

Art / Rosalind Constable

# THE MAILAWAY ART OF RAY JOHNSON

)))RAY; JOHNSON)))

“His most radical aspect is the overturning of the art market by free distribution. His works can't be bought or sold, only received.”

A couple of months ago Ray Johnson told me he was having an exhibition of his collages at the Feigen Gallery starting February 17, and I said I would like to write an article about him, his Mysterious New York Correspondance (*sic*) School and the collages. Johnson promptly enrolled me in the New York Correspondance School, instructed its members to write to me, and almost daily I began to receive the most curious communications, sometimes encased in the most imaginative envelopes.

As a matter of fact, this was not the first time I had been on Johnson's mailing list, for back in the fifties I had interviewed him in his stark white studio on slummy Suffolk Street on the Lower East Side. A day or two later I received from Johnson a small envelope containing a small quantity of dust. I assumed that Johnson, a monkish type, had felt compelled to sweep out his studio after it had been contaminated by my alien presence, and I was rather hurt. I dropped the envelope into the wastebasket. Little did I know then that I was discarding a work of art, for today a communication from Ray Johnson is a prized object in many collections.

Needless to say, the New York Correspondance School has been the subject of much learned exegesis in the art reviews. Writing in the Italian magazine, *Collage*, William S. Wilson, Ph.D., explained: “The collages and writings of Ray Johnson occur at that angle in the pie of art where poetry borders on painting. He does not use words musically but visually or pictorially, the letters forming a shape as well as a word.” Bill Wilson, who teaches medieval literature at Queens College, Flushing, is Johnson's chief biographer—his Boswell, in fact. Wilson has described how Johnson would take a taxi from the Harbor Bar across lower Manhattan to the Barbara Bar “just for the sake of a bad rhyme, a coincidence of sounds.”

Another faithful chronicler, David Bourdon, wrote in *Art International*: “The most radical aspect of the NYCS is the attempted overturning of the American art market through the free distribution of art. Johnson's mail-away art can't

be bought or sold but only received—whether the recipient wants it or not.” In an interview in *Artforum* Bourdon asked Johnson whether he considers his mailings a do-it-yourself art form. Johnson replied: “The contents is the contents; the stamp are the stamp; the address are the address. It is very clear. Your question ‘Is this an art form’ is the art form.”

Here is a sampling of some of the communications I received over the last few weeks from Ray Johnson and members of the NYCS:

□ An envelope from Benson, Nags Head, North Carolina, containing a stub from a Roslyn, Long Island, movie theatre taped to a bill from Tender Buttons, 143 East 62nd Street, New York, rubber-stamped RAY JOHNSON.

□ A bulging, psychedelically decorated envelope from the North West Mounted Valise, 44 East Riding, Cherry Hill, New Jersey, containing (among many other things) a stick of Wrigley's spearmint chewing gum, a hospital form to be filled out by an Expectant Mother, and an advertisement that read: “Bravos are a revolutionary smoking product. They contain no tobacco, no nicotine and are made of lettuce leaves . . . You will notice a gradual decline in your craving for a cigarette . . .”

□ A letter from Ray Johnson saying: “Andy Warhol said he wanted to be quoted as saying ‘Ray Johnson's letters are entertaining.’”

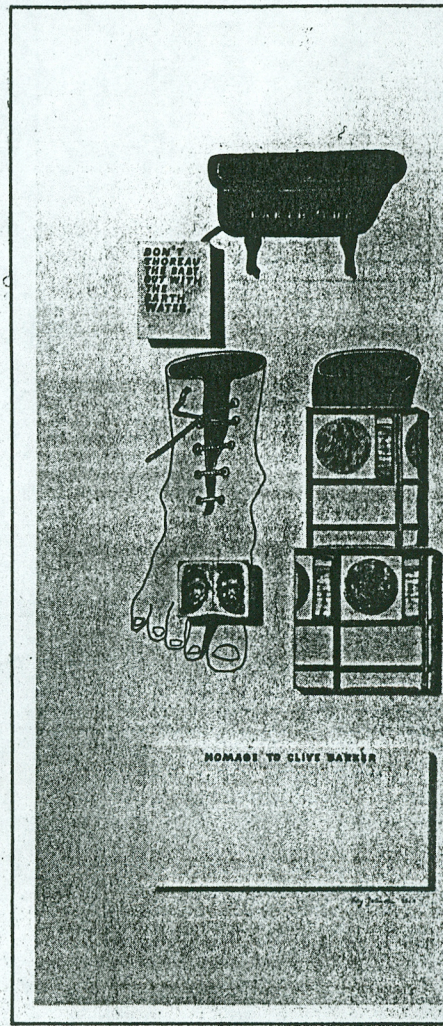
□ A huge card postmarked Chicago saying: “Dear Friend: due to ever increasing production costs and a multiple of other reasons, the FAT CITY SOUVINER PLASTIC POSTCARD COMPANY finds itself regretfully forced to suspend operations indefinitely . . .”

□ A letter from A.M. Jones, General Delivery, Supai, Arizona, enclosing the notice of a 10-cent refund paid by Mountain States Telephone to Albert M. Fine, 25 Curtis Road, Revere, Massachusetts, who had lost a dime in a coin-operated telephone.

□ A Photostated montage from Ray Johnson of part of an article on him in a Finnish magazine. (Johnson is of Finnish descent.) It began: “Ray Johnsonia on sanottu New Yorkin kuuluisimmaksi

tuntemattomaksi taitelijaksi’ . . .”

On Christmas Eve I received an envelope from the Museum of Modern Art containing nothing at all, and I found myself wondering whether MOMA had joined the NYCS. In fact, I was no longer sure what was or what wasn't a communication from the NYCS—it might be one of their objectives to surround all mail with mystery. However, I was beginning to find the joke wearing a bit thin. Although David Bourdon maintains that every enclosure has a message and a meaning, the choice of materials sent me seemed for the most part purely arbitrary (although Roslyn, L.I., was fairly simple, and I finally figured out Nags Head), a whimsical way





of disposing of junk mail as well as personal letters that the writer might not have wished to have made public. Bill Wilson wrote in *Art and Artists*: "One of the sources of exhilaration and liberation in this game is the lack of respect for privacy."

Ray Johnson likes to tell interviewers that he was born in Idaho, Potato, or, alternatively, Birthmark, North Dakota. He was born in Detroit and studied with Josef Albers at famed Black Mountain College at the same time as Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage. All three descended on New York in the fifties, but if Johnson didn't make the same splash it was partly due to his own reticence. Setting himself up in a \$31-a-month studio on Suffolk Street, he started the NYCS, whose members are elected (and sometimes ejected) solely on his say-so. At the same time Johnson was making small collages for sale. Refusing all gallery offers, he hawked his wares himself in a cardboard box containing precisely 100 collages, tied together in bundles of 25 and selling for \$100 each. "Like packages of money," Johnson explains. "I felt I was carrying around \$10,000. It was a Happening, really." When Johnson called on a prospective buyer he spread his wares out on a

table, which became the stage for his Happening. In this way he sold 10 collages to publisher Harry Abrams.

But far from "overturning" the art Establishment, Johnson finally decided to join it. In 1965, still living on the Lower East Side and busy with what he calls his "cockroach collages," he came down with hepatitis. When he recovered he allowed his good friend, sculptor Richard Lippold, to persuade him to have a one-man exhibition of his collages at Madison Avenue's Willard Gallery. After three successful shows at the Willard he switched to the Feigen Gallery. His current exhibition is his first in that gallery's new quarters at 27 East 79th Street, an ambiance so sumptuous that the *New York Times*' Hilton Kramer described it as resembling "an expensive hairdressing salon."

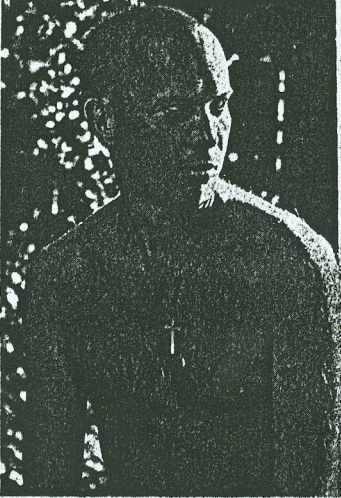
In 1968 Johnson was mugged on the Lower East Side, the same evening that Warhol was shot on Union Square. Johnson immediately left New York and went to live on Long Island, from where he wrote Richard Feigen: "Having lived in Manhattan for many years the rude Spanish switch-blade almost plunged into my back the shaky evening of the Warhol shooting prompted my moving from the city one hour away to an old white farmhouse with a

Joseph Cornell attic half a mile from a Sound. This nothingsville will help my future. Nothingsville was Glen Cove, but Johnson recently moved to Locust Valley, where he continues to live in almost total seclusion.

In recent years Johnson collages (now considerably larger) have taken over many of the elements used in his correspondence, combining exquisite little India-ink drawings with beautiful hand-lettered text. While many of the NYCS productions are, in Lippold's words, "little gems of organization," they don't always come off. Johnson's large collages have, in my opinion, a substance and esthetic validity not always apparent in his correspondence. Inevitably, Johnson's collages have been compared with those of Kurt Schwitters, the master collagist. But whereas a Schwitters collage contains no more than meets the delighted eye, a Johnson collage is full of hidden meaning, enigmatic analogies and obscure jokes.

Johnson is perfectly willing to reveal the private iconography of his work. In the current exhibition, for example, *I'd Love To Turn You On* contains, within a big light bulb, part of one of Jill Johnson's interminable stream-of-consciousness columns that have been occupying most of the space (or so it sometimes seems) in the *Village Voice* over the last few years. Says Johnson, deadpan: "I thought I'd hand-letter the complete works, but I got very tired. It's a herculean task." *Homage to Clive Barker* is intended as homage to René Magritte, the Belgian surrealist who once painted a pair of feet turning into boots—or vice versa. A young English pop sculptor, Clive Barker, recently reproduced the boot-feet in bronze, titling the piece *Homage to Magritte*. Johnson's *Homage* contains a Barth tub. Why Barth tub? Says Johnson: "Because we were all thrilled when John Barth mentioned the Correspondance School in the *Atlantic*." *Zeppelin List* is filled with numbers, because Ferdinand von Zeppelin was a Count, and this fact started Johnson counting.

Johnson's collages are, in fact, often said to have an affinity with Cornell's mysterious boxes. But Johnson denies he has been influenced either by Cornell or Schwitters. "I'm more interested in movie stars," he says. "I'm fascinated by the glamorous lives I think they lead." Johnson is famous for such non-answers to questions, and it is sometimes hard to know when his reply is a put-on. I asked him if the NYCS did not cost him a great deal in postage. "Not more than six cents a day," he assured me. The blue eyes in the high cheek-boned, slightly oriental Finnish face shone with such compelling honesty that I found myself believing him.



Random Johnsoniana: Snake-logo from his stationery (opposite page); "Homage to Clive Barker", sketch by a friend, and photo of the artist in the flesh.

Richard C.