

**The Riddler**

No one liked a puzzle better than artist Ray Johnson. So it should have surprised no one that he leapt from a bridge in Sag Harbor this month and backstroked into oblivion, ending his life without warning and bequeathing a final riddle to his friends. GUY TREBAY



The Riddler: Peter Hujar's 1975 portrait of Ray Johnson

95 01 31

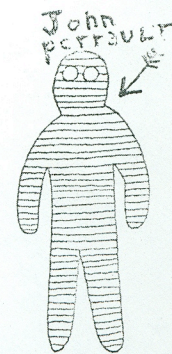
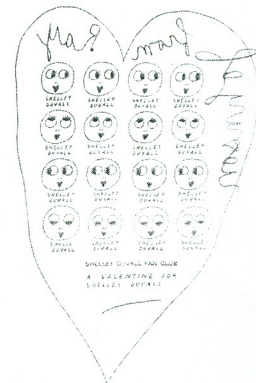
OF LARRY (RAY JOHNSON) (GUY TREBAY)

# BACKSTROKING INTO OBLIVION

**No one liked a riddle** better than Ray Johnson. Puns and wisecracks and word games were central to the artist, whose work, for all its fragmentary and ephemeral nature, had the ornery assurance of a Zen koan. So it was both “a surprise and no surprise at all,” as a friend later claimed, when news got out that the Pop collagist and founder of the New York Correspondence School had leapt from a bridge in Sag Harbor on January 13 and backstroked into oblivion, ending his life without warning and bequeathing a final riddle to his friends. ❖ Under a bright moon on a warm winter evening, the 67-year-old

## The Riddle of Ray Johnson's Suicide

artist apparently jumped 20 feet into Sag Harbor Cove from the unnamed bridge that connects North Haven and Sag Harbor. He drifted for a time in the frigid water before he drowned. Two hours earlier, Johnson had checked into Baron's Cove Inn and taken a \$95 second-floor room with a clear view of the bridge and the cove. Around seven o'clock, he drove the short distance from the hotel to a 7-Eleven at the foot of the bridge and parked. A bottleful of Valium from an old prescription was later found in his car. Wearing a blue windbreaker, Johnson walked to the top of the bridge and scrambled over a hip-high safety railing. ❖ The splash was heard by two teenage girls who had been hanging out under the bridge. When they darted to the top, what they saw was a fully dressed man leisurely backstroking away from land. The two then ran a short distance to town for help, but found the adults they alerted unconcerned and the police station shut for the evening. Someone left a message on the Sag Harbor Police Department's answering machine. But it wasn't until the following afternoon that Johnson's body was accidentally discovered by a local man who'd dropped his wife off at the Harborview Medical Center and then taken a walk by the shore. ❖ All his life Johnson had been devoted to symbolism and nagged by reminders of his own semiobscurity. Few people in the artworld were unaware of Ray Johnson's name. Yet his work was rarely discussed in recent years and it had been some time since he had had a gallery or a gallery show. Even as he took his own life, Johnson somehow failed to get himself noticed. Informed of Johnson's suicide, a painter friend remarked that it was a “good career move.”

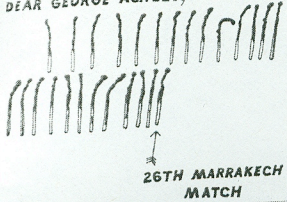


By  
Guy Trebay



MARCH 16, 1969

DEAR GEORGE ASHLEY,



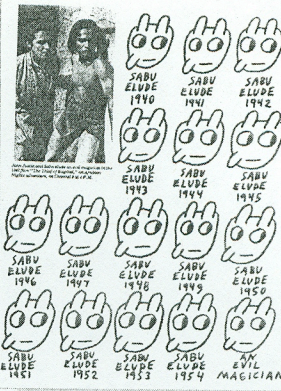
26TH MARRAKECH MATCH

all the people who punctuated the art and social scene" of the past half century. "He knew obscure or humorous things about everyone. And he could interlock all those things, time past, the present, imaginative time in his work."

According to friends, Johnson was obsessed with symbolism and the importance of gesture. "Why he [killed himself] will never be known," says Lieber. "But the meanings are in the details." Johnson would not have failed to note, says Lieber, that on Friday the 13th, a man of 67 (6 + 7) checked into room 247 (2 + 4 + 7) and

doing these evaporations all his life."

Johnson was nothing if not deliberate. Gifted with a droll cast of mind, great graphic skills, and a range of memory that drew astonishing connections between Pop and camp and official culture, between celebrity and obscurity, Johnson was also naturally playful in his art. Ephemeral as it was, his work



the North Carolina Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art never owned one until Johnson contrived to spirit a piece into the museum's library collection. A "bunny" cartoon of Willem de Kooning, it was later included in Chuck Close's celebrated "Portraits" installation.

But it's Johnson's correspondence that most fans consider his major contribution. Conducted on a scope that almost defies com-

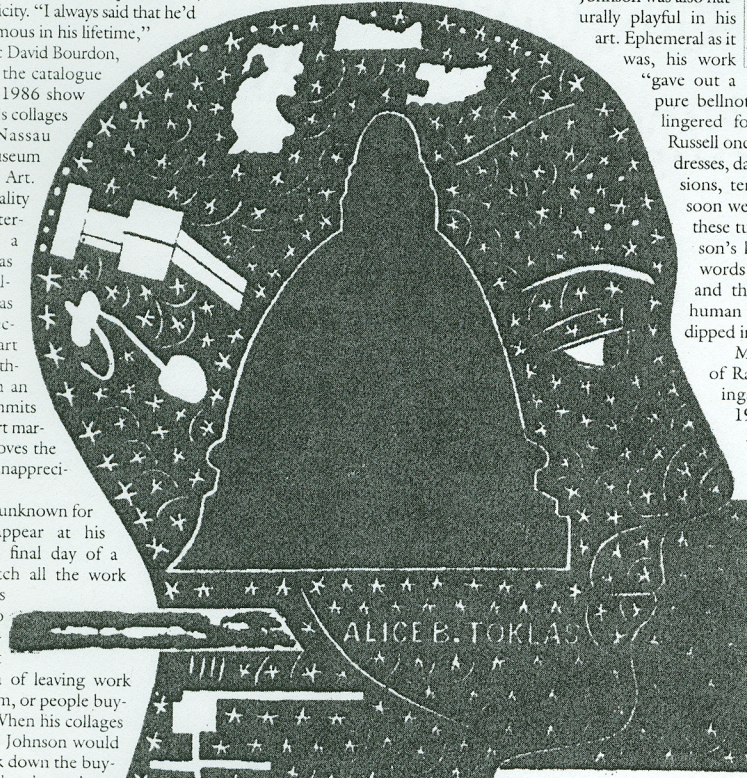
### To people in the art world,

Ray Johnson's reputation was formed in equal parts of talent, ubiquitousness, and eccentricity. "I always said that he'd never be famous in his lifetime," says art critic David Bourdon, who wrote the catalogue essay for a 1986 show of Johnson's collages at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art. "His personality was a big deterrent. Ray was a pest. He was rough on dealers. He was rough on collectors. But the art market loves nothing better than an artist who commits suicide." The art market, he says, "loves the legend of the unappreciated artist."

It was not unknown for Johnson to appear at his gallery on the final day of a show and snatch all the work away. "Dealers had nothing to sell," says Bourdon. "He didn't accept the idea of leaving work in the back room, or people buying on time." When his collages sold at auction, Johnson would sometimes track down the buyers and demand to know how much they'd paid. "Or he'd call four times in a day and ask who was Natalie Wood's costar in such and such a movie," explains Bourdon. "I always said that without the impediment of Ray's personality there'd be a lot of interest in the work."

Writing to a friend in the 1970s, Johnson claimed that "whether something dramatic or nothing happens, it is all the same to me." He meant this philosophically. The truth is that Johnson wished as deeply for recognition as most of us do, and obtained what measure of it he could from the New York Correspondence School network and from his few devoted friends. "In the next century, people will say, 'He was among you, what fools you were,'" says William Wilson, a critic-novelist and Johnson's friend of 40 years. In Johnson, Wilson saw an argument for life lived "as an aesthetic construction."

"Ray was so brilliant. He was like this reservoir," says artist Edward Lieber, who spoke to Johnson weekly. "He knew who everyone was. He knew



Johnson's Correspondence Art (pictured here) attests to his penchant for symbolism, in art and in life.

prepared to kill himself. "I see this as a clear, rational decision," says Wilson, the last of his friends to speak to the artist. "I don't know what the grounds of the decision were. I know that if Ray thought he had a terminal disease he would have killed himself: it's his style. He would not want the physical intimacy of medical care." According to a preliminary report by the medical examiner, Johnson's organs were in good health. "I also know that water imagery was a recurrent theme," Wilson continues. "He often rode the Staten Island Ferry and threw art overboard. He was obsessed with the details of Natalie Wood's death by drowning. But, really, anyone who knew Ray can tell you that, if you were out for an evening with him, he might suddenly say goodnight and disappear. He'd been

pure bellnote of meaning that lingered for years," as John Russell once wrote. "Lists, addresses, dates, ephemeral allusions, terms of speech that soon went out of style—all these turn up in Ray Johnson's letters, where dead words get up and dance and the small change of human communication is dipped in gold."

My own experience of Ray Johnson's mailings dates to the 1970s, when he was in the habit of posting drawings of Napoleon's penis, laundry lists, watch parts, or photocopies of Deborah Kerr's autograph, and recycling annotated, doodled-on mail from the Canadian publishers of *File* magazine. For every mail art piece that

Johnson launched, 10 others were returned by his passionate correspondents. Johnson's was the best chain letter ever delivered, the only one not ripe with superstitious menace, despite the fact that an envelope might contain such eerie detritus as an egg carton filled with dead bees, or a box of laundry blueing, or notes from Anna Banana, Joseph Cornell, Yoko Ono, or Eleanor Antin, or a rattlesnake hide. His mailings have only one point of intersection, one common reference: Johnson himself.

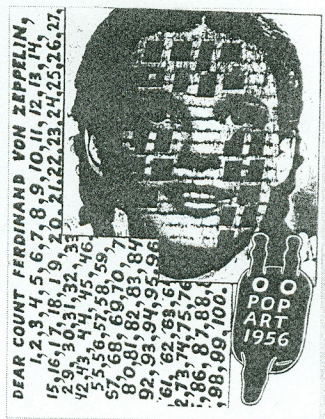
And yet the alchemical magic he exercised in art never served Johnson quite as well in his career. "A living legend," critic Clive Phillpot once called him in an essay. If you went looking in the obscure byways of late-20th-century art for your legends, Phillpot would be correct. "Ray was an extraordinarily interesting art world figure," says painter Chuck Close, a friend and collector of Johnson's work, "a really original American talent who both loved his outsider status and resented it."

Never a star of the first magnitude, Johnson, predicts Bourdon, will "end up occupying a little constellation in the sky with Warhol, Rauschenberg, and Cornell—artists who all dealt with images from popular culture and didn't have any prejudices about high or low." Although Johnson's work received retrospectives at the Whitney, the Nassau County Museum, and

prehesion, much less elucidation, it continued until his death. Friends who visited Johnson's house after he died found no explanatory letter, and few domestic objects inside the tidy, gray, two-story clapboard in Locust Valley. "It was an eerie spectacle," said one. "Neatly piled up boxes containing this huge, huge archive" dating back to Black Mountain College and Pop art's early days. "The image was of the cell of a monk."

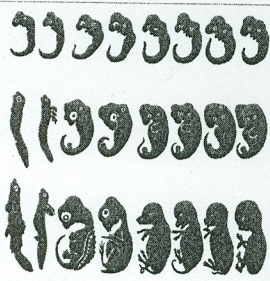
Johnson was evidently healthy when he died, solvent (he had \$1700 in his wallet when he was found), sober, in good spirits, and readying himself to produce a catalogue raisonné of his work. He had recently had a new roof put on his house. "I spoke to him not long ago," said Close. "I couldn't tell if he was happy or sad: he had that same flat affect always." If anything, Johnson seemed to friends uncommonly optimistic.

"The police said there was no evidence that he was in distress," said Helen Harrison, curator of the Pollock-Krasner House in Springs, whom Johnson had recently called for an appointment to draw a human skull from Pollock's collection. "They called all the local people in his ad-



dress book when he died, so we were among the first to hear." As Harrison tells it, Johnson apparently didn't "call out for help" before drowning. When the body was fished out of the 40-degree water, Harrison was told, "Ray looked composed and calm."

"Conundrums," Bourdon once said describing Johnson's work, "conundrums in which almost every element is an 'x,' and every 'solution' another riddle or pun." Considering the death of his long-time friend last week, Bourdon added, "It's just too peculiar. There was no note. There was no particular reason. There's really no explanation." All week, he said, people had been calling to say, "Watch your mail." So far, though, nothing has arrived.



PPPAAGGGEEEE888  
ZZZUUUCCCKKKEE  
RRRMMMAAANNNNN  
HHHAAARRRPPSSSIII  
CCCHHOORRRRDDSSS