the

flames?" Bartleby, it seemed to me, could have been the doppelgänger of your dark lonely side: you had both processed the world through an endless succession of envelopes.

Yet, when you emerged from your solitary scriptorium on the Lower East Side, you were eager to initiate new antics. Do you remember when Ethel Scull hosted a party at Andy's Factory and invited only famous friends? While I sulked out in the cold, you sauntered up to the security guard at the door, presented yourself as Norman Mailer, and gained admission. It wasn't a total put-on because you were, in fact, a prominent, if lower-case, "mailer."

Andy and I never figured out how you made ends meet; you had no job, seldom sold a collage, and appeared to survive on about \$3 a week. Your attitude toward galleries and exhibitions was perverse—in spades. You seemed disdainful of affiliating with any actual gallery, yet you enjoyed taking out ads for fictitious shows. One of the most memorable was your *Village Voice* ad (July 30, 1964) for an "8 man show" by George Brecht, George Herms, and you at the bogus Robin Gallery. Shortly afterward, you came down with hepatitis and ended up in a men's ward with 19 beds on each side of the center aisle at Bellevue Hospital. Andy and I thought you were turning your life into an art work, so we took out a *Village Voice* ad (Sept. 17, 1964) that announced: "Ray Johnson and other Living Americans in 38-man show at Robin Gallery, Section B2." (B2 was the ward number.)

One afternoon, while you were recuperating in Bellevue, I went to visit you and found that I had been preceded by a handsome older man, standing silently at the foot of your bed. You introduced him as Richard Lippold, whose name I recognized as a famous abstract sculptor. He was gazing at you with soulful intensity, with a look conveying such a complicated mix of concern and resignation that I instantly intuited that you had a "past."

I knew, of course, that you were born in Detroit (1927) and grew up as an only child during the Depression. I later learned that an art scholarship took you to Black Mountain College, which changed your life. Even now, I have trouble picturing you at that famous institution near Asheville, North Carolina, where you spent three years (1945-48). Josef Albers was the teacher who apparently made the greatest impact on your sense of design, prodding you toward a prissy Bauhaus-type abstraction and encouraging you to deploy clear-cut shapes and subtle colors with

determined fastidiousness. You seldom alluded to that eye-opening, star-studded summer of 1948, when John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller and Richard Lippold arrived at Black Mountain as artists-in-residence. You never outgrew your admiration for the ideas and esthetics of John Cage. You never forgot how distraught Elaine and Bill de Kooning were that July night, when they learned that their friend Arshile Gorky had committed suicide. And you probably never expected—although you knew you were cute (blond, wholesome and 20 years old)—to pluck the heartstrings of Richard Lippold, who was then 33 years old, with a dancer-wife and a couple of daughters in tow. Back in those days (and nights), any husband who wanted to hold onto both a wife and a boyfriend had to perform some pretty fancy footwork.

So you departed for New York and moved with Lippold into the same Lower East Side tenement building where Cage had earlier established a residence. Between 1949 and 1952, you affiliated yourself with the American Abstract Artists group, where you met Ad Reinhardt, Charmion von Wiegand, Leon Polk Smith, et al. I suspect you derived some of your flair for self-abnegation from Ad. (Much later, in 1966, Ad surprised me during a visit to his studio by praising what he called your “mandala collages” of several years earlier. When I said I had never seen them, he remarked, “Well, they’ve probably been cut up and put into new collages.”)

Around 1953, although still involved with Richard, you moved farther downtown to live alone in a small apartment on Dover Street, at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge. You free-lanced as a commercial artist in the mid-'50s, making pen-and-ink drawings and collages for *Mademoiselle* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Through Andy, you got assignments from New Directions to design book covers, the most impressive being for a work of Rimbaud. You befriended Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly and, in 1954, met Jasper Johns. Rauschenberg invited you and Jasper to contribute small art works as subsidiary elements in one of his combines, *Short Circuit*; you provided a collage and Jasper donated a small flag painting. You were all equals, sort of. When a Johns “Target” painting appeared on the cover of *Art News* in January 1958, the magazine noted that the artist could be placed alongside such “better-known colleagues as Rauschenberg, Twombly, Kaprow and Ray Johnson.” Don't you love the dynamics of fame?

You managed to plummet from “better-known” to “unknown” within the next seven years. In 1965, Richard Lippold attempted to boost your career by convincing his dealer, Marian Willard, to mount an exhibition of your collages. Grace Glueck, reporting on your show for the *New York Times*, suggested that you might be “New York's most famous unknown artist.” The label stuck to you for the rest of your days. (Do you remember how I used to needle you,

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seven-year Willard-Feigen period are, to my mind, among your finest.

One reason why these collages literally stand out is that they are more three-dimensional in relief, consisting of variously shaped chunks of multilayered paperboard that you arranged like “building blocks” in horizontal and vertical configurations. I once compared the blocks to tesserae in a mosaic. You delicately modulated the painted surfaces of the tesserae by subtly sanding their edges, as if to suggest the erosion of river stones. Then you sometimes juxtaposed the tesserae with pen-and-ink drawings and hand-lettering. Where you typically covered your earlier collages, edge to edge, with a grid of paper strips, you made the new works airier by sparsely deploying the collage elements against a blank white field.

Movie stars and artists of “legendary” magnitude constantly inspired you. James Dean and Elvis Presley images turned up repeatedly in your collages of the late 1950s. Some of your favorite leading men over the years were Tab Hunter, Gary Cooper, Steve McQueen, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Alain Delon and Matt Dillon. As for leading ladies, you favored Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong, Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy, Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe. You also had a special place in your heart for Shirley Temple, Hayley Mills and Natalie Wood. One of the few movie queens with whom you actually corresponded was Joan Crawford, who was famously conscientious about replying to every scrap of fan mail. In January 1973, she sent you a note: “I am delighted that the ‘Joan Crawford Dollar Bill’ was sold to America's Leading Art Collector, Joseph Hirshhorn. I hope that you had a magnificent Christmas and will have a beautiful New Year.”

You were ever-mindful of art-world stars, resulting in many collages that referred to the personalities or works of Mondrian, Magritte and Duchamp, among others. One of your later and most durable idols was Joseph Cornell, who lived in a quaint turn-of-the-century house in Queens. After you moved to neighboring Nassau County in 1968, you seemed to model yourself upon him, cultivating your own reputation for reclusive eccentricity. How thrilled you were when Nicolas and Elena Calas wrote, in their 1971 book *Icons and Images of the Sixties*, “Ray Johnson is to the letter what Cornell is to the box.”

Your telephoned reports of your visits with Cornell were chock-full of fascinating details, but all I can remember now is the food that was served. Once he invited you to Sunday

asking, “Who is the *second*-most famous unknown artist?” and “Who was the most famous unknown artist *before* you?”) You had two more shows of your “serious” collages at Willard (in 1966 and 1967), then switched to Richard Feigen's gallery, where you had shows in 1968, 1970 and 1971. The collages you made during this

lunch and served canned spaghetti and peas and carrots. Yum. Then there was the time you brought him a cake and the two of you sat down to drink tea and listen to Dionne Warwick recordings. Suddenly, Cornell burst into tears. You could not take your eyes off the tear-sodden slice of cake that was slowly disintegrating on his plate. Was he crying because he was so saddened by her poignant rendition of "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?" or "You'll Never Get to Heaven (If You Break My Heart)"? Or was he distressed by an intuition that she would later lose her girlish figure and become a spokesperson for the Psychic Friends Network?

Cornell died four days after Christmas 1972. (He had been born on Christmas Eve, his favorite holiday.) What psychic affinity prompted you, 11 years later, to pay a post-Christmas, post-midnight visit to his house? In mid-January 1984, you were driving home from Manhattan under a bright moonlit sky, when a mysterious impulse goaded you to turn off the expressway and proceed to Utopia Parkway. The streets, being covered with snow and ice, seemed more luminous than usual. As you parked near the house, you had a premonition you would "find something." You got out of the car, walked by the house a couple of times, and, right in front, made out the contours of a discarded Christmas tree, mostly covered by a mantle of snow. Remnants of silver tinsel, clinging to the branches, sparkled in the moonlight. You snatched a handful of the tinsel and hastily returned to your car, where you transferred your booty to an awaiting envelope on the front seat. At a later date, you mailed the envelope to a Cornell devotee who would relish the referential overtones.

Almost always when you were out in public, you appeared to be "on stage," performing. Some of your most notable performance events were the NYCS daytime meetings that you organized in specially chosen places. You held an impressive total of six NYCS meetings in 1968. The first took place at the Religious Society of Friends Meeting House in Manhattan in April (before your move to Long Island). If I recall correctly, *nothing*—in proper Cageian style—happened at that meeting. The one that offered the most fun was the "stilt" meeting in Central Park in October. Dozens of your friends and fans turned up to try their skill at walking about on children's stilts that had been provided by the city's parks department.

Movie stars and art legends inspired many of your subsequent gatherings. "A Meeting for Dame May Whitty" occurred at the David Whitney Gallery in November 1970. The "First Marcel Duchamp Fan Club Meeting" was held at the Church of The Holy Trinity, on the Upper East Side, in April 1971; the announcement promised that "the role of Teeny Duchamp will be played by Ultra Violet." (Those

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belles were linked in your mind because, two years earlier, I had invited the three of you to dinner.) In June 1972, you held a "Meeting for Anna May Wong" at the New York Cultural Center; the model Naomi Sims impersonated the sultry actress. The "Paloma Picasso Fan Club Meeting" took place at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in April

1974. Shelley Duvall rated *two* fan club meetings, in 1976 and 1977. You organized a "David Letterman Fan Club Meeting and Performance" at the C.W. Post college campus in Nassau County in April 1983. The talk-show host initially seemed an unlikely choice for your pantheon, until we realized that, like Norman the *mailer*, David is a *letterman*.

The flip side of your silliness, which usually entertained and charmed us, was that you could be really irksome. You knew precisely how to harass and annoy your friends, and you spared no effort in making life a purgatory for certain dealers and collectors. Anyone who attempted to buy or sell your work without your knowledge risked offending you. When works of yours changed hands in the "secondary" market, you pestered the dealers and collectors who were involved in an effort to find out the sale price. Although a few dauntless dealers expressed interest in representing you in recent years, you left them dangling. Richard Feigen maintained that you were "a lot like Cornell," that you "didn't want to sell anything."

When your artist-friend Peter Schuyff attempted to buy a collage from you, you became typically evasive. "If you want a \$500 collage, send me a check for that amount," you told him; "if you want a \$10,000 collage, send me a check for that." You showed Peter several works, and he liked one priced at \$2,000. He then apparently had the "gall" to send you a check for 25% less than that. When you delivered the unframed piece, he was dismayed to see that you had lopped off 25% of the work. What, he asked, was he supposed to do? "Well, it's three-fourths of a collage," you said, "get three-fourths of a frame."

Although you had a hearty appetite for fame, you seemed increasingly dissatisfied by the quality of esteem that was accorded you. The major museum retrospectives and million-dollar auction sales never happened for you. If the international art world had agreed to historicize you as the one and only father of mail art, would you have been any happier? If you had been granted a greater share in the enormous reputation and fortune that inundated your Pop-art pals, how would you have handled it? You gave away so much NYCS mail art over the decades, bedeviled most of the dealers and collectors who were interested in you, and found so many ways to sabotage whatever market remained for your "serious" collages, is it any wonder that the art world's money-changers and reputation-launderers avoided you?

Hints of despair occasionally tumbled out of your envelopes, but always modified by your ironic humor. In 1989, you sent

me three photocopied sheets, each with big block letters arrayed against a background of collaged news clippings. They respectively announced: "Ray Johnson collages one million dollars each," "Ray Johnson letters to David two million dollars each," "Ray Johnson free art works three million dollars each." A 1993 mailing contained five photocopied drawings of paired, cartoonlike heads. One face in each drawing is inscribed with your name; the other is labeled with one of the following names: Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Bob Rauschenberg, Jim Rosenquist and Andy Warhol.

You sounded perfectly fine during our several telephone chats during the early part of last January. It was I who called you in what turned out to be our last conversation, and I did detect a bit of irritation or impatience, but your curtness was hardly what I would take as evidence of suicidal depression. Other friends of yours, including Chuck Close and Duncan Hannah, also spoke to you in the days prior to your departure and they, too, thought you were your normal self. We knew you led a fairly active social life on Long Island and saw lots of people. We also knew that you had developed an interest in photography and went on nature walks along Long Island Sound every afternoon. You were an avid reader, borrowing many books from the local library, one of the last being Alain Borer's *Rimbaud in Abyssinia*, which you found absorbing.

So why were most of us surprised when you chose Friday the 13th in January to jump off a bridge? Some of your fans, attempting to find a rationale for your deed, detected a recurring pattern of 13s, noting that your age (67) corresponded to the date of your death ($6+7=13$) and to the number on the motel room you had checked into earlier that day ($2+4+7=13$). The details of your journey on that final day leave a rippling wake of unanswered questions. Why did you withdraw a couple of thousand dollars from your bank that morning? Why did you have several days' worth of clothing in your car? Why did you drive all the way to Orient Point, on the easternmost tip of the north fork of Long Island, where you posted your last mailings? Why did you then proceed, via the two Shelter Island ferries, to Sag Harbor on the south fork, driving over the same Sag Harbor-North Haven bridge to which you would later return? Why did you check into Baron's Cove Inn, if you were really intent upon returning to the bridge?

Your drowning reminded us, of course, of other cultural personages—Hart Crane (who jumped off a ship), Virginia Woolf (who waded into a river), even Natalie Wood (although her overboard fall was ruled an accident). In one of your 1994 "movie star collages," the name "Natalie" is juxtaposed with a stylized face, whose nose is a triangular piece of weathered wood—a reference, no doubt, to the sick joke that begins, "Can you name a wood that doesn't

Why were most of us surprised when you chose Friday the 13th in January to jump off a bridge? Your final day leaves a rippling wake of unanswered questions.

float?" And, speaking of movie stars, let's not forget those stylish actors and actresses who made cinematic exits into the surf—Fredric March and James Mason as Norman Maine in the first two versions of *A Star Is Born* and Joan Crawford as Helen Wright in *Humoresque*. I decided to check the dates of your last mailings to me and found that the final one had a November 1994 postmark. It contained a photocopied drawing of two whimsical heads, one of them inscribed, "Dear La Monte Young, Happy Death Day." Puzzled as to why you would make such a negative remark about a friend and colleague of 30-some years, I telephoned La Monte and learned that he had tried, earlier last year, to sell one of your collages through a Manhattan dealer. He did not anticipate that you would find out about the transaction (which did not go through) and become resentful. In fact, when he saw the drawing, he assumed you were cleverly acknowledging his birthday. We have good reason to believe that you did remember his birthday, as you always remembered mine, because the three of us constituted a sequence of Libras—La Monte born on October 14th, I on the 15th, you on the 16th. Now you've gone and upset our equilibrium.

One of your more recent artist-friends, Bob Warner, received an ominous "last mailing" that he is convinced is really from you. Bob had not gotten a letter directly from you since last October. Then, a couple of days after the Sag Harbor event, he received an envelope, postmarked January 11th, containing an item that had been forwarded by your North Carolina correspondent, Richard C. It was a U.S. postal service form concerning "dead mail matter." The form was altered to read "From Dead Mail Branch at Limbo." Within a printed circular outline, designed to contain a postmark, there is a drawing of a skull with a "happy smile."

Still wondering about your state of mind, I got to thinking about Dionne ("That's What Friends Are For") Warwick and decided to call the Psychic Friends Network. A psychic named Bill took my call, shuffled his Tarot cards, and gave me a reading on you. An astonishing majority of the cards came up negative—Four of Coins, Judgment, Knight of Batons, Three of Batons, Three of Coins, Five of Swords. As Bill interpreted them, you were disappointed, bitter, suffering setbacks, experiencing rupture or discord in your life, unhappy about bad business decisions, trying to atone for something you had done, passing judgment on yourself. Well, that sounds like everyone I know, so I interrupted Bill to ask if your spirit is now at rest. He turned up the Two of Cups (joyous harmony, peaceful resolution) and concluded "Spiritually, Ray is fine." I hope it's true.

Goodbye, Ray.
David

Author: David Bourdon is a New York critic. His book, *Designing the Earth*, will be published by Abrams in November.