

The New York Correspondence School

The exchanges which follow represent an extract from a single segment of the New York Correspondence School, Ray Johnson. Prop. Fortunately, the selection is more "linear" than most; at a certain point the correspondence began to be shaped by the necessity to exchange certain information relating to the interview with Ray Johnson which was finally published in ARTFORUM in September, 1964. David Bourdon, who perforce played some role in the exchanges below, has been kind enough to provide an introduction to the workings of the New York Correspondence School:

If you say Ray Johnson has been mailing his life away for 15-20 years, no one will contradict you. Everybody has been saying "over 10 years" for years. At Black Mountain College, Norman Solomon used to leave notes in the grass for the snakes; Ray never tires of mar-

veling over this. Perhaps it's made up.)

Who he writes to? The correspondence, while extensive, is highly selective. Some people have implored for years to be put on his "mailing list" without result. I don't believe Ray feels obligated to "answer" every piece of nutty mail he receives from strangers. I would say he corresponds with those who are likely to be in tune with his way of thinking. These may be total strangers: people whose art or life he "digs." It has to be something that meshes with his own fantasies. If people don't respond (and many respond negatively) he usually drops them from his mailing list — though he may occasionally dun them with cryptic — and abusive — mailings. He likes it when the recipient responds and "plays the game."

The reason he can't correspond with a total stranger is that he has to have some focus on

the individual, some real or fancied slant. I knew Ray for some time before I got any mailings. It wasn't until I brought up, ceased to repress, my interest in James Dean that I began receiving envelopes of James Dean material.

Every enclosure has a meaning. The enclosures are arranged within the envelope according to size. The outside of the envelope may also have a message (stamps, return letterhead, etc.) Most of the material is referential and you must have total recall. The colored dots on Wonder Bread wrapping may refer to Larry Poons or Little Stevie Wonder, depending on which — or maybe both) you were talking about last.

How does he keep track of penpals? Who knows? He strikes when least expected.

July 6, 1964

Dear Mr. Leider:

Ray Johnson suggested I send to you our interview of last December, as you might possibly be interested in it for ARTFORUM.

I enclose my review of September 3, 1963 which presents a more flattering yet truthful picture of Ray Johnson — should ARTFORUM be interested in doing a one-page feature on him.

Ray will be featured in the next issue of Location. I will be in the fall issues of Paris Review, with an Andy Warhol interview, and Konstrevy, with an article on Claes Oldenburg.

Ray and I appreciate your looking at these pieces.

Sincerely yours,
David Bourdon Jr.



August 3, 1964

Dear David Bourdon:

Thank you very much for the interview with Ray Johnson — I like it very much and hope to use it either in the September or October issue, depending on how many illustrations I can dig up from Irving Blum. I also understand that Coplans has some pieces which we may be able to use.

We are not so good at paying for things. I am putting the article down at \$30.00, which is the most we can afford when we do pay, and hope to be able to send this to you sometime in the future.

Please let me know if you have any other pieces in your drawer that you think we might like.

Editor

August 10, 1964

Dear Mr. Leider:

I am very glad that you like the interview with Ray Johnson. Harry Abrams may be able to provide us with a photograph or two of the Johnson collages in his collection. For more junk mail, you might contact George Herms and Wally Berman.

It has been pointed out to me that my 3rd. question is ungrammatical; the sentence should read "papier colle is a mirror" or "papiers colles are mirrors." Please correct our grammar and misspellings so that we don't look like perfect fools. In the cement forecourt of the Grauman's Chinese at the World's Fair, Masina spelled her name Giulietta, not Giuletta.

I believe you're right about the 30 pieces of silver. It seems to be the usual fee.

Sincerely,
David Bourdon Jr.

August 8, 1964

Dear Mr. Leider:

Today is the eighth day of the eighth month and David Bourdon called me on the telephone to say you will publish his interview.

I enclose an announcement of the eight man show which has been drawing record crowds at the Robin Gallery.

I suggested to David Bourdon that the Abrams Family Collection might supply photos of the ten collages they purchased of mine recently and I also have some eight by ten glossy movie star photos of people like Vicki Dougan that might be of interest.

Ray Johnson
176 Suffolk St.
New York City 2

8 MAN SHOW
GEORGE BRECHT
GEORGE HERMS
RAY JOHNSTON
ROBIN GALLERY

August 12, 1964

Dear Mrs. Fenton:

This is the twelfth day of the eighth month, and, as you undoubtedly know, we like to give birth on the first day of the ninth month. This leaves us with precious little time to contact the Abrams Family Collection for the ten colleges they endowed from you. In lieu, as they say, I've borrowed some four lithos from Irving Blum (chair, ARYOU8, something with lettering, etc.) and, in the spirit of things, have handed them over to the layout kid and told him to use them all, or any combination, with the text.

When I was a kid I lived at 165 Suffolk Street; there was a store that sold gravestones across the street. I shook my tiny fist at an indifferent sky and swore that one day I'd fight my way out of there. Next night, Big Rico came down the block and on his arm was Vicki Dougan. He saw me writing art criticism at my window. "That kid's got something," said Miss Dougan.

If you can get to the Abrams Family very fast and have them send photos of the collages they have, I will be able to substitute them hurriedly. Don't send the originals — we will only enter them anonymously in the Walnut Creek Art Festival.

Lastly, Mrs. Fenton, its come to my attention that there is an 8-man show at the Robin Gallery, but only six have showed up. Can we call up your tubeless energy to, perhaps, fill in? With Mr. Hendricks?

Phil Leider
Los Angeles



DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND BUILDINGS CITY OF NEW YORK

EDWARD T. CRINNION FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

August 17, 1964

Dear Mr. Leider:

I enclose the Vicki Dougan photo. Note her glove. She is seated next to Victor Borge. Note his shoes.

Color them plum.

I once unsuccessfully tried to steal Victor Borge's overcoat. Sonia Sekula once stole Mrs. Bernard Reis Collection's mink coat. That story is in John Cage's "Silence."

That gravestone store you mention on Suffolk Street is now a Knoll's showroom.

Sonia died two years ago.

With best wishes, Ray M. Johnson



Dear Philip Leider,

Sorry — Harry Abrams Family Collection has not photographed its Ray Johnson holdings.

Sincerely, David Bourdon

August 21, 1964

Dear 176,

Thanks for the photo. That's her all right, same as when I knew her. Couple of changes, of course; used to be when only one buttock was on the chair the other would sag a bit — now it kind of cantilevers. Of course the negative might be flopped.

The guy is not Big Rico; looks, from the jacket, like an early shot of Kid Twist Reles.

Sorry about Sonia. You never know. Six months ago she looked just great.

Knoll's showroom is obviously a front. Behind every Knoll there is a gravestone.

176 Suffolk had gypsies; no window shades.

One Avenue B got lopped off for a freeway.

Harry Abrams Collection keeps its minks in vaults and doesn't photograph endowed collages.

Yours truly, 165

8/24/64



8/25/64

RJ: Preter Dougan to Dougan

PL

8/9/64

Dear Mr. Leider:

Here's a photo of Vicki Dougan as a child cooking up some of that Goode food. Please note the can opener on the radiator in the Pussy Group Show picture.

Very sincerely yours,
Ray Johnson



August 30, 1964

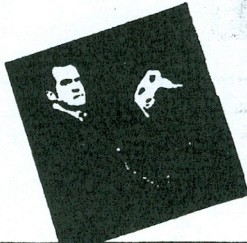
Dear First Deputy Commissioner Edward T. Crinnion.

Congratulations on your promotion; guess I can't call you Ed anymore, eh Ed. ol buddy?

Thanks very much for the Cat Violation; we'll do something about that can opener right away. And Vicki Dougan or no Vicki Dougan, kids on welfare can't have new toys like that — we'll look into it, Ed.

Enclosing a photo of Dickie Dougan for your files; he's the Dad all right. Soon as we find him, they all go off relief.

Yours truly,
Robert T. McCarthy
Second Deputy Commissioner
Department of Public Welfare
City of New York



Dear Mr. Leider,

I am just out of Bellevue Hospital where I with hepatitis vacationed for three weeks.

You will send David Bourdon and I copies of ARTFORUM won't you with the I-N-T-E-R-V-I-E-W?

Mr. Gerry Ayres, 7267 Franklin Avenue in Hollywood hoards an early Johnsonia Luckv Strike Collages Collection that perhaps you and Mr. Blum might find amusing to plow through over a tall clinky drink but as for myself what my spleen and liver have been through I am on the wagon, attending to a backlog (or is the word blackblog) of nonsense correspondence and I have all those snakes to look after.

It did not occur to me to suggest Mr. Ayres be consulted about illustrations of my "work" to go with that Bourdon interview but I trust all is well.

Dorothy Podber and I borrowed a pencil from the before-mentioned tombstone factory on Suffolk Street so I could write down "potassium permanganete" on a piece of paper which I need for my feet. She asked the man who was working on a piece of stone with a stylus who died today.

Whatever happened to your Mr. Coplans?

Ray Johnson



1110
96 CENTS
POSTAGE
FOR 8 PAGES
OF 144 PAGES
\$5.00

DEATH
TO RAY
JOHNSON
178 SUFFOLK
ST. BROOKLYN
CITY



MAN SHOW
HERMS
JOHNSON
BRECHT
ROBIN
GALLERY

MAN SHOW

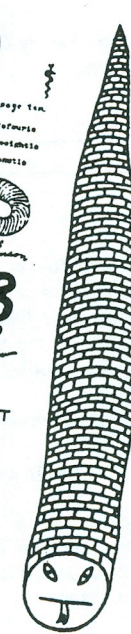
GEORGE BRECHT

GEORGE HERMS

RAY JOHNSTON

ROBIN GALLERY

BRICK SNAKE
FOR ANNE WILSON



August 19, 1966

Dear Mr. Leider.

Ray Johnson's Paintings by Earle Brown

Earle Brown produced to my surprise a small package of Borden's *Pick Ups*, which are cheese peanut butter sandwiches. They are square and four in a cellophaned package. Curiously, there are 13 holes in the sandwich and I counted the top the top side and then the bottom side and both times there were 13 holes so that makes 26 holes. since there is this choking (neck) peanut butter all dried and not very chewy. The design of holes is such:



Ray Johnson
New York, N.Y.

8/25/66

CONTRA BROWN ON JOHNSON

One is hesitant to question the authority of Earle Brown in visual matters, but I cannot help seeing the *Borden's Pick Ups* in radically different terms. Mr. Brown, it seems to me, misses the importance of the cellophane package: here the framing edge becomes both container and, paradoxically, establishes the limits of the work invisibly. This "invisible square," as it were, is echoed in the rigor with which Brown chooses, not three or five sandwiches, but four, forcing our attention to the four corners of the structure. The dot pattern, too, reinforces this remorseless insistence on the square: between the rows of three dots, a perfect square is formed. Then — and this is an invariable characteristic of Johnson's genius — the entire validity of geometry is challenged by the (also invisible unless the piece is literally smashed!) inclusion of the peanut butter, than which no substance is less geometric. Brown seems also to miss the point of the fact that the peanut butter is both dried and not very chewy: here, the addition of *moisture* restores the peanut butter to its true state, but in doing so destroys the rigor of geometric form. Thus, a brilliant game of form and form-destruction is played out to its final consequence.

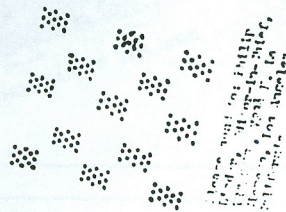
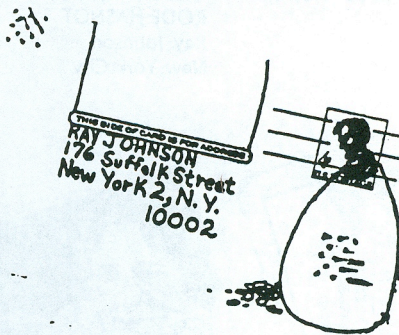
—Anita Ech

August 30, 1966

Dear Phil,

Earle Brown (nee Simone Whitman) neglected to comment on Ray Johnson's sophisticated use of the new technology and its materials. Here credit must be given to Bell Labs' wizard Billy Kluver who, after nine months herculean labor (working on his own time during coffee breaks), was finally able to wrest the desired object from a vending machine. Thanks to the savvy Swede, more and more artists are now gaining considerable nutrition from these flavorsome peanut butter cheese crackers.

Sincerely yours,
David Bourdon



September 3, 1966

Dear Philip Leider.

I received a post card from Earle Brown dated 29 Aug. 66 reading: "I can't find my peanut butter crackers — I don't know what could have happened to them but if I forgot them at your house please don't loose them or anything else like that—how's everything else like that? Earle."

This was on the back of a card reading: "Don't try to fool me . . . I've been to Collage."

I happened to have the very same card reading "Don't try to fool me . . . I've been to Collage," so I wrote on the back of it addressed to Earle Brown:

"I can't find my peanut butter crackers — I don't know what could have happened to them but if I forgot them at your house please don't loose them or anything else like that — how's everything else like that? Ray." And I used the same 5¢ Washington postage stamp in returning the message to him.

Ray

Valentine's Day, 1967

Dear Mr. Philip Leider.

I am having my 3rd one-man show of paintings at the Willard Gallery, 29 East 72nd St., NYC from April 25 — May 27th. The theme will be

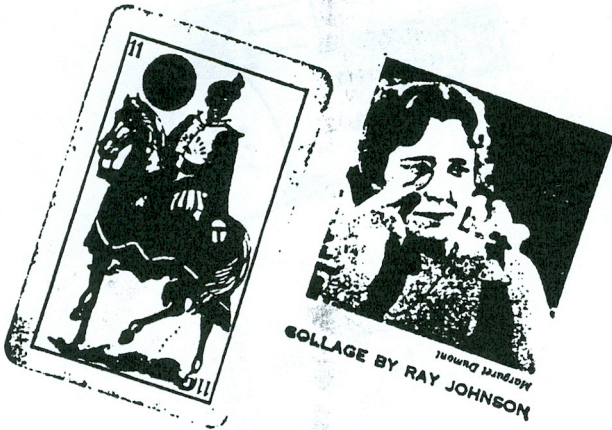
BOOTS COMBS HATS

I am also showing eight paintings of black hats having something to do with Marianne Moore and mantah rays at the Finch College Collage Show opening March 10th.

I enclose Lil Picard's reportage about the Wanda Gag in Ray Johnson's life. David Bourdon and I are not speaking.

I showed paintings to Dore Ashton today. She wrote a perceptive review of my last show for Studio International. She is interested in writing a kind of article if I also write something. Are you interested in our project.

RODE HASNOT
Ray Johnson
New York City



Dear Miss Tonash.
No. thank you.

Washington's Birthday, 1967

Hilp Deiler

March 3, 1967

Philip Leider,

Golly gee. I wonder if Milton Kramer is going to say something nice about me soon. gosh I just don't know what he will think (gush!) he SAID IN PRINT! that Paul Klee just wasn't one of the "greats." Gulp!

How is your little girl?

Best wishes,

P.S.: I have asked Richard C of Johnson City Fan Club to give you a blast.

March 7, 67

Ray Johnson,

Gee, Ray, how can you think it would matter to any of us girls here at the Ray Johnson Fan Club of Sin City what Nickie Hilton thinks about a guy like you? We wouldn't care what he said, even in print, even on the whole front page of the NEW YORK TIMES. In our hearts you're the best!

Do you really think we here at RJFCSC can't see that all he's trying to do is make a rep for himself by putting down Cassius Klee? Why before you came along we had a great picture of a little tinker toy and swore allegiance every single morning to the CKFCSC.

Sue-Ann X

April 6, 1967

Dear Philip Leider,
How are things out there
in the Great American West?
—Ray Johnson

ROBERT F. KENNEDY
NEW YORK

110 EAST 42ND STREET
NEW YORK 10017

United States Senate

July 15, 1966

Mr. Ray Johnson
176 Suffolk Street
New York, New York 10002

Dear Mr. Johnson:

It has come to my attention that you were presented an art award at the joint annual ceremonies of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters held recently at the Academy auditorium.

I wish to join with your family and friends in congratulating you on this honor.

With kindest regards,

Sincerely,

Robert F. Kennedy

April 13, 67

Dear Ray Johnson,

This is how things stand in the great American West. The quotation is from an untitled manuscript by an untitled author named Tom Olsen:

Lonesome Cowboy: "The West ain't big enough for me and Black Bart!"

Sidekick: "You crazy? Get on your horse and get the hell out of here before he shoots your ass off!"

Lonesome Leider