

AURELSCHEIBLER

Press Release

Ray Johnson

Duration:

November 12, 2011 until
January 28, 2012

Opening:

November 11, 6–9 p.m.

Location:

Aurel Scheibler
Charlottenstraße 2 (in the alley)
10969 Berlin



Ray Johnson (1927–1995) needed but a few simple forms to create his icons - the bunny heads, snakes and stylized skulls that are among the characters peopling his collages. They represent him but also at times people, objects and themes that interested him and functioned in his work as a kind of label. Dubbed the “most famous unknown artist in New York” by The New York Times, Johnson is considered the founder of Mail Art and the initiator of the New York Correspondance [sic] School. His collages, which he began distributing worldwide in the 1950s, were seminal for Pop Art. His performances have been referred to as the first informal happenings; he called them “nothings”. He staged his suicide on a Friday the 13th in January 1995, which resulted in numerous speculations and a downright Johnson cult.

Aurel Scheibler, in cooperation with the Ray Johnson Estate in New York, is proud to host Johnson’s first gallery show in Germany. The exhibition will be comprised of collaged silhouette portraits from the 70s, 80s and 90s from the estate as well as Mail Art and graphic works of the 60s from a private collection.

Ray Johnson studied at Black Mountain College with, among others, Josef Albers, Lyonel Feininger and the graphic designer Paul Rand. It was here that he began his friendships with John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller and Willem and Elaine de Kooning. In 1948 Johnson went to New York, where he began an abstract body of work and exhibited with other members of the American Abstract Artists (AAA). In the late 50s he became a master of collage. Photographs and snippets from illustrated magazines and newspapers served as material that he confronted with his own drawings, figures and poetic texts. He added directions for use and commentary, addressed them to friends and strangers and, according to William Wilson, played the U.S. mail like a harp. The recipients of his works included artists such as Andy Warhol, musicians, literary figures and art critics, who became participants in his close-knit network of interactive communication.

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These collages were received not only in the mail. Johnson arranged his “moticos” – an anagram of the word osmotic he used to describe his works – in installations that occasionally took place on the street, in Grand Central Station or in dilapidated New York cellars and count among the first informal happenings. In one of his most famous works from the mid-50s, at the height of Abstract Expressionism, Johnson painted the eyes of an Elvis Presley photograph, called it “Oedipus” and, in reference to Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, claimed that he was “the only painter in New York whose drips mean anything.”

Johnson did not see art as an act of production but rather as a form of communication and in this, thereby anticipating the concept of social networks long before the invention of the Internet. At times curiously backwards but always rich in context, his imagery revitalized the medium of collage. These works highlight the art scene up until the present-day and remain as contemporary as the day they were created.

Last exhibitions:

- 2011 *Kurt Schwitters & Ray Johnson – Merz & Moticos*, Max Ernst Museum, Brühl
- 2010 *A Book About Death*, Kunstverein Amsterdam. *From BMC to NYC: The Tutelary Years of Ray Johnson 1943–1967*, Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center, Asheville
- 2009 *Ray Johnson. Please Add To & Return*. Retrospective exhibition at Raven Row in London, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). *Voids*, Centre Pompidou, Paris

Image

Ray Johnson, Untitled (David Bourdon Profile with Clock and Moticos Tesserae), Feb. 10, 1979, Feb. 11, 1979
Collage on cardboard panel, 29,8 x 26 cm / 11 ¾ x 10 ½ in.
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