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- Teaching Stamp Classes
- Tribute to Ray Johnson
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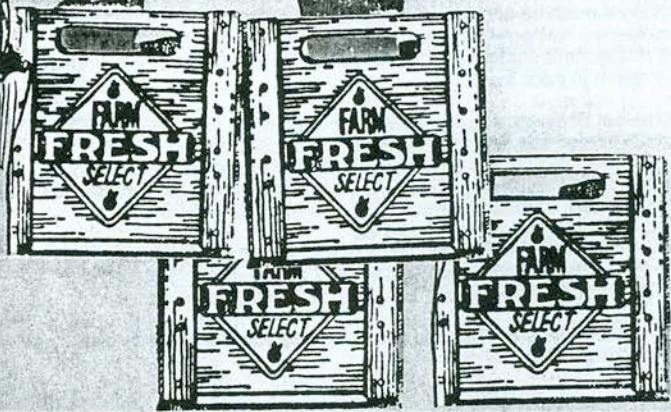
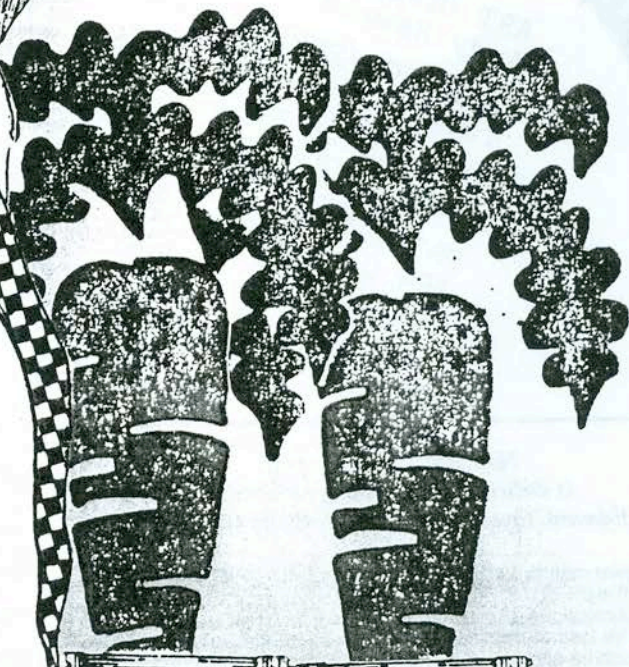
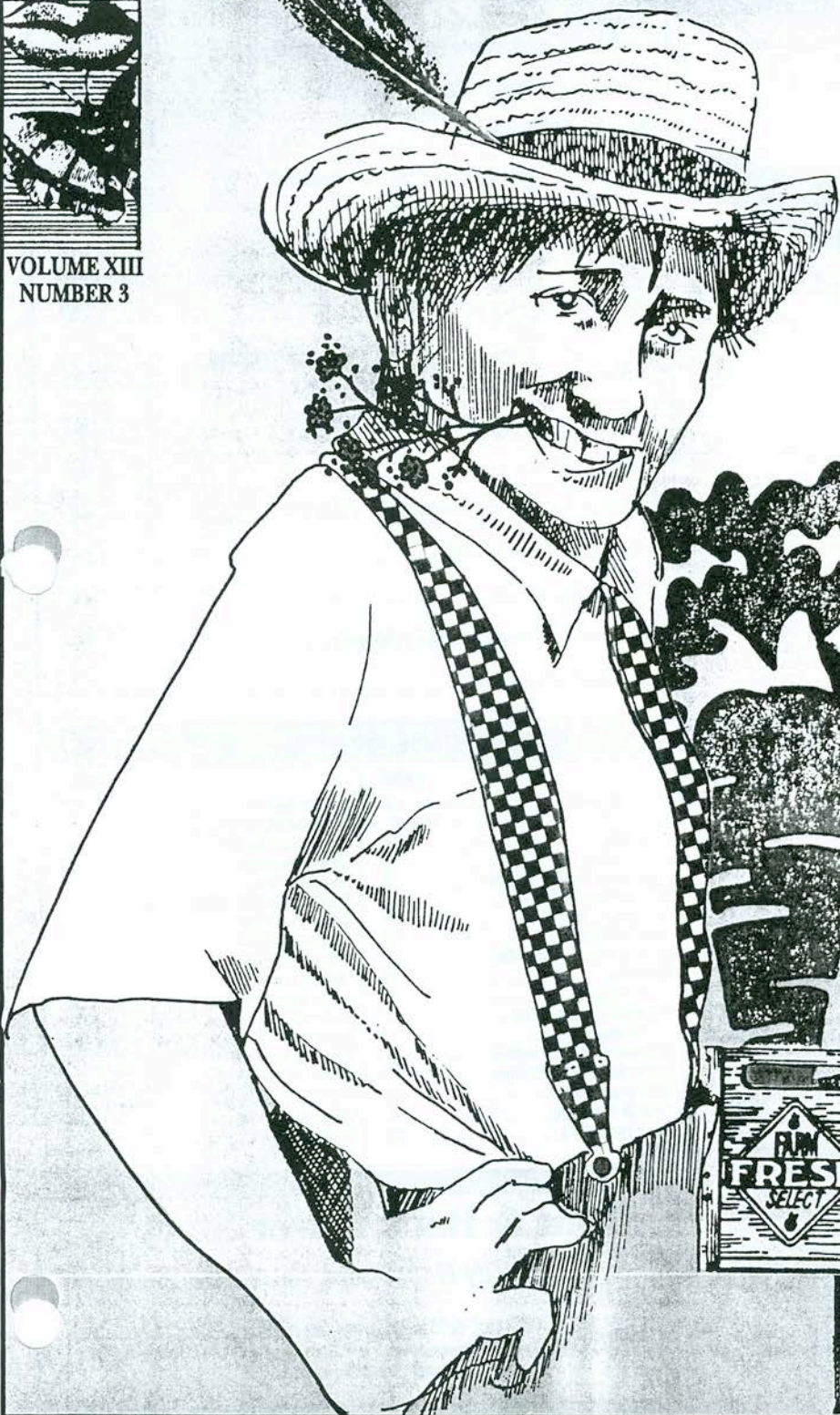
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# NATIONAL STAMPAGRAPHIC

VOLUME XIII  
NUMBER 3

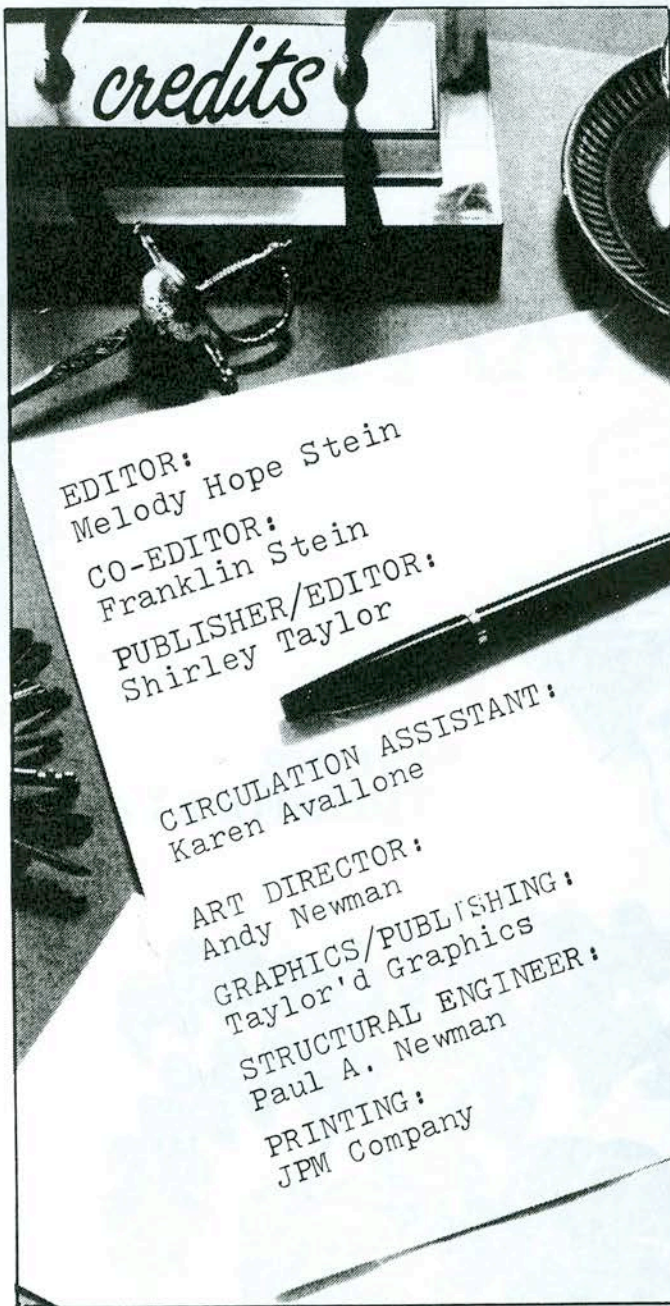
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# NATIONAL STAMPAGRAPHIC

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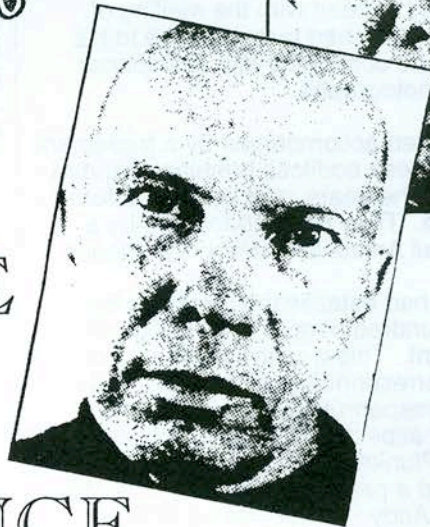
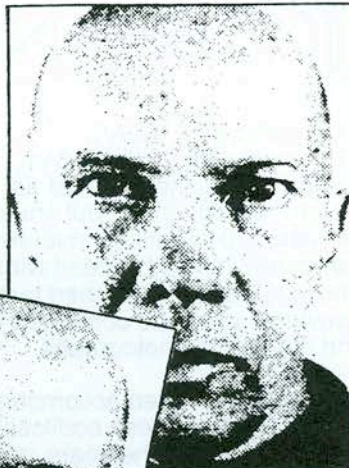
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*by Melody Hope Stein, North Valley Stream, NY*

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# BUNNY DEAD: THE MYSTERIOUS LIFE AND DEATH OF RAY JOHNSON AND THE RISE OF THE NEW YORK CORRESPONDANCE SCHOOL OF ART



by JOHN HELD, JR.

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On January 13, 1995, the founding father of Mail Art, died under mysterious circumstances rivaling the enigmatic way in which he conducted his life. He was 67 years old and leaves behind a legacy of incalculable proportions. The New York Correspondance School of Art that he birthed remains a reality in mailboxes around the world. For his many friends, Johnson has not left, but has only traded addresses. His is still the brightest star in the firmament of the Eternal Network.

Ray Johnson was born on October 16, 1927, in Detroit, Michigan, into a community of Finnish immigrants. He revealed a propensity toward art from a young age, and he was eventually given a scholarship to Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which he attended from 1945 to

1948. Black Mountain has assumed mythic proportions in the history of American art as a training ground for the major art trends that exploded in the fifties and sixties. It was here that Johnson studied with such modern masters as Josef Albers, Lyonel Feininger, Robert Motherwell, and Ossip Zadkine, among others.

In 1948, he moved to New York where he was a painter of geometric abstractions. He was friendly with such artists as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, with whom he was associated at Black Mountain. In the mid-fifties, he was dealing with images from popular culture (such as Elvis Presley, James Dean and packaging of Lucky Strike cigarettes) that



RAYJO

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# RAY JOHNSON

CONTINUES...



pre-figured the Pop Art Movement. By the late fifties, he had established himself as a major collage artist, but shunned gallery representation until the mid-sixties. He concerned himself instead with the mailing of "moticos", a self-described term he gave to his drawings, which he combined with newspaper and magazine photographs.

They were often accompanied by a trademark "bunny head". These bodiless bunnies changed appearance over the years, and became a form of self-portraiture. They have been used by a generation of Mail Artists to evoke his presence.

By 1955, he had established a mailing list of at least two-hundred people to whom these moticos were sent. This was the beginning of the New York Correspondence School (later to become the Correspondance School to reflect the performance aspect of the mailings), so named by E.M. Plunkett in 1962. Johnson's mailings asserted a peculiar legitimacy from the very beginning. Andy Warhol was an avid fan and collector, offering cash rewards for any Johnson letters he was able to obtain.

Unlike the career driven artists in his milieu, Johnson seemed satisfied with his underground reputation, scorning mainstream acceptance. While Cage continued in the creation of quirky yet recognizable classical idioms such as oratorios, quartets and the like; and Merce Cunningham continued in the tradition of Modern Dance; where Rauschenberg and Johns surely stretched the boundaries of easel painting, yet remained implanted within a studio context; Johnson turned to something completely different - correspondence art. It has been said that what Joseph Cornell was to a box, Johnson was to the letter. It was a medium that he made completely his own.



1968



1970



1971



1974



1969



1971



1972



1975

*Ray Johnson  
has been dropped*



It is for this reason that Mail Art has had trouble escaping the ghetto it has been placed in by the mainstream artworld. Critics speculate that while Johnson was a major innovator, all others involved

in a similar course were doomed to repeat his considerable efforts. He was so talented that he was able to make it look easy. When he encouraged his

... continued on next page

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# RAY JOHNSON

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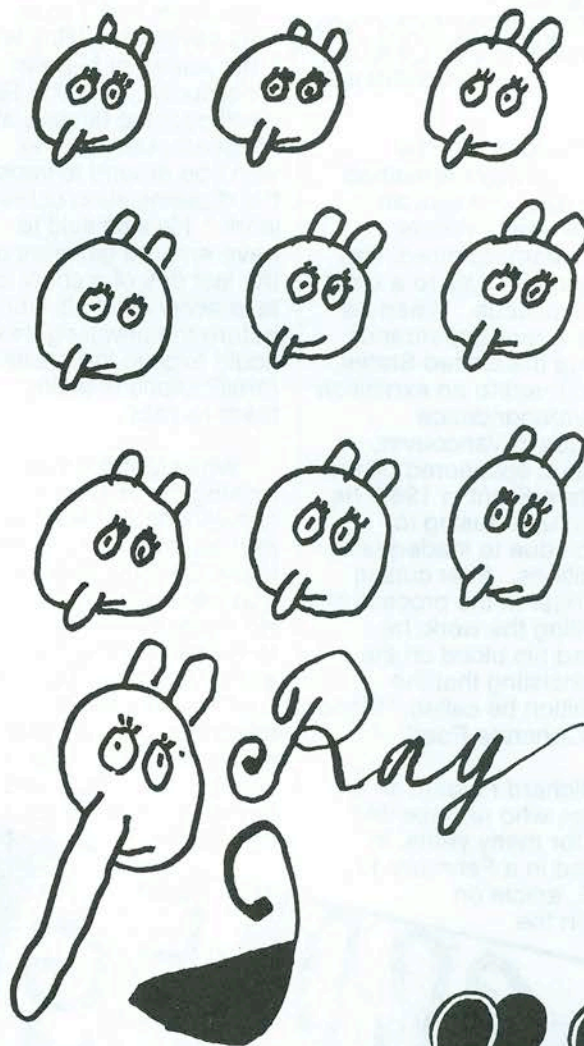
correspondents to "add and send to . . .", Johnson let loose a flood of creativity that encircled the globe, but the activity has never been completely able to break free of the sheer force of his personality.

Johnson was also a performance artist, who typically rebelled against the prevailing "happenings" of the era. In typical Johnson fashion, he was an agent of "nothings", conceptualizing an event from which he immediately removed himself and left the audience to its own devices. At other times, however, he brought together members of his mailing list into New York Correspondance School of

Art Meetings, formed against different thematical backdrops. These events predate the Mail Art Congresses of 1986 and the Networker Congresses of 1992 by several decades.

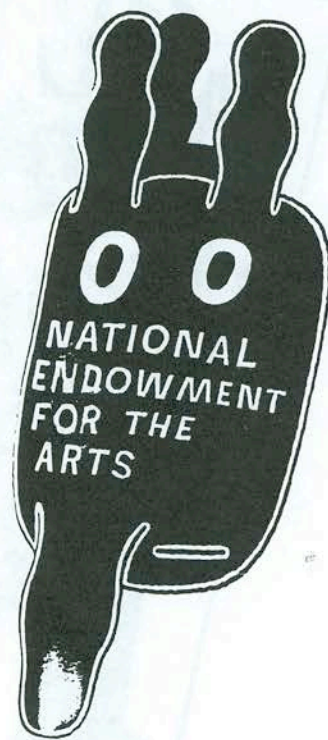
His 1970 exhibition of the *New York Correspondance School of Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, set the tone for a multitude of similar exhibitions in years to follow. The show established the principle that all work submitted to a Mail Art exhibition would be shown without assessment of quality. For Johnson, art was not a matter of consumable objects, but about participation and collaboration.

Despite the search for Mail Art's ancestors; despite the urge to incorporate singular works



of Duchamp into the legacy; despite the dabblings of the Italian Futurists, who used the postal system for propaganda purposes; despite the postal collaborations of Fluxus, and the actions of Gutai; Ray Johnson remains the measure by which contemporary Mail Artists must weigh their accomplishments. He was the spark that ignited a firestorm of international postal creativity.

Fluxus was certainly cognizant of Ray Johnson. Dick Higgins, who was an active participant in the movement, published a book on Johnson, *The Paper Snake* (Something Else Press, 1965). Fluxus produced Flux Postal Kits, rubber stamps and artist postage stamps, no doubt extended the range of Mail Art, but no one could claim authorship of Mail Art other than Ray Johnson. Johnson never asserted himself in this manner. His was a matter of leadership by example only.



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# RAY JOHNSON

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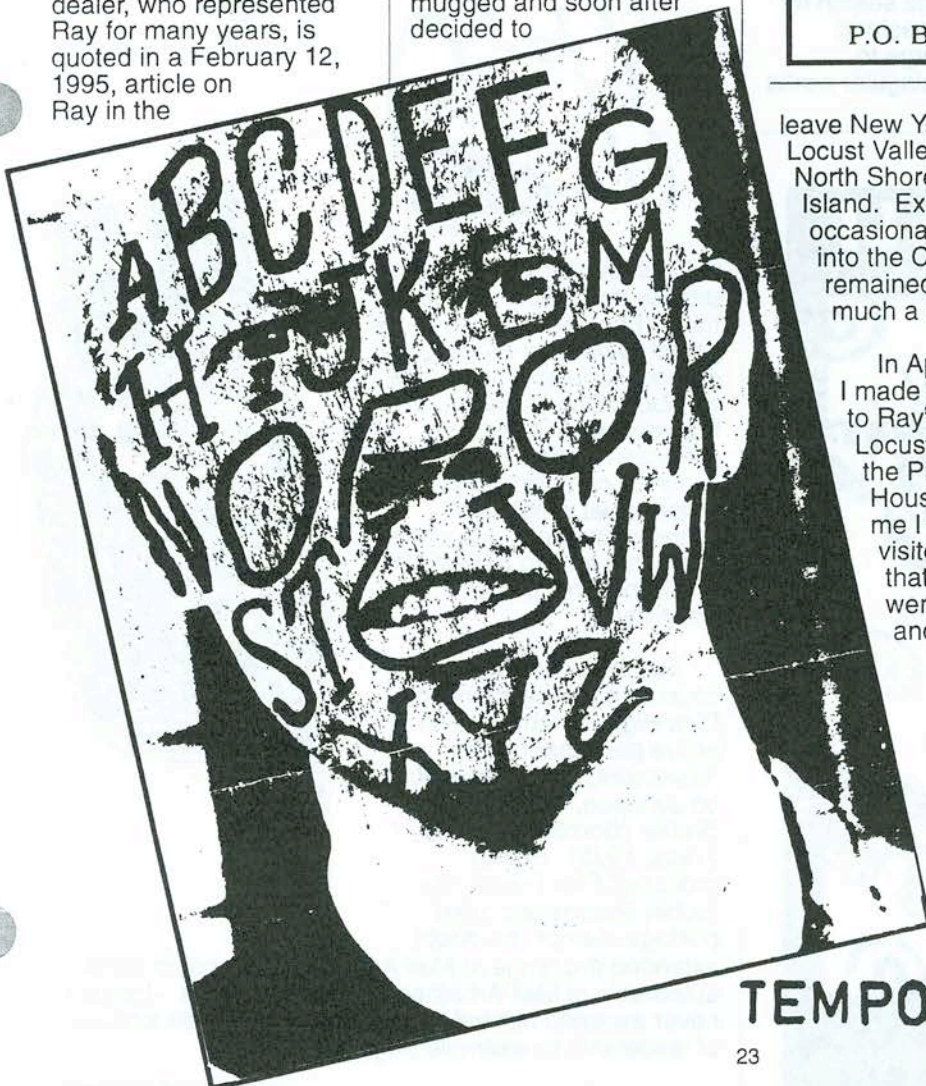
Ray Johnson, the person, always remained enigmatic. He was an artist's artist. Where others compromised, Ray always held tight to a strict personal code. When he made a rare appearance outside the United States, and agreed to an exhibition of correspondence collages in Vancouver, Canada, sponsored by the Western Front in 1969, he ended up refusing to exhibit due to inadequate conditions. After cutting his finger in the process of installing the work, he spread his blood on the wall insisting that the exhibition be called, "Blood of a Concrete Poet".

Richard Feigen, an art dealer, who represented Ray for many years, is quoted in a February 12, 1995, article on Ray in the

the *New York Times*, as saying that "Ray was the author of his own obscurity . . . I think Ray will become famous after

his death, because he won't be around to impede the dissemination of his work." He was said to have entered galleries on the last day of a show to take away all of his work before the unwitting dealer could explain the positive ramifications of letting them remain.

While Mail Art was making the change to Networking Art, Ray never participated in any of the many Congress Meetings that were taking place. He never made the leap to E-Mail (although he was known to Fax). Ray was a letterwriter and a telephone gossip. The same day Andy Warhol was shot, Johnson was mugged and soon after decided to



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leave New York City for Locust Valley, on the North Shore of Long Island. Except for occasional forays into the City, he remained very much a hermit.

In April 1979, I made a rare visit to Ray's home in Locust Valley -- the Pink Swan House. He told me I was the first visitor he had that year. There were no chairs and very little

furniture of any kind. On his bed -- a mattress, really -- there were boxes, and others were spread throughout most of the house. They appeared to be potential materials for his mailings and collage work. I didn't get the impression he collected all the work mailed to him. I know that on more than one occasion, my own mailings to him were recycled with something added to them.

On a personal level, Ray could be as gracious

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## TEMPORARY BLINDNESS

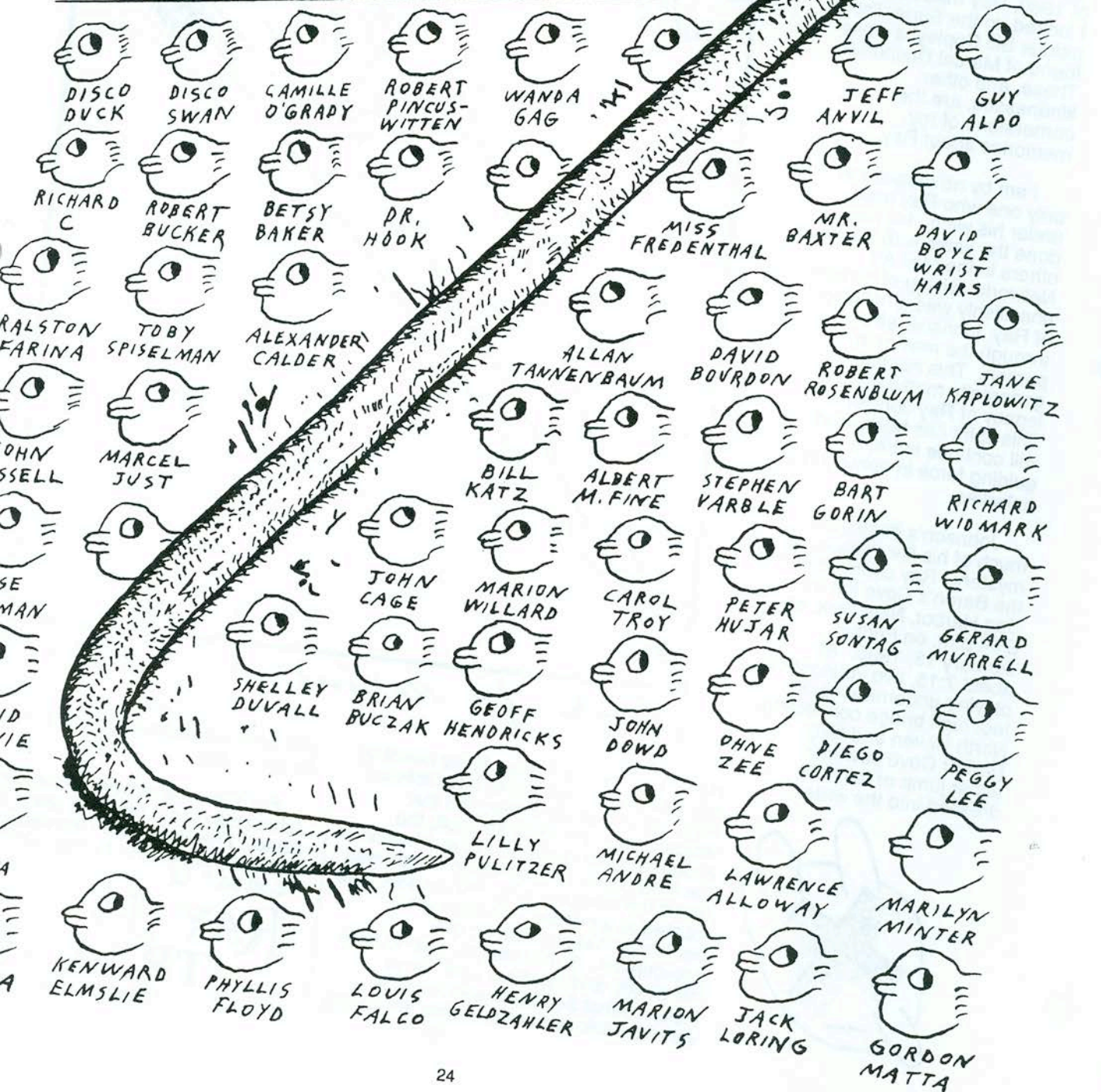


# EACH TIME YOU DRAG ME THIS WAY

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# RAY JOHNSON

CONTINUES ...

RAY JOHNSON  
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LOCUST VALLEY,  
NEW YORK 11560

and giving as his mailings. Seemingly knowing everyone in the artworld of New York, he delighted in making connections. Through him, I was introduced to the poet Madeline Gins, someone I greatly admired, and who was a friend of Ray's. When I made a trip to Key West, Florida, in the Winter of 1980, Ray made sure I looked up the Surrealist painter Bill Copley, a close friend of Marcel Duchamp. These, and other kindnesses, are the cornerstone of my memories about Ray.

I am by no means the only one who Ray took under his wing. He has done the same with many others in the Mail Art Network. Giving of himself unselfishly was a hallmark of Ray Johnson, either through the mail or in person. This natural generosity marks the true legacy of Ray Johnson. This spirit has been, and will continue to be, a guiding force in networking activities.

Johnson's death, like much of his life, remains a mystery. Ray checked into the Baron's Cove Inn in Sag Harbor, New York, at 5:24 p.m. on Friday, January 13, 1995. At about 7:15, two youngsters playing underneath a 30 foot high bridge connecting North Haven and Sag Harbor Cove saw him either jump or fall, fully dressed into the water.



PEREGRINE

PETER FONDA  
ERNEST HEMINGWAY  
ROBERT GINGERS  
DORIS THOMAS

GINGER ROGERS  
ROBERT ALTMAN  
MELODY HOPE

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He began, what a *Village Voice* headline later called, a "Backstroke into Oblivion". Although the children reported the incident to an unidentified adult, the situation wasn't brought to the attention of the local police until Johnson's body was found the following day. His car was later located at a nearby 7-Eleven with a bottleful of Valium from an old prescription. \$1700 was recovered from his wallet, and the *New York Times* reported that \$400,000 was found in various bank accounts. Police are calling

the death an apparent suicide, with death by drowning.

For some there were clues. One of Johnson's recent mailings read, "**Bunny Dead. The New York Correspondence School Bunny was Murdered Today. 12.30.94.**" □

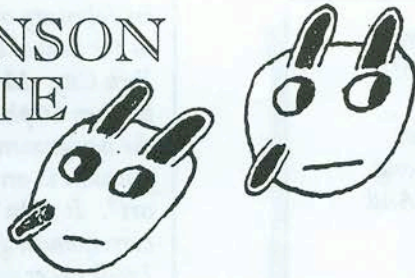
## RAY JOHNSON TRIBUTE

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# RAY JOHNSON TRIBUTE

CONTINUES...



## SAINT RAYJO

To: RAY JOHNSON (1927-1995)

*"The perfection of a suicide is in its ambiguity"*  
~ Guy Debord (1928-1994)

*Attention everyone, a saint is born  
Ray Johnson has achieved nirvana  
He backstrokes against the stream  
He swims ahead of his time  
He will be beatified on Long Island  
And we will receive messages in bottles and jars  
Thrown off the bridge, toward the east  
Sag Harbor - North Haven Bridge  
Then suddenly he jumps into the freezing waters of the night  
A lonely prophet, fully dressed  
Friday the 13th, January '95  
He would have been 67, but the current swept away his body  
The fog carried his spirit and his soul  
The wind blew 3x4 postcards marked Locust Valley  
His miracles were global  
A zen-dada brotherhood of correspondance art  
Buddha University, NY Correspondance School  
Joseph Cornell sent him paper rabbits  
Duchamp sent him a chocolate-making machine  
Andy Warhol, a quacking duck  
May Wilson, bandaged dolls  
Yoko Ono, a scream to the sky  
Rene Magritte, a surreal street  
Ad Reinhardt, a black heart  
Joan Crawford, an 8x10 autographed photo  
He dropped his phallus while visting Dallas  
He sunk his regalia on the way to Australia  
He never avoided the void in his native Detroit  
He enjoyed bringing people together  
The ghost of correspondance, danced his last dance  
The waves are whistling to you Ray  
You will not be forgotten in the night of time  
Your heart is on the bottom of the ocean of the mind  
And scuba divers are trying to retrieve it  
As soon as we catch your heart  
We will send it to you, care of "Paradise of the Wise".*

~ Valery Oisteanu  
January 1995

*I do not remember the New York East side street number,  
Nor the house address,  
Nor the floor.*

*I recall entering Ray's eight foot by eight foot room with  
Ray sitting on the floor because there were neither  
stools nor chairs.*

*For the same reasons I sat on the floor to look into his  
eyes, an act that made me feel we had come from the  
same womb at the same hour.*

*"What are you doing?" I queried.*

*"Being myself," he explained.*

*"How do you do that?" I asked.*

*He said, "I relax for long periods of time in order to  
think of something; then I ask is the thing thought  
real or unreal. If unreal, I reject it. If real,  
I store it permanently in my memory bank."*

~ Bern Porter





The first time Ray came in to my New York City apartment, was to meet Bern Porter (who had published him in 1956!). The next time, he stayed OUTSIDE my New York City apartment during a party I hosted. The next time, he met me at a Locust Valley restaurant. Then, there was his Long Island Museum show opening, where we spoke outside. And then, I came to see one of his Long Island outdoor performances.

Since I moved to Maine in 1986, he would write and call periodically. His communications were always very flattering.

I met a lot of people through Ray: John Evans, Coco Gordon, John Russell, Weslea and Curtis Wells, Bill Wilson and many others.

I sensed that we shared a sympathy, and I always liked him.

I don't know what his passing means. Except that he won't call me again.

~ Carlo Pittore

In February of 1969, I was a student at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. My Environmental Arts teacher, Stephen Kaltenbach gave us the assignment "find out who Ray Johnson is and get involved with his art". It didn't take long before we were corresponding with this unique artist. I will never forget staring in wonder at his framed collages at the Feigen Gallery and thinking "Gee, I've got mail from this guy in a drawer at home!" Other artists have also influenced my life and art, but Ray's influence was special because it was personal. Ray even accepted my cousin, Bill Gaglione and I into his home in Locust Valley one evening in June, 1972 (which he mentioned in an article in INTERVIEW magazine). I know that his unique relection of the world will continue to affect my life and many others and I can only dream of touching as many lives as he did.

~ Tim Mancusi



The news of Ray Johnson's demise was shocking. How could he have done this? He meant sooo much to sooo many people. When I think of the number of people that he brought into my life, I am amazed. Ray was one of the great artists of this era. His collages are superb, and his development of the mysterious New York Correspondance School was true genius. A master has died and he is missed. We may never know what really happened in Sag Harbor. WHO knows?

~ John Evans

Ray Johnson has had an influence on my mailart since 1973. During this time, I saw Ray's work in Art in America and had admired his wit, creativity and imagination. Later in 1976, an Italian friend whom I met in Davis, California, introduced me to additional works by Ray Johnson - and the GREAT influence Ray had on the mail art network movement. I have been actively corresponding with Ray since 1978 - and most recently sent him letters in March and November, 1994. Ray's use of line, text, composition and subject matter - I truly admire! He was a true genius, who befriended every one, and was a strong supporter of his fellow mail artists like myself. I will miss him greatly!

Many thanks.  
Ray Johnson Forever.  
All my art,  
Arturo Giuseppe Fallico  
Saratoga, California

The last time I talked to Ray, he mentioned a mail art piece he did in Intercourse, PA, and another one in Blue Balls, PA. After Ray died, I wanted to send a commemorative mailing of one of my Art for Um postcards that Ray had altered. I thought it would be nice to mail it from Blue Balls. Driving through Pennsylvania, I stopped at Tourist Information to ask where Blue Balls is. There is no such place. I miss him.

~ Buster Cleveland

It was Rocola who first told me about Ray Johnson in 1962. We met at Wiesbaden, Germany, during an early Fluxus performance there. We were both in the U.S. Army at the time. Rocola told me about a special show Ray Johnson and George Ashley were having, so we both made up special envelopes and mailed them to the exhibiton.

~ Picasso Gaglione





I never met him, and he has remained mystical (sic) to me, an amazing figure who played a major role, as I understand it, in getting this whole mail art thing started. By doing so, he has had a really significant effect on my life. The joys I have had as a result of connecting with so many generous, warm, creative, exciting, stimulating, idiosyncratic, inventive, bright people are joys I would never have had, had it not been for him. I feel he lives on in each piece of mail I send, in each new mail art connection I make, in the books about the movement, in the art that is made as take-offs on images he first used, in so many of our hearts and minds. And, in the archives as well, of course.

Someone who has brought joy in direct and indirect ways to so many thousands, has left an impact not only on the network, but on the very lives of those who continue getting and giving joy through this correspondence.

~ Arto Posto

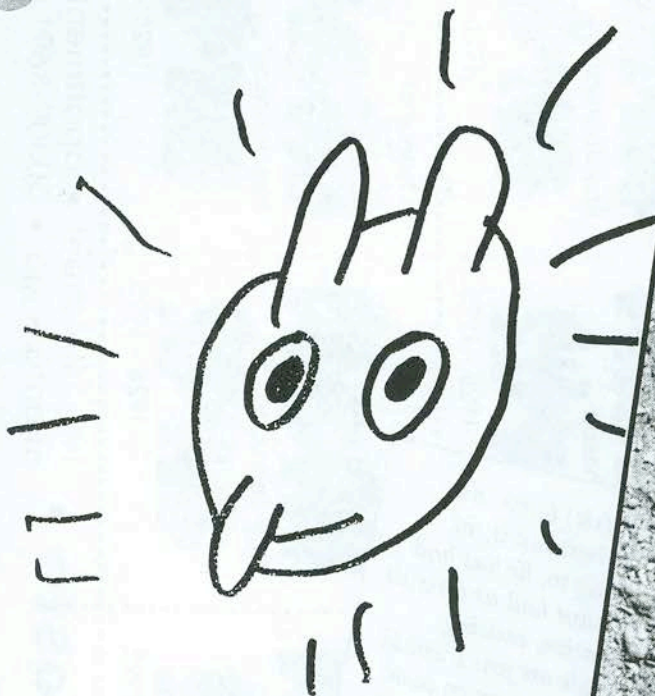
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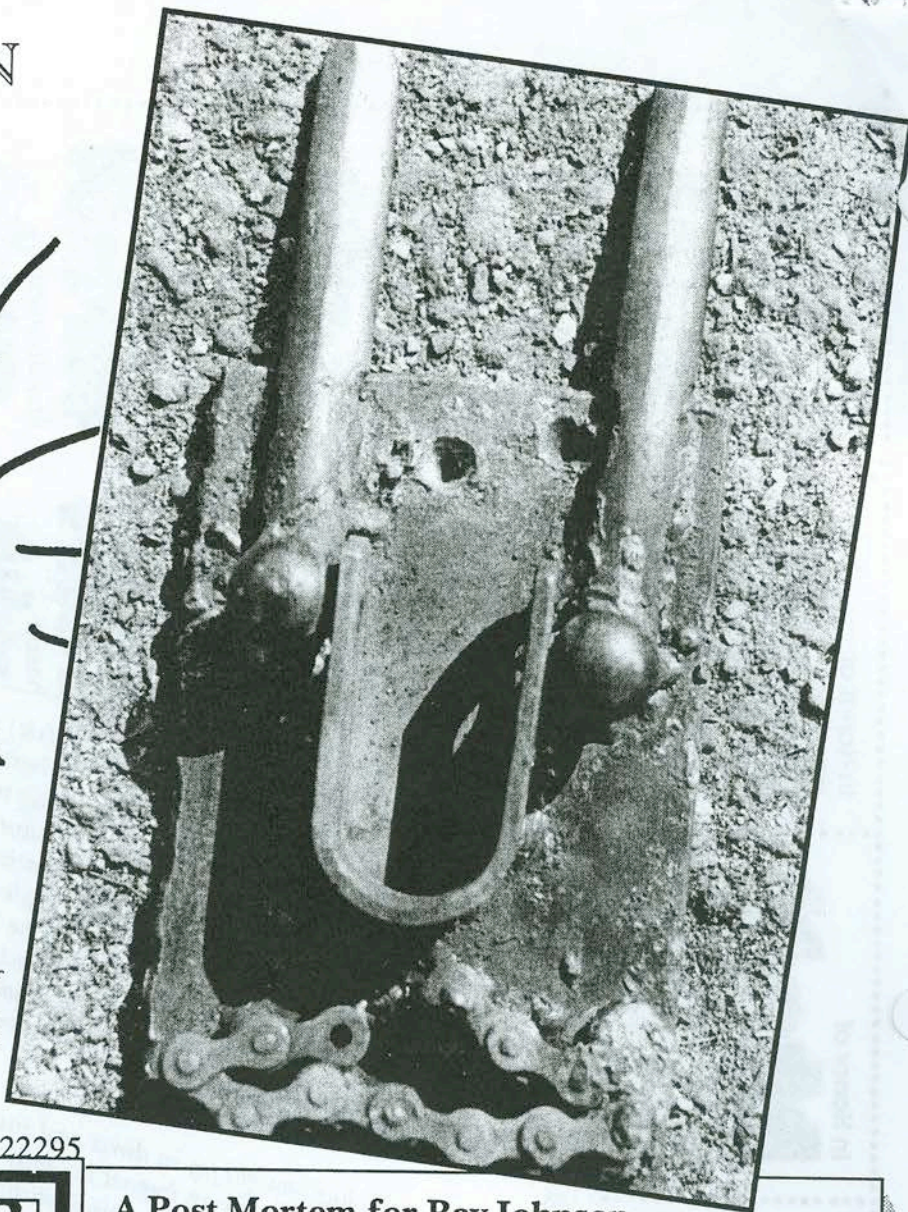


# RAY JOHNSON TRIBUTE

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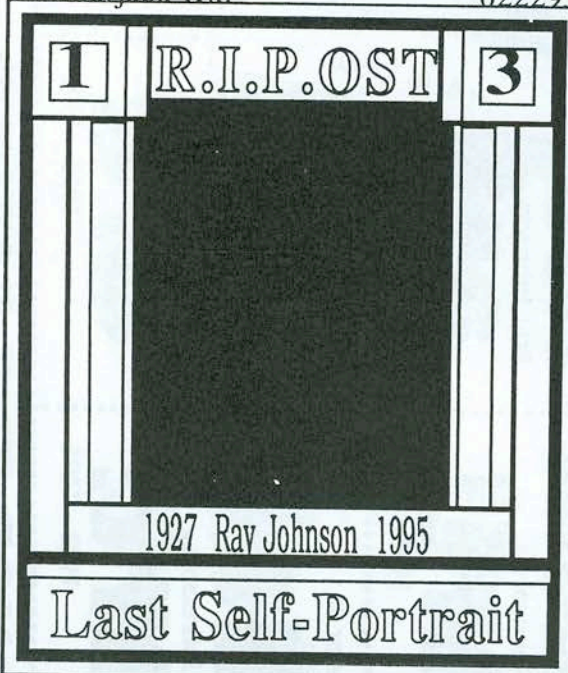


courtesy of  
**Gerard Barbot,**  
Brooklyn, New York



Crackerjack Kid

022295



## A Post Mortem for Ray Johnson

*I first met Ray Johnson when he invited me to rendezvous at his 1984 retrospective exhibition at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art in Roslyn Harbor, New York. Since 1980, Ray and I exchanged numerous items, but one of my favorites was Ray's webbed underwear sent to be pulverized for my material metamorphosis mail art project. His last phone calls to me were about my kids, his "nothings", dead frogs on his lawn, a happy birthday wish, a notification of the death of Jean Brown, support for my edition Eternal Networks, stories about A.M. Fine, and answers to my questions about Ray and Fluxus; Ray claimed to have "nothing to do with it -- I'm the New York Correspondance School, Cracker". My last piece of correspondence from Ray was a letter addressed to my four year old daughter, Lauryn, "To Lyndy c/o Crackerjack Pop". I'll miss Ray's friendship, his quirky mail, his quick wit, and his corresponDANCE calls, but as I see it, mail artists never die, they return to senders. Goodbye Ray, and thanks for sending your last self-portrait!*

~ Chuck Welch a.k.a. Crackerjack Kid

A self-portrait presented to Crackerjack Kid by Ray Johnson for the April-May 1994 exhibition of "Artists' Stamps International Mail Art Exhibition," AVA Gallery, Lebanon, NH

Many thanks to all the artists whose art is included in this tribute. □