

DEATH RATTLE ART

By LI Picard

Visual associations and word images are Ray Johnson's preoccupation. He wanders as a happy hunter, wide awake in the ambiguous space of analogies. He is an artist, a poet and a collagist. Every minute detail of life is an adventure for him. And he loves the smallest things, bits of paper, envelopes, and small prints. He also adores puns, double meanings, and he transforms his ideas, witty thoughts, humorous escapades of mind into collage art. Ray Johnson registers with jet speed the microscopic occurrences of our realities.

In my opinion he discovers the essence of a strange artistic world, his very own world. His collages, which he showed in two one-man shows at the Willard Gallery and recently at the Feigen Gallery in Chicago, are built meticulously in the tradition of Kurt Schwitters and Joseph Cornell, but he also has a touch of Paul Klee. In March a series of Ray's newest works will be seen in a group show at the Finch College Museum in a collage show dedicated to the Visual Art in Process of this particular medium. The theme of the artist is Marianne Moore's famous "Tricorn Hat." Four versions of this black hat will be exhibited.

At this particular moment Ray Johnson announces with a new collage, not yet shown anywhere, his death. He was born in 1927, and one can read in the collage tombstone (see photo) the year 1966 as "death year." Concerned with the death image, he created an ad in his "Paper Snake Poetry Book" (1965, Something Else Press) with the cryptical word collage: "Send 96 cents postage for eight pages of the book about 'Death' to Ray Johnson, 176 Suffolk Street, New York City."

He has been living and working in a small room on Suffolk Street for quite a long time. When I met him at the high time of abstract expressionism in 1960, he appeared to me like a strange monk living in this tiny room, doing detailed small collages from cut cardboard. He was sending pieces of these collages out to friends and also to strangers "by mail." Ray had a love affair with the U.S. Post Office, and he created his own communication system for art. All kinds of people, artists, friends, famous and infamous people in New York and in the country received rays from Ray. William Wilson says about this adventure with "direct mail art" that "Ray Johnson plays the U.S. mails like a harp."

To explain Ray Johnson's poetic conundrums is an impossible task. He is like rain on a windowshield, like smoke above a hillside, like melting snow in a baby's fist, and his masterfully executed paper collages are concrete poems, crystallized ideas. In his last work forks become ceramic-like: ceramic fragments washed again and again from the waters to the shore, smoothed by the waves, rounded by the sand. The colors are very pale, whitish, bluish, pinkish, just traces of designs are left, which one can contemplate.

The tombstone, a particular collage invention, shows an intricate lacy drawing, remembering "Wanda Gag," the romantic writer, who died at the age of 53, June 28, 1946. Wanda Gag, author of children's books ("Millions of Cats," "The Funny Thing," "Snippy and Snappy," "The ABC Bunny" and "Gone is Gone") is coupled with Ray's own declaration of death "1927-1966." Ray indulges in a kind of weird black humor and he also jumps to all kinds of rock-rolling associations, like gag-gagging, a gag. It is this private world of Wanda Gag and her sister Flavia Gag which intrigues him, meandering in the Alice in Wonderland space of fantasies.

Flavia Gag, he tells me with great pleasure, wrote a magazine titled "Fried Ice"; these two words "Fried Ice" inspire Ray to all kinds of imagination. Wanda Gag, as a personality, as author, writer, teller of tales is for Ray Johnson the inspiration to be as dead today as Wanda. "Ray dies today to be alive tomorrow."

The small brick-like cardboard rectangles speak to us with innocence. They have the spirit of patience and are sandpapered and painted over and over with the same concern for smoothness and perfection. Ray Johnson seems to me like a Fra Angelico of collage mastery. Fra Angelico's golden angels are Ray's bits of cardboard cutouts. With unerring mind and eye these tiny specks of paper are collected and joined into a miniature architectural world. Mind, imagination and poetic vision work here together in a happy fertile marriage giving birth not to "Millions of Cats" but to a million paper children of Ray's never ending inventiveness, his humour, his wit and dancing spirit.

