

THE NEW YORK Correspondance School is an art of witty resemblances; it originates with Ray Johnson, but any number can play. It takes the 'New York school' of painters, an invention of careless art historians, and schools of art by correspondence in which famous artists teach commercial art through the mails, and it combines them into a satiric portmanteau that carries still other meanings.

Correspondence is spelled *correspondance*, not in the French manner, but because a Ukrainian poster from the Lower East Side of Manhattan announces a *dance* in a word that looks like *3AbaBy* (three-a-baby). This poster (*dance*, *3AbaBy*) became an image after Ann Wilson gave birth to twins and M.T. became pregnant; three-a-baby seemed a sign of the times.

In the same spirit Ray Johnson invented the Robin Gallery as an answer to the Batman Gallery in San Francisco (Robin was Batman's youthful companion in the comic as we now all know). The Robin Gallery not only held 'robbin' events (in October, 1963, Ray Johnson and Sari Dienes stole a painting back from friends at Haverstraw), it also held (at least announced) an eight man show with only three artists, because 3 and its inverted reflection ϵ make an 8. Clearly the truth for Ray Johnson is not correspondence to actuality (verisimilitude), but is correspondence of part to part (pregnant similarities that dance).

Now *correspondence* belongs in a thesaurus not only with 'correlation, agreement, symmetry, and concord', but also with 'epistolary intercourse, written communication, and letter writing'. So the NYCS uses the US mails as part of its method or medium.

Ray Johnson first notices something about a person, an image which might be central or marginal, and then he fills an envelope with scraps of images that comment on or add to or combine with that image. This process begins with a fondness for filing things, so he sends horses to Billy Linich, lobsters to Henry Martin, balloons to Karl Wirsum. He files a person under something in his mind, and then sends along through the mails whatever he feels belongs in the same file.

The use of the US mails, a sanctimonious institution with pretensions to heroic purity and endurance, offers

the delight of turning to aesthetic purposes a practical outfit with ethical ambitions ('Report obscene mail to your postmaster.'). The slow daily post is still useful, but technologically as obsolete as the nineteenth-century middle-class family in which grandfather seems to have devoured bacon and the morning post together. Now that data can be communicated electronically, the old fashioned mails begin to yield aesthetic possibilities. At just about the time that mailboxes ceased to be painted drab green, as nature intended them, and became red, white and blue, like US hybrid petunias, Ray Johnson founded the NYCS.

With correspondence as content (similarity) and as method (epistolary intercourse), many otherwise flat details come into relief. The bombastic statue of Samuel S. Cox, 'the letter carrier's friend', at Thompkin's Square off 10th Street in Manhattan, becomes a work of art when it is drawn by Karl Wirsum for page 7 of the Book About Death, a series of multilithed sheets Ray Johnson has mailed around. An envelope becomes part of a work of art, and the typical envelope of NYCS missive has been found discarded by a commercial firm or municipal agency (in truth, some filched by friends). Envelopes carrying the crest of TIME-LIFE INC rather deflate that afflatus of editorial wind, and envelopes from IBM turn up as truants from commerce playing a part in art whose value cannot be computed. The envelope usually has a commercial history, then, but its future lies as an unsalable part of the NYCS taking its chances in the unassailable US mails.

On the envelope is usually a correct return address for Ray Johnson (176 Suffolk Street, New York City, 10002), the address of the recipient, and stamps. The picture on the stamp can correspond to something, and the position of the stamp, and of the cancellation, is important formally to the success of the envelope. Stamp and cancellation are as significant as the position of a collector's seal on an oriental painting—sort of New York Chinatown Dada. (Ray Johnson has lived at Munroe Street and Dover Street, both near New York's Chinatown and City Hall. He has collected scraps of paper, pictures, and other trash from both. Chinatown has provided words—probably the

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by william wilson

price of chop suey—which are opaque, beautiful, and unintelligible, and which easily become part of a visual language of articulate design. City Hall has provided examples of English so stupidly depleted by municipal misuse as to be ready for resurrection in art.)

Some envelopes in the NYCS contain items that are, like a poem, overheard, since they are inscribed, 'Please send to John Doe, 123 4th Street, New York City 5'. The envelope, having passively passed through the mails, is now at the mercy of the first recipient. Some alter, some add, some subtract, some detract, some discard, some hoard, and others conscientiously forward the materials on their appointed rounds. Ray Johnson says he doesn't care what is done, that there are no rules, but he once circulated a list of people dropped from the NYCS for various offenses.

The relationships can get rather complex, as Ray Johnson directs to someone an image which he mails to someone else first. The first recipient, the middle-man, might or might not see something in what is passing through his hands. Knowing that people have been tampering with the mails, the final recipient cannot be certain what Ray Johnson originally sent.

He was once questioned by Lieutenant Johnston of the New York City Police department because a young woman received an envelope of indecent pictures with his return address. He explained the NYCS to the lieutenant and was *not* arrested. Even apart from hysterical females afraid of photographs, the possibilities are complicated, and in each case unique; what arises out of the NYCS is a curious tissue of relationships, a society of sorts, associating people who might think in images.

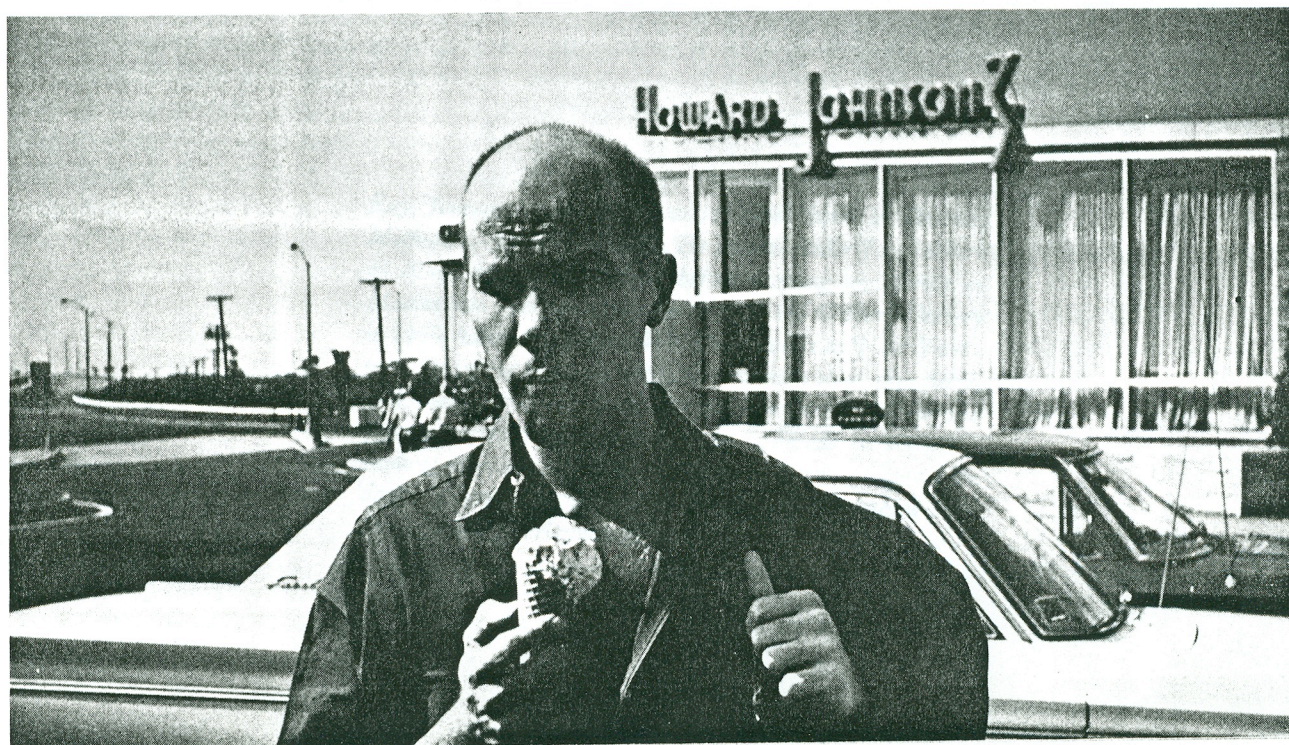
One of the sources of the exhilaration and liberation in this game is the lack of respect for privacy. We all came from homes in which even our sisters could be trusted not to read private letters; now letters most private get dumped into the NYCS, but these expressions of emotion are treated as abstractly as a triangle, as parts to be combined with other parts. Cries of the heart are examined for form and pattern, not sincerity. Personal letters are not sacred, because what is real is not the self or emotions (see Abstract Expressionism), but the special moments of

discovery in which the apparently random forms parallels. Ray Johnson is not accepting the lukewarm pleasures of a thermodynamic and chance distribution of junk through the mails. (Nam June Paik, a disciple of John Cage, once kept on his mantelpiece a mailing from Ray Johnson, who told him he had it wrong-side-out. For Paik, all sounds are music, but Ray Johnson turned the mailing to the significant side.) He is not shooting dice, he is creating possibilities for pattern, metaphor, and meaning.

We are familiar with metaphor that illuminates or enhances existence, but metaphor is not only a way of thinking about things, its use can be a theory of reality. Ray Johnson is a realist for whom reality is in designed or coincidental resemblances, a tissue of correspondences, a fabric of metaphors. These correspondences imply no 'higher' reality. The images do not bring forward invisible worlds in the way that the Visible Church embodies the Invisible Church. The envelopes and images do not clothe an underlying *ens*, nor are Ray Johnson's collages a shadow of the real. The mailings and collages, however deliberately the image may be veiled or obliterated, present that which is real because it is sufficient: correspondences. This real world of parallels and resemblances works with at least three principles:

Identity: Ray Johnson never read Leibnitz, but he plays with the problem of the identity of indiscernibles, renewing excitement and wonder that two things are identical, or almost so. He often uses 1c stamps so that several identical images are repeated on the envelope—George Washington George Washington George Washington George Washington—to make the 5c postage. Inside the envelope there may be two copies of the same photograph, or one photograph of James Dean in different sizes reproduced on different paper in different magazines. The photograph is the same, and yet it is other, and this fluctuation of same-and-other speaks to us of images enduring in the flux of things when they resemble other images.

Analogy: Sometimes Ray Johnson sees with a biologist's eye resemblances in form or function, but he works out his own genera and species, cutting not at the joints of scientific distinctions, but carving out his own 'impertinent



correspondencies' (Lamb). To him, a photograph of Buster Keaton leaning over the side of a ship belongs with a postcard of a gargoyle leaning over Notre Dame. An Indian drawing of a woman, seen sidewise, looks like a photograph of a pistol in the same envelope. The equation, woman and pistol, relates to a whole theme of 'Annie Get Your Gun', Ethel Merman, muff pistols, and Connie Francis in a recent movie in which she plays a female mailman with guns hanging above her mantelpiece.

Focus: A horse does not resemble, however abstracted, a cup and saucer, in the way that the Indian woman resembles the gun. But Ray Johnson can find a horse that is seen in the same way that a cup and saucer is being seen (Fernande Olivier painted by Picasso looks more like Kahnweiler painted by Picasso than like herself painted by Kees van Dongen). Ray Johnson finds resemblances between two things that are being imagined from the same point of view, or photographed from the same mental focus, and offers the resemblance as correspondence, and correspondence as meaning.

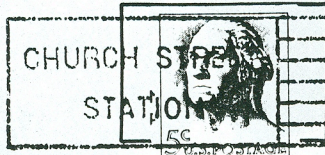
What suffices for Ray Johnson is a mind that makes metaphors and a world that yields them. He perceives identities in spite of obvious differences, and holds a tension between identity and difference in his work. The meaning of most envelopes in the NYCS is partly in the content (a picture of a horse conveys an idea), but more is in the method, the use of correspondences. These correspondences are not part of a cosmic design with metaphysical consolations. They represent a temporary balance between an unsatisfying common sense world and an imaginative mind, moments when miscellaneous items are shown to be a coherent motif: moments that rhyme.

Ray Johnson finds it sufficient to discover correspondences, and he corresponds with people by mail to convey to them images that correspond to some image they will recognise as appropriate.

His address is: 176 Suffolk Street, New York City, 10002.

(left) New York Correspondance School, 1964, using an envelope as the background of a collage-letter; note the variety of type and means of printing. The entry on Pope is clipped from a dictionary and attached with tape

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Pope, Alexander, 1688-1744, Eng. poet and translator, **h. London**, son of a prosperous linen merchant. He wrote in poetic form from a very early age. In 1714 he pub. his *Rape of the Lock*, which brought him instant fame. He is particularly noted for his translation of Homer's *Iliad*, 1715-20; the *Odyssey*, 1725-26; and an edition of Shakespeare, 1725.

COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON

Ray Johnson
176 Suffolk Street
New York, New York

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Ray Johnson is an American collagist born in Detroit, Michigan, October 16, 1927. He studied under Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, before working and living in Manhattan. His first one-man show at the Willard Gallery in 1965, hailed him in the New York Times as 'New York's most famous unknown artist'. His one-man show this April, '66, should bring his public reputation into line with the private reputation he has had for a decade as an artist ranking with Rauschenberg and Johns. A book of Correspondance School material was published by 'Something Else Press', 160 Fifth Avenue, NYC.