

Happy membership

I mean, what would you do?
I am certain only of my own uncertainty. I am now a member of the New York Correspondence School. I know this because it says so on the postcard:

April 29, 1969

Dear John,
Mr. Andreae is now a member of the New York Correspondence School.

Ray Johnson.

You observe that Mr. Johnson is not writing to me. He is writing to John. Further evidence on the same card suggests that the said John, who may or may not have seen Mr. Johnson's note, is John Willenbecher. I know this because Mr. Willenbecher (in a different type) has sent a brief note to Mr. Johnson — on the same side of the same card. It reads:

Dear Ray,
I'd walk a mile for Nancy Graves.
John Willenbecher
NYC 27 IV 69

To the right of this is a round print made, presumably, by a rubber stamp, and containing the letters JW. It is always possible that these are Mr. Willenbecher's initials.

Above the JW, perched more like a bird than a mammal, is, without any intended rhyme, a camel. The camel is also a rubber stamp. Or the rubber stamp is a camel. It depends how you look at it. It is not an Arabian camel (*Camelus dromedarius*) often called dromedary. It is a Bactrian camel, doubly watertight, equipped with two humps. It is *Camelus bactrianus*, none other.

All this is on one side of the card. And more. Next to Mr. Johnson's name is a slightly smudged ink drawing of a head with two bunny-like ears. The head is neckless. It is also on one side. It may well be (for all I know) a self-portrait of Mr. Johnson. But I have never met Mr. Johnson, so I can't be certain. I am not certain.

And then there is the collage. Strictly speaking, the collage is on both sides of the card. It consists of the bottom part of a brief article by me which appeared on this page several weeks ago, a piece about Nancy Graves and some camels she had made and had exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York.

This partial article is glued to the card partly on one side, partly on the other. One might say that it is bent. But it is on this side of the card that one is informed that the collage is by Alexandra Findlay.

COLLAGE BY ALEXANDRA FINDLAY

it says.
We now proceed to the flip-side.

Working from top to bottom, we start with the other side of the collage. To the left of this, Mr. Johnson (or someone) has kindly stamped his address. Below this is Mr. Willenbecher's address. Below Mr. Willenbecher's address is my address, with the words "Please send to" next to my name. To the left of my name are the only words on the card that appear to be actually addressed to me:

Happy Membership,

These two simple words (nicely rounded by a comma), conveying a sentiment I can only appreciate, may be the work of Mr. Willenbecher—the type appears to match his, at any rate.

Then at the bottom of this side are the words, partly in type, partly in rubber stamp:

PLAY IT STRAIGHT, MAY WILSON
and her address.

So that is the card and its messages, and I'm not at all sure what to do next. I could just sit back and be happy in my membership, I suppose. But how can I be sure that if I sit back, I might not lose my membership for reasons of nonparticipation? Then again, how should I participate?

Should I send the card on to someone else? Has May Wilson in all her straightness seen it yet? Should she? How can I be sure she deserves to see it? Or would even like to?

My waking hours are plagued with such questions. Perhaps I should just hold on to this card-cum-collage and hope it increases in value. Perhaps I should have it framed—in one of those Janus frames used by museums to show the work of draftsmen who have inconsiderately drawn something on both sides of their piece of paper.

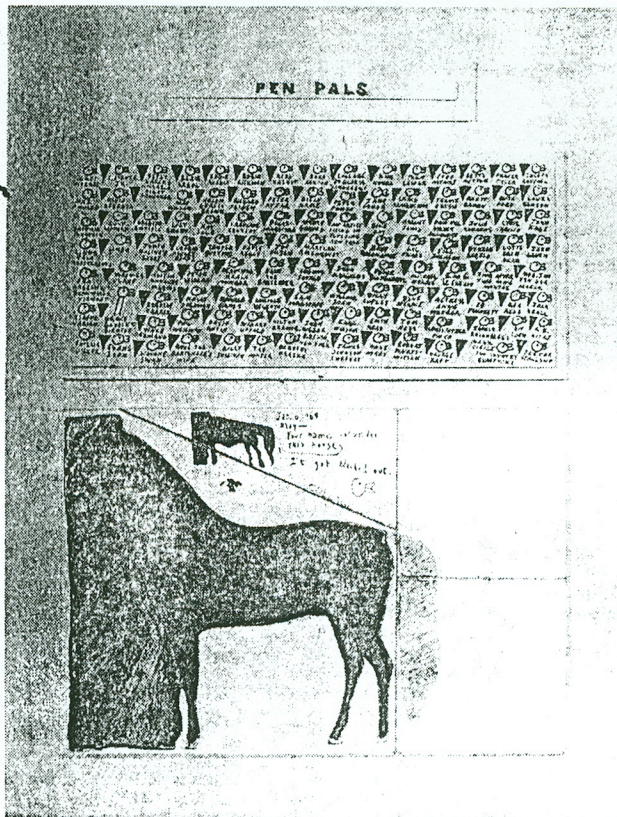
Since it is a school that my membership is to be happy in, perhaps I should be learning something—but then it is possible to be both happy and learning something simultaneously?

Maybe I'm expected to start sending enigmatic postcards to people myself. Or should I telephone Mr. Johnson (or Alexandra, or May, or John) and express my thanks? But since it's a correspondence school, perhaps telephones are out. On the other hand every one of these people is actually featured in the New York telephone book, so presumably they have telephones; and if they have telephones it must mean that they are expecting someone to phone them; and it could be me. You never know.

On the other hand I could just send them each an unusual present—a mold for a plasticine porter for May Wilson, for instance; a delicate replica of one of Bici Hendrick's knitted manhole cover covers for John Willenbecher; a chart indicating the precise duration of February fill-dike for Alexandra Findlay; and a mesembryanthemum seed for Ray Johnson.

In fact I am not untaken with the idea of sending a mesembryanthemum seed to Ray Johnson. I think he might like that.

I begin to feel more certain already. A mesembryanthemum seed for Mr. Johnson. Just the thing. It would give him something to do. It would somehow pass back the responsibility for action. It would enable me to sit back and enjoy my membership, while he struggles with his mesembryanthemum seed.



Pictures by courtesy of the Richard Feigen Gallery, New York
"PEN PALS," 1969: Collage (16 1/8" x 13") by Ray Johnson, American, 1927-



"TWIGGY WITH DOLLAR BILL" 1969: Collage (17" x 17") by Ray Johnson

I won't tell him what to do with it. I'll leave that entirely to him. But this mesembryanthemum seed will be a token of my appreciation for everything he has done to make me a happy member of the New York Correspondence School.

And then I will go out in the hope of seeing John Willenbecher walking a mile for Nancy Graves—or maybe even in the hope of seeing a camel. It's several weeks since I last saw a camel in New York.

CHRISTOPHER ANDREA