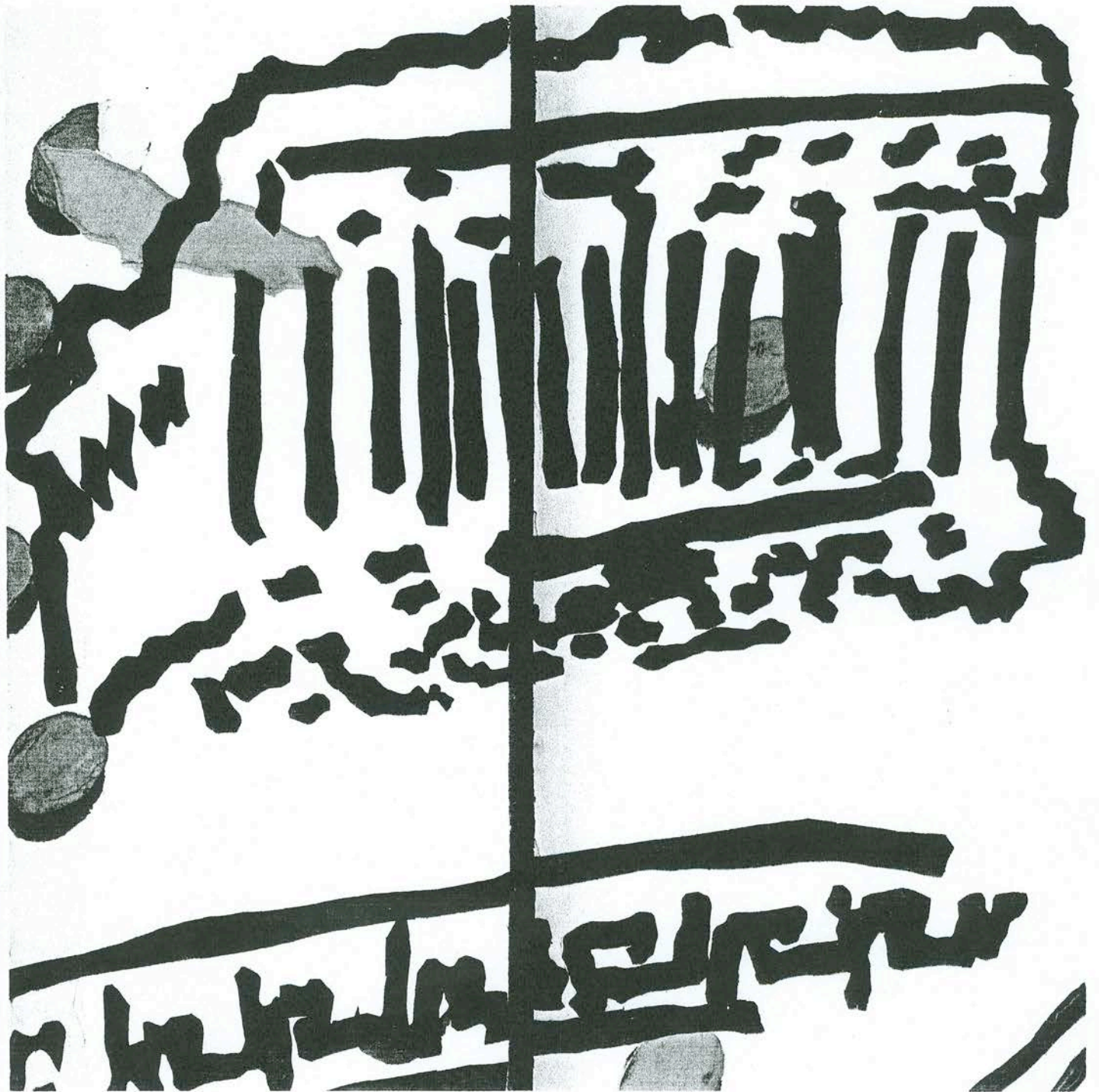


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The Fires of J.M.W. Turner/Rifka, the Parthenon & Postmodernism/Ray Johnson
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Ray Johnson: Collage Jester

Best known for his "Correspondence School" mail art, Ray Johnson was revealed in a recent show to be a witty, often oblique collagist as well. Below, a decoding of some of his mosaics of pop icons and art-world puns.

BY GERRIT HENRY

When we hear the word "collage," we tend to think of Joseph Cornell, or, if we're of a European frame of mind, Schwitters or even Ernst. But now—a recent exhibition at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art has all but declared—when we hear "collage," we should think of Ray Johnson. And, when we hear "Ray Johnson," we apparently should no longer think exclusively, or even mainly, of his New York Correspondence School—mail art for the art-world masses—featuring bunny heads running serially across the page, named after famous personages in art or show biz or kulchur. For Johnson, since the '60s, has also been the creator of an infinite variety of collages, approximately 100 of which came to light in the Nassau County exhibition last season. The show was an effort on the part of museum curators Phyllis Stigliano and Janice Parente to introduce the general public to Johnson's "extraordinarily inventive collages . . . [revealing] an intricate buildup of structural design and a deft handling of subtle coloration." Stigliano and Parente are not alone in their appreciation of the collages: lenders to the exhibition included the Abrams family, David Bourdon (who also penned a neatly intelligent essay for the catalogue), the late Joseph Hirshhorn, Ronald Feldman, Hon. and Mrs. Jacob K. Javits, Jasper Johns, James Rosenquist, and the Whitney Museum.

In an act of almost instant art historical revisionism, we were told here

that the collages, taken together, present the solidest body of work in Johnson's output. What do they look like? A typical Johnson collage features horizontally or vertically arranged mosaic "tesserae" (actually sandpapered layers of cardboard), as Bourdon calls them, interspersed with bits of words, whole words, famous names, drawings, parts of photographs, and other items that have touched the artist's heart. Bourdon described the mail art as "ephemeral" in comparison. (Remember the value the Conceptualists placed on the evanescent a short ten years ago? But here's Bourdon, revaluing the sort of work which will withstand the onslaught of time.)

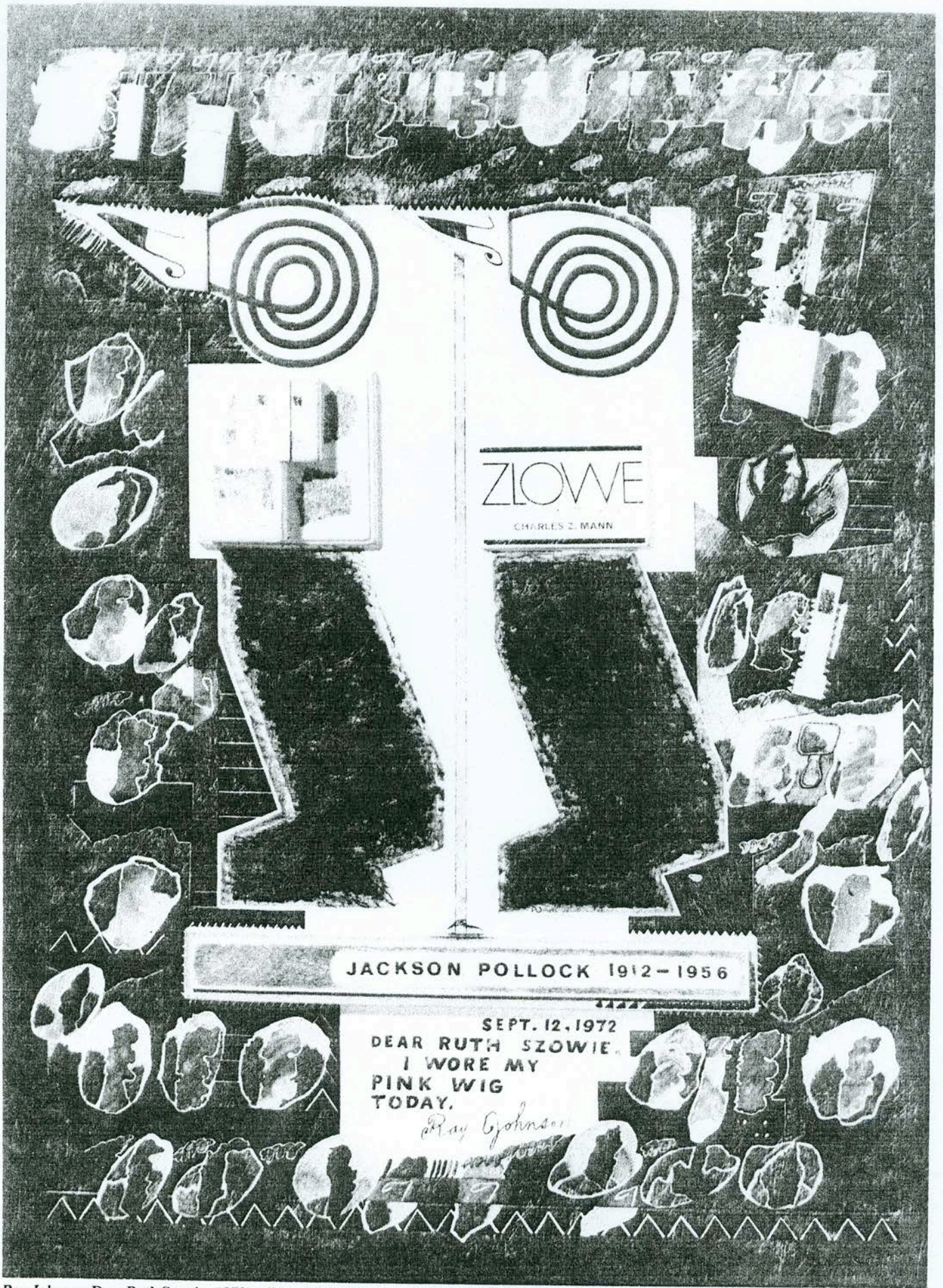
This does not mean, however, that Johnson's xeroxed Correspondence School ephemera and his unique wall-works are completely disparate types of art. No, the wit, at least, is the same in both; it's a lot more cryptic in the more "serious" collages, but still recognizably Johnson's wit—full of verbal and visual puns, often loony and rather loud. Images have been shared—we get a big bunny head in one of the latest collages in the show, the 1977 *Blood*. The bunny's right eye contains a water pail, a bit of mosaic reading "in love, les Hotel ALSO NUMB," and a kind of crescent moon below the eye, the lighter side of the moon reading:

c/in/love/That
Also/numbe/very/con/wa

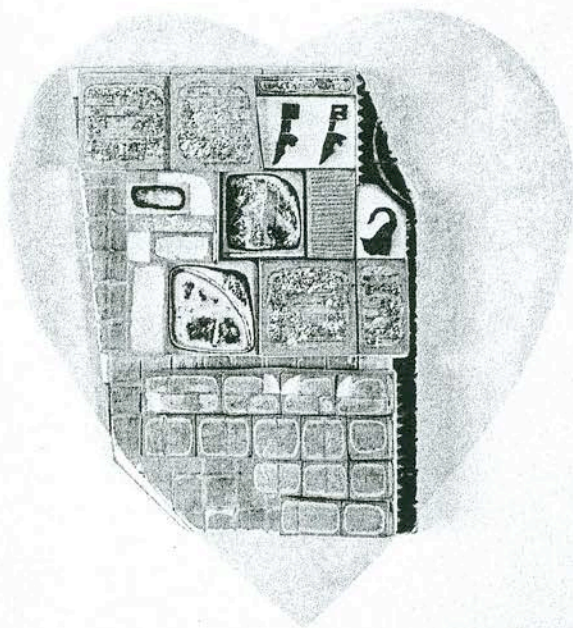
in typewritten letters.

If the sense of this would seem to

baffle even an ace cryptographer, well, Johnson has always been teasingly oblique in meaning. The Surrealists were, too, and Johnson stands in that cryptic tradition. But his meanings can be ferreted out at times, especially if you're up on art world intrigue. Take, for instance, the rather complicated piece *Dear Ruth Szowie* (1972), composed of mosaics and spirals and a central white shape that may serve as a kind of tombstone. The work operates on many levels, some of them of dubious taste, but all of them pure Johnson. We might take Ruth Szowie as a fictional creature, or as a woman dreamed up by Johnson in response to the card for an exhibition of paintings by Florence Zlowe included in the collage. But also obvious (to some) is his reference to a famous late-'50s painting by de Kooning, *Ruth's Zowie*, titled in honor of a lover who had previously been Jackson Pollock's girl, and was the only one of three to survive the 1956 car crash in which Pollock died. And lest we get too far afield in Florence Zlowe-land, below it all is a thin rectangle printed with "Jackson Pollock 1912-1956." Then, the clincher: a handwritten note in block letters dated Sept. 12, 1972 reading, "Dear Ruth Szowie, I wore my pink wig today. Ray Johnson." The art-world references, the puns-upon-puns, the "tesserae" decorating the piece, all seem at first like Learesque nonsense, but they have their correlates in real life as well as in collage. (Except, perhaps, the pink wig: Johnson is not widely known as a cross-dresser.)



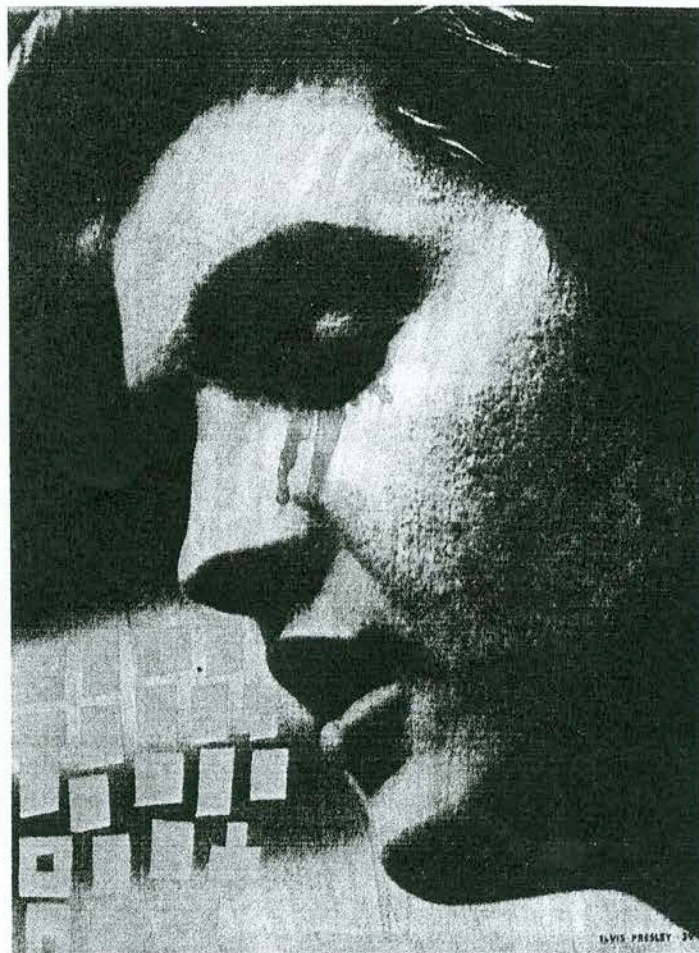
Ray Johnson: Dear Ruth Szowie, 1972, collage, 20 by 15 inches. Collection Estate of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, Florida.



VALENTINE FOR JOSEPH CORNELL

Ray Johnson 1971

Valentine for Joseph Cornell, 1971, collage,
24 1/2 by 17 13/16 inches. Betty Parsons Foundation, New York.



Elvis Presley No. 1, ca. 1955, collage,
14 1/2 by 11 1/2 inches. Collection William S. Wilson

Johnson, 57, wasn't wearing a pink wig when he showed up, unannounced, at the Nassau County Museum the day I was there. The bald pate of this elfin Locust Valley resident shone like the top of the Chrysler Building as he took his visitor past every collage in each of the five rooms devoted to them, his patter about the collages—what they meant (possibly), who they referred to, how they had come about—informatively non-stop. "It's too bad you didn't bring a tape recorder," Johnson said. And, as I look at my notes, it seems he was right—he was just too quick to be quotable.

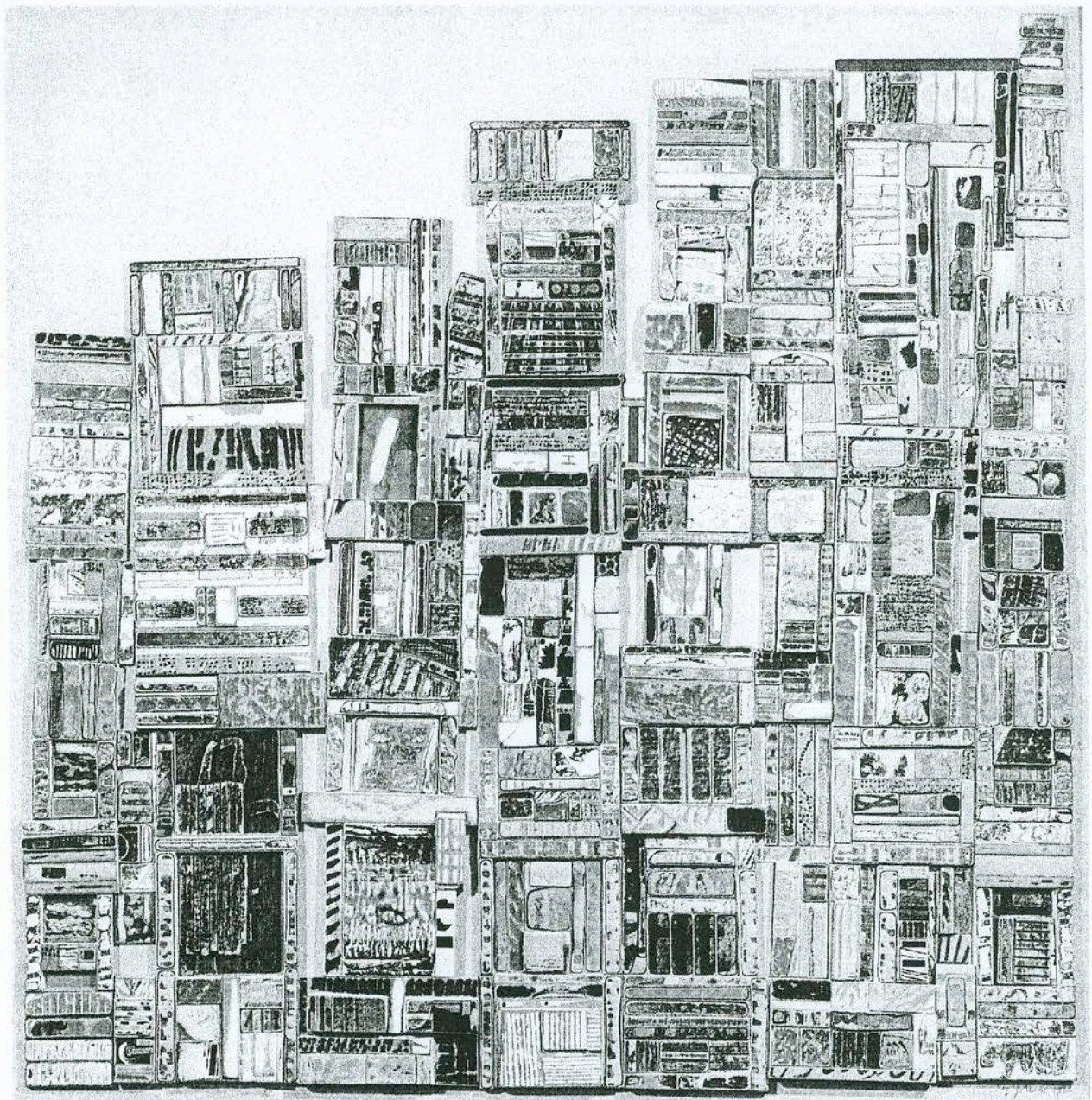
Most viewers of the show, however, presumably went through its five rooms unaccompanied. Some of the work doubtless made sense on its own. At the beginning of his career, Johnson was generous to his viewers, in that he drew so much of his material from pop culture; a bloody-eyed Elvis in the 1955 *Elvis Presley No. 1*; James Dean with "Mickey Mouse" ears (actually two Lucky Strike pack-

age circles) from 1957; and a preoccupation with Marilyn Monroe that amounted to a mania, exemplified by *Corinne Marilyn*, 1967—mosaic shapes again, animal forms, a chest with two swords through it, "Marilyn Monroe 1926–1962," and a liplike form titled "Some Like It Hat." (Marilyn's lips reminded Johnson of Marianne Moore's tricornered hat—and their initials *are* the same.)

But that's already getting a little arcane, and Johnson's private world, as he went along, got more and more so. To understand *Paul Feeley*, 1972, you have to know that Johnson's collaged worms refer to Feeley's painterly undulations. *Cervix Dollar Bill*, 1970, with its scrawled-over rumps, its dollar bill on a cervix-shaped piece of fabric, its double Mona Lisas and endless verbal puns ("HI COWGIRL HAIKU GIRL") and name-dropping (Zachary Scott, Ruth Ford—helps to know that these two were married—Cecil Beaton, Candy Darling, Parker Tyler), is a lesson in verbal and visual confusion and contusion. Art at its

best is a private world gone public; Johnson, in his later pieces, often doesn't bother to make the leap. We pretty much understand the work of his Surrealist forebears, though; maybe the legibility of Johnson's collages will increase with time.

For better and sometimes for worse, Johnson has played court jester to New York School art and culture of the '50s, '60s and '70s. But this exhibition—including a good deal of Correspondence School material in the ill-lit hallways—seemed to be out to make a knight of a jester. Why not? one might ask. Just look at Johnson's credentials: a scholarship to famed Black Mountain College in the late '40s. Study with Albers and Feininger. Friend of Cage and Cunningham and disciple of their games of chance. Exhibitor with Ad Reinhardt and Leon Polk Smith, and, later, influenced by Cy Twombly and Rauschenberg. Doesn't he deserve a little belated "serious" examination?



Jan.-Feb., 1966, collage, 30 inches square. Willard Gallery.

He's had some of it in the past, of course—there were earlier shows, at the Whitney and Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum, devoted to the New York Correspondence School. And for many of us, the mail art *is* Johnson's "serious" work, in its very prankishness and hilarity. The collages seem to me to shine a spotlight too directly on the jester's attitude towards his court: a kind of fawning malice. In my view, the nimbler and more "ephemeral" Johnson's appearances, the better.

Anyway, absolutely the best collage in the whole show—*Jan.-Feb.* from 1966, an epic assemblage of those carefully glued and colored and sandpapered cardboard mosaic chips, Al-

bersian in its grace and color, Steinbergian in its humanoid abstract figuration—included none of the puns or the in-jokes, or the fawning or the malice, in the stacks of mosaics and mosaics-within-mosaics that accumulate across the picture's surface. Another nice piece from even earlier on—1953—was paint, paper, string, board rectangles, and a dress-shaped piece of cardboard all in *Yellow*, while the easygoing wit of a mosaic *Camel* also rang esthetically true. Not to mention the 1971 *Valentine for Joseph Cornell*—tesserae over a heart-shaped form, full of grace and truth. In pieces like these, the jester becomes a troubadour.

History, and not the Nassau County

Museum, will have to make the final judgment about Johnson's collages. In the meantime, rest assured that Johnson's mail art is still with us, in a perhaps nasty, but funny, mail-piece making the rounds. "Natalie Plywood" is the name he's given to a kewpie-doll face offset by a rectangular piece of board below; additions have included Holly Plywood and Grant Plywood. Start thinking of all the famous "Woods" you can, and watch your mailbox. By scattering his art to the winds, Johnson's in control once more. □

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