

A Performance-Art Death

Legendary (and legendarily unknown) artist Ray Johnson plotted his apparent suicide like one of his practical jokes. Now he's a celebrity.

THE BIZARRE SUICIDE OF ARTIST Ray Johnson was recently memorialized by an even stranger postmortem in the New York Times that suggested his death may have been related to numerology. Johnson drowned in Sag Harbor Cove on Friday, January 13, the Times reported. The digits in his age, 67, added up to 13, the paper of record said. So did the digits in his motel-

last saw Johnson alive was actually a little before or a little after 7:15 p.m. And, according to Ialacci, the only "obvious" significance of the 7-Eleven is that it happens to be located in the parking lot closest to the Sag Harbor-North Haven bridge from which Johnson evidently leaped.

All of which makes Johnson's death even more puzzling to his closest friends. If there was no numerological subtext, what was his suicide supposed to mean?

objects and images of celebrities, such as *Elvis Presley, No. 1* (circa 1955) and *James Dean* (1958), seemed to anticipate the work of artists like Andy Warhol and David Salle. "Ray was a precursor of Pop Art," Feigen observes. "He was doing what he did long before Andy Warhol."

Back in the sixties, Johnson made a name in East Village circles as a pioneering performance artist who hung with the likes of composer John Cage and dancer Merce Cunningham. During one memorable "Ray Johnson event," he put on a sky-blue suit, climbed aboard a helicopter, and dropped foot-long hot dogs on the crowd attending an arts festival on Wards Island in the East River. He would also do empty-room shows, which he called "Ray Johnson nothings," as opposed to happenings.

But Johnson may be best remembered for starting the New York Correspondence (a.k.a. Correspondance) School around 1968. Using coin-operated public-library Xerox machines and the U.S. Postal Service, he circulated personalized art-and-wordplay messages to friends and acquaintances around the world, typically requesting each "correspondent" to add something to the work and pass it along to someone else in the "school." Much of this art featured Johnson's two trademark images: a bunny and a snake.

"Ray invented the idea of mail art," says former MOMA librarian Clive Phillpot. "Ray's use of mails was part of his subversive approach," adds artist Chuck Close, a friend and collector for more than 25 years. "He didn't like dealing with museum curators because he didn't like the idea of rejection, so he corresponded with the museum librarian, knowing his letters would have to be filed."

"He was brilliant, quite brilliant," says literary agent Morton L. Janklow, a collector and a former correspondent, "but he was a very, very strange man."

A Detroit native, Johnson attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the legendary avant-garde art academy, where he studied under Josef Albers and Robert Motherwell with classmates Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. In the summer of 1948, the blue-green-eyed, cherub-faced 20-year-old art student met sculptor Richard Lippold, then a visiting lecturer a few years his senior.

"Ray was really a beautiful young man,



Johnson in the mid-seventies: Why he killed himself remains a mystery.

room number, 247, and in the time he was last seen alive, 7:15 p.m. The Times noted further that Johnson had left his car parked in front of the local 7-Eleven. Seven plus eleven is eighteen, but the paper quoted a friend of the late artist's who pointed out, "Seven-eleven is obvious, in terms of chance and the throw of the dice."

Sag Harbor police chief Joseph J. Ialacci, who has been investigating the Johnson case for more than six weeks, calls the numerology angle a bunch of bunk. And he should know. "I was just giggling the Times reporter about all that No. 13 stuff," he says.

A desk clerk at the Baron's Cove Inn says that room 247 was the only one available when Johnson checked in the afternoon before he died. Witnesses who gave statements to the police say the time they

"Nobody can figure out why Ray killed himself or what he was trying to accomplish," says Richard Feigen, the artist's longtime dealer. "It will make him better known, but I've been trying to make him better known for 33 years."

Making the late Raymond Edward Johnson better known wasn't easy. Though he allowed his work to be displayed at Feigen's gallery, the Willard Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, he resisted even well-intentioned attempts to commercialize his art, preferring to give most of it away. And yet, despite his self-imposed obscurity, Johnson is regarded by many fellow artists as one of the more important figures of our time. Some of his early collages, which incorporate found

and I was quite fond of him, so I summoned him to New York," Lippold recalls. "He and I were lovers for the next 30 years until I dissolved it. I'm bisexual, and I was breeding three children, so it was difficult for us to live together."

In the early eighties, Johnson spent part of two summers on Shelter Island working on a portrait project with his closest female friend, Toby Spiselman, a New York bank officer. At one point, he presented Janklow with 26 color portraits of the agent's head, demanding he buy all 26 at roughly \$1,000 per. When Janklow balked at the price, Johnson turned the Janklow heads into portraits of Paloma Picasso.

Gerard Malanga, a former Warhol aide, recalls that Johnson liked to give the impression his art was fetching high prices as a way of explaining why he could afford to sell so little of it. But according to Feigen, the reverse was true. "Ray's work usually got only a few hundred dollars at auction, maybe \$1,000 or \$1,200 maximum."

In recent years, Johnson had grown ever more remote and reclusive. He put brown paper over every window of his two-story wooden frame house in Locust Valley and received few visitors. According to Ialacci, who examined the place after Johnson's death, the lower rooms were filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked with boxes, a worktable, and a solitary mattress. "There was no art on the walls," Ialacci reports, "and all the paintings were leaned against the shelves so you could only see the back of them."

"Ray became very paranoid," Lippold says. "One day, he called me and said, 'People are stealing my work. They broke into my garage.' Another time, he told me, 'People are bugging my telephone.' There was no evidence of any of that." Still, there were signs that he was ready to come out of his shell. A few days before his death, Johnson called Feigen's office about showing some of his work. "I think I'm finished with this period of nothing," he told Feigen executive Frances F. L. Beatty, "and I'm on to something."

True to form, Johnson left a puzzling paper trail leading up to his death. At 11:29 A.M. on Friday, January 13, he withdrew \$2,000 from his account at the Emigrant Bank in Locust Valley. Johnson then climbed into his 1986 Volkswagen Golf and drove 80 miles to Orient Point, where he mailed at least three packets to Spiselman. They contained an ace of hearts and a letter announcing a "mail event."

Later that afternoon, Johnson took the North Ferry from Greenport on the North Fork to Shelter Island, and continued on the South Ferry to North Haven, on the South

Fork. One of the receipts is marked with a time stamp (3:45 P.M.). Neither ferry has a time stamp—did Johnson stamp it himself?

At 5:24 P.M., Johnson checked into the Baron's Cove Inn. Desk clerk Hathaway M. Barry recalled that Johnson "appeared tired and definitely not happy." Local contractor

Chris Kuziw, who was staying in the room next door, says that he thought he heard "two males talking loud" in room 247. "I thought, I hope they don't keep this up all night. A minute later, the noise stopped and I heard two people leave."

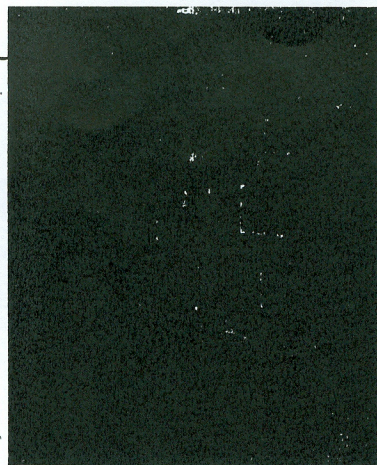
Leaving his room virtually untouched, Johnson drove his VW out of the motel lot and parked it in front of the 7-Eleven about a hundred feet from the Sag Harbor-North Haven bridge. Two local girls, ages 14 and 15, said that around 7:10 or 7:15 P.M. they bought Cokes at the 7-Eleven and went under the bridge to drink them. Then they heard a splash and ran up onto the bridge.

They saw "a bald man wearing dark clothing" who was "on his back and moving his arms in a swimming motion." Both girls noted that the man looked "relaxed." One recalled: "At no time did this person yell for help or say anything. I thought he had a wet suit on."

The girls walked to the village police station, but found it closed for the night. Then they ran into the mother of a friend, who told them not to be concerned, so they went on to the movies at Sag Harbor Cinema. "Ray would've loved that," his friend the artist James Rosenquist says. "The two girls walking away and not reporting it—that was like Ray's sense of humor."

The next day police found Johnson's body floating face up with both arms laid across his chest. "There was no grimace on the victim's face, no abrasions indicating that he may have hit his head on a rock," Police Chief Ialacci recalls. "With a water temperature of 40 degrees, I figure he only lasted about five minutes; then he went into a euphoric state and drowned."

But a subsequent search of Johnson's car, house, and personal papers complicates the picture somewhat. His locked



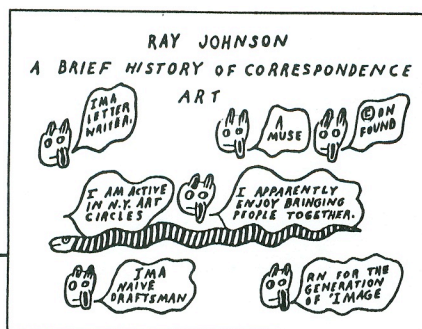
Elvis Presley 2 (1955): Prefiguring Warhol.

VW was packed with enough clothes for several days (three T-shirts, five pairs of socks, six pairs of briefs, an overcoat, an extra pair of jeans). There was \$1,670 in his pocket. Police say John Ritter, an attorney originally retained by his friends, found \$400,000 in Johnson's bank account. And Johnson had apparently rented a safe-deposit box, then hidden the key. Johnson's friends insist that he was in good physical health and did not smoke, drink, or take drugs. But police, who are still awaiting a toxicology report from the Suffolk County medical examiner, found a bottle of Valium in his car, which contained only 6²/₃ tablets out of the original 30; the prescription was four years old. A few days after Johnson's death, a postcard dated January 13 arrived at Johnson's home in Locust Valley. It featured a bunny smiling over the words IF YOU ARE READING THIS, I MUST BE DEAD, and it had a sticker bearing Johnson's return address, suggesting he had mailed it to himself. But in an interview, John Tostado, a New York Correspondence School member who lives in Los Angeles, confessed to mailing out this and 199 other identical postcards. "Some people thought it was tasteless," he says nervously, "and some people thought Ray would really have appreciated it."

Since Johnson left no will, the fate of his estate and the disposition of his art, which may be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, is in the hands of ten cousins whom he rarely saw. In the meantime, efforts to solve the riddle of his suicide have only added to the postmortem weirdness. Two weeks after the death, collage artist Robert Warner walked out on the Sag Harbor-North Haven bridge for a "silent act of communion" with Johnson. A passing motorist, fearing that another man might be attempting a jump, notified police, who called out the Fire Department and shut down the bridge for hours.

Johnson, his friends say, would have delighted in just this sort of false alarm—and in the irony that by killing himself he would now get the public recognition that he avoided in life. His house in Locust Valley has already become a shrine, with a bouquet of dead roses jammed into the door handle and a gray bunny doll perched on the steps. Feigen is giving a memorial show of his work in April and is planning to host a Johnson symposium in May.

Even the Sag Harbor police chief has become something of a Johnson groupie. "I'm not one of these art snobs; I'm what you'd call a traditionalist," Ialacci says. "But after going through all this stuff about Ray Johnson, I gotta say I like the guy. He was giggling everybody all along, and they never even knew it."



Johnson's "Correspondence Art."