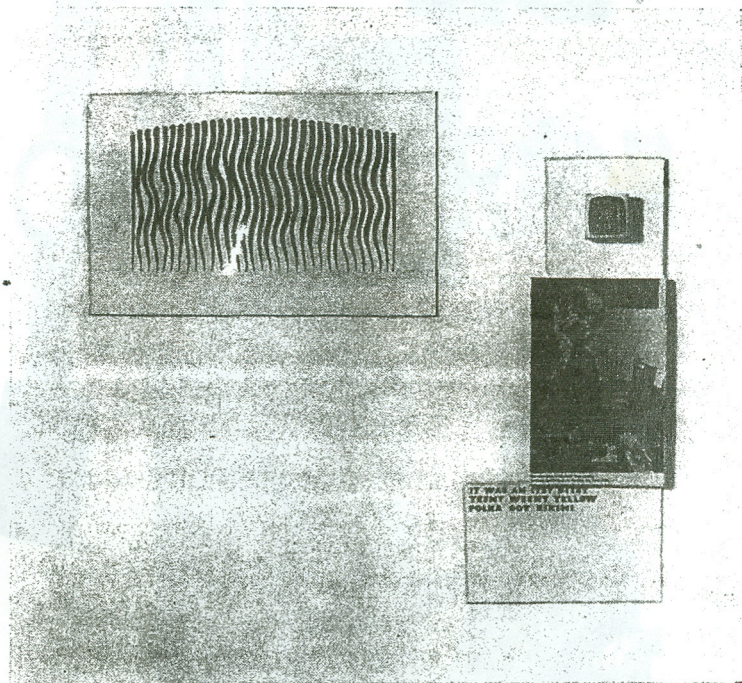
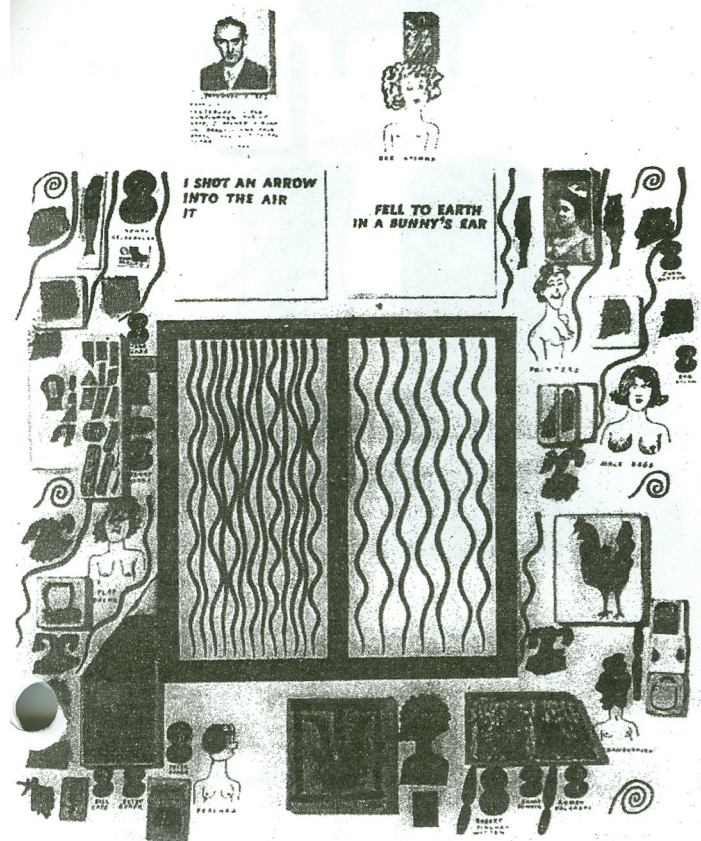


# Ray Johnson: Letters of Reference

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Ray Johnson, *Mondrian Combo* (1969), collage 24" x 27". Richard Feigen Gallery.

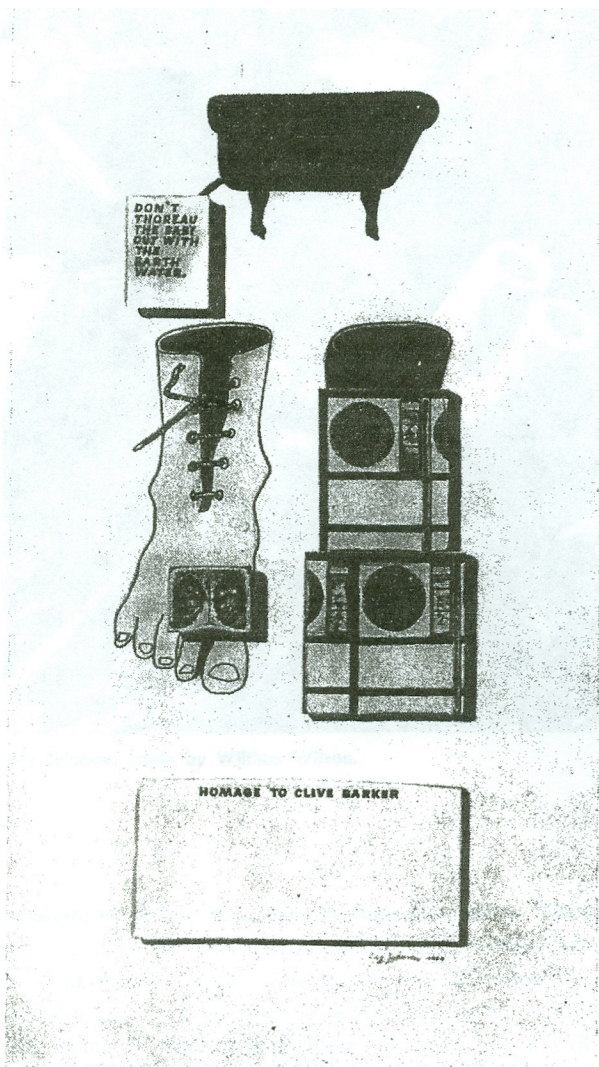
Left: Ray Johnson, *I Shot an Arrow* (1969), collage 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Richard Feigen Gallery.

by WILLIAM WILSON

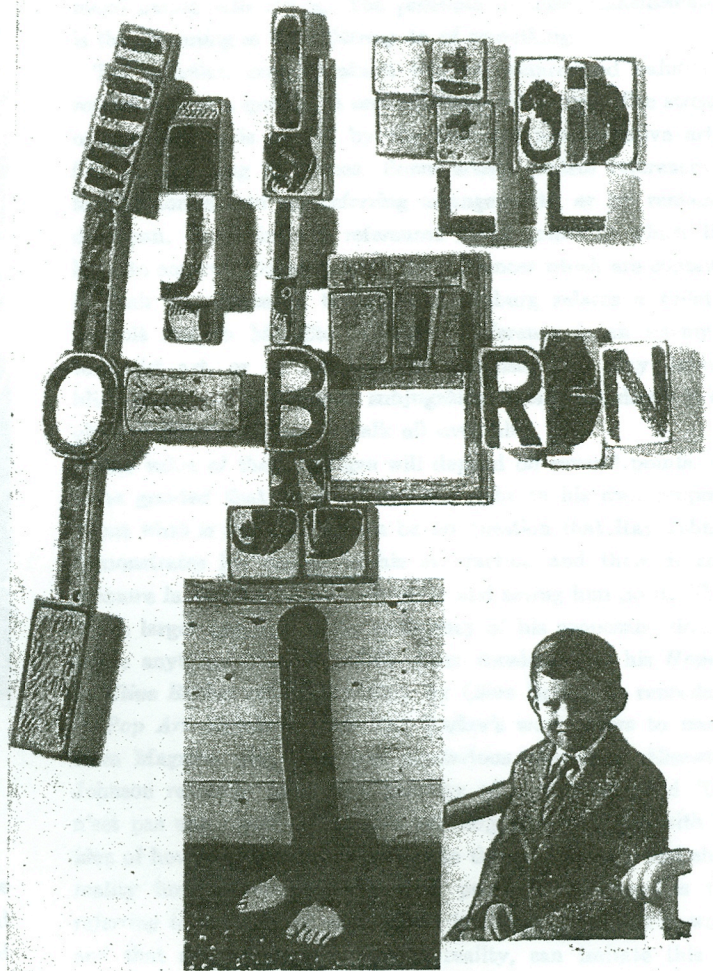
Ray Johnson thinks with resemblances as in homonyms, synonyms, coincidences, analogies, and identities. He develops his ideas with mirrorings, reflections, symmetries, and repetitions. This way of thinking has an ancient and worthy history; "The sum of wisdom," Joseph Needham has written in *Science and Civilization in China*, "consisted in adding to the number of intuited analogical correspondences in the repertory of correlations." Ray Johnson's art, which arranges and creates correspondences, is his way of thinking about his reality. The art proposes that an event or thing or image is real insofar as it contains a reference to another; *reference* becomes the common denominator of the terms used above: analogy, correlation, repetition, pun, et al. *Meaning* occurs when two things meet which contain a reference to each other. While existence was once read as a book of *revelation* in which each image bore a transcendent meaning, Ray Johnson reads existence as a book of *references* with "see above," "see below," "op. cit.," "idem," and "ibid" written all over things. These references intersect and overlap, and lead backwards or forwards, with no end in sight, and no purpose in view; they are too reversible to lead to any conclusion.

Thus attention is focused on *referring to*, and *referring to* is isolated as a quality or property experienced in a thing as immediately as color or weight. The formal arrangement of his collages supports the proposition that a thing is real as it refers to another thing, or to make the same point in other words, meaning means *referring to*.

One way to create meaning in a work of art is through the creation of a self-sufficient wholeness, a significant form in which the parts derive their meaning from their relation to the whole. Johnson's recent collages suspend that wholeness and therefore suspend that kind of meaning. His finished collages look haphazard, or undesigned, or unfinished, so that they do not make a claim to significant form; by not being a whole, they can be a raw clue, a fragment or episode in an intimate unraveling. He sends much of his work through the mails, sending images which correspond to other images as his form of epistolary correspondence. In this New York Correspondence School of Art, he takes public images (e.g. clippings from popular magazines) and sends them to friends for their private references. In the *public collages*, private references are made public; but they



Ray Johnson, *Homage to Clive Barker* (1969), collage 30" x 16¾". Richard Feigen Gallery.



Ray Johnson, *Jill Born* (1969), collage 18½" x 15¾". Richard Feigen Gallery.

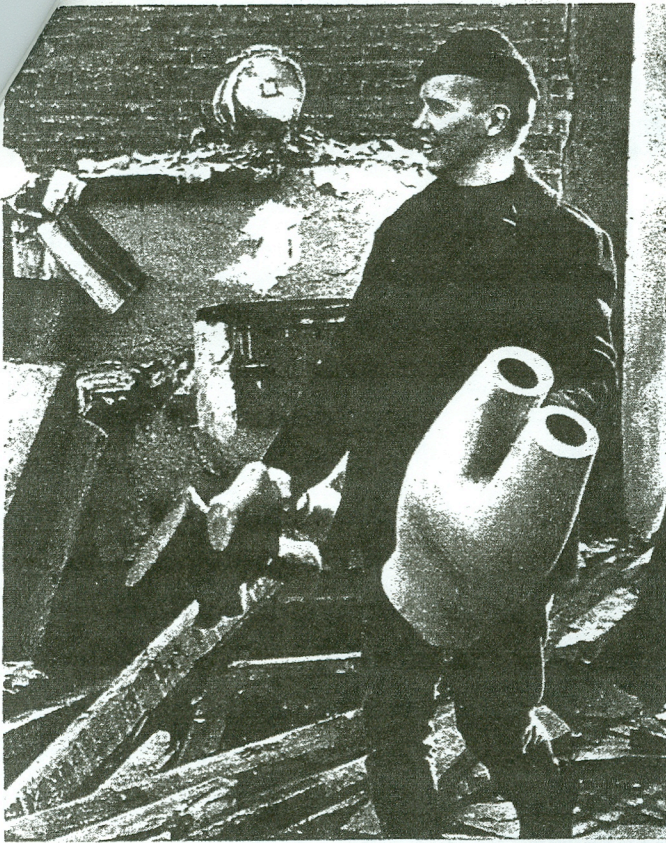
remain private; and thereby remain references. Anyone who gets all of the references does not get the collage, which uses opaque references in order to call attention to *reference per se*. The universality of significant form and of public reference are both sacrificed in order to allow *referring to* to surface as a universal, an essential part of experience.

*Referring to* has many forms. A comparison between two things makes something in one thing refer to something else. So a metaphor is a reference, and a bad metaphor successfully calls attention to reference in a way that a good (transparent) metaphor does not. The comparisons of breasts copied from a crudely drawn cartoon are vulgar; Michael Findlay speaks of Ray Johnson's "willing suspension of taste." What a way to refer to a lady's bosom! *Watermelons, cranberries, bee stings, cucumbers, mail bags!* But because of the vulgarity, the feeling of reference itself is part of the experience. The parts of the collages labeled "please send to" are quotations of items in the New York Correspondence School, sent to someone to be sent on to someone else. When he copies these correspondences, the copy or representation becomes a reference to a reference. He

creates a field of referential force and anything which enters that field yields a reference or disintegrates. One painting-collage (*Mondrian Comb*) has a part that looks like a comb, or snakes, or a Bridget Riley painting, and a photo of Mondrian on the other side, and as a whole refers to the juxtaposition of two earlier collages in a catalogue, *Pop Art Redefined*. Another collage, *Jill Born*, refers to Jill Kornblee. Jill and Born both contain four letters; the feet quoted from a painting by Margritte refer to each other, and then to the hand of the boy in the photograph, and to the claw-like arm of the chair, making four shapes which refer to each other. The most obscure reference in the collage is to another collage, yet to be made, using the other four letters from Kornblee: Klee.

In this context a photograph works as a reference to something, not a representation of it. Some of these references are to a past known only by memory and rearranged by the logic of reference. Memory and logic are reformulated into a single language of cross-references.

The actual formal structure of these collages depends upon letting one's attention be directed by the references. There is



Ray Johnson; photo by William Wilson.

of course no picture plane and no single focal plane. The separate items, in high and low relief, have different physical depths and different illusory depths. The mind's eye can follow the formal references in the paintings, the relation of part to part, the echo and rhyme of diagonal and ellipse. But the inward pull of the internal formal references is countered by the outward thrust of the external references. Or to use another image, there is a smaller orbit of attention to visual forms, and a larger orbit of attention to non-visual references. Attention jumps from one orbit to another, with an increase of visual energy on the lesser orbit, and a decrease on the larger. But this visual and visible slackening is compensated for by the increased energy of identifiable meanings: things do mean something, and they do so by referring to something else. Nabokov describes this feeling in *Pale Fire*: "There are events, strange happenings, that strike the mind as emblematic. They are like lost similes adrift without a string, attached to nothing." This non-visual, non-painterly energy can go back into the collages, reabsorbed as attention to the purely visual emissions.

These paintings (collages) prove that one thing does indeed lead to another, that one chair suggests another chair, one duck (quack) another duck (canvas), one star leading to starfish, chicken-with-stars soup, and a sheriff's badge. Images multiply like rabbits (cf. Rabat): jilt, stilt, kilt, tilt; Hi, Cowgirl, haiku girl. Words come into this process because events in fact throw up words which, although they might not be the name of the

William Wilson, who teaches at Queens College, is a frequent contributor to current art publications.

meaning of the event, can be the nickname of the event. Ray Johnson often uses nicknames to refer past a person to the meaning of the person. He can handle words so that they are not the names of things, but are references to other words. He can also make names into words. The principle in these transformations is that meaning is the *referring to* of something.

The question remains about the importance and validity of *referring to* as a quality in our experience of things. The strength of this quality is proved by the difficulty non-objective artists find in excluding references. Some artists control references by locking forms into self-referring arrangements, or by remaining dead-pan. Some include references as an impurity which they hope to control. Others release the references which are contained in their experience of things, as Oldenburg relates a toilet to Detroit and to Mt. Ste. Victoire. Reference is an enemy of formalist art, or of formalist art criticism, but Ray Johnson blithely accepts it, yields to subjugation, cuts it up, draws it out, glues it down, and lets it walk all over him.

The value of these collages will depend on several points. Let it be granted that an artist has the right to his own proposals about what is real. There can be no question that Ray Johnson demonstrates his reality to his satisfaction and there is some pleasure in looking over his shoulder and seeing him do it. There is the larger question of the sufficiency of his proposals: does he prove anything true or useful? First consider that his *Homage to Clive Barker* refers to a work by Clive Barker as reproduced in *Pop Art Redefined*, and that Barker's work refers to images from Magritte with their own mysterious references. Elsewhere Johnson refers to Magritte's painting of a pipe inscribed "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Magritte's painting already plays with the idea of how images and words refer to things. The proposal about reality implied by Ray Johnson's personal references is that *referring to* is a quality experienced in things as well as in words and that art, as an imitation of reality, can imitate this experience. His quotations of earlier art show that art has imitated that experience, which is a strong witness to its truth, and certainly evidence of its usefulness.

Since we find ourselves already dwelling in a language, not only has a name the quality of *referring to*, but a thing has the quality of referring to a name. Experience occurs within this interchange of reversible referings. Within Johnson's art, his disinterested *referring to* has no goal or purpose any more than being red has a goal; his style allows that everything refers to something other than itself; without meaning anything beyond reciprocal referring. Things, people, words and image can be brought together for a meeting, but not for a fusion; they can meet because they bear a common reference, but they have other references in reserve and must be sent on. Events bear a punning relation to other events, and people a punning relation to people. He makes a telephone call at a certain time knowing that Jay Johnson will answer the phone, but not to speak to him. Thus implicit in *referring to* is a distance, cold as a pun, between points of reference. You can come closer and closer to these paintings, and never be intimate with them. Their meaning can be suggested in a few words, but the effect of trying to grasp this work is like grasping a piece of ice which begins to change shape even as you touch it.

Ray Johnson will show at the Feigen Gallery from February 17 to March 21.