

ART-BREAKING:

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> A Panel Discussion on Ray Johnson

- > Transcribed from live radio broadcast on the Pacifica Network's
 - > Artbreaking,
 - > on WBAI-FM in New York hosted by Charlie Finch. Portions reprinted from
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- > Shortly after the death of Ray Johnson, WBAI-FM art critic Charlie Finch
 - > and
 - > Artforum Executive Publisher Knight Landesman assembled a panel to talk
 - > about Johnson's art and legacy. The panel: Chuck Close, artist; Jill
 - > Johnston, critic; Richard Feigen, dealer, Mark Bloch, multi-media and
 - > mail
 - > artist.

 - > Charlie Finch: You're listening to WBAI-FM 99.5 on your dial.
 - > Commercial-free, listener-sponsored radio. Welcome to Artbreaking, the
 - > Thursday afternoon arts magazine. Knight, why don't you introduce our
 - > guests
 - > live in the studio.
 - >
 - > Knight Landesman: I have a lot of guests that I'm thrilled are here. In
 - > the
 - > Artforum upcoming we have a bunch of recollections of Ray Johnson from
 - > six
 - > people who knew him. We have two of them in the studio today and we also
 - >
 - > have two other people who knew Ray very well. So I'd like to talk about
 - > Ray
 - > and what his art was about and what his life was about. I'll ask our
 - > guests
 - > to tell us who Ray Johnson was because they can do it much better than I
 - >
 - > will.

>
>I'm pleased to have in the studio today the marvellous painter Chuck
>Close,
>Jill Johnston, Richard Feigen, Mark Bloch and our host Charlie Finch,
>who
>knew Ray a little bit in relationship to this show.
>
>Charlie Finch: Ray was a fan, I'm happy to say. Later on we'll be able
>to
>hear some messages. Mark Bloch has brought some tape.
>
>Knight Landesman: Great! So we'll actually be able to hear the voice of
>Ray.
>Why Ray Johnson? Who was Ray Johnson for you? Let's go around the table
>and
>have everyone talk about who Ray was for them. Was he important? Who is
>he?
>Lets start with Chuck.
>
>Chuck Close: Ray was a much more important artist than was generally
>recognized by the art world. He was an idiosyncratic figure. I think he
>was
>very inventive in bringing his work, through his collages, and things
>that
>he's known for, actually, predating Pop Art with the use of pop subject
>matter before Lichtenstein and Warhol. But, probably, he is best known
>to
>the general public as the inventor of the Correspondence School and of
>mail
>art.
>
>Knight Landesman: How would you describe mail art? Was it something than
>an
>artist would make and send to other people?
>
>Chuck Close: Well, alot of it was generated by Ray. That is, he sent
>things
>out and he sort of orchestrated a path for each of these things. He
>would
>send something to me and say 'add to and send to so and so' and you were
>
>supposed to send it on. We didn't always do it because sometimes we
>liked
>the stuff so much. We wanted to keep it. But eventually, it would make
>its
>circuitous way to wherever Ray had decided it should go.
>
>Knight Landesman: When did he start to do mail art?
>
>Chuck Close: I'm not sure exactly when he did start. In the 60s I think.
>
>Mark Bloch: Well he founded his New York Correspondance School in 1962
>though it offically started in 1968. But I noticed there was a
>correspondence with his friend Arthur Secuda who is a working artist,
>still.
>That was as early as 1943, where he was decorating his envelopes and
>playing
>around with the mail.
>
>Knight Landesman: That's Mark Bloch speaking. A multi media artist who
>works

>with performance, computers, and video and also does mail art. How did
 >you
 >first know Ray and tell us about your relationship with him.
 >
 >Mark Bloch: Ray is a very legendary person and he was only a legend to
 >me
 >when I was living in Southern California in the late 70s. I was
 >involved
 >with mail art. I didn't know that he still did mail so I just started
 >playing around, saying that I was Ray Johnson and I had changed my name
 >to
 >Ray Jones. And I started this thing called the God Jones Surf Club and
 >all
 >these spin-offs on Ray. If you knew Ray you would know that this
 >delighted
 >him and he sought me out tried to find out who I was and what I was
 >doing
 >and and why. So that when I moved to New York in 1982 we began a
 >correspondence. Eventually I met him at a party. He cornered me and just
 >
 >started asking lots of questions and we've been friends every since— on
 >the
 >phone and in the mail.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Richard Feigen has been a dealer in New York for many
 >years and also in Chicago. When did you first meet Ray?
 >
 >Richard Feigen: I became aware of Ray's work probably at the end of the
 >50s.
 >I was still in Chicago and I was very much involved with Surrealism at
 >the
 >time. I don't remember when I actually met Ray for the first time but I
 >do
 >remember seeing some of his collages. I wasn't as aware of his role or
 >place
 >as a kind of cult figure. Artist friends of mine told me that when they
 >arrived in New York, there was this strange fellow down on the Lower
 >East
 >Side selling these little collages. He was here before anyone got here.
 >And
 >I reacted really visually.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: You just liked what you saw?
 >
 >Richard Feigen: My first reaction to something is I get very
 >inquisitive. I
 >want the thing. I saw these early Shirley Temple things and just wanted
 >to
 >own them. Later on all this sort of information about Ray accreted. I
 >opened
 >my New York gallery in 63. I can't remember when I started representing
 >him.
 >I know I find records of shows we had in, I think, '66 but alot of that
 >stuff has been lost. But when I met him I realized that his personality
 >was
 >very much on the same wavelength as another artist whom I was very much
 >involved with and who I admired— Joseph Cornell. These two guys were on
 >the
 >same planet, but it wasn't this planet! I remember not long after I
 >started
 >to represent Ray, he wanted me to hire an airplane and drop 100 pounds

>of
 >link sausages over Riker's Island. Things like that. His personality
 >came
 >after the work though. I still own my Ray Johnsons, and I don't want to
 >give
 >them up. They're extraordinarily beautiful things. And as mysterious and
 >
 >weird and poetic as they are, I think he was a seminal figure. I always
 >did
 >and it was hopeless in thirty-odd years to try and get him known.
 >Because
 >only the artists seemed to know who he was.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Did you continually represent him over those 30 years?
 >Did
 >you feel you were his art dealer?
 >
 >Richard Feigen: Yes. And when I had my public gallery close in 1973 I
 >opened
 >up a more private space here. We still had a gallery in Chicago and
 >still
 >showed his work. But Ray didn't have a gallery as such. You had to work
 >with
 >Ray on his own terms. For instance, in recent years in Chicago we've
 >been
 >trying to have a show of his work. We've been trying to get him better
 >known. Ray wanted to have a show with nothing in it!
 >
 >Then I finally put my Chicago director on the case. I loved Ray, but it
 >was
 >an all-day, full time thing with Ray. You didn't just have a short
 >conversation. You didn't really resolve it. He was very much like
 >Cornell.
 >That's why I was so, in a way, startled when he called me a few days
 >before
 >he died and asked me if I was interested in buying his James Dean
 >collage
 >which is a very famous work in Ray Johnson Land. Ray never wanted to
 >sell
 >anything! Looking back I don't know what he was trying to tell me.
 >
 >Chuck Close: He didn't need the money, for he had considerable savings.
 >
 >Richard Feigen: He was just like Joseph Cornell, who had annual reports
 >stacked up on the porch of his home on Utopia Parkway. Both of them were
 >
 >very similar.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Did they know each other Cornell and Ray?
 >
 >Mark Bloch: Ray went out to Cornell's on Utopia Parkway and I wish I
 >could
 >remember the story he told me but I don't. I only know Ray repeated over
 >and
 >over that Cornell spent the whole time sitting on the radiator, sobbing!
 >
 >Knight Landesman: So people can understand why we're speaking about Ray
 >in
 >the past tense, on January 13, 1995, Ray Johnson jumped from a highway
 >bridge into Sag Harbor Cove on Long Island and was seen backstroking
 >away

>from land. His body was found the following afternoon having washed
 >ashore
 >nearby. All the people who knew him were very touched by him.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Jill Johnston, the eminent critic, can you tell us
 >about
 >your relationship with Ray?
 >
 >Jill Johnston: I didn't have much of a relationship. Of course I knew
 >Ray,
 >everybody did in the 60s. I don't remember when I met him or even if I
 >did
 >meet him. As Richard said, Ray was kind of an alien. I was at a
 >Fluxus-type
 >performance. He was a very Fluxus type of artist then. I asked somebody
 >why
 >he never was a Fluxus artist and they said he just couldn't join
 >anything.
 >He was always a loner. But it was a small auditorium full of people, and
 >I
 >remember Ray running around the outside of the audience with Albert
 >Fine.
 >Just running around and creating his own event.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: A kind of ecstatic joke...
 >
 >Jill Johnston: I don't know that it was ecstatic. It was disruptive. One
 >
 >noticed. That's what I remember. I didn't correspond with Ray because he
 >
 >scared me. I found him extremely intense. I considered him an integral
 >part
 >of our scene— one of the crazier ones. I heard from him before he died.
 >I
 >believe he committed suicide. Many people, apparently, had various kinds
 >of
 >messages from him before he died. His message to me was, "Jill, Ronald
 >Feldman sold the 'I'd Love to Turn You On' work, which has my hand
 >lettering
 >of your words in it to a charming California art dealer or something."
 >Then
 >I looked up the piece to see what words of mine he had appropriated,
 >that he
 >had hand written in 1969. My piece was called 'Casting for 69', it was
 >published in the Village Voice, January 9, 1969. The first line of my
 >piece
 >was, "My story begins with some unfamiliar handwriting on an envelope."
 >and
 >of course, Ray copied that. He copied the first 452 words in a collage
 >that
 >he made. I found in this piece this line of mine which Ray had
 >appropriated:
 >"Then, at some age or other, for lack of any good reason to go on
 >living, he
 >committed suicide." At the end of these 452 words I had written 'You've
 >got
 >to have something to be dismembered by.' Anybody who's into psychic
 >phenomenon and stuff... I've been thinking about it. That kind of
 >resonated.
 >
 >Mark Bloch: Yeah, I don't know if its psychic. I think it's a literal

>use of
>what you wrote to come back and haunt us, as it were. A lot of the things
>
>that I've been finding in my own correspondence with Ray and in
>collecting
>stuff from other people... and I'd like to talk to each of you about it,
>
>also... These clues are everywhere. There's lots of references to death,
>of
>course, and everything else.
>
>Knight Landesman: I'm curious if Chuck and Richard feel this way. Did
>you
>have premonitions that Ray would end his life in that way?
>
>Richard Feigen: I didn't have any premonitions. But in retrospect all
>these
>clues are turning up and they did get more intense toward the end. One
>of
>these I just told you. He asked me if I wanted to buy the James Dean
>collage.
>Well he never wanted to sell anything. He never talked about that. I
>didn't
>take it as a clue. A few days later it looked like one. My colleague
>Francis
>Beatty had a call from Ray and I don't remember what it was but it
>indicated that he did have this in mind. So it seems obvious to me that
>he
>orchestrated this thing.
>
>Jill Johnston: For what purpose?
>
>Richard Feigen: I think it's part of a whole effort, like a whole
>performance. I don't know. I don't think pragmatically to get himself
>better
>known, though it certainly has done that.
>
>Jill Johnston: You don't think there was an emotional component at all
>in
>this?
>
>Richard Feigen: Put it this way: I don't think Toby Spiselman, who was
>very
>close to him, knows. Or Bill Wilson. I really don't think anyone was
>that
>close to Ray. I don't think you can really know what was going on in his
>
>head but you can begin to piece it together retrospectively. By the way,
>I
>do want to say this: I found Ray as I say, on another planet. But I
>always
>found him a very gentle, benign personality.
>
>Chuck Close: He looked scarier than he was.
>
>Jill Johnston: That's right yeah.
>
>Knight Landesman: Chuck, you weren't scared of him, right?
>
>Chuck Close: No. (laughs)
>

>Richard Feigen: No, because he had a shaved head? No!! He was very
>benign.
>He got frightened when Andy Warhol, his friend, got shot. He ran out to
>Locust Valley, Long Island for the rest of his life. He ran away.
>
>Chuck Close: He moved out of the city and never came back.
>
>Richard Feigen: He was harmless.
>
>Chuck Close: He looked like a biker.
>
>Richard Feigen: Yeah, I mean, he wore those black leather suits. Things
>like
>that. But he was a completely benign character.
>
>Knight Landesman: Chuck, did you have premonitions of his death?
>
>Chuck Close: As a matter of fact, I have a little trouble with gleaning
>clues now in retrospect. I think you can prove that almost anyone died
>on
>purpose. If you want to sift through, you can find some references to
>death
>or whatever. Of course, he was obsessed with Natalie Wood's drowning.
>There
>is something about returning to the water, I suppose, that one could
>look
>for. I spoke to him several days before he died, and we spoke regularly
>on
>the phone. As a matter of fact, Ray sounded very optimistic about the
>future
>and was talking about having shows. He had just put a new roof on his
>house.
>
>Jill Johnston: Do you disagree with Richard that he orchestrated this?
>
>Chuck Close: I also believe that he was very close to Toby Spiselman...
>it's
>just inconceivable to me. Although I do think that he committed suicide,
>I
>don't think it was as planned out, and a performance piece. Because I
>just
>don't think that he would do that to Toby and do that to people that he
>cared so much for.
>
>Richard Feigen: I asked Toby this because I had a lot of remorse. Because
>
>when he asked if I wanted to buy the James Dean collage, I said 'Of
>course I
>do Ray. But let me think about it.' I didn't know what kind of price.
>Who
>knows what Ray Johnson prices are! And I said #39;'I'll call you
>back.#39; I
>got tied up I didn't call him back for a couple days and then I left for
>
>England. And I was there when I heard that he had drowned. So when I got
>
>back I said 'Toby, my god, I hope I didn't contribute to depressing him
>by
>not calling him back.' And she said 'No, no,' and then she gave me this
>whole litany of things that decisively meant that he was going to do this
>anyway. She was sure this whole thing was planned out. That he was

>sending
 >out clues and there was nothing I could have done that would've changed
 >his
 >mind. And the same thing with this business that my colleague Francis
 >Beatty
 >was confronted with, with Ray. I don't remember what it was but it was
 >on
 >his mind.
 >
 >Chuck Close: I think people who kill themselves are profoundly
 >depressed,
 >not because they want to boost their careers.
 >
 >Jill Johnston: I was trying to suggest that.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: I want to go around the table and ask people where
 >they
 >think Ray and his art will stand in in time in relationship to the other
 >art
 >of our time.
 >
 >Chuck Close: I think that's hard, at this time, to really access. Ray
 >had
 >profound ambivalence about everything— even about living— from the
 >looks
 >of it. He wore his outsider status both as a badge of honor, and he also
 >was
 >incredibly pissed-off. He made things difficult, and yet he wanted
 >attention
 >desperately. He streaked his own lecture! It was like, how can you screw
 >
 >yourself up? It's so much a part of him.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Richard where do you think he'll be seen as an artist?
 >
 >Richard Feigen: Well I haven't changed my mind in 30-odd years. I think
 >he's
 >at the very very top rank of seminal artists of the second half of the
 >20th
 >century. I mean, this is what I do for a living so I think I have a
 >perspective. I think I do. There's been never any question. His collage
 >works, more than the the correspondence things, are of an extraordinary
 >high
 >order, aesthetically. Forget the fact that they are earlier than
 >everybody
 >else . They're just beautiful, beautiful things and they are very
 >important.
 >One of the clues, maybe, and I dont need any clues, is: we're borrowing
 >works from Jasper Johns. I don't know, Chuck, if your lending, but we're
 >
 >borrowing stuff from all these artists. That's who knew Ray. That's who
 >kept
 >his work. Somebody like Jasper is a real collector. He's passionate
 >about
 >it.
 >
 >Jill Johnston: Why are you borrowing these things?
 >
 >Richard Feigen: We're borrowing it for our memorial exhibition.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Richard's doing a show that will open April 27. It's a

>
 >memorial show for Ray Johnson. How long will it be up, Richard?
 >
 >Richard Feigen: I don't remember. It will be up for a quite a while.
 >What's
 >happened now, since he died: I was at the National Gallery in
 >Washington,
 >recently, talking to its contemporary art curator, Mark Rosenthal.
 >Before
 >Ray died, it was like screaming into a wind tunnel trying to get a major
 >
 >museum to acquire a work of Ray Johnson's. Now, all of a sudden, he died
 >and
 >it's all over the press. Here's Artforum. The National Gallery wants
 >one.
 >And it's not going to be difficult to place Ray Johnson in these
 >museums.
 >And I'm talking now as an art dealer. I would submit if I'd been
 >successful
 >in having a... getting Ray to cooperate and have a show in Chicago with
 >my
 >gallery, which we were trying to do for several years, I wonder if
 >Artforum
 >would have reviewed it. Maybe they would have, maybe they wouldn't have.
 >You
 >certainly wouldn't be doing a huge article like this one. So there's no
 >question that he's going to get known now and get placed in these
 >museums
 >and now collectors are going to start coming out of the woodwork and
 >want
 >his works. I have no doubt of it.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Mark, where do you see him fitting in?
 >
 >Mark Bloch: I personally feel that he's one of the most important
 >artists
 >of the century. I really do. And perhaps the most important one since
 >Duchamp. Here's why: any young person who is doing mail art, who is
 >doing
 >zines or involved with cyberspace... these are all influenced by Ray
 >Johnson. By correspondence, by highlighting the process as the art as
 >opposed to the art object. His relationship to the art market is one
 >thing.
 >But when you look at somebody who was involved with a long lasting
 >influence... we're talking about thousands of artists in over 50
 >countries
 >who are still involved with mail art some thirty years after he began
 >it. I
 >can't think of an art movement that's lasted longer. I think his
 >influence
 >is huge. And like Richard said, the early pop art works are not only
 >beautiful but important because he was the first artist to ever work
 >with a
 >celebrity that I can find. I don't know of any other artist who took a
 >celebrity and made that the subject of the art. I think as they look
 >back on
 >our century and they try to figure out what was happening, who did it
 >first,
 >I think they'll come up with Ray. Not to mention all the nothings and
 >weird
 >stuff that he did— which was among the earliest performance work.

>
 >Jill Johnston: I think possibly his ambivalence, which Chuck pointed
 >out,
 >could pursue him into his after life. He needs a good explicator. He
 >needs
 >an in-depth, huge show collecting examples of his work, behind glass, of
 >
 >correspondence. And let's just say a book following correspondence with
 >one
 >person and annotated. That's the way I see it.
 >
 >Chuck Close: He was, I think, a profoundly unique and idiosyncratic
 >person.
 >We don't do too well, as a country, as a culture, recognizing
 >idiosyncratic
 >people. We very much look for people in the mainstream. It'll take what
 >Jill
 >was suggesting, I think, that is, an interpreter to pull things together
 >and
 >point out to the rest of the world what artists have always known about
 >Ray.
 >Which is that there was a major contribution.
 >
 >Knight Landesman: Charlie, you knew Ray briefly, right?
 >
 >Charlie Finch: My friend Walter Robinson was, of course, a correspondent
 >
 >with Ray and was featured in a number of his bunny head pieces and I got
 >one
 >of Ray's last pieces of mail art right before he died, because Ray was a
 >fan
 >of my radio show and was nice enough to leave Mark Bloch a message on
 >his
 >answering machine about it. Let's hear Ray's voice on tapes that he made
 >for
 >Mark.
 >
 > (Voice of Ray Johnson:) Mark, do you have Beatrice Wood 's phone
 > number or address? Yes, no? (Click.)
 >
 > Mark, Ray Johnson. I 'm looking at the photo in the New York Times
 > of the collapsed roof on Delancey and Eldridge Street, near the
 > lumber yard. (Click.)
 >
 > Mark, Ray Johnson. Have you heard this one? It's President Bush
 > talking about recession. They have this music in the
 > backgroundwith it. I don't know who did it but its pretty good.
 > Can you hear it? Can you hear it? (Click.)
 >
 > Hi, Mark, this is Whoopie Goldberg, again.(Click.)
 >
 > Hi Mark. I guess you're out on your honeymoon. Could you call me?
 > (Click.)
 >
 > Mark, it's Ray Johnson. The Sandra Gehring opening I told you
 > about is on December 3rd from six to eight. (Click.)
 >
 > Hi Mark. I'm listening to the Charlie Finch Show, he has a very
 > nice voice. (Click.)
 >
 > Hi Mark I like this big color xerox you sent me. (Click.)

>
>Richard Feigen: I wish I'd taped some of those things.
>
>Knight Landesman: Who do people think would be the right person to put a
>Ray
>Johnson show together? To curate such a show?
>
>Richard Feigen: I don't know. Maybe Bill Wilson?
>
>Jill Johnston: I think David Bourdon.
>
>Richard Feigen: We borrowed 38 things from Bill Wilson and David
>Bourdon. I
>don't think many people know that much about Ray's work.
>
>Knight Landesman: Do you think about him alot?
>
>Richard Feigen: Yeah I do. I was very fond of him You couldn't get too
>involved with Ray or it was a full time thing. I loved the guy. But if
>you
>got on the phone with him, when we did reperesent him, it was all day
>long.
>You couldn't just do anything else. You couldn't represent anybody else.
>But
>in a lot of the conversations, for instance, with James Rosenquist...
>he's
>on this planet and there's a beginning and an end to what your talking
>about. He'll let it go as long as you want. There's a point to the
>conversation. With Ray there generally wasn't. So I honsestly miss him
>alot.
>I feel like I should have... I dont know... carried on these
>conversations
>more...
>
>Jill Johnston: He still feels guilty.
>
>Chuck Close: I think everybody who knew Ray feels guilty, because
>everyone
>was annoyed by him sometimes.
>
>Jill Johnston: I don't feel guilty because I didn't have enough to do
>with
>him.
>
>Chuck Close: Sometimes the phone calls came when you really didn't want
>one.
>Or send a drawing on to someone else and having to go to the post office
>
>became an obligation.
>
>Jill Johnston: What you're saying sounds like he's incredibly lonely,
>like
>he was reaching out all the time.
>
>Mark Bloch: I think that was part of his work, though...
>
>Jill Johnston: He lived alone.
>
>Mark Bloch: ...the isolation.
>
>Chuck Close: Yeah. I think it was a ritual. I mean, the fact that... I

>mean,
>everyone can have a xerox machine. They're incredibly cheap. But he
>liked to
>walk to the post office and put coins in a coin-operated xerox machine.
>
>Mark Bloch: By the way, I think he was the first person to do that, to
>use
>the first coin-operated xerox machines in his work. Can anyone think of
>anyone who did it before Ray?
>
>Knight Landesman: Do you think about him every day, Mark?
>
>Mark Bloch: Yeah as a matter of fact I do. Especially lately. I find a
>real
>emptiness exists. And I've talked to other people about this. I used to
>walk
>down the street and I'd find something on the street and it would make
>me
>laugh. I'd pick it up and I'd send it to Ray. Now I don't know what to
>do
>with that stuff. I don't know whether to bother picking it up or what.
>
>Knight Landesman: Chuck, do you find yourself thinking about him even
>more
>now that he's dead?
>
>Chuck Close: When the phone rings, every time, for a split second, I
>think
>it may be Ray. It's very sad.
>
>Knight Landesman: Many of our listeners maybe haven't seen Ray's work
>but it
>often involved language, yes? I'll ask you, Mark, maybe you know it
>best.
>Did it always involve language?
>
>Mark Bloch: Nearly always. Sometimes there was language underneath the
>visual stuff. He'd cut stuff up and recycle it. So yes, I'd say a large
>portion of it.
>
>Charlie Finch: Thanks to all the guests. I'm sure Ray would have loved
>it.
>Maybe somewhere he's listening to it.
>
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